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"by force". Premiere. Choreographer Mari-Liis Eskusson. 2014.

Attempts at Self-Surprise

Theatre NO99 is known for its lack of compromise – both in artistic choices and subjects that concern public issues. What is your credo?

Firstly, compromise is never a good tool in art ... at least not based on our experience. That may be difficult to stick to with large teams, which is why we have included an optimal number of people in ours.

When Theatre NO99 was established, what made it happen was the desire to conjoin the qualities of various contemporary disciplines in our work – performance/figurative art/music etc. The theatre's core is our 10-strong permanent company: we prefer to work with the same people from one production to the next, this provides the actors an opportunity to grow together and develop through all these different challenges. We regard our theatre as a serial act of conceptual art: at the time when the company was established, we also made the decision to number all our productions, beginning at 99 and finally reaching zero. A significant part of that is a poetic vision that, on the one hand, derives from the temporal nature of the art of theatre: we all know that a theatre performance only exists in the moment. On the other, however, the world that surrounds us has created a system for marking time where each passing year adds a number, so people prefer to think of time as an infinite resource, but we decided to take the opposite approach – to acknowledge from the start that no creative collective can last forever.

Therefore – let us value the moment here and now, focus on that and give our absolute maximum to this very performance tonight, to what is happening right now. Equally, the rest of our arsenal is subservient to this idea: the theatre uses black and white, intentionally minimal brand aesthetics, the photos used on posters and programmes are always from rehearsal, etc.

What importance do you place on a theatre – alongside its base function – being also a think tank, reflecting and conceptualizing society, leading opinion? It's a question that arises time and again, as one can often get the impression that theatre collectives can get caught up in their professional 'bubble' and may only have the energy to address internal problems.

First of all, as our working method consists largely of improvisation geared towards a particular subject matter and often there is no base text that we depart from – so to say – and the material for the production is created in rehearsal, it gives us the freedom to address various topics. It allows us to do what seems most important at that given moment in time. In other words, we do not depend on existing scripts, which gives us flexibility and the opportunity to genuinely be really in the moment, choose our focus, and utilise all means known to us in creating a new production.

As we are bound by the numbering system mentioned above, it is vitally important for us to regularly challenge ourselves, try to surprise ourselves. Take a step somewhere we haven't been before, do something not done before, primarily as artists. Thus, during the 12 years we have been active we have repeatedly touched upon socially sensitive subjects, but we have never defined our agenda from merely that point of view. We have made a production about the birth of a fictitious political party that had an audience of 7000. And an ancient-tragedy-inspired rock

musical about the mayor of Tallinn as the tyrannos of a polis in Eastern Europe. And a two-hour introspective live broadcast about Estonian memory, about the deeper causes of a nation turning away from the outside world. And a guided city tour about corruption.

But we have never wanted to limit ourselves to just 'socially sensitive' challenges.

When we feel like it, we do make more traditional drama productions based on a chrestomathic play. Or put together an absurdist comedy. Or focus on our physical existence for a change and dive into mud – literally speaking – as we did in the production NO43 Filth.

I feel that the way the question is phrased is somewhat limiting. Naturally, NO99 is a think tank and a mirror of society, however in the first instance it is a platform for various works of art.

It seems to be that first we ought to define the phrase 'the base function of theatre', which was part of the question. What is it?

For us, it is art – in its deepest meaning. It seems to me that when a theatre company gets accused (and rightly so) of providing mere entertainment, it often makes a U-turn by adopting the role of a social scientist and thereby loses its existential dimension entirely. But that is boring, because it is rational. Picking at social pressure points every day is just as dull as traditional well-made storytelling. In essence, storytelling remains mere storytelling – even if the subject is children in famine.

I get the feeling that the world around us is becoming simplified to the extreme, people's imagination is withering away. The ability to focus is limited to ever shorter moments. Everyone appears to know everything about everything, but really, we know nothing about anything. Therefore, as an artist and theatre maker, it's imperative to force ourselves to dive in time and again, to be able to surface somewhere we haven't been before.

Theatre is a game, an illusion. Shifting realities. Manipulation. Risk. A composition that can be constructed out of very different elements. If you add these elementary truths to the theory of conceptual art, you can keep experimenting infinitely and the results will not be so safe and predictable.

In many places around Europe, particularly in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, radical right-wing politics have infringed rather forcefully on the art world, and once again standards of 'correct art' are being implemented. Fortunately, that is not yet the case in Estonia. What are the options for theatre in these circumstances, and what would Theatre NO99 do, were it to find itself in an equivalent political situation?

Naturally, this is complete speculation, but I do not see a reason why we should surrender our current artistic vision in any given political situation. A particular word, a specific image or even a whole subject matter can be censored. But I am fairly certain that art is always able to come up with new combinations of elements aligned in such a way that the message conveyed passes right through the net of censorship. In truth, I think the decisive factor in a situation like that is how demanding the audience will be able to be.

An interview with
Ene-Liis Semper,
the Artistic Director
of Theatre NO99



Ene-Liis Semper

Let me continue and finish with the subject of Estonia – why have you chosen to work in Estonia when the doors to the global theatre scene are wide open? What makes the local working environment special and interesting?

Firstly, the opportunity to work with the same ensemble cast is relatively unique. We are all aware that big, state-funded repertory theatres (in Germany, for example) have large ensemble companies on salary, unfortunately they are very large indeed and the qualities of the actors growing together and developing a sense of each other on stage are not fully realised. Therefore, at NO99 the opportunity of working together long-term with a smaller ensemble cast was a conscious choice for us, and we know to value it highly. Having been able to experiment with various styles (physical theatre, improvisation, musical productions, psychological drama, socially sensitive projects) with the same group of people we have reached a relatively high level of flexibility. We are able to freely choose the means we wish to use in future works. That is a great luxury.

Secondly – we are united by a Nordic identity, shaped by Estonia being a small country and by its geographical location. This is a concept difficult to explain in an ever-globalising world. There is a kind of specific point of view that one is only able to hold here. The question is whether to consider it a virtue or a flaw.

When we – together with the other co-founder of NO99, Tiit Ojasoo – go to direct something outside our own theatre company, we gain fresh experience and expand our notion of theatre as a concept.

But still, we are able to express ideas that matter to us most sensitively and with the greatest accuracy working with the people with whom we have learnt to 'breathe' together over the last dozen years.

Interviewer: Liisi Aibel

Theatre Series Tale of the Century

Monika Larini

To mark the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in 2018, The Estonian Association of Performing Arts Institutions is bringing the century-long story of the Republic of Estonia to the stage. All productions will be created in cooperation between at least two theatre companies - one big and one small - bringing together 24 organisations within the project. In terms of themes, we have divided the century into decades as well as added a piece about the future - hence 13 new theatre pieces will be created under the aegis of the comprehensive production project.

Preparations for the series have already been going on for a few years. We chose to leave it to chance which theatre companies get paired up into creative duos, so each partnership was decided by draw. The grand draw between theatre companies took place three years ago and in addition to assigning each to a creative partner it also allotted a decade to every pair for inspiration. Indeed, precisely for inspiration, since we do not presume theatres to take a factually accurate approach to history. Thus, stories are in the process of being born, some of which stem from a particular event or person associated with that decade - others, however, weave mystifications of history with a very authentic sense of the age. Our interpretations of the decades also have a place for reflections of global events of the time in our cultural sphere. In any case, the plans being conceived by the theatre companies promise a remarkably multi-faceted and playful approach to times gone by and times yet ahead, while the series as a whole will undoubtedly add new and intriguing angles to our current perception of history.

