Rīga
International
Biennial of
Contemporary
Art

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Making a drama out of the crisis

For 10 years, politicians have been grappling with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Now, it's the turn of the theatre. By *Sarah Hemming*

In a tiny store in Montgomery, Alabama stands a man surrounded by bolts of cloth. The floor is creaky and the door handle sticks. The stock is plain: wool, flax, hemp, cotton. "Nothing flashy," he says. "In Alabama, you don't work to live. You live to work."

This is 1847 and the man is Henry Lehman. He rises at 5am and works all hours, selling cloth by the inch to pay his debts. This shop is his whole world: just three years after leaving his native Bavaria, he's making his way. The sign on the door reads "Lehman Brothers".

So how did we get from there to the famous scenes of 2008, when Lehman came crashing to the ground, bringing the global economy to the brink of collapse? For 10 years economists and politicians have fought over the answer as capitalism has faltered and populism soared. Now, it's the turn of the artists. *The Lehman Trilogy*, by Italian dramatist Stefano Massini, opens next week at London's National Theatre, under the direction of Sam Mendes. An epic, searching affair, it brings Lehman and his two brothers back to witness the eventual unravelling of their company.

"At the end of it you do feel you have gone on this enormous journey," says Simon Russell Beale, one of the three actors who portray the founding fraternity. "Alabama at the beginning seems very far away. But we never lose sight of the fact that, even when the three central men are dead and it is late on in the story, they are still around. It makes the moral dilemmas in the story clearer. Basically, what would the three founders think of what happened in 2008?"

Finance is not an obvious gift to a playwright, particularly in an age of mind-boggling derivatives. Drama usually lies more in bedsheets than spreadsheets. Shakespeare didn't have to unpick the subprime mortgage crisis or grapple with collateralised debt obligations. Even as a theatre critic for the Financial Times, the news that a play will tackle the 2008 crash doesn't quicken the pulse. David Hare's 2009 verbatim play *The Power of Yes* assembled opinion on stage from dozens of experts. It did an excellent job in covering the ground — but Hare himself admitted it wasn't rip-roaring drama.

And the crash is a crowded cultural field. Books, articles, films, documentaries — dozens of them — have charted the end of Lehman's. A 2009 film, *The Last Days of Lehman Brothers*, dramatised the boardroom battles that preceded its demise; Adam McKay's 2015 film, *The Big Short*, Charles Ferguson's 2010 documentary *Inside Job*, J.C Chandor's 2011 film *Margin Call* and the 2011 HBO television film *Too Big to Fail* (based on Andrew Ross Sorkin's book) all lifted the lid on the rickety financial market in which it was embroiled.

The Lehman Trilogy has to do something different to succeed. NT deputy artistic director Ben Power, who has written the English version, says the play has the sweep, scope and ambition to do just that. "It does something more complex and interesting than just tell the story of the lead-up to bankruptcy," says Power. "It asks, in a very, very big way, 'How did we get here?'"

Massini's drama spools back to when the Lehman Brothers were just that: three impoverished Jewish siblings newly arrived on American soil. The play starts in 1844, as Henry Lehman opens that tiny fabric shop in Alabama, grafting to keep his business on the road. From there it spills forward over three hours, three parts and three generations as a one-room family firm evolves into a huge global concern.

We watch as the business shifts into cotton, into credit, into banking. We see the arrival of the railways, the creation of the stock exchange, the advent of film. The company weathers grief, the civil war, the Great Depression — only to implode, spectacularly, in 2008. With each iteration, we see the emergence of modern America and with it modern capitalism. "If you want to make money, you need to find the simple things before they become simple things," says Philip Lehman in 1887. He could be talking about Apple.

> 'The play asks very good questions about when did capitalism become, in the eyes of many, a bad idea?'

"Really it's about how American finance, how the American capitalist mindset, was created," says Power. "You keep seeing the country reinvent itself and change itself. And what might be unexpected is that the play celebrates that: it's quite romantic about it. It's an American Dream story — a story about an immigrant family who contribute in a really positive way for a very long time to the making of America and the making of the western world."

The trilogy trains a long lens, then, on the question of how we got here. But what's really striking about it is its style. It feels like an epic poem, studded with refrains, repetitions and patterns. There's something myth-like, almost scriptural about it — we're seeing recent history unfold like a parable.

And above all, it's a family saga — a form as old as storytelling itself — and a classic three-part story of creation, consolidation and loss. It's about fathers and sons, falling in love, family feuds — all the stuff that drives drama from the ancient Greeks to *The Godfather*.

