# SIMPLY ENTERTAINMENT? CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND POST-TRUTH IN CONTEMPORARY COMEDY

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## Abstract

The paper concentrates on conspiracy theories as a subject for contemporary comedy. Based on performances by Latvian theatre artists, the author argues that comedies in the post-truth media environment function as a hybrid genre, mixing entertainment and public discourse, fact and fiction. The article concentrates on the strategies used by the performers to influence the discourse of conspiracies and mould their audience's perceptions and beliefs by strengthening their pre-existing biases.

**Keywords:** *comedy, entertainment, conspiracy theories, theatre, post-truth, audience*

In September 2022, the Latvian-based research company SKDS conducted a survey to explore public beliefs in Latvia regarding the existence of a so-called "world government." According to the survey results, 53% of respondents agreed with the statement "There is a secret organisation or group of people that has influence over all global processes and controls many of the world's governments." In contrast, 27% of participants rejected the notion of such an organisation, while 20% expressed uncertainty, selecting the option "it is difficult to say" [Kaktiņš 2022].

Conspiracy theories have increasingly become a focal point of scholarly interest in recent years, particularly in relation to the role of social media, global politics, and the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying theatre as a part

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of the media system, this article seeks to explore strategies employed by Latvian theatre-makers when addressing the theme of conspiracy theories. I will concentrate on a case study of three Latvian performances – "The Last Straw", "Don Quixote of an Apartment Building", and "Operation Mindfuck" – while examining how entertainment is used to communicate with a broader public of theatre-goers and the effects it can have on audiences. The study uses narrative and semiotic approaches, while also concentrating on the contextual levels of the perception of a performance and argues that in the context of post-truth and hybrid media environment entertainment can become a factor in strengthening shared beliefs in groups of spectators.

Within the disciplines of cultural and communication studies, the cultural landscape evolving in the 21st century is frequently characterised as a "post-truth" regime. The discourse surrounding this subject exposes a growing disillusionment among large segments of global society with the concept of an objective, verifiable reality. It is not that truth is entirely absent, but rather that it is perceived as unattainable and unverifiable, thereby diminishing its practical relevance. In this context, truth is often supplanted by personal beliefs, ideologies, and impressions, that reinforce individuals' preexisting sense of reality.

Furthermore, the increasing globalisation of politics, economics, and culture has distanced ordinary citizens from the decision-making processes that affect their lives, fostering a sense of powerlessness. This phenomenon is compounded by cognitive biases, such as the tendency to interpret significant events — whether personal or societal — as intentional rather than accidental. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has also created extensive networking opportunities, enabling the proliferation of alternative narratives. As a result, while conspiracy theories have historically occupied a marginal position in society, the 21st century has witnessed a marked surge in their prominence, with these theories increasingly gaining social legitimacy and acceptance [McIntyre 2018].

Conspiracy theories are generally defined by two key components: first, they provide explanations for events or circumstances as the result of a secretive plot by typically powerful conspirators; second, they assert that a significant secret is being deliberately withheld from the public. Culturally, conspiracy theories, especially about race and religion, have been present in the European context; however, in theatre, at least in Latvia, conspiracy theories have never previously been an important subject. In the few cases that could be gathered during the last decades, conspiracies are mostly used as a narrative tool to construct metatheatrical performances utilising mystifications, alternate history narratives, etc. Hence, importantly, post-truth performances dealing with conspiracy theories treat this subject differently.

All the performances discussed here belong to a commercial strand of theatre, and their primary aim is to entertain their public. However, the specific comedies are dependent on semi-documentary inspirations and treat contemporary conspiracy theories (COVID-19, QAnon, and Big Pharma) as belonging to the factual, not fictional reality. This creates an interesting opportunity to reflect on how entertainment functions as an information dissemination tool and whether it offers any critical reflection on controversial subjects. While conspiracy theories are a prominent subject in fields such as media studies, especially in the context of emerging hybrid media environments, they have seldom been explored in theatre practice or theory. It can be noted, for instance, that when addressing themes related to COVID-19, the emphasis in theatre studies is typically on the technical aspects, and theatre is framed as a medium of resilience [Beeler & Beeler 2022; Boland 2020], rather than as a direct commentary on the crisis itself. This can be partially explained by the fact that the focus of theatre studies often excludes mainstream theatre practices that lack artistic excellence or clear social or political significance.

