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To See Pink Elephants. Polygon Theatre. 2013.

Diverse theatre texts

Ene Paaver

With its population of 1,3 million, Estonia has a million visits to the theatre per year, about 200 new plays are staged, and around 100 new theatre texts are added yearly. Theatre has become more diverse institutionally, artistically, and increasingly diverse dramaturgy includes the transcription of improvisational plays, documentary collages, as well as classical drama. Theatre occupies a special position on the Estonian literary landscape, as do the staged plays themselves: there are even two big prizes for plays, the Theatre Union's original dramaturgy prize and the Cultural Endowment's literature foundation prize for plays.

Strategies of text creation have changed. Dramaturges are actively involved in the whole staging process. It is impossible to overestimate dramaturge Eero Epner's contribution to one of the brightest and biggest theatre creations of the last decade, which has also garnered international renown - the NO99 with its highly acclaimed plays. The massive *Unified Estonia Assembly* (2010) and *Savisaar* (2015) acutely raised questions about political and human responsibility, manipulating the public, and ethical governance. The theatre crossed the threshold of the cultural field and became the subject of passionate societal debate.

Collective creation is developing vigorously, as is the participation of the ensemble in creating text. *Filth*, by Tiit Ojasoo, Ene-Liis Semper and the ensemble, is a choreographic symphony of moments when the world crumbles (NO99, 2014). Theatre researcher and professor Luule Epner has written that today's theatre, which synthesises performing arts, "is more presence than depiction, more process than a finished work," and that the tendency is "the fruit of the distancing of theatre and drama, which has been going on for a long time" ("The Paradox of Postmodern Drama", TMK 2, 2011). These kinds of texts are often disjointed in their structure, without clear characters, indifferent towards traditional drama rules. Even when it comes to thorough remarks, the written text doesn't necessarily reflect the plentiful nature of the reality on the stage. For example, such is the case with the sparse text of the video and theatre artist Ene-Liis Semper's piece *El Dorado: The Clowns' Raid of Destruction* (dramaturge Laur Kaunissaare, NO99, 2015), which nevertheless has a very precise dramaturgical structure and is physically and visually very intense.

On the other hand, in big repertoire-based theatres as well as in smaller collectives, a widespread phenomenon is texts that have been written by the directors themselves, mostly during the course of rehearsals, and sometimes the directors even design the set and the sound, and act among the cast as well, as did Uku Uusberg, Urmas Vadi, Ivar Põllu, Tiit Palu, Andres Noormets, Urmas Lennuk, Andri Luup, Kertu Moppel, Anne Türrpu, Mart Koldits, and others.

In the 1980s, director Merle Karusoo started doing documentary theatre in Estonia. Presenting



NO75 Unified Estonia Assembly". Theatre NO99. 2010.

everyday life on a stage came off as shockingly unreserved in the closed state: the mundane moments candidly showed the absurdity of the Soviet system. Today, documentary theatre has become an influential part of the mainstream. In Jaak Prints' monologue *Screams of Fatherland*, you hear a sports commentator, speeches by politicians, letters from readers, reportages, songs, slogans, interviews, ads, and headlines, where not a comma has been changed (NO99, 2015). *Murru 422/2* (Kinoteater, 2017) by Paavo Piik and Priit Põldma (Kinoteater 2017) is based on the recollections of the prisoners and guards from a now closed huge Soviet-era prison. Andra Teede's *Estoplast* (Vanemuine, 2015) talks about a flagship factory of the Soviet Estonian manufacturing sector, a plastics and lamp factory, and about the values, relationships and dreams of people of those times, based on interviews with the employees and documents from the era. The base material for Tõnu Önnepalu's *Brother* (Drama Theatre, 2014) is a fortunate find: the writer bought an abandoned farm house and found a collection of letters that had remained there untouched for more than half a century. They were sent in 1920-1960 by a man who emigrated to the US to his brother, who stayed behind on their home island.

Folk tradition, folklore, testimonials have been used for years as material for plays by the director, professor and actress Anne Türrpu. Together with actress and director Eva Koldits and director Mart Koldits they led the production of *...and a Hundred Deaths* (Drama School, 2017), which is based on documents from the 19th century Christian brotherhood movement and also folklore, prophecies and visions. In the same directors' play *sugrierror.com* (Straw Theatre, 2011) Finno-Ugric rituals that have been preserved until today were performed by Estonian, Udmurt, Mari, and Khanty actors and singers.

Historical and cultural-historical dramaturgy has been very influential and plentiful in the 21st century. Perhaps it can be read as a sign of wanting to counter globalism by turning to one's own land and people to conceptualise the Estonian identity. Authors to point out in this context include Ivar Põllu, Andrus Kivirähk, Heidi Sarapuu, Mart Kivastik, Kauksi Ülle, Urmas Lennuk, Loone Ots, Toomas Suuman, Tiit Aleksejev, among others. There is a rich tradition of staging prose in Estonia. At the moment, the trend of 'writing over' the classics has become popular: distance is boldly taken from the original, and just some of the motifs, characters, etc., are used.

Traditional drama, meaning a play that has been completed before rehearsals begin as a literary work that clearly belongs in one genre is becoming rare. All the same, that is how one of the most influential Estonian writers Andrus Kivirähk writes, as do noteworthy prosaists like Mart Kivastik, Jaan Undusk, Tõnu Önnepalu, Martin Algas, Urmas Vadi, Tiit Aleksejev, Meelis Friedenthal, and Jan Kaus. The 2017 drama award went to creative writing professor Siret Campbell for her *Beatrice* (Vanemuine, 2017), which looks at the ancient question of the connection between the body and the spirit: if it becomes possible to transfer consciousness from one body to another, how do you determine a person's identity?

In 2008, the first specialised dramaturges graduated from the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, and dramaturgy studies at the Drama School continue. The private creative writing school Drakadeemia has now been active for around ten years. The Estonian Theatre Agency has organised a playwriting competition every other year since 1995 and initiated training courses and collaboration with the Writers' Union and the Directors' Association.

The universal playwright

Interview with
Piret Jaaks



Piret Jaaks

What themes are important for you in writing plays? How have you delved into them?

I have always been interested in people who are not in a position of power – the old, forgotten opera diva, a woman locked up by her husband, the victim of bullying at school, minorities among larger ethnic groups, etc. To me it seems that it is my task to give them a voice and make it heard.

When I was writing *To See a Pink Elephant* (1st prize at the 2011 Estonian Theatre Agency competition), I was haunted by the thought of a woman who is totally under her husband's control and who does not have the chance to make individual choices. In *Queen of the Night* (2015), I wanted to tell the story of an older woman, who once was a big star, but her fame did not stand the test of time. I was haunted by the question of what happens to us, when the society turns its back on us? Someone surely takes advantage of that situation and these people who live in isolation. That gave me the idea of how a gold digger arrives at this old dame's door, determined to take advantage of her situation.

In my work with documentary materials, I have been captivated by groups that are somehow marginalised in our society, whom people would rather see exist quietly and keep their opinions to themselves. For example, one of my one-person plays speaks about an actor, who has to leave the stage due to losing their attractive appearance after a serious illness. Appearance is always a sensitive topic and our world, which thirsts for the cult of success, does not want to talk about it. People want to show their beautiful and strong sides, the things that attract and entice. It seemed to me that this topic needed a closer look.

Why do you write specifically for theatre?

If I were to start by saying that I have always loved the theatre, it would probably not be enough. If that were all, I might as well just be someone in the audience, which I have also been my whole life. There is something in theatre that pulls me to it so strongly that I have to write for theatre. On the one hand, my introverted observer character is probably a good prerequisite. I have this constant curiosity about people and a desire to understand them. But there must be something else... It's possible that it's the boundless capacity of the theatre to open new perspectives through different mediums. And, of course, the collective aspect through which this art form is born.