The productions in the Tale of the Century series will premiere between August 2017 and July 2018 in chronological order, offering theatre buffs the opportunity to see them in the 'right order' should they so wish. Nevertheless, each production will be an independent artistic piece, able to be enjoyed as a stand-alone performance without having seen any of the others in the series. The productions in the Tale of the Century series will remain in the repertoire of each theatre company for an extended time. The whole series can be seen all together at the Tale of the Century theatre marathon at the Draama Festival in Tartu, in September 2018.

Playing through the history of the republic, the project is, in a way, making history itself - it is, beyond doubt, the largest production ever undertaken in Estonian theatre, both in terms of the number of participants and the time frame. Furthermore, the time allowed for



"Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock". Estonian National Opera + Kanuti Gildi SAAL. Premiere in January 2018.

delving into the work - from the planning stages up until the opening nights - is unprecedented, giving reason to expect remarkably well-matured artistic results. The production series also creates a raft of original scripts and music.

First and foremost, for us, the primary value of the Tale of the Century project lies in the cooperation between theatre companies, which is why the project was planned as a series of collaborative stage productions. Sure, theatre companies work together from time to time independently of this particular project, however most often such collaborations are undertaken with kindred spirits - creatives with a similar artistic palate. Our plan was far more ambitious than that we wanted to encourage cooperation between theatre companies that differ in both their institutional framework and creative creed - in other words, between those who would otherwise probably never meet in an artistic collaboration. Naturally, it meant taking a fairly big gamble, however by today, with all the creative pairs working together in a substantial way, one may make the observation that the loudest shrieks of joy tend to emanate from those rehearsal rooms that have become meeting places for seemingly opposite creative methods. Clearly the chance to discover new means of expression through a field they were not familiar with

on a daily working basis has inspired the participants. Thus, thanks to the Tale of the Century project, it is about to become a reality that a performing arts centre focused on alternative forms of theatre and lacking a permanent company will produce an opera on the stage of the national opera house, or that a repertory company based in the capital city that almost never puts on performances outside its home venue will be on wheels for months, touring their co-production in small communities all around the country where professional theatre productions are rarely seen.

We hope that one day, when the Tale of the Century has become history itself, people will speak of the influence that inspiring collaboration between theatre companies had on Estonian theatre. And we hope that as a result of this project, Estonian theatre will reach a more resolute understanding that one is able to expand one's world infinitely, if one can maintain a curiosity not merely towards personal self-expression but towards the wider world and others operating in the theatre field.

To keep up with news and developments of the Tale of the Century series, visit its homepage at EV100.ee/teater and its Facebook page at www.facebook.com/sajandilugu.

Participating theatres and time scale:

1910-1920	Teater NO99	Foreign partners	August 2017
1920-1930	Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava	Vanemuine	September 2017
1930-1940	G9 Theatre	VAT Theatre	October 2017
1940-1950	Von Krahl Theatre	Tartu New Theatre	November 2017
1950-1960	Endla Theatre	Kuressaare City Theatre	December 2017
1960-1970	Estonian National Opera	Kanuti Gildi SAAL	January 2018
1970-1980	R.A.A.A.M	Ugala Theatre	February 2018
1980-1990	Vaba Lava	NUKU	March 2018
1990-2000	Rakvere Theatre	Fine 5	April 2018
2000-2010	Old Baskin's Theatre	Tallinn City Theatre	May 2018
2010-2020	Nargenfestival	Estonian Drama Theatre	June 2018
2020-	Russian Drama Theatre	Schools	July 2018
	Theatre marathon in Tartu		September 2018

Through the curtains and the backrooms: a view into two centuries of Estonian theatre

Laura Porovart

When an Estonian is not busy wandering in the woods or coming up with a new IT solution in their home office, they may well be found in the theatre. True, our recorded theatre heritage does not reach back to the days of yore – in all fairness, in terms of a systematic theatre practice, we can only talk about the last two hundred years; however, it is probable that a knack for performance was common much earlier among country folk – where else could the enduring theatre bug have come from? Alongside other modernities, theatre was officially ‘imported’ to Estonia by Baltic German intelligentsia in the 19th century, when two plays by Lydia Koidula adapted from German for an Estonian audience were brought on stage – *The Cousin from Saaremaa* (“Saaremaa onupoeg”, 1870) and *The Betrothal Birches* (“Kosjakased”, 1870).

But it was still too early to speak of any professional theatre companies – those, namely *Vanemuine* in Tartu and *Estonia* in Tallinn – grew out of their namesake societies in 1906. The leap that they faced to catch up with the kind of theatre being seen in the cultural hubs of Europe did not leave room for folk plays for long, with both companies soon filling their repertoire with works from Scandinavian authors dissecting Neo-European issues, the likes of Henrik Ibsen becoming a remarkably popular choice. The emergence of professional theatre companies combined with the largely Russian or German schooling of those artists who had some level of professional training subconsciously dictated the manner in which Estonians tended to depict their stage truth – something which proved unbreakable even to the modernist aspirations of the innovative *Hommikuteater* (The Morning Theatre) in the 1920s, and to the theatre innovation of the 1960s, thus pushing both artists and contemporary audiences into the ‘clutches’ of deep psychological realism; old habits are hard to break.



By the birth of the republic in 1918, a (semi-)professional theatre had been established in every larger town in Estonia and the thrill of seeing a stage performance had become available to many people in more remote parts of the country, but the capital city did not miss out on these developments, either – alongside the now-seasoned Estonia company two new remarkable troupes took their place at the forefront: *Draamastuudio Teater* (Drama Studio Theatre) that grew out of a private drama studio run by Paul Sepp and reached impressive heights of artistic quality, followed slightly later by *Tallinna Töölister* (The Tallinn Workers’ Theatre) that carried a more socio-political agenda. The Estonia theatre expanded its artistic reach to include opera in its programme and established a ballet company. Naturally, *Vanemuine* could not let itself be outdone by Estonia, moving forward with similar developments. Before World War II, both ballet companies performed internationally renowned pieces and works from domestic authors in equal measure. In drama, as the 1930s approached, the share of contemporary Estonian material grew alongside world classics – dramatizations of books by two of Estonia’s best known authors A. H. Tammsaare and Oskar Luts were particularly popular, among others. The 1930s saw a rising trend in the local theatre scene: the opening of a government-funded drama school, an established and functioning network of theatres, and a rise in attendance by the public.

Following the rise, in the 1940s working under foreign occupation (intermittently under German or Russian rule), Estonian theatre didn’t transform in any drastic way in the first few years, however several theatre companies and societies closed down due to lack of personnel. The situation on the theatre scene after the war was bleak – several theatre buildings were in ruins, a large amount of scenery, props and costumes had been destroyed – but the audience numbers did not falter, as the instability of daily life made people come

to the theatre to forget their woes for a while. The second half of the 1940s brought a rigid implementation of intense Soviet regulation through repressions and ideological pressure, removing Western plays from the repertoire and replacing them with works from Soviet authors, however that icy grip loosened again somewhat in the second half of the 1950s. In the mid-1950s, two men who were true masters of fine psychology emerged as prominent directors, Kaarel Ird in Tartu and Voldemar Panso in Tallinn – the latter having acquired his signature directing style at GITIS in Moscow, brought welcome refreshment to the Estonian theatre scene of the time with his degree shows *The King Is Cold* (“Kuningal on külm”) and *Man and God* (“Inimene ja jumal”).

