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Saturs (Content)

- 4** *Olga Senkāne*. Identitāšu semiotiskās reprezentācijas Gunara Janovska un Viestura Kairiša atveidotajā Latgales mazpilsētā (Semiotic Representations of Identities in the Small Town of Latgale Portrayed by Gunars Janovskis and Viesturs Kairišs)
- 30** *Ilze Ļaksa-Timinska*. Mēģinot izprast 20. gadsimta 20. gadu padomju latviešu identitāti. Roberta Eidemaņa garā stāsta "Ielenktie" imagoloģisks lasījums (Towards an understanding of Soviet Latvian identity in the 1920s. An Imagological Reading of the Long Story *The Surrounded* by Roberts Eidemanis)
- 50** *Juris Urtāns*. Suņi Latgales pilskalnu folklorā (Dogs in the Folklore of Latgale Hillforts)
- 70** *Signe Šēnfelde*. Alternatīvā lasīšanas kultūra Latvijas PSR 20. gadsimta 50. gados pēc Kaspara Aleksandra Irbes dienasgrāmatas (Alternative Reading Culture in Soviet Latvia in the 1950s through the Diary of Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe)
- 98** *Jānis Veckrācis, Mārtiņš Mintauris*. Vēstures (terminoloģiskais) diskurss un dažu pamatterminu vēsture latviešu valodā (The (Terminological) Discourse of History and Emergence of Some Basic Terms in the Latvian Language)

- 142** *Linda Zulmane.* Ceļš pārejas laikmetā Andrieva Niedras pasākā "Zemnieka dēls" (The Road in the Age of Transition in Andrievs Niedra's Fairytale *The Farmer's Son*)
- 160** *Sergejs Kruks.* Ambiguous Grammatical Forms in Latvian Corpora (Neviennozīmīgas gramatiskās formas latviešu valodas korpusos)

ARHĪVI, DOKUMENTI, FAKTI
(ARCHIVES, DOCUMENTS, FACTS)

- 178** *Gonzalo Preciado-Azanza.* A Guide to Sources of Information for Researchers of the Latvian Ballet Diaspora (Informācijas avotu ceļvedis Latvijas baleta diasporas pētniekiem)

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DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2024.0056.08

**A Guide to Sources of Information for Researchers
of the Latvian Ballet Diaspora**

**Informācijas avotu ceļvedis Latvijas baleta diasporas
pētniekiem**

Latvian ballet can be proud of its centennial history. However, much remains to be said. I first became acquainted as a dancer of the Latvian National Ballet troupe, becoming captivated to such a point that I decided to fully commit to the task of understanding its pivotal role on the international scene. The following text aims to act as an early guide for researchers interested in this field. Even though there is no such thing as a magic wand to unravel the intricate trajectory of ballet in Riga, the knowledge of some sources can be helpful in illuminating its path. But what is the starting point for research on Latvian ballet?

First, we must begin by presenting a brief state of the art. Elza Siliņa could be considered a pioneer. As the first professional Latvian ballet critic, she wrote a monograph, *Latviešu deja* (1939), with highly valuable data about the beginning of this art form in the current territory of Latvia, though Georgs Brants and Georgs Štals authored the first histories of Latvian ballet in 1937 and 1943. Both books, titled *Latviešu balets*, are fundamental primary sources for those interested in the ballet that took place during the interwar Republic of Latvia. Unfortunately, the Soviet period was a period of stagnation that profoundly affected the number and quality of Latvian ballet publications. The few references that exist are not only biased towards Russian influence, but also omit Diaghilev's crucial legacy.

On regaining independence, Latvia was keen to compensate the hiatus in its historiography. Ballet literature showed considerable growth at the turn of the century. The dance critic Ēriks Tivums opened a new era. It is worth mentioning his chapter on Riga's ballet history in *Latvijas Nacionālā opera* (2000). Biographical approaches flourished. Helēna Tangijeva-Birzniece, Austrā Strazdiņa-Miļeviča, Aleksandrs Lembergs, Haralds Ritenbergs, Maris Liepa, Anna Priede, and Aivars Leimanis are among the 20th century Latvian ballet icons covered. The prolific Igors Freimanis provided us with an interesting vision from the angle of cultural history, while Rita Spalva's scientific approach towards choreographic processes is summarized in *Dejas kompozīcija* (2018). But above all, we need to highlight the voluminous *Latvijas balets* and *Ar mūzas skūpstu dvēselē* that respectively cover the history of Latvian ballet as well as the Riga Choreography School. Both works, published in 2002 by ballet historian Ija Bite, together with the latest edition of Gunta Bāliņa's *Latvijas baleta un dejas enciklopēdija* (2018),¹ and the exhaustive chronicle presented in *No skices līdz izrādei* (2018), constitute the starting point of any research on the subject.