"We can see ourselves and our families in these people," says Power. "The play explores where hubris and ambition meet, at what point the wrong decisions are taken and where the build to 2008 begins. But it does it in a really human way.

"I don't think success for *The Lehman Trilogy* equals 'do you fully understand all the financial mechanisms now?'" he adds. "It's interested in the people and the ideas behind the financial models, rather than the systems themselves."

Traditionally empathy has helped finance to find a voice on stage. Writers from Ben Jonson to Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller have tackled the human cost of financial affairs — as of course did Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*. Miller, that great critic of the American Dream, made plain the terrible impact of corporate cover-up in *All My Sons*, and his masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* nailed the cost of failure so movingly that on the play's first night in 1949 businessmen wept openly in the stalls.

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From main: a re-enactment of the famous images taken of Lehman Brothers employees following the collapse of the company in 2008, photographed for the FT by Greg Funnell; Simon Russell Beale, Ben Miles and Adam Godley in 'The Lehman Trilogy' at the National Theatre — main image shot by Catalli Mark Douet

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Rīga International Biennial of Contemporary Art

Travel

Latvia | Once favoured by stag parties, today the capital is staging a new modern art biennial and showing off its cultural side. By *Kirsty Lang*

The reinvention of Riga

I'm lying on a waterbed in the pitch black. On the ceiling is a video screen of starfish reproducing in slow motion on a coral reef. The soundtrack is from a 1970s soft porn film. As a devotee of David Attenborough's *Blue Planet*, I'm thoroughly enjoying the whole experience — until a complete stranger parts the black curtains and climbs in next to me, triggering a wave motion in the waterbed. We're inside a video installation by the Berlin-based artist Anne Duk Hee Jordan called "Ziggy and the Starfish". From the outside, the artwork looks like a four-poster bed shrouded in black drapes and — even stranger — it's on display in a functioning railway station alongside ticket machines and timetables.

Art Station Dubulti is a striking Modernist building overlooking the Baltic Sea with a roof reminiscent of a huge wave. It's one of eight venues hosting the inaugural Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (Riboca) that runs from June until the end of October. Five minutes' walk from the station is a white sandy beach stretching for 30km. This is Jurmala, the Hamptons of Latvia, just 30 minutes by train from the capital.

There has been a proliferation of art biennales in recent years as cities recognise their power to attract not only tourists with larger wallets but also artists, who play a key role in the regeneration of urban spaces. Riboca is financed entirely by private money. Its youthful Russian founder, Agniya Mirgorodskaya, studied in London and is passionate about contemporary art and its power to transform lives. She is also the daughter of a powerful St Petersburg fishing magnate, which she says has made the Latvian political class sometimes invasions of young men attracted by budget flights, cheap beer and pretty girls. Decades of postwar Soviet occupation had left it shabby and neglected. The country took a big hit in the 2008 crash, leading to a mass exodus of young educated Latvians. (There's an estimated 100,000 in the UK.) In the winter months, Riga can feel like a ghost town full of crumbling, empty buildings.

One of the aims of the biennial is to lure back some of the more talented members of the diaspora by reinventing Riga as a destination for art lovers, hipsters and mindful millennials. Abandoned factories and dilapidated Belle Époque buildings are gradually being turned into art spaces, pop-ups and co-working spaces for tech start-ups. It reminds me of Lisbon or Porto before the Instagrammers descended there en masse.

Even if you're not interested in modern art, downloading the Riboca app on to your smartphone or tablet is a great way to discover venues that are off most tourists' maps. There are art installations in the ferry port, the former residence of a wealthy merchant and an abandoned textile factory called the Bolshevichka.

Our waiter sprayed the white paper tablecloth with purées — and encouraged us to mop up with bread

red and yellow, and charming squares lined with café terraces. It's also home to the largest number of Art Nouveau buildings in the world, reminder of the city's prosperous heyday as an important trading post on the Baltic Sea. For centuries Riga was part of the Hanseatic League that dominated trade along the coast of northern Europe. Timber, furs, tar, flax, honey, wheat and rye from the Russian empire passed through Riga en route to England and Flanders — with cloth and manufactured goods going in the other direction.

By the turn of the 20th century, Riga was a cosmopolitan hub with large German and Jewish communities (Isaiah Berlin was born there). George Armitstead, the mayor between 1901-12, came from a family of British merchants who House. In 2006 Queen Elizabeth unveiled a sculpture of Armitstead with his wife and dog in one of the nine public gardens laid out by him.

In one of those parks between Old Riga and the Art Nouveau district is the former university biology faculty now transformed into the main Riboca venue. The building is like stepping on to a period film set with 1950s laboratories, wood-panelled offices with black-and-white photographs of long-dead Soviet scientists on the wall.