## Case studies

The first Latvian performance to engage with the themes of conspiracy theories and misinformation in the post-COVID environment was *The Last Straw* (*Pēdējais salmiņš*) by Ivo Briedis, directed by Toms Treinis, and premiered at the National Theatre of Latvia in 2019.

On a narrative level, the performance is structured as a dialogue between two opposing worldviews, although in time, the spectator may realise they are not necessarily exclusive. Edvīns, a rational, sceptical man, is married to Marija, who tends to believe in various superstitions. The couple's difficulty conceiving escalates their beliefs, and the conflict mounts when Marija invites a healer Voldemārs Kuzma to live with them.

The male character of Kuzma is played by actress Lāsma Kugrēna and becomes the focal point of the comedy. Kugrēna uses a grotesque manner and crossdressing that in a psychologically realistic performance underscore subversion of conventional notions of "normalcy". It is important to recognise that crossdressing in Latvian culture and in theatre does not have a tradition that the broader public would be familiar with, and on rare occasions when it has been used, it was typically in the context of cruder comedies. Hence, in this case, challenging gender norms also becomes a sign that the subject the character represents, namely the alternative medicine practices, are being ridiculed.

However, this reading of the plot is complicated by two additional aspects of the play. The first one is the fact that Kuzma is based on the real-life figure of Ivan Kuznetsov, a well-known Russian inventor and healer, whose acupuncture mat is

very popular in the region and likely encountered or even used by many members of the audience. Therefore, it could be argued that any ridicule directed at Kuzma, to an extent, could be construed as targeting the audience.

The second aspect is plot-based. As the play progresses, it turns out that Edvīns hosts a television program that promotes alternative medicine. He does not reflect on the contradiction between his personal beliefs and professional role, viewing the latter merely as a means of financial gain. The lack of morals in Edvīns' professional choices is later revealed to be profound when his doctor-friend invites him to switch sides – promote pharmaceuticals, despite their shared scepticism regarding the efficacy of drugs.

Traditional medicine is widespread and culturally accepted in Latvian society, often used to complement Western-style medicine. However, the scepticism towards conventional medicine during the last decade is becoming more widespread, and the plot of Edvīns' career clearly references conspiracy theories recognisable to the audience – namely, so-called 'Big Pharma' and by extension vaccine scepticism.

The reviews indicate that the performance is not necessarily critical of such conspiracies. For example, theatre critic Atis Rozentāls observes that, while Kuzma is a comical character, he is also portrayed as sincere and unwavering in his beliefs, thus evoking audiences' sympathies. In contrast, conventional medicine is presented as an enterprise driven by financial motivations rather than a concern for the welfare of patients. Rozentāls concludes that the juxtaposition of alternative and conventional medicine in the play invites the audience to recognise flaws in both fields but notes that the emotional choice represented in the play is not between truth and falsehood, but rather between "freaks and cynics" [Rozentāls 2019]. Thus, the critic situates the play in the context of post-truth, acknowledging that the "truth" or message of the performance is largely dependent on pre-existing personal beliefs of the audience, and the performance itself is not in fact positioned to offer an opinion either way.

In contrast, "Don Quixote of an Apartment Building" ("Blokmājas dons Kihots") written by Artūrs Dīcis and directed by Gundars Silakaktiņš at the Dailes Theatre in 2020 appears to provide a more structured depiction of conspiracy theories, with reviewers interpreting the narrative as a commentary on mental health issues [Svarinska 2020]. However, a closer examination reveals that the strategies employed in the theatre production exhibit striking similarities to those used in "The Last Straw".