Do you have any role models, those who inspire you?

I am inspired by good playwriting, which gives me courage to write differently. Just recently I read David Harrower's *Knives in Hens*, which enchanted me with its hidden facets and precise details. Throughout history, playwriting has been very strictly standardised, and all kinds of innovations in form and content are very exciting.

Often times I find motifs to write about in the media. For example, in my play *Queen of the Night* I indirectly touched on some events that took place in Estonia, where people pretending to be social workers cheated the elderly out of their real estate property. They would trick them into signing documents and then acquire vast properties in the form of houses and apartments. Of course, that is not the only motif in the play, there is much more there.

I can also be inspired by some phenomena that are present in our society right now. In the play *Sirens* (2nd prize at the 2017 Estonian Theatre Agency competition), I focused on overworked people, who can't get off the treadmill and who sacrifice their relationships and health to work. I grappled with the same problem some time ago, and then I got the funny idea that if Dante should make his list of seven deadly sins today, then overworking would definitely make that list.

Which of your texts and why should reach stages abroad?

I have already been called the universal Estonian playwright, which to an extent probably is true, because when I think about it, nearly all my texts would work on foreign stages too. Something that would definitely work is a play called *In a Year* (2014) that I wrote for radio theatre about the emotional break-up of two people; the dramas *To See a Pink Elephant*, *Queen of the Night*, *Sirens*, which look at timeless themes; also, the one-woman shows *What Difference Does it Make Being Hanna Jakobs?* and *Redskin*. The play that talks about youth rivalry called *All the Normal People* is universal enough that it could be played in any country, where

phenomena such as social media or motocross are familiar. Other texts might be more tied to local issues or are clearly dramaturgy plays, written with specific staging in mind.

What do you have in the works?

In addition to those works commissioned by Estonian theatres, I am writing around four plays. Two are clearly documentary and related to my doctoral thesis at the Academy of Music and Theatre, where I look at how to create dramaturgy by involving communities. One topic is the position a person obtains in society and in the labour market through their appearance. The second topic is single mothers, which we are going to research together with director Helen Rekkor. The thing is that I and many others were really upset, when a well-known former politician insulted single mothers and claimed that it wouldn't be morally right to give a single mother the "mother of the year" title. You would think that today these kinds of values are forgotten, but we still continue to encounter them on a daily basis. It seemed to us that this topic needs to be dealt with closer in theatre as well.

Interviewed by Liisi Aibel & Heidi Aadma

ANNOTATION

Piret Jaaks *Näha roosat elevanti* (*To See Pink Elephants*)

Genre:	Drama
Written:	2011
Roles:	2f, 1m
Translations:	English, Finnish, German, Russian, Spanish, Swedish
Awards:	1 st prize of New Drama Competition in 2011.

It seems that the life of a married couple, Simona and Levi, is quite unbearable. Simona is always listening to Michael Nyman in the nude and Levi shovelling his passive aggressiveness into cleaning their already sterile and very modern apartment in a house called The Pink Elephant. The play paints a very precise picture of these intimate partners of the we-can-have-it-all generation who share the same dirty dishes, same haunting past and faint hopes to a more fulfilling future and a wholesome life. The biggest thing missing is a baby to bring it all together. After a while it's clear that no matter how many reproductive techniques are used, the baby just isn't going to happen, so Simona suggests Levi should try and have a baby with her friend Katriin. This is when things get particularly messy, leaving the characters and the audience wondering, who has the upper hand in this psychological play and who gets to decide on the games we play in our messed up lives. And then the most important question: can you really trust what you see as to the motives of the character and even on what is shown on the stage?

Characters: Simona, Levi, Katriin

Estonian well-made plays: Andrus Kivirähk and Jaan Tätte

Oliver Issak

Although no Estonian well-made play standards exist as of yet, both the lighthouse keeper/actor Jaan Tätte and the current pop star (the so-called king of literature) of the literary world Andrus Kivirähk have plays that would certainly make the list. Perfect examples of *une pièce bien faite* do include several of their plays, full of conflicts, secrets, unexpected turns and unforeseen final conclusions. The events that are pushed into motion trigger plays into existence, raise conflicts, reveal secrets that some knew and others did not. Heroes suffer and antiheroes bask in their pain. As the stories unfold, the tension builds. And builds. And builds. And builds. And builds. And builds. Finally, the long-awaited climax arrives, all unanswered questions are resolved. The hero wins. The (happy) end is here.

"That never happens in real life. In general, nothing much happens in real life at all. Days just go by, one after another, one resembling another... You do something, you go somewhere, at some point it's a bit fun, but mostly it's still boring. And sometimes it's even downright tedious."

Andrus Kivirähk, *Wombat*

Andrus Kivirähk

The man who wrote himself into the ranks of Estonian literature classics already at the age of 47 probably needs no introduction to anyone in Estonia. And not much introduction abroad either, for that matter, since besides his well-known and recognised prose that has been translated into many languages, eight of Kivirähk's plays are also available in a foreign language (some in Russian, English, Latvian, Hungarian and German). The range of Kivirähk's dramatic works is, however, even wider, since he has published already more than 30 plays in Estonian, and they have all without exception found their way to the stage (or studio). As early as in one of Kivirähk's first plays *Old Men from the Seventh Floor*, we can see some inkling of what kind of creative work to expect.

"When I left the fishing boat and retired, I moved here. See, then at first I thought the same thing. That there's a street outside my window. Boy, was I bored! At night, I dreamed about the sea, in the morning, I would open my eyes and – streets. [...] But then one day – I woke up and took a look outside – the sea!"

Andrus Kivirähk, *Old Men from the Seventh Floor*

It is precisely this "sea outside the window" or unlimited, unbound imagination that saves characters in Kivirähk's works from the grey of mundane life, that oppressive dampness (of eternity) that daily surrounds us and often times troubles those of us who are weaker, poorer or less able. Imagination, which gives life to an actor who lost

two toes, whose dream to play king Lear finally comes true with the help of an overworked night watchman, who is drowning in the sea of life (*Kaheksa varbaga kuningas, The Eight-Toed King*, 2011). And imagination brings along dreams of the imagined coming true.

Kivirähk's characters are often simple people of their times: soldiers, who long to return home from the war (*Suur lahing Petuulia linna all, The Great Battle at the City of Petulia* 1995); quiet pub owners next to a new, big pub (*Atentaat Caesarile, The Assassination of Caesar* 1997) or a modern family, who suddenly gets a visit from an unknown relative, who is researching their family tree (*Vombat, Wombat* 2008). It seems that what Kivirähk does is he writes the characters, then places these imaginary characters/persons/beings on a piece of paper and lets them do as they will in a framework he has provided. Aside from many serious and deep characters, such as the 20 year old young female communist serving a lifetime sentence (*Ingel, ingel, vii mind taeva; Angel, Angel, Take Me to Heaven*, 2008) or the Harlequin artist that moves around and gets invited from one rich person to another (*Papagoide päevad, Parrot Days*, 2000), there are many, even dozens of simpler, more clearly defined and two-dimensional (comedic) characters, who in their uniqueness (whether it is stupidity or an unattainable, surreal genius instead) tell the most wonderful stories.

"Being simple is like having a trump card. Sometimes I envy Pierrot and others like him, who can believe without the shred of a doubt that their existence is necessary. I have no such illusions. Do you, honey bunny?"

Andrus Kivirähk, *Parrot Days*



Angel, Angel, Take Me to Heaven.
VAT Theatre. 2009.