On Panso’s initiative, the Estonian National Youth Theatre was formed in the mid-1960s, mostly from the national drama school’s second group of graduates, the class of 1965; meanwhile in Tartu, Kaarel Ird took the young and angry Jaan Tooming, Mati Unt and Evald Hermaküla under his wing – a threesome whose attempt at theatre reform at the end of the decade became a counter-revolution against the dominating everyday realism of the time. The new epoch in theatre valued its independence and expressivity, seeking for which, practitioners attempted to go back to the very roots of theatre. The movement drew inspiration from the contemporary writings on theatre theory by Grotowski and Brook. Therefore, in the 1970s, theatre became more multi-faceted and made inroads into fusing realism with metaphorical and modernist theatre, alongside which there was growing interest about the past, too. Simultaneously, the gap in the level of artistic quality between provincial theatres and the large repertory companies in the bigger cities grew smaller, so remarkable stage productions came from places other than just Tallinn or Tartu – the most notable examples being Pärnu Theatre with the young directors Kaarin Raid and Ingo Normet, and Rakvere Theatre with its artistic director Raivo Trass.



The rising tide of the 1970s was followed in the early 1980s by an air of tediousness – but regardless of that, theatre was still a unifying force of resistance against the foreign occupation, and the questioning of national identity that had begun to emerge in the previous decade became amplified. The latter part of the 1980s signified a loosening of censorship and saw the

establishment of the first independent theatre company in Estonia – VAT Theatre (1987) – followed in 1992 by Von Krahl Theatre which grew out of Ruta Killakund, and by Theatrum in 1994. The country regained independence in 1991 which made for fertile ground later in the decade and in the early noughties for independent companies and small theatres to grow – including NPO Association R.A.A.A.M, CIO Fine 5 Dance Theatre and Theatre NO99. The phenomenon of summer theatre – which one could cheekily dub extreme theatre as well, since it has taken audiences into bogs and ruins – is re-discovered in the mid-1990s, and it seems the success of summer productions was in no way inferior to the repertoire of the main season. Alongside that, several theatre festivals were born that still run with great success, such as the Estonian Theatre Festival Draama in Tartu and the biannual Baltoscandal in Rakvere. In the noughties, fresh graduates of the national drama school's directing degree programme emerged alongside the masters of the previous decade – among them Tiit Ojasoo, Mart Koldits and Urmas Lennuk.

In the second decade of the new millennium the visibility of Estonian theatre on the international arena has only gained momentum; one of the productions featured at the Avignon Theatre Festival in 2015 was NO51 My Wife Got Angry from NO99. At the same time, one ought to keep an eye on the new wave of theatre artists emerging from both drama schools – in Viljandi and Tallinn – promising to alter the future of Estonian theatre. The recent establishment of Teater Must Kast (Black Box Theatre) and Teater Kelm (Rascal Theatre) – which are yet to really prove themselves, having been active for a very short period of time – counts as a first sign of that shift, referring clearly to artistic aspirations and needs that for the young theatre buffs can no longer be fulfilled by the familiar repertory theatres.

Theatre in Estonia has come through the curtains and the backrooms, and as long as the IT set-up in the home office can't replicate the experience, Estonians will continue to participate in theatre – both in the audience and on the stage.

Field Guide to Estonian Theatre Audiences

Liisa Pool

Estonians are among the least religious people in Europe, however one can assert without a shadow of a doubt that we are of theatre faith. The average Estonian attends the theatre more often than the church. In 2016, the total audience numbers at professional theatres topped 1.2 million. Considering the relatively small size of our population, with a bit of rough-handed rounding it nearly adds up to one attendance per every inhabitant. Not bad, is it? In reality, not everyone goes to the theatre. The share of the population that has attended a theatre performance in the last year is a 'mere' 45 per cent. Who are these people and what brings them to the theatre?

Those who seek for summer adventure

The Estonian summer is a short one, and we tend to spend the majority of that precious time either at work, weeding the garden at our summer cottages, or sheltering indoors from the rain. To enable us to enjoy the summer sunshine (should we be in luck), to indulge in a bit of domestic tourism discovering beautiful new nature spots, and to spend quality time with friends partaking in something cultured, we have developed an active summer theatre tradition. In the summer season, actors on leave from repertory companies who don't know how to just relax and enjoy their vacation, jump into action and revive various NPOs from hibernation that offer a platform for new performance projects co-created with friends who happen to be freelancers. A proper summer production ought to match a couple of key criteria – a remote location accessible with great difficulty (such as a bog far away from any major population centre, or a half-decrepit country mansion), an unusual performance time (such as at 5 a.m.) or duration (i.e. the Tammsaare marathon performance that lasts for 24 hours). Summer theatre audiences possess the foresight to arrive armed with sunscreen, rain coats, mosquito repellent, warm sweaters, seat cushions, and picnic baskets. Be they faced with sunstroke or torrential rain, the performance will go on as planned. A quarter of those who have attended a theatre performance in the last year went to see a summer production. The summer open-air shows

range from light variety programmes and comedies to serious classics. The best-known makers of summer productions are project-based R.A.A.A.M that often tends to invite directors from abroad (Sergey Potapov, Hodayun Ghanizadeh, Marco Layera, for example) and Emajõe Summer Theatre in Tartu, which has already got two decades of experience under its belt.

Those who live by the edge of the woods

The majority of theatre companies in Estonia are based in two of the largest cities – Tallinn and Tartu. Four regional towns also have a permanent repertory theatre: Pärnu, Viljandi, Rakvere and Kuressaare. However, grannies living in cottages by the edge of the woods and other inhabitants of small towns and villages also wish to attend the theatre, but have no means of getting to the big city independently to go see a performance. Going to see a professional theatre production whilst living away from a town with a permanent company presents one with significant added expenses for travel and overnight accommodation. The last scheduled coach to get back home for the night tends to depart before the evening performance has even begun. So, in order to satisfy the thirst for theatre in small places, many companies tour in civic centres around the country. The share of the national audience who attended a performance at a local community hall stands at 18 per cent. The majority of touring is done by small project-based theatre companies who mainly perform light comedies. Out of the large, established theatre companies, it is Rakvere Theatre that does the most touring – despite having their own building with three theatre spaces, nearly half (44%) of their performances are given outside their home venue. Thus they are also colloquially known as 'the theatre on wheels'.

Those who are wonderfully open-minded

Kids represent a significant segment of the audience. Almost a third (33%) of the 6552 theatre performances in 2016 were aimed at audiences under

the age of 17. The breeding of young theatre fans already begins at kindergarten (around the age of 3-4). Semi-professional theatre companies tour kindergartens and elementary schools with light entertainment pieces for the price of a chocolate bar. School kids are normally taken to see a performance at least once a semester by their teachers. This usually entails a great deal of excitement, as they often pick a theatre based in another town and that involves a group coach trip. Estonia also boasts an extraordinarily active school drama scene – there is an extra-curricular drama group at nearly every school, getting many youngsters even more interested in theatre by taking part in amateur drama. In terms of theatre aimed at children, both NUKU and VAT Theatre – based in Tallinn – deserve a special mention in light of their work mainly for young audiences. Both theatre companies also offer educational opportunities alongside their repertoire. However, productions aimed at children can be found in the programmes of other established repertory companies. At least definitely before Christmas, if not at other times.