Dīcis is an actor turned contemporary playwright, and he specialises in a style that could be described as a collage of collected texts. Dīcis frequently uses large quantities of slightly modified media and social media quotes to form the body of his plays achieving a sense of contemporary relevance, while also representing on stage

people that are typically marginalised in contemporary Latvian theatre, namely, *petit bourgeois* and their everyday experiences. Due to this, in recent years Dīcis has become a noteworthy contemporary playwright in commercial entertainment theatre field relying heavily on his audience's contextual perceptions – ability to identify his plays as "life-like".

"Don Quixote of an Apartment Building" revolves around a hostage situation. An electrician named Viktors is tasked with entering private flats to check electricity meters, and during this mundane task he encounters a nameless character identifying himself as "the Question Mark" who refuses to let Viktors leave. The Question Mark is a conspiracy theorist, and as he tries to free himself, Viktors gradually becomes ensnared in his world of unconventional beliefs.

The play is staged as a comedy, and much of its comic appeal emerges from Question Mark's bizarre way of connecting unrelated subjects to form an all-encompassing worldview. However, the playwright has described the play as "a contemporary tragedy" rather than a comedy, and the sign system of the play showcases the fluidity of such concepts as "norm" and "abnormal".

One of the key aspects of critical thinking is a constant analytical re-evaluation of the information and what is considered true in any situation. In "Don Quixote of an Apartment Building" it quickly becomes obvious that the one questioning and re-examining the reality is the conspiracy theorist, while "the normal one" lacks the ability to question his reality or approach it creatively and is dependent on and maintaining a system he does not understand (electrical grid, societal control mechanisms, etc.). The title of the play further underscores this contrast, since Don Quixote, the famous character from Cervantes' novel, is traditionally seen as an idealised figure of a seeker of truth, and it is perhaps a coincidental irony that this attitude is often referenced in journalism as a metaphor for an ideal practitioner in that profession. The reference to an "apartment building" also brings forward the question of agency – is the quest for truth a prerogative of certain privileged groups, for example, and why should others accept this truth without examining it?

The genre difference between the play and the performance raises questions about the intended perception of the piece. The performance uses the metaphor of theatre as a mirror. The performance is being performed outside of the theatre building looking in – the spectators are seated in the Daile Theatre garden, looking in through a glass wall of the theatre's café where the actors are. As the performance ends, the lights dim, and the glass wall takes on a mirror-like quality. However, there is a difference in how a "theatre-mirror" functions in a comedy or in a tragedy. Tragedies deal with larger societal matters and reflect society in a manner that in all seriousness highlights the cause of the problem; comedies on the other hand often concentrate on individual level and use distortions to draw audience's attention to

the subject matter. As Patrice Pavis explains, while tragedy engages with our fears, comedy works to counteract them by providing a shield against them – a comedy presents a distorted version of social realities, often based on misunderstandings or errors, thus allowing spectators to form a distance from the object of ridicule and laugh. [Pavis 2003: 183–184] In comedy, the object of laughter is typically "the other", and while it does not preclude deeper reflection on the subject or oneself, if the audience perceives the fictional reality of the play as "life-like" and relatable, they are likely to view the character's search for truth—despite its misguided nature—primarily in a sympathetic light, as a sincere effort to uncover hidden knowledge in an uncertain and deceptive world.

The validity of this interpretation is supported by a spectator review, which the theatre has intriguingly used to promote the performance. Kristaps Baņģis, a well-known activist in the community of alternative knowledge on the social platform *X,* endorses the play: ""The Don Quixote of an Apartment Building" raises a lot of questions that come to mind in this schizophrenic world of (COVID) restrictions (...)" Given the reviewer's context, the categories of "normal" and "abnormal" in the play are clearly fluid.

This example brings into focus the intricate relationships between the intentions and contexts of the authors of a performance and the positioning of the audience. My last example – "Operation Mindfuck", created by Yael Ronen and Dimitrij Schaad and directed by Alvis Hermanis at the New Riga Theatre in 2022 – demonstrates just how complicated these relationships are.

Unlike the previous theatre artists, Hermanis is an internationally well-known theatre director of considerable status, who has been working in an *avant-garde* theatre environment for decades. However, his professional stance in recent years has changed, and it affects the reading of this piece.

