

## Juozas Vaičkus: The *Spiritus Movens* of Lithuanian Theatre and Cinema

### Summary

Juozas Vaičkus (1885–1935) was a personality who daringly sought ‘to open a new page in the history of his nation’. At the beginning of the twentieth century, he was an organiser of Lithuanian evenings, a theatre director, and a pedagogue. He achieved the establishment of a professional state-funded drama theatre in Lithuania in 1920 and directed the first production in this theatre. In the 1930s, Vaičkus fulfilled another of his goals and opened a permanent Lithuanian drama theatre in the USA. Fired by the idea of creating Lithuanian sound cinema, he travelled to Hollywood; upon his return to Lithuania, he put great effort into opening yet another new page of Lithuanian culture by laying a ‘cornerstone’ in the field of cinema.

Referred to as the father of Lithuanian drama, the Don Quixote of Lithuanian culture, and a prisoner of culture, he was a true *spiritus movens*, an awakening and stirring spirit, of Lithuanian theatre and cinema. Vaičkus’s life was very consistent: from his first play in Mažeikiai in 1905, his most important goal was the fostering of Lithuanian culture. After his unexpected death, his life was compared to a theatrical tragedy, and he was seen as the main character of that tragedy. However, until the tragic end, a multitude of genres, from heroic drama and comedy to tragedy, intertwined in the story of Vaičkus’s life, while public opinions about his work cover a wide range of styles from admiration and exaltation to irony and sarcastic bullying, from the official press to satirical newspapers and anecdotes that travelled through the grapevine. Based on extensive and controversial archival material, press articles, and the work of theatre and film scholars, the book offers a reconstruction of Juozas Vaičkus’s biography and his diverse activities.

The book opens with ‘Prologas: istorijos pradžia’ (The Prologue: The Story Begins). It tells the legend of Juozas Vaičkus, recurring in a number of memoirs, about how he organised the revolt of students at the Mintauja gymnasium against the demand to pray in Russian; it also identifies the true hero of the story, Juozas Vaičkus’s elder brother Feliksas Vaičkus. Although he remained on the sidelines of

the cultural history, he, an enlightened and respected personality, played a crucial role in providing his younger brother with education; he preserved Juozas's letters. The discussion of Juozas Vaičkus's childhood environment highlights personal traits of his father, who took part in the 1863 uprising and sought to educate all of his children. From him, Vaičkus inherited self-respect, perseverance in pursuit of a goal, and an uncompromising nature. Attention is drawn to Vaičkus's first performances in the gymnasium theatre.

The chapter 'Lietuviškų vakarų sąjūdyje' (In the Movement of Lithuanian Evenings), is focused on the beginning of Vaičkus's independent theatrical activity at the time when he was still a gymnasium student. The decades-long ban on the Lithuanian press and cultural activities imposed after the suppression of the 1863 uprising was lifted in 1904, and a genuine Lithuanian theatrical movement began in 1905. Lithuanian evenings with plays, songs, and dances were organised all over the country. This phenomenon is viewed not only as an artistic and cultural breakthrough, but also as a school of community mobilisation in which almost all future politicians of independent Lithuania received their first lessons of functioning in public. Juozas Vaičkus, the youngest theatre director, stood out in the panorama of Lithuanian evenings for his production of the comedy *Velnias spąstuose* (The Devil in the Trap) by Two Women (Žemaitė and Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė) in Mažeikiai. He was the only one of the large group of directors who debuted in 1905 and staged plays all over Lithuania with his troupe 'Skrajojamasis Vaičkaus teatras' (Vaičkus's Flying Theatre) until the First World War.

In 1916, after enrolling at the Alexandra Theatre Drama School in St Petersburg, Vaičkus launched his pedagogical work by establishing a studio where future actors of the professional Lithuanian drama theatre received the basics of acting. Vaičkus helped Petras Vaičiūnas, the would-be classic of Lithuanian drama, to discover his talent as a playwright: the troupe performed his first plays. Vaičkus's company, which had been performing in St Petersburg theatres *Krivoje Zerkalo* (Distorted Mirror) and *Dom Artista* (Artiste's House), became a permanent youth theatre.