Those who want to shine

A distinct audience group is made up spectators for whom the performance they are going to see is of secondary importance. What they are primarily interested in is the glamour and social shine of going to the theatre. These hedonist patrons dress up in suits and evening gowns, sip a glass of wine or cognac during the interval, and of course share their impressions of the experience with colleagues the following day. A particularly popular destination for this is Tallinn City Theatre, where performances are routinely sold out due to the relatively small theatre spaces. Clinking champagne flutes together during the intermission of an impossible-to-get-tickets-to-show makes it all the more special. In addition to the difficulty of acquiring seats it is necessary for the production to feature a famous actor. This audience segment tends to favour a well-staged classical drama production, performed in a familiar and comfortable environment where the bar serves cake during the interval and one can mingle

amongst other well-dressed patrons. Other theatres well suited for such an attendance are the Estonian Drama Theatre and Vanemuine. However, this group has lately also begun to frequent NO99 – going to see avant-garde is just as good a social status forming agent as watching the beloved grand old ladies of Estonian theatre in more traditional productions.

Those who go on a date

People rarely attend the theatre alone. The most common unit of audience is a couple made up of a man and a woman. The twosome may consist of a middle-aged couple that have been married for years, or a pair of young lovers who only have eyes for each other rather than for the actors on stage. Usually the theatre visit is initiated by the female who is well informed about the production they are seeing, and her companion is left to dutifully and patiently accept his fate. With couples one may often observe how the woman drops a few emotional tears, while the good fellow does his best to keep from dozing off during a quiet performance or is engaged in meditative introspection, hidden behind a jaded expression. The couple can be seen in every theatre in Estonia attending performances of every genre.

Those who establish trends

Hipster theatregoers are primarily found attending venues in Tallinn with a more alternative repertoire – NO99, Von Krahl, STL, Kanuti Gildi Saal, Cabaret Rhizome. This audience segment is very culturally aware and expects a strong concept, innovation and a clear rhetorical stance. That may also mean a strong political charge or relation to society, or the opposite – delving into explorations of art philosophy. Hipsters are fascinated by postdramatic theatre and the more recent developments of modern performing



"Izhorian Epos". Directed by Anne Törnpu & Eva Klemets. 2015.

arts. They keep an eye on what's happening abroad and will definitely be present when a notable foreign artist gives a guest performance in Estonia. This group largely consists of artists and their entourages. During artist talks following the performances they tend to sit with a haughty expression and eventually utter something cryptic and laden with meaning that is only really decipherable to others of their kind.

Audience members from the couples group or members of the school of shiners who are present at the discussion generally miss their thought entirely. Modern dance productions were attended by 13, experimental performances by 5, and interactive theatre pieces by 2 per cent of the people who have been to the theatre in the past year. Hipsters, therefore, are relatively small in numbers.

Three brothers in a theatre wonderland

Current situation
of Estonian drama
by Mihkel Seeder

There is a rumor that Estonia is a theatre wonderland. And if you trust the statistics, then this rumor almost becomes a fact. Over 1 million theatre visits per year! 86% of Estonians say that theatre is one of the most important parts of Estonian culture! And both of those figures are growing almost on a yearly basis! This must be a wonderland!

As a playwright, I'm happy about another statistic in my home country – we do quite a lot our own drama. 2015 and 2016 combined saw about 200 new theatre productions that were based on "our own material". That is around 40% of all the productions made over those two years. However, statistics have their limitations and looking behind the numbers we don't find an armada of Estonian playwrights spawning texts left and right. The situation is more complex.

Fairytale wonderlands work especially well with magical numbers, such as three. Contemporary Estonian drama also rests on the shoulders of three brothers. And the power is currently shifting.

The oldest brother, the "classical" playwright, has ruled the realm of Estonian theatre quite autonomously for years. In 2004, the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre became the first university in the country to offer the chance to study dramaturgy at degree level, but playwrighting education is still rather inefficacious. A welcome exception is the private writing school Draka-deemia, founded in 2008. Still, most playwrights tend to have a background in classic literature. These "old school guys" believe in a firm division of roles in the

theatre: the playwright writes, and the director and the actors give their best to put that fantasy on the stage.

The second brother, the self-writing theatre director, has observed his older brother from the side for years, not bothered much by it, because he can do his own thing. There have always been such autonomous artists, but they have been quite small in numbers. However, many new self-writing directors have emerged in the new millennium. People like Uku Uusberg, Ivar Põllu, Kertu Moppel, Urmas Vadi, Mehis Pihla have built their theatre careers around creating shows that seek to fulfill their vision to the last detail. And some of the most remarkable productions of recent years have emerged from that group.

But another brother wants to show his strength. Because of the liberating moods of Estonian theatre in recent years, and with the growing numbers of freelancers and project theatres, more and more production dramaturges appear in Estonia. Even though this role is quite common in Europe, in Estonia the young brother is still in his breakthrough phase. And let's be honest, most of the directors here still don't have a clue what to do with this new and curious creature. Nevertheless, the production dramaturges forge ahead and now even conquer "classical" theatre venues. And some people have already almost entirely committed themselves to that work. Two most prolific names are Eero Epner and Laur Kaunissaare, the two dramaturges at NO99, where nearly all shows are born with intense participation from a production dramaturge. The success of NO99 has also inspired others and today we have names like Paavo Piik and Andra

Teede, who are currently mostly focused on documental theatre; Anne-Ly Sova and Liis Aedmaa, who as theatre dramaturges have taken more and more creative responsibility in the productions at their home theatre; Piret Jaaks and Siret Campbell, who work with very unusual forms of theatre or in dance theatre; or Maria Lee Liivak and Tõnis Parksepp, who have completely committed themselves to the art of production dramaturgy. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. Because the role of a production dramaturge in Estonia is still in the development phase, their tasks can vary from one production to another – from writing and re-writing the text, giving feedback to the director and actors, or even making crucial decisions. This opens the door for multiple exiting new forms of making theatre, such as group work, devised theatre, etc. I predict the biggest growth spurt for the youngest brother in the coming years.

The year 2016 marks the moment for Estonia, when the two younger brothers – the self-writing directors and production dramaturges – created more than the oldest brother, the playwright. That kind of diversity can only help Estonian theatre. I urge everyone to read the texts by the people I mentioned above – the Estonian Theatre Agency will be glad to help you out.

But with this I also come to the worrying part. Some of these texts can't be read because they don't exist or are too schematic to be understood without seeing the show. This is quite symptomatic of the material by these two groups. In a sense, this is logical. If a director writes only for him/herself, the text doesn't have to be complete. All the gaps can be filled in rehearsal.

Some productions start off with no written text at all, and also finish the same way. For me as a writer, this is a loss. I hope that the dramaturges and directors are interested in creating a complete theatre text as well. Furthermore, the other way around - a play is the perfect place where some things can already be worked through. It's another battlefield where different ideas and visions can be analyzed to save the actors from extra stress and doubts. Yes, I know, the rehearsal times in Estonia are quite long (around two months), but watching contemporary shows I often feel, if they

had just took an extra week or two to truly finish what they started. A well composed play can help to accelerate this process. I repeat: I cheer on the two younger brothers, they're doing a wonderful job, but I hope they also see how useful a tool a play can be for them. The big names of Estonian playwriting are still doing extremely well. Andrus Kivirähk, Urmas Lennuk, Martin Algu have constantly got their hands full. There are even some more recent names like the writers Tiit Aleksejev and Tõnu Õnnepalu, the dramaturge Kristiina Jalasto and the fiction author Indrek Hargla,

but in no way can they be called real "newcomers". And this is the most concerning part of it all. Right now, I can't see a new generation of playwrights emerging. The current trend is that young talents invest their energy in other activities rather than writing drama pieces with big narratives. But to keep the level of Estonian drama up I believe all three brothers need to be healthy and hungry. The revival will probably happen when playwriting becomes the new alternative. And then the older brother will discover his second youth in the theatre wonderland.