Clockwise from main picture: the opening event of the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (Riboca) this month; sunset at Majori Alberta iela; Belgian artist Maarten Vanden Eynde's 'Pinpointing Progress' (2018) — Shutterstock; Walter Bibikow; Andrejs Strokins

In a former chemistry lab on the second floor full of dusty test tubes and mysterious medicine cabinets, Norwegian artist and chemist Sissel Tolaas has created an installation that captures the smells of the sea and the shores around the Gulf of Riga. It consists of nine glass beakers blowing out water-based fog, each one giving off a different smell.

One of my favourite installations is the "Brexit Kiosk" by British artist Michael Landy. He has taken an old Soviet newspaper kiosk, painted it with the Union Jack and put a revolving sign on top saying "Open for Business". Bemused Latvians — who are new and enthusiastic members of the EU — can buy typical British merchandise such as PG Tips, baked beans, HP Sauce and Tunnock's Teacakes as well as customised "Hard Brexit Condoms".

If you prefer something healthier, there's a new slow food market in Sporta2 Square — another Riboca venue — in what was once a sweet factory. The founder is celebrity chef Martins Ritins, a British-born Latvian who grew up in Corby. He arrived in Riga in the early 1990s to cook on a film set before becoming head chef at Vincents, which remains the country's most famous restaurant. You can grab a tofu salad or a carrot cake at Pagalms, a trendy café and bar on the grassy banks of the ancient moat next to the faculty of biology. From there take a ride on the City Canal aboard a traditional wooden boat that takes about an hour and doesn't feel naff or touristy.

Renting a bike is probably the best way to get around all the different venues of the biennial. Latvia is flat, which makes it perfect for cycling. You can get out of Riga in 20 minutes and there are plenty of cycle paths through the forests. I even saw people cycling on the beach in Jurmala.

After the art, the cycling and the tofu, I retreated to Hotel Neiburgs in a quiet street behind the Dome Cathedral in Old Riga. On the outside it's a listed Art Nouveau building with a monumental sculpted woman on the front. But the interior is modern and minimalist with a sign over the reception informing visitors that it's a "Mindful Hotel", whatever that means. There's also a spa that can be reserved for private use. (Hotel Bergs is another boutique hotel, just outside the old centre, which also combines 19th-century charm with contemporary sleekness.)

The Latvians are very keen on all things natural, from foraging mushrooms to celebrating the summer solstice with pagan rituals. The lakes, rivers and forests provide an endless supply of freshwater fish, venison, duck, sorrel, chanterelles and cloudberries.

This came to life particularly vividly over dinner at the Three Chefs restaurant, where our waiter sprayed the white paper tablecloth with different

On my last day in Riga, I sacrificed art for the traditional Latvian sauna. For the full experience, you need to go outside the city and allow up to three hours. I went to Saules Pirts (Sun Sauna), a small wooden bathhouse in the suburbs. There I was scrubbed with salt, rubbed in honey, swatted with leafy branches and immersed in cold water. In the winter you can roll in the snow, but as it was June, I lay on the lawn and enjoyed a relaxing snooze under a pile of birch leaves.

Brigita Stroda, an arts manager who used to work for the Latvian Tourist office, had told me that "nature is like a religion for the Latvians". As I lay on the cool grass breathing in the scent of birch sap, I understood what she meant.

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Kirsty Lang was as a guest of Riboca and Air Baltic, which operates flights to Riga from London Gatwick
Download the Riboca app at digital.rigabiennial.com
Saules Pirts sauna must be booked in advance on tel: +371 261 5231

Stressful family holiday? Call for the butler

England | Lucknam Park is offering a new style of break — self-catering within the hotel grounds. *Francisca Kellett* finds the right balance for a break with children

There are many emotions that accompany parenting. Tiredness, irritability, laziness. There's joy and love and all that too, of course; I'm not a monster. But sometimes, when it comes to holidays, we are worn-out and short-tempered, and we want things to be easy. This is why I've never held much truck with self-catering holidays. You arrive weary and harassed, and then you . . . go shopping? And cook? And clean? And make beds, do laundry? No. Hotels on the other hand, can turn you into the kind of person who starts every sentence with "don't". Don't shout, don't throw food, don't splash in the pool, don't draw on the walls with felt-tip pens.

The keeper's lodge, Lucknam Park

Enter a new style of hotel holiday: the compromise. Making the most of the facilities so you still get a break, but having a place to withdraw to, to let the kids shout and run (without drawing on the walls). Lucknam Park in Wiltshire, an easy two-hour drive from London, has cottoned on to this with its latest offering, the refurbished Keeper's Cottage, a short walk from the main hotel.