It seems that the genius of Kivirähk lies in his characters, who often move along completely usual situations. Several of Kivirähk's characters, who now already seem like immortal elements of our cultural history, soon have been roaming Estonia virtually and physically for decades. These characters and the friendly jabs at many other symbols/elements/situations/characters/core texts that go with being Estonian are probably the reason why many of Kivirähk's plays or texts might at first glance seem confusing for those outside the Estonian cultural space. In general though, Kivirähk still balances on the border between one culture and universal meanings and many, perhaps near most of his works are accessible for anyone. Accessible to enjoy these "well-made plays".

"You know, Maria, what seems strange to me when it comes to all this making the world a better place? The fact that the world is being saved, but people are still broken."

Andrus Kivirähk, *Angel, Angel, Take Me to Heaven*

Jaan Tätte

Unlike Kivirähk, Tätte studied acting and has said himself that he writes plays from the perspective of the actor, always thinking about what and how it would be better for the actor to say and to act (having played different roles in several of his own plays). While Tätte is less prolific (with just 10 plays written, which have also all been staged), his achievements are just as notable as those of Kivirähk. What's more, Tätte is also the most played Estonian author abroad, and his plays have been translated into bigger languages (English, French, German, Russian), as well as smaller ones (Finnish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Latvian), and his popularity has not waned to date.

"And then the main thing is that you think, just a little more and then I'll start living my life. That I'll just finish the project and then I'll live. But then the feeling came that "and then" would never come."

Jaan Tätte, *Mindless*

While the characters stand out most in Kivirähk's work, Tätte lets the situations take the spotlight. In scenes that reach genius levels of absurdity, the action can change and develop with just a few lines, the dialogue flows and seems to melt as you read, it pleases the mind's eye – that is probably Tätte's secret to success. What's more, the philosopher and thinker in Tätte is strongly expressed in his work as well. He allows his characters to speak, often in long monologues, which in their simplicity and ease of expression still carry very deep significance. The self-titled human observer of a playwright has managed to join simple to deep and dynamic to slow flow. How do you talk about eternity without going on for an eternity?



The Highway Crossing. Movie set. 1999.

"Because they are afraid of getting hurt. Because they think that it's all still ahead and there's no rush. And then one day they realise that there's less and less ahead and what was left undone or unsaid will remain undone and unsaid. It will remain unknown."

Jaan Tätte, *Bridge*

What happens when an old man living in the woods offers a young man a billion dollars for his wife (*The Highway Crossing*, 1997)? Or when a wife returning from a work trip (happily!) announces to her husband that she has fallen in love again, and that her new hubby is waiting downstairs (*Happy Everyday!*, 2001)? Or when the Nokia chief "has enough" at some point and decides to move to the woods (*Mindless*, 2005)? Or when two men dying of thirst meet a woman in a desert by the last well (*The Well*, 2006)? Or when good meets evil in the forest (*Losers*, 2003)?

Tätte's absurd situations full of fantasy and mysticism nearly always find realistic resolutions, logical and natural, well-made-play-like ends. The path to the existential flow of life, to peaceful existence, to the quiet sway of the wind is found. Often it leads through love, which conquers all in the end. Despite everything, it still remains! Love for life, for another, for the world or for something else.

"Life is so weird. All these UFOs and... Dreams and..."

Jaan Tätte, *Happy Everyday!*

ANNOTATIONS

Jaan Tätte *Ristumine peateega ehk Muinasjutt kuldsest kalakesest (Highway Crossing, or the Tale of a Golden Fish)*

Genre: Comedy
Written: 1997
Roles: 1f, 3m
Translations: Afrikaans, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Russian
Awards: Second award of New Drama Competition in 1997.

Hitch-hiking to go to a party, the young lovers Laura and Roland find themselves stuck in the middle of the countryside. It's getting dark and nobody will give them a ride. They find a solitary cottage in the woods, inhabited by Oswald, a middle-aged oddball bachelor. Reluctantly he allows them both to stay. Oswald is infatuated with Laura and makes the couple an unexpected proposal. He claims that a magical golden fish gave him four billion dollars. He now offers Roland one billion to forget about Laura, and promises to fill all of Laura's dreams with the rest of the money. Roland and Laura think that it's crazy talk but when they check the back room of the shabby cottage, they indeed find boxes full of money. Laura agrees to stay with Oswald and urges Roland to leave. Secretly she suggests to Roland that this is only a temporary arrangement – they can get back together after they have gotten hold of the money. Oswald overhears them and decides to back down from the deal but now the young couple is ready to do anything to change his mind.

Disillusioned and heartbroken, Oswald offers them to simply take the lot. As they're about to start celebrating, the real owner of the money arrives. It turns out that the money Oswald found in his back room was not a magical gift, it was simply hidden there by a gang of criminals on the run from the police. As the fairy-tale is over, there's just one more thing to do: to start the play all over again!

Characters: Oswald Koger (Carp); a lonely middle-aged man living in a cottage in the woods; Laura Siig (Whitefish), a young woman from the city; Roland Raim (Sprat), her boyfriend, a young man from the city; Kaupo Koha (Pike-perch), a middle-aged man, big-time criminal.

Andrus Kivirähk *Helesinine vagun (Blue Wagon)*

Genre: Comedy
Written: 2003
Roles: 1f, 5m
Translations: English, Hungarian, Russian

The story takes place in today's Estonia. The main characters are 30-year-old people who grew up in the last decades of the Soviet period, they were pioneers and marched in the parades, watched Soviet animation films and shared the Soviet atmosphere, yet not experiencing the evilness of the regime. For the last ten years they have lived in a new system and got adapted to the new situation, but the memories have remained. This makes it possible for the young people to compare their earlier dreams with today's reality.

It's Indrek's birthday and he has his old classmates Märt and Tõnu over. The party mood and alcohol give them an impulse to recollect the world that seems absurd if you look back on it, but which yet was once reality. Contrasts of different mind-sets become clear when first Anton – Indrek's neighbour in his sixties – and later Sirts – Indrek's young female colleague – join the party.

The characters: Indrek, Märt, Tõnu, Leopold, Anton, Sirts

Winners of the Estonian Theatre Agency's 2017 playwriting competition

The Estonian Theatre Agency has organised playwriting competitions since 1995. Some of the competitions have been themed to target children and youth, and some have been organised in cooperation with neighbouring countries. The 2017 playwriting competition was the sixteenth in line.

The main competition prize this time went to Ott Kivilusk for his *Kirvetüü (Ax work)*. The Seto language play tells the honest and humanistic story of the residents of a small Estonian village, through lush yet at times painful humour.

The second prize winner *Sireenid (Sirens)* by Piret Jaaks is a text that holds mystery, as a group of people meets in a puzzling room to find a way out together.

This year third place was shared by two texts: Maimu Berg's cultural-historical and personal *Salong (Salon)*, and Johan Elm's *Vask (Copper)*, an artist's story with its relationship tensions. Special mention from the jury went to four texts: Karl Koppelmaa's play about the multi-layered nature of internet crime *Trõll ehk Sokrates peab surema (Trõll or Sokrates Must Die)*, Siiri Metsamäe's text about Estonian workers in Finland *Betoonhingede aegu (In Times of Concrete Souls)*, Olev Remsu's playfully historical piece *President*, and Liis Seina's play about blind musicians *Kustpoolt puhub tuul (From Where the Wind Blows)*.

"This time around, what stood out was that the topics of the creator, his or her creation and human responsibility found a lot of reflection. Important key words or points of departure for authors were music and sounds. Several plays, in one way or another, took a look at the problems surrounding those who are leaving or already have left Estonia. The virtual world has also noticeably found its way into playwriting – games involving the mind and the body on topics related to humans and modern technology and the internet. The Estonian greats in culture, literature and history also still hold their place in these plays, and their fates are viewed either in all seriousness, through the prism of humour, or often from completely new vantage points," recalls jury member Anne-Ly Sova, summarising the wide thematic scope of the competition.

