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Psychiatry in Theatre

Anna 'Asja' Lācis (1891–1979): drama, trauma and neuropsychiatry

George Ikkos 

Pioneer female theatre director Asja Lācis was born in the Russian Empire's Livonia (Latvia) and gained a degree from neurologist and experimental psychologist Vladimir Bekhterev's (1857–1927) Institute of Psychoneurology in St Petersburg. She had sharp wit and excellent knowledge of Russian, German and French literature and in 1914 moved to Moscow to train at the Kommissarshevski Institute of Theatre Sciences. In 1917 she embraced the Bolshevik revolution and went on to make the most of its early commitment to gender equality and radical innovation in art.

Of interest to psychiatrists is Lācis' work as a children's theatre director. In *A Memoir* she recounts her experiences in Oryol (central Russia), where she was assigned in 1918. Here she found the *besprizorniki*, feral 'abandoned children ... black faced boys ... gangs of thieves – victims of world war and civil war', who repeatedly ran away from state help. When approached, they taunted and threatened her, but gentle perseverance was rewarded by lively engagement in her children's theatre workshop in a requisitioned aristocratic villa. She curtailed directorial authority, cherished their autonomy, cultivated their sensory acuity and trusted their psychological, moral and aesthetic development through collective production of performances by children for children.

Duties for the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros) took Lācis to Berlin in 1922, where she engaged with the city's flourishing artistic *avant-garde* and collaborated with theatrical genius Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), who recognised her outstanding acting talent. She married second husband philosopher and theatre director Bernhard Reich (1894–1972), who followed her to the USSR. Daughter Daga's ill health took Lācis to Capri in 1924, where she had an affair with German critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). They collaborated intellectually and he acknowledged her profound impact on his work. Infatuated, he pursued her unsuccessfully over a decade in Berlin, Riga and Moscow.

Following a period of exhausting activity, Lācis was admitted to hospital in 1926. Concerned, Benjamin travelled to the USSR and *Moscow Diary*, the vivid memoir of his frustrating visit, refers to her 'mental breakdown'. In a posthumously published Russian-language autobiography *The Red Carnation* she wrote: 'when I got home, I wasn't feeling well: my body listed to one side, I saw everything double, I lost my balance'. She returned to Germany in the late 1920s and had a similar episode in 1929 at a time of emotional turmoil: 'my coordination of movement became disturbed. Benjamin took me to the famous neural surgeon, Kurt Goldstein. "I can't diagnose you in just a few minutes," Goldstein said and invited me to come to his Sanatorium in Frankfurt am Main for treatment'. Migraine? Functional neurological symptoms? Regardless, an attempted cohabitation with Benjamin was marred by constant arguments and lasted only 2 months. Both were moody, intense.

During 1938–1948 Lācis was exiled to a forced labour camp. Following release, she returned to Latvia and developed a theatrical ensemble of international reputation in Valmiera despite the Cold War (1947–1991). Her *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator* was translated in French and Italian. She died in Riga aged 88.

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