Vaičkus's activities after his return from Russia to Lithuania are analysed in the chapter 'Lietuvoje: profesionaliam teatrui kuriantis' (In Lithuania: Evolving Professional Theatre). When Lithuania declared independence, Vaičkus and his troupe returned, performed in Vilnius and later in Kaunas. The distinctive character of Vaičkus's theatre, one that raised and explored social and moral issues, burgeoned in St Petersburg; it received a boost in Lithuania. A repertoire of serious dramas was being formed, along with comedies enjoyed by the audience. Vaičkus's troupe was performing Konstantinas Jasiukaitis's drama *Alkani žmonės* (Hungry People), Herman Heijermans's *Du keliu* (*Allerzielen*, All Souls), Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, and Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and *Ghosts*. After founding the professional drama theatre called 'Dramos vaidykla' (Drama Playhouse), Vaičkus

directed Hermann Sudermann's *Joninės* (*Johannesfeuer; The Fires of St John*) and Halmar Bergström's feminist drama *Karen Borneman*. However, Vaičkus's choice of theatrical direction was harshly criticised because of the problems raised in his productions and the complex dramas deemed not suitable for young actors. There were many directors who wanted to lead the state-funded theatre and due to a number of circumstances Vaičkus left the theatre he had created.

Based on reviews in the press and archival sources, the next chapter, 'Juozo Vaičkaus veikla JAV' (Juozas Vaičkus's Activities in the USA), discusses the performances of Vaičkus's drama theatre in Brooklyn and Chicago, his tours of Lithuanian colonies with Lithuanian actors and the pupils of the acting studio he had founded. Vaičkus's goal in the USA was to establish a permanent theatre. Even if only for a few months, he achieved it in 1925, at the Hull House Theatre in Chicago. Maintaining a permanent theatre was difficult: there was a shortage of actors, time, and funds for the new productions. In the USA, Vaičkus staged performances based on previously directed comedies, dramas, and melodramas (*Genovaitė* was particularly popular both in Lithuania and in the USA), as well as new works by Lithuanian and foreign playwrights. Among the new works he directed, the most notable were the historical plays *Kęstutis* and *Mindaugas* by Adamas Asnykas. Vaičkus tried to show the heroes of the medieval history of Lithuania in lavish costumes (he used the photographs of these plays in advertising campaigns), and he used a choir in *Mindaugas*. The majority of the audience were émigré workers who expected entertainment and comedy from the theatre and not serious dramas. Vaičkus was facing some serious competition: the vaudeville group 'Dzimdzi Drimdzi' that came to the USA from Lithuania and included Vaičkus's students won the hearts of the audiences. People preferred evenings of comic songs and plays to Vaičkus's drama performances.

In the USA, Vaičkus tried out new activities: in 1924 and 1926, at the Victor Talking Machine Company, he recorded Lithuanian folk songs, his own comic monologues and dialogues on twenty-eight records. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of American independence in 1926, Vaičkus contributed to the organisation of Lithuanian Days in Philadelphia by arranging a theatrical procession: living paintings on the Lithuanian float depicted pagan Lithuania, Lithuania enslaved by Russians, and Lithuania reborn. This event was filmed by the American film company Cineova. On Vaičkus's initiative, his drama theatre and Cineova toured the Lithuanian colonies for several months with theatrical and film evenings.

In 1929, he arrived in Hollywood to study sound cinema. His name found its way to the Hollywood press; he took part in performances organised by artists, read comic pieces, and directed one play with actors of different nationalities. Vaičkus's name appeared in articles, interviews, announcements, and reviews of past events. According to the information he himself provided, he acted

in several German and French films. Although no actual evidence of his film studies has been found, the testimonies of many people in the press about Vaičkus's extraordinary abilities as an entrepreneur and manager make it very likely that he could have been able to organise the finishing touches for the first Lithuanian film in Hollywood.

Vaičkus's activities upon his return to Lithuania are analysed in the chapter 'Antras mano gyvenimo lapas – padėti lietuviškam filmui kertinį akmenį' (The Second Page of My Life: Laying the Cornerstone for Lithuanian Cinema). Along with the cinema, episodes of theatrical activity and Vaičkus's efforts to return to drama theatre are discussed in this part.