Although the original ideas of many plays were captivating, the ones that stood out did so thanks to their great dialogue, strong *umwelt* and generalising capacity, explains jury member Mehis Pihla. "A good theatrical text gives a similar feeling to that of hearing great music that takes the listener away. Where exactly is hard to explain, because each experience is different. Unique and personal. A great text stays with you," confirmed jury member Sulev Keedus.

ANNOTATIONS

Ott Kivilusk *Kirvetüü (Ax Work)* (1st prize)

Genre: tragicomedy
Roles: 6f, 8m

A unique picture in time of Setomaa at the beginning of the 1990s, with multi-faceted characters and their lush verbiage. At first glance, the play creates an epic, full-on apocalyptic and desolate, over-the-top world of drinking, screwing, dying and killing, where everything is somehow base, dilapidated and revolting. At the same time, all that is delivered to the public through rich language and enchantingly disarming humour, which gives the depicted desolation a particular and humanistic charm. Even though the shadow of the past that hangs over these characters gives plenty of opportunity to turn this story into a tragic and depressing one, the author's will elevates it so that hope and inexhaustible *joie de vivre* triumph in the end.

Characters: Little Villi – Alive in the beginning, then dead. A boy, who is bloody all over and in rags. Small, pitiful, a faceless being; Little Borka; Little Andre; Little Feliks; Andre – A man in trouble. 45 years old; Feliks – Simple by nature, always coming up with stupid poems, a bit dull and has a stutter. About to turn 45; Borka/one-armed man – A sad, middle-aged man, whose one sleeve is tattered, bloody and empty. Alive in the beginning, then dead; Enrico – A closed-off, bitter man, a vengeful strategist. Age undetermined; Paul – A businessman, who once dropped out of the agricultural university because of mental illness, a shop keeper, a former department head. 50 years old; Riina – Paul's wife, teacher. Over forty, a bit younger than Paul; Mati – Paul's friend from the agricultural university. Owner of a land survey company in Tartu; Mürka – A man, who has been to Finland. Did something in Tartu. Failed everywhere. In a hopeless cycle throughout this story. About 25 years old; Virve – Andre's wife. A bit younger than Andre. Attractive; Olli – Feliks' mother – witch, soothsayer, medium. Undetermined age; Piret – The new English teacher. 23 years old; Vaike – Store clerk, useless slut, in her twenties, dumb, focused on appearance. Not bad looking though; Reet – a culture person, librarian. Just another middle-aged woman; Andre and Virve's children; Andre's mother – A shadow in a vision; Feliks' father – A shadow in a vision; Joss – A musician, who died in a car crash. He should carry the musical elements of the piece.

Place: everything should be on stage at once: the place where the explosion will happen, Enrico's apartment, Andre's home, Feliks' home, the hall of the cultural house, the teacher's apartment, etc., but at the same time everything should look like it's in the woods.

Piret Jaaks *Sireenid (Sirens)* (2nd prize)

Genre: drama
Roles: 3f, 6m
Translations: English

The play reveals its secrets step by step, bringing an extremely diverse group together into a room with closed doors and no windows. Completely cut off from their daily life, three women of varying ages and six men unexpectedly have to find a common language and a way out of the closed room. None of the nine get a chance to escape their fates or dodge events of the past. It is only by listening to each other's stories and going deep into them that the structure that connects them starts to appear. Even though the world of the play is not a realistic one, the atmosphere and characters are credible down to the smallest details. *Sirens* asserts its own, very strong *umwelt*, which grabs you and takes you along as it all draws towards a general truth that touches everyone.

Characters: Armand Ots – A man in his late thirties, but with a strong mind; Irina Nikolayevna – A woman in her early thirties, sensitive, realistic; Jaak Vaher – A man in his late twenties, overweight, emotional; Linas Gutams – A man in his forties, a dandy, fears manual labour; Martin Ossipov – A man in his fifties, a strong personality; Vahur Stromming – A man in his thirties, nervous disposition; Mari Saar – A woman in her late twenties, strong in a motherly way, Mrs Amalie Utam – A retired woman, been through fire and water; Johannes Takki – A retired man, enjoys life; the voice of a child

Place: It could be a basement or the windowless floor of an abandoned factory. On the left, on top of a worn cabinet, there is a rusty wash basin, above it a cracked mirror. To the right by the wall, there is a long bench, under which there is a small stool. Brown paper and old newspapers litter the floor, covered in dust. A long fluorescent bulb glares its light from the ceiling. A strange sculpture is set in one corner – a beige birdwoman with a sizeable beak and huge wings. In the background, a monotonous beeping sound comes from behind the walls. Sometimes it gets louder, at times it stops altogether.

Time: October – November, nowadays.

Johan Elm *Vask (Copper)* (3rd prize)

Genre: drama
Roles: 1f, 3m

A graphical play built on tense, sensitive and sophisticated dialogues and polylogues, where lives dedicated to the arts collide in a moment of obscurity. The painter Saul waits for the former model Birke at his studio. He hasn't seen her

for a long time, but he wants to ask her for one last favour before he loses his sight for good. The invitation was extended by Saul and Kristian, and the meeting was thoroughly planned; however, cracks appear slowly and steadily as the story, which hides shared moments in the past, reveals fateful turning points, and then the company is joined by Birke's partner Tunis. The introspective story is shrouded in mystery, and the play's well-functioning and secure structure create ideal opportunities for the birth of great roles.

Characters: Saul, Kristian, Birke, Tunis

Maimu Berg *Salong (Salon)* (3rd prize)

Genre: biographical play
Roles: 6f, 4m

Maimu Berg's play talks about a legendary salon, whose impact on the history of our culture and theatre has endured for decade and continues to endure. Time and time again, a vase freezes until it shatters in an apartment in the Estonian university city, where in spite of time and each other, people are drawn together again and again by Spiel. This story of a Man and a Woman, or actually rather a Woman and a Man, looks at these people and their relationships from a new angle. Salon is a kind of confessional game of seeking forgiveness and making amends with the past, where the view to the events of the past is presented by the party that thus far has been silent. Plays about cultural history that delve so deep under the skin of those whose portraits are painted are always interesting, and the autobiographical nature of Salon makes this text all the more intimate and credible.

Characters: Woman; Man; Joel S; Kuno O; Kaarin R; Salon guests – participants at the annual meeting of the University café and the Writer's Union (actors Jaan K, Tõnu T, Milvi K, writers Mati U, Igor Č, Jaak R, Tõnu T wife Tiia, Ingo N and others); Maie; Aili; Mari; Young woman; Young man.

Comments: All the characters are ageless in a way, and the actors that portray them should preferably be in their early middle age. Similarity to actual persons can be aimed, but doesn't have to be. The set design definitely needs chairs, a long table, a coat rack for hanging clothes and a staircase.

Karl Koppelmaa *TrOll ehk Socrates peab surema (TrOll or Socrates Must Die)* (special mention)

Genre: drama
Roles: 17r

The main character of this crime play that begins with a court hearing is twenty-eight year old Kaspar Ehrenwald, who is writing a master's thesis on internet psychology. Under the close scrutiny of the investigators, we see the formation of a character, who during his research on the opportunities and vices accessible through different websites becomes the victim of virtual crime himself. While looking for an identity between the digital and the real, as well as a suitable narrative, however, the portraits of the victim and the offender start to blend together. The youth-oriented thriller is cool, dynamic and unravels a multitude of levels and, appropriately for the topic, does not bring all the ends together to form a singular truth.



From left: Karl Koppelmaa, Piret Jaaks, Johan Elm, Ott Kilusk, Siiri Metsamägi, Liis Sein

Characters: Kaspar Ehrenwald; Professor; Investigator #1; Investigator #2; Mother; Father; IT guy; Triinu; Tinderella; Server; Man; PlatOn; TrOll; Lawyer; Judge; Check-in; Reporter

Time: After the internet, but before the apocalypse.