1 In 2006, Gunta Bāliņa and Ija Bite published the first edition of this encyclopedia.

Nonetheless, this perspective was provided by Latvian literature. Thus, it is necessary to contrast it with the information from a foreign viewpoint too. The *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (1998), edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen, as well as *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (2000) both include a chapter dedicated to Latvia. Particularly valuable is the inclusion of Osvalds Lēmanis in the *Supplement to Complete Book of Ballets* (1942). By so doing, British dance historian Cyril W. Beaumont positioned Lēmanis as a major international choreographer. *The Dancing Times* published different approaches to Latvian ballet in the 1930s, while in the midst of the Cold War, *Ballet Today* recounted its history as well as writing about the figure of Tangijeva-Birzniece. Soviet dance historian Natalia Roslavleva praised Latvian ballet in *Dance News*. Marian Horosko interviewed Aleksandra Feodorova-Fokina in *Dance Magazine*.² Although ever since *Ballett International* and *Dance Magazine* gave an account of the complicated 1990 situation, it seems that Latvian ballet has been forgotten. Only Feodorova-Fokina has been briefly analyzed in the collective volume *Tras los pasos de la Sílfi* (2022), the impact of Spanishness has been succinctly studied in the ballets *Paquita*, *Jota Aragonesa*, and *Don Quixote*, while Mikhail Baryshnikov appears, most extensively, in every single publication related to Latvian and Russian ballet.³ Latvian ballet history is a diaspora, as illustrated by Dita Jonīte's chapter in *Latvija: kultūru migrācija* (2019). Unfortunately, the Latvian National Ballet centenary has not evidenced, in a deeper academic publication, how its trajectory is richer than its literature actually showcases.

Many of these bibliographical references base their information on Riga's archives. A logical starting point is the Latvian National Opera and Ballet Archive, though, migrations have substantially reduced its material. Therefore, one should begin with the Museum of Literature and Music (Fig. 1). Its holdings are extensive. Latvian ballet can be encountered in many collections. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover all of them. As a rough guide, *Nacionālā opera* holds an extensive number of interwar visual sources, whereas *Operas un baleta teātris* is dedicated to the Soviet period. Each subject has its own collection. Siliņa's exhaustive repository is particularly significant, covering both the panorama in Latvia and abroad. Another point of interest is the Latvian State Archive. *F265 Latvijas Nacionālā opera* comprises material from before 1944, while *F260 Latvijas Nacionālā opera* goes up to 2015. The collection of Marta Alberinga, which has been analyzed by Māris Brancis, should also be noted. Her Spanish dance photographs and costumes can be found at the Museum

2 In this article, we use her name as displayed on her visit cards in Riga and Kaunas. Later on, her ballet studio in New York was named Alexandra Fedorova Fokine (NYPL *MGZMD 110).

3 Indeed, Baryshnikov wrote the foreword of Robert Greskovic's *Ballet: A Complete Guide*.



Figure 1. Museum of Literature and Music repository in Pulka iela. 2020. Photography: Gonzalo Preciado-Azanza.

of the History of Riga and Navigation. It is especially difficult to trace ballet history prior to the independence of Latvia in 1918. Hence, the Academic Library of the University of Latvia's program notes can be helpful. A choreography has not been fully completed without its set and costume designs. During the prewar Republic of Latvia, several productions were influenced by the Ballets Russes's perception of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Ludolfs Liberts, Niklāvs Strunke, Romans Suta, and Sigismunds Vidbergs are among the artists whose sketches can be found at the Latvian National Museum of Art, the Zuzeum Art Centre, and also the Romans Suta and Aleksandra Beļcova Museum.

Nevertheless, if you truly want to unravel the richness of Latvian ballet, then you need to look at foreign archives. This is not surprising if we remember the abundance of international ballet masters who worked in multicultural Riga. French, Italian, Polish, and German females were amidst the leading ballet figures during the second half of the 19th century. The Russian Aleksandra Feodorova, sister-in-law of renowned choreographer Mikhail Fokine, established the foundation for the development of the Latvian National Ballet between 1925 and 1932. Thus, it seems reasonable that several of her materials are included among the *Alexandra Fedorova*



Figure 2. Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra reading room. 2022. Photography: Gonzalo Preciado-Azanza.

papers. This collection is held at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, considered the world's most extensive dance research library. Although the exhaustive *Guide to the research collections of the New York Public Library* (1975) can give us a glimpse into its overall content, it is advisable to follow the subject *Ballet-Latvia* on its online catalog searcher. There you can find many other Latvian dancers who settled in the United States, such as Lēmanis and, most extensively, Baryshnikov, whose collection is based on his own archive donated to the library.