Good Theatre Surpasses Language

An interview with the actress and director

Mari-Liis Lill

In our small country, the Estonian and Russian theatre scenes are relatively separate. The audience tends to remain segregated as well. What are the main causes of that?

The Estonians and Russians have an unfortunate habit of sticking to their own paths. Ever since Estonia was occupied by Russian forces during World War II, each family carries its own historic trauma. A thing like that lives on in people for a very long time. Since our independence was restored, we have only had just over a quarter of a century to process these traumas - but social science says it takes three generations for integration as such to reach a positive outcome. Therefore, the two nationality groups tend to also be separated in theatre. One can add a language barrier and the resultant lack of information to the mix. For example - marketing departments tend to be made up of relatively young people who don't speak Russian and don't translate their press releases into Russian. Consequently, when it comes to the Estonian language theatre scene, much of the Russian-speaking population lives in an information blackout. To add to the problem, Russian language culture journalism in Estonia is in a dire state. I've got a friend

who has taken it upon herself to translate press releases about contemporary theatre and dance productions into Russian and distributes them to her friends, but essentially it cannot remain the effort of a single private citizen.

When anything gets translated these days, it tends to be into English ...

That stems from the reality that everyone speaks English and it's not a difficult task. Whereas translating into Russian takes much more effort - I am not capable of translating a press release into Russian, either ... However - in truth, good theatre surpasses language. I know a couple from St. Petersburg who regularly attend performances at the Estonian Drama Theatre. They both make the trip especially, even though neither of them speaks a word of Estonian. Furthermore, the Estonian Drama Theatre no longer offers a synchronised translation service, but since they have already found something here that has touched them, they keep coming back time and again.

You have been a part of several productions that facilitate the meeting of Estonian and Russian theatre practitioners. How easy or complicated is it to bring artists of two different nationalities together and get them to toil for the same goal?

It is not difficult at all to bring people like that together, there is a great deal of interest towards each other. The problem is not that someone would not wish to come join, but that nobody has ever asked them if they would like to join. At *Second Sight* (directed by Mari-Liis Lill and Paavo Piik), a collaboration between Tallinn City Theatre and Russian Drama Theatre of Estonia, was a long-term project - the Estonians learnt Russian and the Russians learnt Estonian for a few years before the production even made it to rehearsal. At times the enthusiasm did falter, of course. The whole process gave the Estonian cast members the best kind of feedback on a notion that we tend to hold from our point of view - how come ethnic Russians have not managed to learn to speak Estonian after living here for decades - by trying to actively learn to speak Russian themselves, alongside all their daily work, it led to a much better understanding of why that is. Fair enough, we had two years, they have had twenty-five, but daily work takes up the same amount of time and energy, so without having a very, very high level of motivation, human beings are simply lazy. Just like our cast members found themselves thinking at times they will just learn this monologue by heart and won't bother with trying to learn the language, it's just too difficult. It certainly led to a much greater understanding of each other.

How favourable a place is the stage for dissecting topics such as social or ethnic issues? Have you received any audience feedback as to if and how much it changed the way people think?

My view is that the theatre is as good a place for this as any. When Estonians and Russians meet at football practice, that's pretty great already. When they attend the same summer camp, that's very good. When they happen to be working in the same team and like to chat in the smoking area, that's also wonderful. When they do that in the theatre, that's better still. Ideally, theatre can have the effect that in addition to the actors meeting on stage, it also affects the audience. The reactions to both productions were very controversial, as they address things that lie deep in emotional memory. For example - the understanding of what one can and cannot joke about can be quite different. In *At Second Sight* we tend to poke fun at Estonians more, as we - the writer-directors - are Estonian ourselves, so that comes far more easily. It would appear somewhat unfair to create a performance lasting an hour and a half to only laugh at the expense of the Russian population, since we - the Estonians - are currently the ethnic majority in this country, in a stronger position, and it's not nice to pick on those who are weaker. Nevertheless, the production does feature a scene called *The Poor Russian*, aimed rather sharply at those of the local Russian population who are never satisfied with anything. It is rather significant that a member of the technical crew from the Russian Theatre refused to work on our production after having seen this particular scene in rehearsal. So indeed, this topic does flare up emotions. When it comes to audience response, I have never before received so much feedback as I have with these two productions. After a performance of *At Second Sight* I received a letter from an audience member with the following comments: "I went to the theatre thinking that all Russians are idiots, I saw the piece, listened to Sergey's monologue and realised that actually they're pretty normal people. I apologise, I feel rather embarrassed and it was a really remarkable experience." That, for me, is the best kind of feedback there is.

I'd Rather Dance with You (directed by Oleg Soulimenko), a collaboration between Vaba Lava and R.A.A.M, is essentially more ambivalent. It does not set out to seek a common language. It features four people "from the street" that hold relatively extreme views - old and young, Estonians and Russians. One who will only watch Russian television and looks up to Putin, and another who is an Estonian nationalist with a keen interest in history. It is beyond obvious that these two can't possibly agree with each other. And if they are provoked with pointed questions, then naturally they will become agitated and get into an



Mari-Liis Lill

argument. The performance does not have a happy end and nobody walks away into the sunset holding hands. Therefore, with *I'd Rather Dance with You*, the most frequent comment we get from the audience is that people held a much more positive understanding of how things are and that the problems at the focus of the show had largely been consigned to history. Living in our everyday bubble, as Estonians, it appears to us that all the animosity between nationality groups has evaporated, but this production demonstrates vividly how extreme the views of the representatives of different nationalities can still be, how easily it can lead to arguments and how impossible it is to reach agreement on certain issues.

Oleg Soulimenko, the director of *I'd Rather Dance with You* is an ethnic Russian but resides in Austria. How did he – from his outside viewpoint of sorts – relate to this subject and how did he steer it?

Soulimenko's strength is that he is not held back by the opinion of his compatriots. Communital pressure to have 'the correct opinion' is a particularly fascinating subject that I have come across during these collaboration projects. More so on the Russian side, but also on the Estonian side. For example, we are also making a TV show based around the same subject, where ethnic Russians resident here introduce viewers to their version of Estonia. When we first meet them, many speak of how they would wish to go stand next to the Bronze Soldier statue and talk about how embarrassed they feel about the local Russians who visit there, and although their grandfathers also perished in World War II, they no longer want to belong to the same group of people who celebrate the anniversary by drunkenly shouting 'Rossiya!' from car windows at passers-by and waving Soviet flags. But when we meet them next, they speak of how they've had time to think and since the programme is also broadcast on ETV+ (the Russian language channel of the Estonian national broadcaster), they would prefer not to address the subject in such a way

after all. They are restrained by the *comme il faut* of their ethnic community. It is fascinating to witness those boundaries. Ideally, we ought to be able to freely express the opinions that we hold in Estonian, Russian, English or even in Korean, if necessary.

At *Second Sight* and *I'd Rather Dance with You* are different in form but similar in their creative method – both productions were created chiefly through group work. Is that – and if so, how much – an asset when dealing with the question of ethnic relations?

For me, very much so. Perhaps it would work just fine if a good Estonian playwright wrote a nice play about integration, but then the primary point of it would be lost ... In such a case, the production would mainly count as a strong theoretical effort. But when Estonians and Russians actually meet in rehearsal, it adds the element of practice. We may well try and imagine what problems local Russians face or read up on statistics from newspapers and come to conclusions based on that, but unfiltered personal experience is still something different entirely and that can't be replicated. Especially in a situation where many Estonians have no daily contact with Russians. This means that unless we actually meet in a rehearsal room, then those issues would have to literally be made up.