Siiri Metsamägi *Betoonhinged aegu (In Times of Concrete Souls)* (special mention)

Genre: drama
Roles: 2f, 4m

The dreams of workers from different corners of Estonia are as varied as their backgrounds and languages, however, there is something similar in them as well – homesickness is something they are all very much familiar with. The play *In Times of Concrete Souls* tells the story of Estonian migrant workers, who share an apartment, and while working at a concrete factory in Finland in 2015-2016 earn and share their bread. The format of the play provides the opportunity to show in parallel the lives of the men and those they left behind at home, with looming barriers created by the society and the individuals themselves.

Characters: Rolts or Type, real name Roland Sohni – 45, an attractive man, who lives in Haapsalu, originally from Viljandi, a former rower, now a concrete factory worker in Finland; Igor Varjagov – 43, tall blond man, a university teacher from St. Petersburg, originally from near Jõhvi, a concrete factory worker in Finland; Pops, real name Eevald Kuninga – 51, formerly a sailor from the shores of Lake Peipus, a concrete factory worker in Finland; Kadri – 28, an attractive and modest woman, a florist from Tartu; Rapunzel, real name Ly – 39, a housewife in Tallinn, originally from East Viru County; Berit – 24, from East Viru County, sells burgers in Helsinki; Tuuli Nesselberg – 46, a woman with roots in Pärnu, a librarian from Viljandi, a cleaning service provider in Helsinki.

Time, place: homesick Estonian migrant workers in Finland 2015-2016.

Olev Remsu *President* (special mention)

Genre: tragicomedy
Roles: 4f, 10m

There are stories that are meant to endure. They come again, seek new forms and meanings, and their veins run deep with historical games. The

play *President* is historical fiction, set in the beginning of the 1950s, in Russia, at the Burašhevo psychiatric hospital and its surroundings. Appropriately for the setting, the colourful characters include female doctors, patients and their visitors, and, in keeping with the times, military characters and politicians. There's also room for Napoleon, Lenin, the President, Jesus Christ and Ivan/Kalev, who swiftly changes his identity as needed. *President* is a warped story of the possible opportunity the President of the Estonian Republic Konstantin Päts might have had during the brief Beria era after Stalin's death, and it lavishly presents both the absurdity and tragicomic nature of the times.

Characters: General practitioner, psychiatrist Dr. Nadezhda Illarionovna Gashina (about 45 and 85 years old); her sister, psychiatrist Dr. Alvinna Illarionovna Tsuhh (44); therapist Dr. Varvara Jemeljanovna Komorova (35); therapist Dr. Ida Romanovna Moissejeva (55); other female doctors; Ivan Trofimovitsh Komissarov / Kalev Mäeumbaed (40); restaurant personnel; two riflemen; President (rather old); patients One, Two, Three and Four; the rest of the patients; civil defence lecturer, instructor Viktor Viktorovitsh Kutuzov (30); Lavrenti Pavlovitsh Beria (exactly 54).

Liis Sein *Kustpoolt puhub tuul (From Where the Wind Blows)* (special mention)

Genre: drama
Roles: 2f, 3m

Plays that describe worlds unknown to most of us in a comprehensible way without any losses are few and far between. *From Where the Wind Blows* is one of these plays that brings the audience this kind of a world – the sounds, touches and smells that make up the world in which the blind live. The central character of the story, however, is an orchestra, whose disbanding at the same time tragically impacts the blind musicians that play instruments in it, as well as the conductor, who is slowly but steadily losing his sight. Music is the thing that brings them together again and again and creates new realities in their darkening world.

Characters: Si; Marke, Alice, Kustav, Someone, A voice

Places: Concert hall, tram, doctor's office, different apartments, a cemetery, a temporary rehearsal room, a crematory, a toilet room, a night club

Kinoteater and projects that don't have to recognise borders

Keiu Virro

As a theatre observer, my interest has always extended more to smaller and more experimental theatres. One collective, whose activities I have taken a keen interest in since the beginning is Kinoteater (Cinema Theatre), whose website doesn't waste time on being humble and declares, "So good it hurts." The theatre's starting point can be considered to be the year 2011, when people who otherwise mainly had ties to the Tallinn City Theatre (Paavo Piik, Paul Piik, Diana Leesalu, Henrik Kalmet) came together and decided to show that quality stand-up can also be done in Estonian. By that time, stand-up comedians had already started to appear in Estonia, although for some reason their shows were mainly in English, even if the whole public was made up of Estonians.

What Kinoteater is doing could be of interest for theatre people outside of Estonia too. Not only the texts of the plays or even the plays themselves, but the project concepts could in several cases be exportable abroad. In fact, it has already been done, but more on that later.

Let's take it back to the beginning. The first Kinoteater project, where four actors on stages made jokes, was a success. Word of mouth worked, word got out, and the audiences came. Since then, Kinoteater has done a number of projects across genres, which are not hindered by their medium, classical dramaturgy, location or even the idea that only actors should be on stage. For example, in the play *Make My Wife Disappear or What It Feels Like to Be a Magician*, instead of actors, the performers were well-known Estonian magicians Meelis Kubo and Charlekas, who intertwined magic tricks with autobiographical stories and sketches about the many facets of magic. *The Rehabilitation of Mr. Tammik* was the initiative of former teacher Priit Kruus. Again, based on autobiographical stories. The play *Murru 422/2* took place at the recently closed Murru prison, and the events could be followed by the audience via headphones, as they moved around the prison territory. The text of the play was based on the recollections of prisoners, guards, a prison teacher and the wife of one prisoner.

Another noteworthy play is *She Who Has the Worst Husband Wins*, a successful stand-up show about being a woman by actresses Katariina Tamm and Piret Krumm, which somewhat helped shift the general opinion that only men can be good comedians. *No Beating Off* was a one man play by Sander Rebane, for which he and dramaturge Paavo Piik did extensive research on porn, and in their preparation work decided to go through a porn fast.

But now a few more words about using the ideas behind plays elsewhere. A good example from the practice of Kinoteater is the already briefly mentioned play *The Rehabilitation of Mr. Tammik*,



No Beating Off. Kinoteater. 2017.

which premiered in 2015, where former teacher Priit Kruus stepped on stage as himself, a male teacher, which in and of itself already means that considering the general gender profile of a teacher he was a statistical anomaly. The core of that play was invited to stage another new play in the UK.

Collaboration got started after the Estonian contemporary performing arts showcase draamamaa.weekend in 2015. At that time, Kinoteater participated at the festival with a play by magicians, however, producer Henriette Morrison from Theatre of Europe also heard about *The Rehabilitation of Mr. Tammik*. Morrison invited Kinoteater to the UK to work on another play. The collective accepted the task, and in March 2016 they went to London to find a suitable and interesting teacher, around whom a new story could be constructed. That is how collaboration with former primary school teacher Tim Paramour began.

So in 2017, the London Lyric Hammersmith Theatre saw the premiere of the play *Finding Mr. Paramour*, which partly followed the structure of the play in Estonia, but on the other hand it also included problems that are particular to that cultural space and more political content than the Estonian version. It seems to me that the same concept could be of interest to many other countries, since the target group is quite a wide one – after all, everyone has been a student at some point, and there are teachers everywhere.

Lastly, a few words about a project that Kinoteater is currently working on. In 2018, Kinoteater has one employee. There doesn't seem to be a

reason for there to be any more – the main work of the core behind Kinoteater is elsewhere, and there is no reason to create a unified ensemble, as you might guess based on the above.