Hermanis' international career came to an abrupt halt in 2019, and he sees it as an act of ideologically motivated censorship stemming from his public opposition to European refugee policies. Recently, Hermanis has also been marginalised in Latvian theatre context. His theatre building was under a prolonged renovation, and during this time Hermanis argued that the temporary space of the company was not suited for serious art, but also – that he believed the theatre should become more audience-friendly. This resulted in a repertoire consisting mainly of commercial pieces and comedies, as well as Hermanis' adopting a more traditional directorial style, often dependent on the text and relatively closed to interpretation. As a result, Hermanis has lost a significant amount of critical acclaim, and this he also identifies as a politically motivated process, believing that critics belong to a radical left-wing conspiracy. What is significant here is that his views are publicly accessible, as Hermanis actively uses *Facebook* as a self-publishing platform and frequently has

his posts reprinted or quoted in sympathetic cultural outlets, as well as on society gossip pages.

This creates an intriguing paradox: while most of Hermanis' recent performances are not explicitly political; they are created by an artist who is known for his outspoken ideological views. Hermanis has also, to some extent, shifted his audience base—while a segment of long-time fans continues to attend his productions, many have been replaced by a new group of individuals who align themselves with the values expressed by the director or his regular social media interlocutors, particularly those with conservative, right-leaning ideologies. For this group, Hermanis has become a figurehead, representing a self-identified marginalised segment of society that feels disconnected from power, both politically and culturally. As I will demonstrate, the impact of the performance is dependent on the group to which the spectators belong.

"Operation Mindfuck" explores various conspiracy theories through a layered narrative. The play itself is a study of the emergence of cults – it concentrates on Discordianism, a religion celebrating chaos that, according to internet sources, was founded in the 1960 as a mock cult but has acquired a sincere following in the 21st century. However, Hermanis presents the play to the audience without any emotional or analytical pointers, almost as a neutral reading of the text. Therefore, the construction of the play text becomes the main source of the meaning.

The first layer centres on the fictionalised creation of a well-known conspiracy theory QAnon. A budding writer lands a job producing clickbait news and quickly learns that the more outlandish the story, the more successful it becomes. The idea is characterised by referencing real-life conspiratorial claims, such as the idea that Finland does not exist or that birds during the COVID-19 pandemic were replaced by surveillance drones. This level clearly identifies conspiracy theories as fabricated and propagated in the media and can be seen as a critical commentary.

The second layer of the performance introduces a political dimension. A lobbyist discovers an unremarkable man with no social media presence, ideological leanings, or talents, and turns him into a successful politician. The political process here is shown through the lens of a puppet-master relationship, creating the sense that the political process is never transparent, and the public does not actually know who governs. This layer is strengthened by a casting choice – the lobbyist is played by a Latvian actor turned populist politician, Artuss Kaimiņš. The play draws on references to the political dynamics of the United States, particularly the rise of Donald Trump, so the inclusion of Kaimiņš effectively localises the play's political critique to Latvia. However, it also evokes a specific kind of watching.

Marvin Carlson has written extensively about the concept of ghosting in theatre – the fact that the audience members actively use their individual memories

of previous stagings, interpretations, castings, company or space contexts etc., and his understanding of how the contexts become visible through the body of the performer also applies here [Carlson 2011: 52–95]. Despite Kaimiņš being an actor many spectators do not primarily perceive him as a character portrayed by a professional, but rather as a politician commenting on a political process. In this way, his presence on stage appears to legitimise what is depicted, as he brings an element of insider knowledge to the performance.

Carlson examines such strategies of perception from a semiotic perspective, suggesting that rational analysis is used to identify the connections between the layers of embedded material. As I will discuss further, theatre however is not necessarily a rational experience for the audience. Therefore, in the context of entertainment, I think Carlson is effectively complemented by McConachie's insights who, while discussing theatre perception in the context of neurology, notes that the processes of conceptual integration (simultaneous perception of character, actor, text, staging, audience, etc.) usually happen with little conscious thought [McConachie 2013: 53]. In addition, for McConachie, this process also involves "absent agents" [ibid.: 55], for example, playwright's or director's intentions; therefore, Hermanis' expressed mistrust of "the establishment" is a factor even if it is not reflected in the performance itself.