The hotel itself, dating from 1720, is a grand Palladian mansion, with an impressive approach along a mile-long sweep lined with 400 lime and beech trees. Inside, the decor is traditional and strait-laced: stuccoed ceilings, heavy silk curtains, oil portraits scowling from the walls. We didn't stay there for long, but were ushered into a golf buggy and driven to the cottage, a pretty, three-bedroom stone house with its own fenced-in garden. All was stylish and contemporary, with pale Farrow & Ball walls (felt-tips were immediately confiscated) and a rustic-chic kitchen equipped with everything a family could possible need.

A food hamper was discovered (no need to shop) and raided, and the cottage explored. Well, my husband and I lounged in the garden eating chocolate Florentines while our two daughters explored, shouting with delight at the wishing-well behind the cottage and the large television in the sitting room. There was little need for shushing them — or for the television, as the grounds at Lucknam are also staggeringly large, a 500-acre ramble of formal gardens, pony paddocks and flowering meadows.

Just a short walk away we found the walled garden, dating back to the 1830s, with blousy flowerbeds and shaped yew hedges, perfect for hide and seek. The stables were visited and ponies patted. The driveway was raced along (there is a row of bicycles by the entrance), and we found tennis courts, a playground and five-a-side football behind the main hotel — all empty and ours for the taking every time we visited. The modern pool and spa areas were not empty, but nor were they busy, and we spent several happy hours in the pool). Next door was the Brasserie, a stylish, casual affair, with huge doors opening on to the gardens where the children could run around, and a menu that included slow-cooked pork belly and wood-fired pizzas.

We avoided the main restaurant, the Michelin-starred Hywel Jones, with its formal, hushed atmosphere that my children would have destroyed. But on our last evening we had the perfect compromise: the restaurant came to us. While the girls rolled on our lawn, the chef Ben Taylor worked in the kitchen and the butler Stephen Cunningham brought us cold glasses of Chablis, scallops with hazelnuts and pancetta, local beef, and a perfectly risen strawberry soufflé. The set-up was such a departure from the pressure one can feel in a smart restaurant, that the girls tried everything.

The grounds of Lucknam Park

We had plans to explore the area, to drive over to Dyrham Park, a National Trust property, or even just to pop into The Hideaway, the kids' club right next door to our cottage. But we didn't do anything. We pottered around the grounds. We swam, we talked, we played, we ate. It was easy and we weren't tired, or irritable, and we barely said "don't" for the entire weekend. It was a compromise, but in the very best way imaginable.

Francisca Kellett was a guest of Lucknam Park. Keeper's Cottage costs from £1,470 per night. The three-course 'Dining in' menu costs from £65 per person, plus £175 for a private chef and waiter

Five country house hotels with cottages

Prices are per property per night; most are minimum three-nights.

Swinton Park Hotel, Yorkshire Dales
Sleeping up to eight, High Swinton Cottage, in the grounds of Swinton Park, has rough stone walls, flagstone floors and country-style decor. There are forest lodges and yurts on the estate, and the hotel is in a castle, with a pool and spa, cookery school and activities including fishing and shooting, cycling and pony trekking.
swintonestate.com; from £230

Gidleigh Park, Devon
The Pavilion is a pretty two-bedroom thatched cottage overlooking the croquet lawns. There are gardens to explore, tennis and fishing, and a hotel nanny service lets parents eat in Chris Simpson's restaurant in peace.
gidleigh.co.uk; £800

Gleneagles, Perthshire
The grand Scottish estate has an attached cluster of houses, Glenmore Lodges, which range from two to four bedrooms and are close enough to the main hotel to make use of the restaurants, pool, spa, children's club and outdoorsy activities such as falconry and gun-dog training. They can arrange for a grocery delivery, and breakfast can be brought with your paper.
gleneagles.com; from £545

Chewton Glen, New Forest
The tree houses at Chewton Glen are set apart from the main hotel, but allow full access to the children's club, spa, restaurants and everything else. The latest, opened at the end of last year, is the biggest yet, sleeping 12. There is a deck with two hot tubs, games for children, and access to a chef, massage therapist and personal trainer.
chewtonglen.com; from £2,850

Cliveden, Hampshire
Spring Cottage, sleeping six, is on the banks of the Thames, within 376 acres of National Trust parkland, and a short walk from Cliveden's maze. Families have full access to the hotel's restaurants, spa and pools and can charter the Cliveden flotilla for river trips.
clivedenhouse.co.uk; from £2,055