Having spent five years in Lithuanian colonies and two years in Hollywood, Vaičkus returned to Lithuania in 1931 and began developing the idea of Lithuanian cinema. He brought together people from culture, academia, business, and politics, founded the company 'Lietfilm', and established a cinema studio to train actors for future films. His idea was that the first Lithuanian film should be historical. While still in Hollywood, he mentioned possible themes in the press: Kęstutis, Grand Duke of Lithuania, the book-smugglers, but back in Lithuania, he spoke that the first Lithuanian film should be *Kražių skerdynės* (The Kražiai Massacre). Vaičkus chose an exceptional event: according to historians, the courage of the people who defended the church in Kražiai in 1893 to resist the tsarist authorities, the brutality of the Cossacks who attacked peaceful believers, and the repressions that followed were the single-day event in the history of the nineteenth century Lithuania that was most widely reported in Europe and the world. The courage of believers with which they defended their faith and freedom impressed Vaičkus. Although there were many reasons that prevented him from creating the film, he spread the idea of Lithuanian cinema and of the film *Kražių skerdynės* in the imagination of many people: he wrote about it in the press, travelled all over Lithuania giving lectures and speeches, and organised committees for the creation of a film of 'the whole nation'. Unfortunately, he could not raise the necessary funds for the production of the film. Vaičkus, who vigorously pursued his goals in theatre and cinema, died before the age of fifty.

Homage to Juozas Vaičkus's memory is discussed in the chapters 'Atomazga: 1935-ieji' (Denouement: The Year 1935) and 'Epilogas. Lietuvos teatro šimtmečiui: Zudermanas, Vaičkus, Padegimas ir kiti' (The Epilogue. To the Centenary of Lithuanian Theatre: Sudermann, Vaičkus, Padegimas, and Others). The plans of 'Draugija Lietuvių dramos teatro kūrėjo Juozo Vaičkaus vardui įamžinti' (Society to Commemorate the Name of Juozas Vaičkus, the Founder of Lithuanian Drama Theatre), founded in 1938, were disrupted by the Soviet occupation and the war. Juozas Vaičkus has become quite a prominent figure of Lithuanian culture in books and articles on the history of theatre and film. To commemorate the centenary of Lithuanian theatre, the director Gytis Padegimas, who has been researching

Vaičkus's life and work for many years, dedicated his new drama and production *Pirmeiviai* (The Precursors) to Juozas Vaičkus.

The concluding chapter, 'Apibendrinimas: Juozo Vaičkaus veiklos akcentai' (Summary: The Highlights of Juozas Vaičkus's Work), looks at Vaičkus's activities from the current perspective: Vaičkus is an interesting personality because of his bold ideas and his relentless pursuit of opening up new spheres for Lithuanian culture. Although he did not realise many of his ambitions, his persistence, strangeness, and his ability to transcend the thresholds of thought and imagination leave an indelible impression.

Like Kazimieras Pakštas, another personality discovered by many people in the twenty-first century, Vaičkus exerts a powerful attraction. Pakštas did not leave the theatre director Rimas Tuminas in peace until he found the playwright Marius Ivaškevičius and produced his drama *Madagaskaras* (2004). Thanks to this production, many people, the film director Karolis Kaupinis among them, came to admire Pakštas. Pakštas's personality inspired Kaupinis to create the film *Nova Lituania* (2019).

Juozas Vaičkus, who is basically impenetrable in an academic text, is also asking for a drama, stage, and theatre. Padegimas's *Pirmeiviai* functions not only as a drama or a performance: it is also a symbolic return of the artist who created a theatre, who was expelled from that theatre, who was not allowed into the theatre, and who returned to the stage of the same theatre, which, admittedly, is now located in another palace. None of Vaičkus's competitors at the time – Konstantinas Glinskis, Antanas Sutkus, Andrius Oleka-Žilinskas, or Borisas Dauguvietis – returned to the theatrical stage in this way.

Many of the goals that Vaičkus had set for theatre, cinema, and acting schools could only be realised by a huge collective or state institutions. Unfortunately, the public was not yet prepared for the implementation of his ideas. The writing of this book made the role of Juozas Vaičkus in the history of Lithuanian clear: it acts not only and not so much in terms of actual results, theatre or cinema productions, but as a factor that propels the theatrical, cinematic, and cultural field, as a *spiritus movens* that is expressed in the relentless activity of Vaičkus as a cultural figure, a nurturer, and an educator.