At the end of 2017, Kinoteater announced that they were searching for someone who is theatre illiterate. They were looking for someone, who had never been to the theatre, and who then would go and see all new plays in professional Estonian theatres (about 200-250 altogether), and then write a blog based on what they saw. 450 people applied for the position, and of these candidates the chosen person was 21 year old Alissiya-Elisabeth Jevtyukova. The young lady receives the minimum wage for a cultural worker, which in 2018 in Estonia is 1150 euros per month, and for that compensation, she has to write a blog entry about each play at <http://eksperiment.kinoteater.ee/>. Currently, director Marta Pulga is working on a documentary film about the process, through which hopefully a wider public can follow the assumptions and results of this intriguing project. In any case, this also seems like a project that might be attractive to undertake in other countries, and why not translate it into other areas of culture as well.

These were just a few examples of what Kinoteater has been up to. It seems that something that helps each consecutive project seem fresh – even if they aren't doing anything groundbreaking – is the reversed relationship between cause and effect. The driver behind action for this team is not to get a set number of plays to the stage each year. There are no play-shaped holes in schedules that need filling, instead a place is made for an idea once it springs into existence.

Visions and deliria

An interview with
Martin Algus



Martin Algus

What themes are important for you in writing plays? Which genres do you prefer?

I'm interested in social themes that lead to some generalisations or eternal moments. Therefore, you might say that I tend to look for complicated topics. I can do simpler things working as a screenwriter for television, just to get them out of my system. But ideas for a play come from somewhere deeper, and they touch me on a personal level. When it comes to genres, several of my plays are tragedies – serious dramatic pieces, but I have also tried writing comedy. When I started to write, I wrote in a rather realistic style, I went for the everyday feel, but I soon understood that visions and deliria can also be interesting. Looking forward, I have set a goal of surprising myself in terms of form. For example, *Sulfur Magnolias* (2nd prize at the 2013 Estonian Theatre Agency competition) talks about a very specific problem – a woman, who has to start taking care of her elderly and sick father, who abandoned her as a child. Stylistically, I tried to keep the play “up in the air” through sparse dialogue. You could say that this piece at times comes off as abstract or poetic. I was interested in the contradiction, the balance between weight and levity. At the same time, in the thriller-like play *Sparkling Darkness* (2016), set in the 1960s in an abandoned ski resort north of the Arctic Circle, with strong influence from film, I experimented with rich dialogue instead, which suited that odd world very well. In general, I always try to create characters that would be interesting to talk to and who can be made to converse with each other. Style wise, I start to fine tune my texts only once I have

the content. I always try to “listen” to the text and figure out what form it should take. On the one hand, it is a battle for my own agenda and, on the other hand, it is a dialogue with that particular work. For me, it is a very interesting world.

Why do you write specifically for theatre?

In theatre, you can go in-depth. I have as much time to think about and fine tune the piece as I want. A TV screenwriter never has that. I have actually been writing since I was a child. Later, I ended up studying acting in drama school, and after that I translated plays. Since I had been looking for an outlet as a writer, I decided to focus on writing plays. I really like working with dialogues, I like writing them. The play as a format is a natural environment for me. In addition to that, the world is trying to simplify itself a lot – there are opposing poles and not many grey areas. Theatre gives you the opportunity to look at those grey areas. For me it is exciting that compared to television or film scenarios, in plays you can play with hidden nuances much more and create layers.

How much do you think about the actors when you write?

The fact that I studied at theatre school determines to a great extent how I write or how I think in the theatre world. It seems to me that I write as an actor. It's like I hear the characters of my play talking, I improvise with them and they tell me right away whether I am writing them right or wrong. It's a somewhat schizophrenic situation, but when you improvise on stage, you can instantly tell whether an idea will float or whether it is going off course.

Who are your role models?

Since I have translated over thirty texts and read heaps of different English and American and some Russian dramaturgy, then all that has influenced me. When I read an article or something of a different topic, it positions itself inside my play space and somehow starts to work on its own. I remember when I started reading In-er-face theatre movement texts, I noticed how the world inside me opened up. Before that I had no idea that this kind of theatre was possible. Really raw, honest and life-like. Also, Mark Ravenhill with his rawness and poetic nature have influenced me a lot. He writes in a casual, everyday way – everything is as if it were real – but underneath that sometimes harsh and crude surface, there is a kind of depth and music. That contradiction is so terribly interesting. He talks about things in a raw way, but all in all it has a soulful effect and it touches you. Reading and translating plays has taught me that you don't have to feel

reverence. It all depends on me – I don't have to ask anyone for their permission to create my worlds. Anything can take place whenever, at whatever conditions, using whichever words. It's not true that there is only one traditional theatre space, where only a few people can be allowed to enter and act. That world is actually much less clear and much more colourful. That discovery for me at that time was very inspiring.

Why should your texts also reach stages abroad?

For example, my play *Contact* (prize winner at the international competition New Baltic Drama 2011) is set in different countries, and the agency Pegasus represents it in Germany right now. The play has been staged in Estonia and Finland too. Generally speaking, it seems to me that theatre has become local. There is a lot of doing it yourself, ensembles are creating texts. Classics are done in new forms. Very few texts are taken from abroad. Of course, the hope is that if you do something that speaks to people everywhere, the piece could end up in the production line-up of theatres in other countries too. But that is something beyond my control...

How do you think when you write? Probably not only locally...

I think that the things I write about are very much universal. For example, *Sulfur Magnolias* deals with questions that are general and currently relevant everywhere. The specific social structure is rather strong, but it still talks about people in a wider sense, about aging, dealing with the past. In *Postmodern Households* (1st prize at the 2009 Estonian Theatre Agency competition), which talks about changes in the traditional family model, there isn't a single reference to Estonia. It could take place wherever. This play could be of great interest in Germany. *Cave* (2008) is time-specific, it talks about the economic recession around 2008 and about how the criminal world received a blow, because those who played the stock market in the US got too greedy, but you could basically take that time element completely out of it. The play worked very well in Finland. *Thirst* (1st prize at the 2007 Estonian Theatre Agency competition) could also be played elsewhere. It is a play with a social theme, but behind that there is a thriller of a story about how people are used. The Western world is so homogenous, the machine of capitalism works the same way everywhere. There are two characters in the play, both of whom want exactly the same thing – to live a normal, regular life. The path to reaching that goal is very exciting, but also extremely strenuous.

Interviewed by Liisi Aibel & Heidi Aadma

ANNOTATIONS

Martin Algus *Kontakt* (*Contact*)

Genre: drama
Written: 2010
Roles: 3f, 5m
Translations: English, Finnish, German, Swedish
Awards: First award of Baltic New Drama 2011.

Contact intertwines three stories of loneliness and isolation.

Tallinn. Rita is a nurse assigned to take care of a 16-year-old paralysed boy Rene. She has been instructed to talk to the boy as part of his therapy, so she starts telling him about her own life, hoping that it would heal them both. Through talking to Rene, Rita finds new strength to abandon her self-pity and move on. Rene manages to move a finger – it's been a breakthrough for them both.

Helsinki and Stockholm. Anton and Georg are travelling to find investors for a research-project in cosmology. What unites the two men is their need to hide from their problems. Anton, who still hasn't gotten over the guilt after his wife's suicide, has fallen out with his daughter (Rita) and sealed himself away to the world of scientific research. Georg has money problems and has also lost touch with his daughter (Anne) to whom she quit her studies.

Copenhagen. Released from a psychiatric hospital, Johan is living alone in the house that used to belong to his parents – members of a sect who committed mass suicide. Anne, who had moved to Denmark from Estonia after quitting university and falling out with her father, has been appointed to be Johan's support person.



Contact. Estonian Drama Theatre. 2012.

With the two feeling equally confused about their lives, they become each other's lifeline.