Another essential archive for any dance researcher is the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra in Paris (Fig. 2). This branch of France national library, however, mainly encompasses the Paris Opera Ballet's collections. It also includes an interesting and unique initiative: the *Archives internationales de la danse*. In 1931, Les Ballets Suédois founder Rolf de Maré established this association by organizing regular dance-themed exhibitions besides covering the international panorama through its journal. As a result, we can find a notable number of interwar Latvian ballet photographs within this collection (AID).

On a final note, we cannot forget another fundamental source not only for the Latvian ballet, but also for dance history: the *Nikolai Sergeev dance notations and music*

scores for ballets, currently known as the Sergeyev Collection and preserved at Harvard University. Nikolai Sergeyev assisted Marius Petipa at the Imperial Ballet in Saint Petersburg. He notated dozens of his choreographies, which ultimately became the legacy of classical ballet. After working with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, in 1922 Sergeyev became the first director of the Latvian National Ballet, where he recreated and produced many Imperial Ballet choreographies. *Paquita* and *La Bayadère* are among these works. This collection also includes several Latvian ballet programs together with photographs taken between 1922 and 1925. In a certain way, Riga shaped the history of 20th century ballet.

In conclusion, it is obvious that Latvian ballet has not yet been fully studied to comprehend its international relevance. The number of sources will satisfy eager researchers who need clear methodologies to conduct their investigations. Ballet in Riga needs to be understood within the context of the cosmopolitan European culture of the 19th century, as described by Orlando Figes in *The Europeans* (2019). The Baltic capital has contributed to its cross-culturalism from the outer edge of Europe, in line with the postcolonial theories of Edward W. Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994). We could continue to mention the presence of Latvian ballet in collections located in London, Madrid, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg. However, this would certainly require another article. Hopefully this brief summary will provide some assistance to unravelling the fascinating history of ballet in Riga.

Archival sources: institutions and funds

Latvian National Opera and Ballet Archive, Riga (Latvia).

Museum of Literature and Music, Riga (Latvia): *Elza Siliņa, Nacionālā opera, Operas un baleta teātris*.

Latvian State Archive, Riga (Latvia): *Latvijas Nacionālā opera (1919-1944)* (sign. F260), *Latvijas Nacionālā* (sign. F260), *Marta Alberinga* (1909), *spāņu deju dejotāja* (sign. F2256).

Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, Riga (Latvia): *Marta Alberinga*.

Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga (Latvia).

Romans Suta and Aleksandra Beļcova Museum, Riga (Latvia).

Zuzeum Art Centre, Riga (Latvia).

New York Public Library, New York (United States): *Alexandra Fedorova papers* (sign. *MGZMD 110), *Mikhail Baryshnikov Archive* (sign. *MGZMD 302), *Ballet-Latvia* (sign. *MGZA).

Harvard University, Cambridge (United States): *Nikolai Sergeyev dance notations and music scores for ballets* (sign. MS Thr 245).

Bibliothèque nationale de France-Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, Paris (France): *Archives internationales de la danse* (sign. AID).

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This article has been funded as part of the Aragon Government Predoctoral Research Grant (Call 2021–2025) to carry out his PhD supervised by Jesús Pedro Lorente and Idoia Murga; the Research Group *Observatorio Aragonés de Arte en la Esfera Pública*, financed by the Aragon Government with ERDF funds; R+D+i project *Cuerpo danzante: archivos, imaginarios y transculturalidades en la danza entre el Romanticismo y la Modernidad*, ref. PID2021-122286NB-I00, financed by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ "FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa"; as well as the Ayudas a la Investigación y Transferencia de la Investigación IPH, 2022, Programa Ibercaja-CAI de Estancias de Investigación (CH 15/23), the Ayudas a proyectos de investigación sobre la provincia de Huesca IEA-DPH, 2023, and the Fundación Banco Sabadell's Ayudas a la Investigación 2023 to be a visiting researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia, Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne University, Paris 8 University, and Harvard University, where he was a Fellow with the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. The author owes much gratitude to Dr. Edīte Tišheizere.