Who make up the audience for integration pieces and who could it ideally include?

When making *At Second Sight* we dreamt of an audience where about half or even slightly more than half would be made up of people who speak Russian as their mother tongue. The audience for this production consists of three groups of people – patrons from Tallinn City Theatre, and from the Russian Theatre, both of whom we hijack and bus across the city to a civic centre theatre space in the district of Lasnamäe, where they are joined by the third group – people who have the opportunity to purchase a ticket locally. Since Lasnamäe is a predominantly Russian-speaking

area, we hoped to attract a large number of Russian people. We didn't. On average, the audience has been made up of approximately three quarters of Estonians and a quarter of Russians, which in its own way represents a pretty fair cross-section of the population, as Estonia has an ethnic Russian population of about 25-30 per cent. The somewhat lukewarm level of interest from the Russian side of the audience is also understandable – when you use the word 'integration', an Estonian will politely listen to what you've got to say. When you utter the same word to a Russian, they often turn their back and head out the door, because it carries a very different meaning for Russians – it equals assimilation, governmental pressure, which has been talked about ad nauseam without reaching any concrete results. Therefore, it is somewhat to be expected that making a stage production about integration is going to scare people off a bit at first.

I'd Rather Dance with You – performed at the Vaba Lava theatre centre – had showings with perhaps just ten people who spoke Russian as their first language among the spectators, which is a mere two per cent of the audience. There are most likely two reasons behind that. First, many local Russians are simply not yet aware of the existence of Vaba Lava, since it's a relatively new performance venue. Second, *I'd Rather Dance with You* is not really a conventional production in many ways. There's no real story and the people move funny ... The director Soulimenko said that for him as an outside eye, the local Russians tend to be far more conservative than Estonians. Including young people. Conservatism among minority ethnic groups is a whole other subject in its own right: with your identity on fragile ground to begin with, not living in the homeland of your ancestors and not having been accepted yet, you are even more bound to look for something to hold on to – and that something to hold on to is most often found in the past. Everyone likes Dostoevsky; Chekov is loved by all, too. That is the something to hold on to.

From Hamburg with love

What makes a freelance producer from Hamburg/Germany come to Estonia and – cheekily – ask for Estonian performing artists, dramaturgs and managers to talk to her? In my case one answer is witnessing deep changes in my own environment, a comprehensive and rich theatre and dance scene between big state institutions and small independent companies. I myself mainly work with the latter. Two years ago, while visiting Tallinn in August, I developed an interest in the Estonian theatre landscape. The local scene seemed strangely familiar and yet totally different from my homebase. Passing by closed theatres (it was midsummer), reading programs of festivals and the seasons to come I figured I had to come back. So you might say I came on a hunch. I am glad I did.

I am aware that a one month stay enables a person to touch the surface at best, but nevertheless I am very grateful for the insights that people gave me. This March/April I had the pleasure to talk to a lot of colleagues who were willing to report about their work and living conditions. I could visit performances of which I sometimes did not understand much but I tried to catch a glimpse of what might be „in the air“ at the moment.

In the meantime I learned that Estonian theatre makers usually are trained actors, directors, dramaturgs, dancers, choreographers and scenographers – seldom theatre researchers for example.

I learned that Estonians are eager theatre visitors (number two theatre goers in the world) and became green-eyed, witnessing your halls being well-attended even at the more experimental shows, also at the smaller venues. For me the boundaries between public theatres and private theatres seem to be much more open than back home.

I gained some insight into the funding framework, and was pleasantly surprised to hear that there is a regular meeting of theatre managers, again featuring diverse representatives and seeking to adjust the funding system in general. I was however not surprised to learn that funding and working conditions look distinct from different viewpoints, career stages and living conditions. I was told that Estonian mainstream theatre is often very traditional, focussed on drama mostly, driven by a Stanislavski-oriented education and acting style. I figure I glimpsed a bit of that from time to time but I seem to have avoided most of that. I confess I tried to seek out the more „off“-venues like VAT Theater, Kanuti Gildi Saal, Cabaret Rhizome, Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava and Must Kast in Tartu but also established places like NUKU, brandnew Vaba Lava and marquee NO99.

Their directors, managers and dramaturgs did not only share their opinions on Estonian Theatre but sometimes also their visions and problems, and often kindly invited me to the performances.

Maike Tödter



Maike Tödter

If I had to choose one paraphrase for the very different performances and pieces that I watched it would be this: without fear. I was under the impression that there was a great readiness to experiment with forms and aesthetics without pushing it or caring too much about reinventing the wheel. I was delighted to discover witty and surprising moments in supposedly known material. Each show seemed driven by a few strong visions or principles which then were executed consistently and elegantly. I see a great importance attached to accuracy, well made story telling and craft of acting and physical performance. Estonian makers however seem to be quite severe when it comes to inaccuracy or anarchic approaches, which is maybe considered „sloppy“ staging. Coming from a (mostly freelance) scene with a lot of non-actors on stage and a high innovation pressure (that really should be discussed critically) I wonder what you might think of some of „our“ output - which I very often find marvellous. But

I guess sometimes I demands of you a certain acceptance for it being rough, punk, unfinished. I was wondering whether there was a discourse about non-linear narrative styles, devised theatre, gaming principles, gender roles or collectivity and was often told that all this was still pretty new to the performing arts scene, probably due to the iron curtain falling only less than 30 years ago. I encountered all those aspects at some time and in some places, for example at Cabaret Rhizome, Teater Must Kast, STL or Kanuti and I am keen to see whether those aspects will become more popular. By the way: I consider a lot of theatre in Germany to be very traditional, focussed on drama mostly, driven by a Stanislavski-oriented education and acting style. It has sometimes become very good at pretending it is not.

The performing arts scene in Germany has currently reached a crucial point and is actually facing demands

for a change of system. The budget for culture is not going to reach a satisfying level in the near future, the distribution of these means between the freelance and the institutional players is debatable and the old leadership model of the big institutions is in question. The Ensemble-Netzwerk, founded in 2015, spoke out against working conditions in public theatres and demanded more agency. An insight into NO99's model was very inspiring in terms of rethinking public theatre. To what point I do not know yet. The middle-sized and smaller venues, companies, collectives and freelance artists actively work on building wider networks and associations and also intent to get connected internationally - without becoming the new ivory towers.

Some of my conversational partners stated the feeling of the Estonian scene being on a threshold too, partly due to the financial crisis in 2008. I hope I can follow the developements further still.

Postdramatic Stanislavski

Ott Karulin



"Dead Souls". Tallinn City Theatre. Directed by Hendrik Toompere. 2014.

"Are we in the century of midget directors?" - this is a question posed in a recent opinion piece by the director Jaan Tooming, one of the drivers behind the innovation of Estonian theatre in the late 1960s.¹ There is nothing extraordinary about asking that question, as the critique has been complaining about a lack of directors for at least since I have been a reader of it. Perhaps even longer than those fifteen years.

Behind the question, at its root lies the ideal of the continuity of director training. Anyone who has seen at least a bit of Estonian theatre might well agree that it rests very heavily on a foundation of Stanislavskian teaching. That is no surprise, either, given the fact that the whole of our theatre education - through a lineage of master-apprentice relationships - goes directly back to Stanislavski himself. The founder and first head of Estonia's oldest drama school - Voldemar Panso - studied directing in the Moscow Theatre Arts Institute (GITIS)

under Maria Knebel, who was one of Stanislavski's students. Panso was the head of the drama school for two decades, from 1957 until his death in 1977. Afterwards the baton was carried on by his students in turn. In 1995, Ingo Normet was appointed to lead the drama school - he had also studied directing in GITIS, under Anatoly Efros, who was one of Knebel's students. At present the drama school is led by Lembit Peterson who graduated from the same institution in the legendary class of 1976, which was also the last year group to have been tutored by Panso.