Characters: Rene – a paralysed boy suffering from multiple sclerosis [16]; Rita – his nurse [39]; Anton – scientist [63]; Georg – former student of Anton, former scientist, now a businessman [43]; Anne – state assigned support person for Johan [23]; Johan – former patient of psychiatric hospital [37]; Woman – multiple roles [30-50]; Man – multiple roles [30-50].

Martin Algus *Postmodernsed leibkonnad* (*Postmodern Households*)

Genre: drama
Written: 2009
Roles: 2f, 5m
Translations: English, Finnish, German
Awards: First award of New Drama Competition in 2009.

Three couples – yes, one of them gay. Kids – some want them and some get them without wanting. Everyone has been a kid at one time – and some still are. Nothing or no-one can give you the clarity about why to be together, why to create a family and how to hold it together. Even the kids can't. But still, people don't give up – they make an effort. Petteri is making an effort too, an effort to cope with living on his own. He

can do it – he's a big boy by now. Postmodern Households is a description of the possible versions of today's families, which according to one study consists of 1.5 members in average. That missing half of a member has often been lost in communication, the author states with empathy.

Characters: Lissi [15], Maks [16], Paul [35], Ngabe [33], Linda [42], Robert [61], Petteri [39], Woman, Mother, Child.

Martin Algus *Väävelmagnooliad* (*Sulfur Magnolias*)

Genre: drama
Written: 2013
Roles: 1f, 2m
Translations: English, Finnish, German, Swedish
Awards: Second award of New Drama Competition in 2013.

A career woman is in the running for an even better job when her disabled father, of whom her only recollection is childhood violence, rolls back into her life. Her partner supports her aspirations – both to get that lucrative job and somehow get away from having to look after her father. And then the man disappears, leaving her alone to face a lost career opportunity, her feeble dad and her childhood traumas. That is how one might summarise the plot without really saying much about the play itself. The text is scarce, poetic and figurative – closer to poetry than mundane realism. Poetic realism. This discord between story and language is a conscious choice by the author in the firm knowledge that poetry can distance the recipient from the story only superficially, whilst mercilessly pulling them deep into the reality of the characters.

Characters: Woman [40], Man [45], Father [80]

Learning to know Estonia through drama and theatre – a personal approach

Jukka-Pekka Pajunen

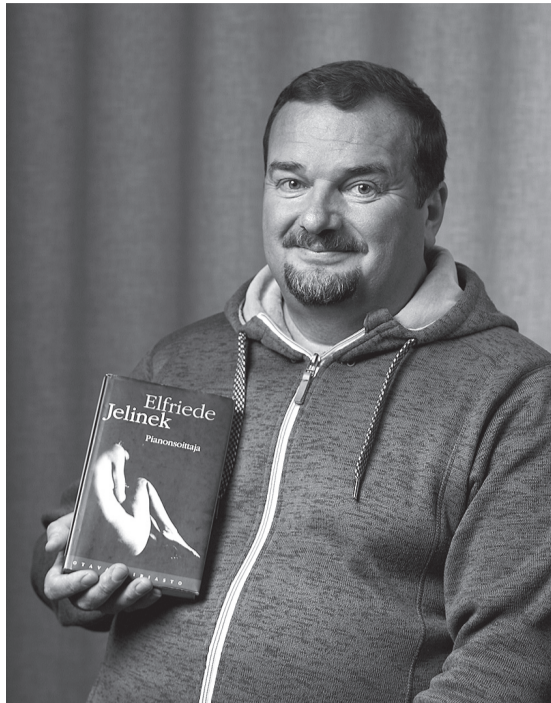
I was born in 1961, in a Europe divided into the West and the East. Hardly had I screamed out my first cry, when the Germans in the East started to build the wall around that part of Berlin which was West. In my youth, Estonia was a part of the Soviet Union, a part of the East that seemed so far away, it was almost as if it didn't exist. My grandparents told still stories about the beautiful city of Tallinn they had visited in the 30s, while attending the Song Festival. At the end of the 60s, we had the show Naapurivisa (Sõprusvõistlus) on television, in which old men from Finland and Estonia competed in a quiz, answering questions which were far beyond a child's comprehension. In the 70s, my father took the boat to Tallinn and brought me a tape that was made by the rock band Apelsin. I was fascinated merely because of the language, which sounded familiar but still

didn't make much sense. At the end of the 80s, during perestroika, the train reached the Helsinki railway station and I could read the text "Vapaa Eesti" (Free Estonia) written on the side of a cliff, the famous singer Juice Leskinen sang how he missed Estonia so "fucking much", and I was learning my elementary Estonian listening to a radio course called "Eesti ring".

The Berlin wall fell in 1989, Estonia restored its independence in August 1991, and in May 1992 I stood for the first time on the deck of MS Georg Ots, heading to Tallinn. That was the beginning of my still ongoing trip into the Estonian culture, history and especially theatre. What earlier seemed to be so far away, now appeared to be emotionally really close, and I was pleased to realise that Finns and Estonians shared the same

love for theatre. Estonian authors like Andrus Kivirähk, Jaan Tätte and Mihkel Ulman were suddenly members of the large, newly reunited European drama family, and their plays were seen even on the Finnish stages. Theatre festivals around the continent showed Estonian performances in their Main Programs.

In 2003, I was called to be a member of the Tampere Theatre Festival's artistic team, and the next seven years I had the fantastic opportunity to see even Estonian theatre in different parts of the country, to meet Estonian authors, directors, actors, dramaturgs, etc., and to discuss its many different voices with colleagues from all over the world. I was also pleased to notice that the Finnish audience was especially interested in all the Estonian performances, which were shown



Jukka-Pekka Pajunen

during the festival. That situation hasn't changed - Estonian theatre performances shown in Finland are mostly sold out, and the audience's feedback is positive throughout.

During my years as a festival curator, I had concentrated mainly on the Estonian performances and less on the texts. This situation changed when I started work as a literary adviser in the Turku City Theatre. In 2011, Turku and Tallinn were European Capitals of Culture, and we wanted to find out what was joining or separating people living in four different states located on the shores of the Baltic Sea: Estonia, Finland, Russia and Sweden. It was interesting to notice that the Finnish and Estonian plays were amazingly similar both in their form and content. It was striking to see how the realistic tradition of the so-called Volkstheater had in both countries led to the proliferation of, for example, themes dealing with everyday life, the deconstruction of family or the ongoing transformation of society and national identity. As a result of the competition, our theatre staged the play *Contact (Kontakt)*, by Martin Algu. The same year, yet another play by him in was staged at the Kuopio City Theatre - *The Cave (Koobas)*, directed by Estonian Ingomar Vihmar, who has also been very active in bringing Finnish drama to Estonian stages.

My latest huge lesson in Estonian drama started in spring 2013, when I was asked by the Estonian Theatre Agency to become a member of the jury

for their annual drama competition. Although I had been reading Estonian newspapers for several years, my vocabulary was still rather limited. After couple of plays and many days of learning from grammar books and dictionaries, I started to understand the surface of the plays; at first I only had a vague idea when it came to the nuances in the language. After reading 50 plays, of which most were on a professional level, I wanted to read more and also to see more of Estonian theatre. And that's what I have been doing ever after.

Through drama I have made a huge trip through Estonian history and everyday life in the past and today. Although our societies are not developing at the same speed and not always in the same direction, it has been interesting to realise how our similar theatre traditions and audiences seem to give the authors the same kind of freedom to be personal, to use autobiography or just to give their own opinions about the surrounding world. Even the relationship with nature, especially with the forests and the sea or lakes, seems to be a permanent part of our theatre. Theatre and drama, as well as translations, can help us to avoid building new barriers and walls in the world.

A healthy sense of humour is vitally important

Interview with Andra Teede

What topics are important for you in theatre and in which genres do you write?