The third layer of the production portrays the level of the "masters". A mysterious character is introduced into the plot, and she fluctuates between the roles of a businesswoman running a clickbait operation and of a "deity of chaos". The organisation she leads is described as a force bent on destroying reality and thus awakening humanity spiritually. Ironically, conspiracy theories are characterised on seemingly mutually exclusive levels: after being initially debunked as fabrications, they are nevertheless revealed to be real and threatening. The conspiracy theory theme, especially in social and political environments, appears in the reviews as the central message of the performance – Rozentāls, for example, bases his review around the concept of "manipulation" in society [Rozentāls 2022], while Normunds Akots uses that of "control" [Akots 2022], but to a very similar end.

## Discussion

The performances I have briefly summarised share common characteristics that offer an opportunity to examine similar pieces of contemporary entertainment theatre in a specific context – as a hybrid genre. To summarise – the key similarities include the genre of comedy, the factual inspiration and contemporary references, as well as the relationship between theatre makers and their audiences.

When describing the dramatic form of comedy, Pavis suggests that laughter can serve two primary functions: it can be either participatory or exhibit superiority,

and it also serves as a defence mechanism against tragic emotions [Pavis 2003: 183–184]. He also states that the goal of comedy is to amuse [ibid.: 183], which could be interpreted as the escapist element in the entertainment, and given Pavis' frequent references to Aristotle, it is reasonable to infer that he views the functions of comedy as primarily didactic, entertaining, and therapeutic – helping the audience to overcome their fears or anxieties.

This categorisation summarises well the traditional dramatic form, however, in the contemporary context Pavis' description remains somewhat limited, since it never addresses the contemporary reality: a fragmented society where belief systems reflected in a comedy would seem absurd to some and very serious to others without a clear distinction to which group constitutes "the norm". But humour is profoundly dependent on cultural context and shared frames of reference [Ödmark 2018: 3], in addition to being influenced by the changing landscape of media, which has also changed the function of entertainment genres in general.

In contrast to theatre studies that are not particularly interested in entertainment, the issue of comedy and its effects is well-researched in the field of media studies – both in discussing media products such as situation comedies, stand-up, late-night comedies, as well as emerging genres, for example, infotainment. For the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight that the dramatic comedies analysed beforehand are created and function much like the products of these genres. All of them rely on a recognisable net of contemporary references that are frequently quoted and then supplemented by artistic distortion, sometimes in the form of a comment, while maintaining that the aim of such communication is no more than entertainment. However, in reality, all are dependent on a spectatorship that shares values and orientations, and thus – the ability to laugh about the same things, and also communicate ideas and attitudes.

When discussing conspiracy theories in the previously mentioned comedy genres, Philip Scepanski notes that conspiracy theories are representative of a populist mistrust of power. As such, they are related to how comedians of marginalised backgrounds perceive and communicate about culture, namely, both comedy and conspiracy theories have served as tools of resistance and protest. [Scepanski 2021: 90] This explains why conspiracy theories tend to emerge among minority communities, since they sometimes are subjects of actual conspiracies and thus prone to be distrustful, as well as draws attention to many conspiracy theories starting out as a joke when conspiracy theorists test their ideas in the "just kidding" mode of humour. [Ibid.: 93]

The shared tactics and approaches did not pose a problem while conspiracy theories remained confined to marginalised groups. However, by the second decade of the 21st century, when they became more widespread, mainstream

media began to take notice, leading to the hybridisation of genres. The process is framed by an attempt to resist the post-truth attitudes, as well as the changes in the media landscape when media consumption has become fragmented, offering each consumer the opportunity to cherry-pick their sources of information. As media researcher Sara Ödmark concludes, it creates opportunities for alternative media actors to be more influential as well as greater incidental exposure to news through other forms of media genres, such as entertainment [Ödmark 2018: 2]. In this new media environment, audiences are not homogeneous – for low news media consumers, contemporary comedy functions as a gateway to the public debate, while for high media consumers it is a complementary text that builds communities and strengthens social bonds [ibid.: 5]. Such communities are often formed around opinion leaders (comedians as celebrities among them), and they influence the news agenda by the way they frame information. [Ibid.: 4]