The class of 1976 is not legendary merely because of the man who led it, but also because alongside Peterson, its graduates include people who went on to become much-acclaimed directors - such as Merle Karusoo and Priit Pedajas - and several actors who have reached cultic levels of fame. Thus, it is but to be expected that if one was to take a closer look at the

list of those who have picked up a Director of the Year gong in the last decade or so, the master-apprentice continuity of study, the consummation of the ideal is proven only further. In addition to Peterson, a student of Panso, several graduates of another legendary group - the class of 1988 - have received the accolade: Hendrik Toompere, Elmo Nüganen and Andres Noormets. Incidentally, that intake was tutored by a student of Panso - Kalju Komissarov - who was also the head of the drama school for nine years before going in a slightly different direction: from 2002 up until his recent death he was associated with the theatre department at Viljandi Culture Academy that had launched its drama programme in the 1990s. So, the class of 1988 also has many acclaimed directors and even more actors among its ranks - and so does the class of 2000 that saw four directors graduate, two of whom have been recognised as Director of the Year thus far: Tiit Ojasoo and Urmas Lennuk. The accolade

has also been awarded to Madis Kalmet - a student of Karusoo - and this very year to Hendrik Toompere Jnr from the class of 2010, which was tutored by his father, the Toompere from the class of 1988. Continuity galore! (A side note: how many female names have you seen mentioned so far?)

Looking at the above one might easily get the impression that Estonian theatre is a very closed system and at least in terms of directors, the bench isn't too long indeed. Fortunately, this is not the case. Even in the newspaper article I referred to above, Tooming answers his own question with "we know not yet, as the century has only just begun, but the talk already is that the time of great directors is past. It is once again the time of the actor, as it has been since the birth of theatre. Was the emergence of theatre directors in the late 19th century really just an anomaly?" In truth, our national drama school has been regularly training theatre directors only since the class of 2000; in earlier years, students were admitted to a directing degree much more infrequently (i.e. the class of 1976), or much of the nature of the actual training depended on the tutor (i.e. the class of 1988). Therefore, it is very

common for many directors to have started out as actors in their careers. Many try their hand at directing already in drama school (i.e. Lauri Lagle), others make that move later on (i.e. Priit Võigemast). There are those who have studied somewhere other than at the Academy of Music and Theatre Drama School. The Director of the Year prize has also been awarded to Peeter Jalakas who honed his skills at the Odin Teatret, to the theatre researcher Ivar Põllu, and to Artyom Gareyev who studied directing in Russia.

And yet there is a longing for great directors ...

One does not need to look very far to spot the cause. Ten years ago, according to our theatre statistics (which have been collected very thoroughly in Estonia since 2004), 21 out of 172 new productions were marked as 'other' since they could not be singularly categorised as either drama, dance or musical theatre productions, however by 2016 the categories alongside the three main divisions also include puppetry and object theatre, circus, and multi-discipline productions, of which there were 45 (while the total number of premieres has gone up around 200). In other words: when

a mere decade ago we had no clue what to even call about a tenth of new theatre productions, then by now we've not only managed to identify them all but the share of productions falling under new forms of theatre across the year has gone up to 23 per cent (and that figure only keeps growing).

But that is most likely down to the term 'postdramatic theatre' only having begun to occur more frequently in Estonian theatre reviews after the English version of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book was published in 2006, and by now the term is familiar not only to theoreticians but practitioners as well, and probably even to some more alert segments of the audience. Devising, bricolage, installativity, interactive theatre, etc. have entered the daily vocabulary, although there are still those who just cannot (or are not willing to) see the director behind such a production. But no matter - perhaps they, too, will soon come to realise that it is precisely the joint and concurrent impact of strong Stanislavskian actor training and the techniques of postdramatic theatre that makes current Estonian theatre interesting (and perhaps consequently distinct from other European theatre, who knows).

Keiu Virro

PREMIERE – a platform for young choreographers

Estonians love theatre. True, contemporary dance productions get a pauper's share of the overall audience numbers, but I dare say that looking at the wider picture, they do hold a small but strong niche. It's a field with ample potential - and partly with that in mind, the PREMIERE series featuring young choreographers was brought into existence, having now become an element of considerable influence on the local dance theatre scene.

The series was initiated in 2005 by the production agency Sõltumatu Tantsu Ühendus led by Triinu Aron. The series offers choreographers who are just starting out the opportunity to make their first public dance production. In other words, the choreographers taking part in the series have usually finished their dance training, it's not about amateur work or a sheepish first try. Rather, it's about people who have got the necessary technical skills base, ideally also a perceptible artistic language or eye, but who may lack skills on the side of production, organisation and other such supportive functions - something that you can't really do without, at least on the Estonian dance scene. Every artist needs to be a multitasker.

The first PREMIERE choreographers (Jaan Ulst and Kati Juurik) presented their shows in 2009. The process of selecting young choreographers for the series has changed over time. In the early years, people from Sõltumatu Tantsu Ühendus would go to see choreographers' degree shows and proceed to make an offer to someone in particular, however later on the selection process has taken the shape of a contest in some form or another. For example, in the last two years, five people have been chosen for a residency based on their draft proposals, out of whom two were then chosen based on a showing to go on to create a production at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. By the way, the Ühendus (Union) was renamed Lava (Stage) for a fairly sensible reason - a few years ago, STL was given a permanent venue to use at Telliskivi Loomelinnak in Tallinn. Coincidentally, Vaba Lava operates at the other end of the same building. Which is also a good place to go see a contemporary dance performance now and then.



"Sula jagu". Premiere. Choreographer Kati Juurik. 2009.

As the editor of a radio show about PREMIERE, in 2016 and 2017 I've had the opportunity to follow the process up close. It's still an awe-inspiring mystery to me how the judging panel is able to read the potential for a final result from the initial drafts - the two rarely have much in common. Year after year, one inevitably also picks up on problems that tend to repeat themselves. Given the gap in knowledge when young creatives work on their first public production there is an endless array of practical problems with keyword stuff like budget, timing, communication. Running short on time, the choreographers aren't always conscious of the fact that in order to have someone watch the performance, they first have to make people aware there is something to watch, etc.

Based on the past years one can assert that the choreographers from PREMIERE are palpably present on the dance scene. Some of their pieces - such as Tõud by Karl Saks (2010) or SÕP RUS EST by Sveta Grigoryeva (2011) - are still quite fresh in my memory. I believe I am not the only one. Other names deserving of a mention include Jaan Ulst, Siim Tõniste, Üüve-Lydia Toompere, Mari-Liis Eskusson, Joanna Kalm, and now I've probably left several choreographers unfairly off the list. Meanwhile, Sveta Grigoryeva and Joanna Kalm are now active in the Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. So, the field of dance is fairly effective at growing its next generation.

There is a clichéd assertion that theatre is not a sport and therefore any kind of competition always has a

strange flavour to it, but that does not stop me from noting that the productions from the PREMIERE series have not been left untouched by awards. Karl Saks was recognised for his aforementioned Tõud in 2010 with a Dance Production of the Year prize.