So far I have mainly done collaborative projects, modern documentary theatre, where the form dictates the topic. Often these topics are current and social ones. Since I am very much interested in history, then most of my texts also touch on Estonian history. Until now, I have never managed to complete a play alone at home and just send the pdf to the theatre, and it seems that the collaboration-based social documentary research aspect will be included in all plays with which I am involved in coming years as well.

How do these plays come about? What is your collaboration with directors like?

My texts are mostly based on interviews, and I like conducting interviews myself too. Often times directors are very much interested in working and they enthusiastically offer to get everyone together to collect material by drinking some wine and just turning on the dictaphone, but you can't really do it like that. I can't imagine interviewing collectively. It's especially bad if there are several interviewees. That is why gathering materials and working through them is something I like doing alone - going to the archive, reading and thinking. From then on, the process where it is decided what happens to the material is something that is definitely done together with the director. For me it is totally alright, if I table seven ideas and four are struck off the list right away. The synergy of doing something together is awesome. That is why I produce a small number of plays, just one every few years. I am very particular about who I work

with. The topics have to be very much close to my heart - I really delve deep into them. Later, I like going to the rehearsals, and as the text comes to life on the stage, I add in new scenes.

What has been the driving force for this particular play?

45 339 km² Bog (2015), for which I was also given the Estonian annual dramaturgy award, came about when director Laura Jaanhold suggested writing a play about Estonians who have left the country. Her initial idea was to base it on the memoirs, letters and novels of those who fled in boats in the 1940s. However, since I had been back and forth between Estonia and abroad for years by then, I had thought about moving away a whole lot and actually went through with it several times, only to give up and come back, I knew that this was very much a topic for me. That is why I said that let's base this play on interviews with Estonians abroad in the here and now. So that is one good example of finding good middle ground. Right now I'm writing a play about Tinder dates. Since I had just read about how difficult it is for a woman in her late thirties to find a man in Estonia, I offered to write a documentary play based on interviews and sociological research. The director then said that the sociological aspect isn't really that interesting. So at the moment, we're interviewing people, but it is more about looking for stories to play out. If these aren't enough, we might go back to sociology and statistics.

The themes of this work are very contemporary, however, you mentioned that you are also captivated by history...



Andra Teede

The play *Estoplast* and its staged versions are based on history (3rd prize at the 2015 Estonian Theatre Agency competition). The play talks about the work and the workers of a lamp factory in the Soviet times, however, in a sense it is also here and now, because it was written based on interviews. Actually, I completed it already during my studies and I see it as schoolwork too. I have written about history a lot in poetry. That is a safer medium for me, one that is much more benevolent and private. The theme only lives within that one poem. In a theatre, it is much more difficult, more public. As a playwright, it is hard to write about history, because Estonian history makes you want to cry. Writing about deportations comes off as easy money, because people are sure to like it and it will probably get some kind of award. In Eastern European art in general, there is a lot of dancing on graves and a lot of occupation era drama. Of course, art should help lick those wounds, but... I haven't found the right 'pencil'

for that kind of work myself. In Western Europe, for example, it seems to me that this topic has been exhausted.

Who are your role models?

Merle Karusoo has definitely taught me a whole lot. Of course, Eero Epner (Teater NO99) because I was his student at theatre school. Epner's ability to write a monologue is remarkable. The key to his success is that he plays on repetition, he really beats it into the public. Martin Alguus has also inspired me a lot. How to do your work, how to be productive. Alguus taught me that it is OK to do high and low art at the same time - to write successful plays and at the same time sell yourself to television. Theatre and poetry don't make much money, but I can write for theatre thanks to the fact that I work in television too. Of course, I also love the world of the series, it is very different from theatre, but it is also dear to me. When it comes to foreign work, I really like contemporary Finnish plays, where you have a lot of suffering in mundane situations. The angst of the Finns is so pleasantly painful.

Why might your work reach stages abroad too?

At the moment, I am working with the Finnish director Aino Kivi on a documentary play about Estonians who live in Helsinki. I was invited to the project, on the one hand, because I have dealt with the topic of Estonians abroad and, on the other hand, because I can translate what

Eastern Europeans are thinking. For example, how Estonian workers live eight to a one bedroom apartment. Why they torture themselves, what money means to Estonians. How Vantaa is really promised land to Estonians, even though Finns themselves might not want to set foot outside the train in that stop. It cracks the Finns up big time. The mental space Estonians are in is rather unique in Europe. At the moment, we are still on the border between the East and the West, but in about thirty years we'll totally be the West. If you ever want to make a Dane you meet at the bar laugh, then tell him how back in the day Estonians used to collect colourful wires and bubble gum wrappers. To us, it signals a healthy sense of humour. I think that sense of humour is precisely why Estonian authors could be successful abroad. I take my poetry abroad for performances quite a bit and since I also write poetry about this topic a lot, they always say that it's precisely this topic - the transition period and the tiger's leap - that could be your key to success, you should talk about that more. I would really like to write comedy. I like joking around, but somehow I end up writing drama all the time, it's really sad. Then again, when writing about sad things, you have to make people laugh from time to time, because if you're only trying to make people cry, it ends up being embarrassing instead. So, in any case, do commission me to come work for your theatre!

Interviewed by Liisi Aibel & Heidi Aadma

ANNOTATION

Andra Teede *Estoplast (Light makers. The story on Estoplast the lamp factory)*

Genre: Drama
Written: 2013
Translation: Finnish, Russian
Awards: Third award of New Drama Competition in 2013.

A play about the making of light in 29 scenes. Although the play is based on interviews conducted with the former employees of the Estoplast industrial plant, it is not the story of a plant but rather a collection of snapshots - from realistic to illusory - of foreign-occupied Estonia. Actually, it doesn't even matter whether it is set in Estonia or not, since bureaucracy and business interests occupy a person much in the same way today as the Soviet Union once occupied its socialist republics a few decades ago. First and foremost it is a play about people and their everyday. Some accept the mundane routine, some hope for a saviour to turn up from somewhere, some protest through minuscule acts that only they themselves are aware of. The author has skilfully entwined the ordinary with the poetic, the real with the abstract, the nostalgic with the critical, and offers the director ample freedom for interpretation, merely stating that "the characters are men and women of various ages, as many or as few as are available and needed."

For an Estonian play, ask the Estonian Theatre Agency!

Estonian playwrights are not yet world famous, however, there are several dramatists whose texts have garnered significant success abroad as well. One of the best known Estonian playwrights is Jaan Tätte, whose plays *The Highway Crossing* and *Happy Everyday!* have reached stages in neighbouring countries but also, for example, France and the Netherlands. The Estonian Theatre Agency is the mediator for the copyrights of plays by Jaan Tätte as well as other Estonian authors. The Agency was founded in 1994, and it was first active under the name of the Estonian Play Agency (*Eesti Näitemänguagentuur*). Since then it has worked to protect the rights of

Estonian authors and translators, and to make sure that the rights of foreign plays in Estonian theatres are also appropriately arranged. Five times a year, an arts council that consists of six members gathers at the agency's library, and takes on a thorough assessment of new original plays and translations, and to represent these new plays the agency enters into exclusive licence agreements. Each year the number of original works that the agency represents grows by about 15 plays, which are also all staged in Estonian theatres. The promotion of original Estonian plays is one of the main objectives and activities of the agency, for which the Estonian

Ministry of Culture provides financial support. The Estonian Theatre Agency also organises playwrighting competitions, commissions annotations and translations of plays, and organises readings. For an overview of all authors and Estonian plays translated into English, Finnish, Russian, German, and other languages, see the agency's website at www.teater.ee. If you wish to order a digital copy of the plays for reading, then we recommend contacting dramaturge Heidi Aadma: heidi@teater.ee. If the read leads to a desire to stage the play, then copyright licences can be obtained by contacting the head of the agency Kirsten Simmo: kirsten@teater.ee.

Useful contacts

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