This is one of the reasons why comedy in certain areas has become more influential, since it is understood as a way of reaching unwilling audiences. Many news outlets use comedic strategies to complement news programs; late-night television in the United States of America during President Trump's first term broke a long-standing tradition of political neutrality and partly converted itself in a political commentary genre, thus stating their moral belief that the truth and facts do exist, etc. However, comedies can be used not only to fight, but also to spread misinformation. "One reason comedy is interesting as a form of social negotiation is that it is in a sense considered "play", which sets it aside from normal discourse. That something is "just a joke" allows for messages and a framework to be presented that in a more serious setting might not have been acceptable," summarises Ödmark. [Ödmark 2018: 5]

Theatre in this new environment becomes a space for the segmented audience to interact. As Ödmark stated, audiences, of course, are not homogeneous; however, the physical coexistence in a shared space has the potential to influence even diverse groups.

When discussing perceptions of theatre, Bruce McConachie focuses on neurological processes. While acknowledging the importance of semiotics in the process of decoding performances, he nevertheless insists that for most spectators, this is not the primary way of experiencing theatre. However, since studies of individual audience members are limited and complex, much of the theory often focuses on the experiences of critics, academics, or spectators trained in specific aesthetics. For him, however, psychological evidence demonstrates that emotional, rather than intellectual involvement is crucial for spectators [McConachie 2013: 57], and it is primarily emotional relationships with characters that form the basis for either "sympathetic or antipathetic responses" [ibid.: 60].

McConachie writes that the enjoyment of a spectator derives from his ability "go with the flow of performance": "Audience attention in the theatre may be momentarily interrupted, or spectators may choose to stop the "flow" of a performance by unblending actor/characters to momentarily think about the work of such singular agents as actors, directors, and playwrights. But usually not for long. The pleasurable effects of "flow" generally pull spectators back into cognitive activities of blending and empathizing". [McConachie 2013: 55–56]

The collective experience of the theatre is a factor, and McConachie talks about enjoyment of "the feeling of togetherness" as being emotionally contagious [McConachie 2013: 69]. Thus, theatre experience can be conceptualised as networking: "Networks are sociological categories, useful for grouping average beliefs and responses but not reliable for determining individual actions. Nonetheless, because we are social animals, we tend to respond within the boundaries or our networks. (...) All performance networks limit the reach of every drama, including the kinds of meanings that spectators within the networks will tend to generate." [Ibid.: 70]

I believe it is important to note that McConachie's description is not entirely all-inclusive, as there are types of theatre that specifically require spectators to be active, inquisitive, and capable of subverting the premises presented by a performance. However, it seems that this description demonstrates how audiences typically behave in a commercial entertainment environment, especially – since they have been conditioned to do so by the media environment that utilises these principles regularly.

As McConachie concludes, the meaning of any performance obviously emerges from the interplay among performers, spectators, and other agents in the network. [McConachie 2013: 73] However, it also explains how the emotional and public experiences shape and reinforce beliefs and orientations in audiences, especially as in the performances discussed previously, when theatres avoid a clear stance, allowing the private beliefs of the spectators to fully determine the view on a controversial subject. As stated by Ödmark, framing of the subject becomes an important tool for influencing a discourse.

Whether by design or coincidence these performances normalise conspiracy theories as a form of public discourse in contemporary Latvian society. This strategy, intentional or not, positions the plays as reflective of the broader social climate, where conspiracy theories are no longer merely fringe beliefs but are woven into the fabric of contemporary discourse. The humour in these productions, rather than offering a critical distance from the subject matter, invites the audience to engage with conspiracy theories as a form of reality, reflecting the shifting boundaries of what is considered "normal".

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