In the last few years, alongside the practical support needed to produce and release a show, STL has also put more emphasis on mentoring (the 2016 intake had Kenneth Flak and Külli Roosna), and has offered the chance to go on a residency at Pardimäe in Estonia where the hostess is the performance artist Kaja Kann, and also to the northernmost town in Europe - Hammerfest - where the PREMIERE choreographers

are supported by the Dansearena Nord dance centre. On the one hand, it is an opportunity for the production teams to get out of their usual environment - further so since the visit has been during the polar night so there is only a sparse couple of hours of something that passes for daylight, so the change in environment really is tangible in every way - and focus wholly on the production, on the other, the dance centre people provide the choreographers with a second (and very experienced) observation of their work.

Concurrently, the PREMIERE series is beginning to gain international grasp. Last season they held their first international open call. My reason as to why that

feels like a positive is not merely down to the selection becoming tighter, but also because it will add a dash of different aesthetics to the series. Dance may be a universal language, but its dialects are observably different by country. In the local context, that fresh blood could well even just be pure and very technical dance. It seems to me that in Estonia the preference tends to lean towards conceptual dance. Not that one is somehow essentially better than the other, and I certainly do not wish to claim my observations constitute the final truth, but an outside point of view is always refreshing.

Plans for further down the line are even more ambitious, and time will tell if and how those are realised.

Performing Arts Festivals in Estonia

Madli Pesti

The oldest, most renowned and acclaimed international performing arts festival in Estonia is **Baltoscandal**. The festival was established during the turbid period of transition in 1990 by the director Peeter Jalakas, the leader of one of Estonia's first independent companies, the avant-garde Von Krahl Theatre. The festival is held biannually in the regional town of Rakvere, a hundred kilometres from Tallinn, and since 2004 it has been curated by Priit Raud. Baltoscandal is like a proper rock festival - held in July, over four days in the serene glow of tender summer nights. The amalgamation of intriguing and controversial theatre, sweltering performance spaces, night-time discussions, morning football games, and punk or rock concerts creates an atmosphere unlike any other theatre festival in Europe. The programme at Baltoscandal offers up both established festival hits (Forced Entertainment, Philippe Quesne, Romeo Castellucci, and others) as well as future hits, pearls yet to be discovered.

An ideology similar to Baltoscandal also drives another biannual festival held in Tallinn in August named **SAAL Biennaal**, curated by the artistic director of Kanuti Gildi SAAL - a modern performing arts venue in Tallinn - Priit Raud, and the producer Annika Üprus. The festival was known as the August Dance Festival up until 2013, but the recent renaming indicates a shift in the content of the festival that occurred some time ago. The summer-time city festival no longer reflects merely the goings-on of the international dance scene, but displays the performing arts in all their kaleidoscopic glory, also venturing out of the traditional black box space and offering up installations, promenade performances and one-off attractions. However, much like Baltoscandal, the works included in the programme are characterised by a strong concept and a pronounced aesthetic or political message.

A substantial festival of puppetry, visual and object theatre in Tallinn named **NuQ Treff** has been basking in a rather well established feel for a while now, also

set to be held biannually in May and June, alternating with SAAL Biennaal. Initially, Treff was merely an expansive and friendly meeting of visual and puppet theatre companies - however, by now the programme has been transformed by the festival's artistic director Vahur Keller into a more compact and encompassing offering, thereby raising the bar in terms of artistic quality (international top names include Giselle Vienne, Philippe Genty, and others).

Fans of musical theatre have the opportunity to enjoy opera in Estonia at two festivals. Kuressaare, the capital city of Estonia's largest island Saaremaa, hosts the **Saaremaa Opera Festival** every July, inviting an opera company from one city (Milan, Warsaw, Tbilisi, and others) to headline their programme for that year's event. In recent years, the festival has also sought to encourage local musical theatre - this year we can expect a quaint premiere of a new original piece from the much-loved songwriter and pianist Rein Rannap (Legend of Evil Island). Beyond doubt, a significant asset of the Saaremaa Opera Festival is its location - a temporary, but impressive and sophisticated opera house is erected next to the medieval fortress, and life in the summer resort town of Kuressaare puts its most attractive foot forward during the festival.

Another festival drawing in lovers of musical theatre is the more genre-mixing **Birgitta Festival**, which was established by the late, internationally renowned Estonian conductor Eri Klas. The festival features international opera and dance productions, as well as concerts of classical music. This festival also has a trump up its sleeve in terms of the location - it is held in the ruins of the medieval Saint Birgitta convent in Tallinn.

Drama festivals include the **Golden Mask in Estonia**, held every autumn and presenting a collection of the best works from Russian theatre companies, and Estonia's smallest international theatre festival - **Midwinter Night's Dream** - held biannually in

December by Tallinn City Theatre. Midwinter Night's Dream has had many faces, however as the most recent few have been curated and organised by the dramaturge Paavo Piik and the producer Paul Piik, the festival has emerged with a clearer curatorial vision. Pieces presented at the festival have - among others - included Remote Tallinn by Rimini Protokoll and Exhibit B by Brett Bailey.

Those interested in international performance art would also do well to keep an eye on the **Vaba Lava international curated programme**, which is almost like a season-long festival. It is Estonia's newest performing arts centre operating in a rather unique way, and hires international curators for two years at a time to compile an open call based programme defined by their own personal artistic criteria in terms of content and aesthetics. From 2017 to 2019 the programme is curated by José Alfarroba from Portugal and Tristan Barani from France.

Although every festival mentioned above does include Estonian productions in their programmes, the richest concentration of Estonian performing arts can be found at two festivals held every autumn. The student hub city Tartu - also the second largest city in Estonia - hosts the **DRAAMA festival** in September, showcasing chiefly drama productions, however the programme includes quite a range of other works as well as dance theatre. The festival offers the chance to see productions that have been recognised by the previous year's theatre awards. The other festival, which is primarily aimed at performing arts professionals and exporting theatre, is **draamamaa.weekend** held by the Estonian Theatre Agency, bringing some brightness into the dark November nights over three days in a concentrated programme compiled by the specialists at the agency, from pieces put forward by Estonian theatre companies interested in exporting their work that may be of interest particularly to foreign audiences. It undoubtedly provides the most expertly chosen and intense bite of Estonian performing arts!

Baltoscandal
www.baltoscandal.ee
Biannually in July
Rakvere

SAAL Biennaal
www.saal.ee
Biannually in August
Tallinn

NuQ Treff
www.nuku.ee
Biannually in May
Tallinn

Saaremaa Opera Festival
www.saaremaaopera.ee
Annually in July
Kuressaare

Birgitta Festival
www.filharmoonia.ee/birgitta
Annually in August
Tallinn

Golden Mask in Estonia
www.goldenmask.ee
Annually in October
Tallinn

Midwinter Night's Dream
www.linnateater.ee/festival
Biannually in December
Tallinn

DRAAMA festival
www.draama.ee
Annually in September
Tartu

draamamaa.weekend
www.draamamaa.ee
Annually in November
Tallinn

7 reasons to get in touch with the Estonian Theatre Agency

1. The Estonian Theatre Agency arranges copyright agreements for playwrights and translators. If you wish to produce a play by an Estonian writer, get in touch with us and we will set up the necessary contracts. If you wish to dramatise a book by an Estonian author or use the works of an Estonian artist in your production, we are also the right people to write to. If we do not represent the person you are looking for, we will find you the right contact details. Estonia is a small country and we know everyone! Copyright matters are dealt with by Kirsten Simmo, a member of the Agency's management.

2. The Estonian Theatre Agency holds one of the largest collections of plays in the country. Information about Estonian plays that have been translated into English or other languages can be found at www.draamamaa.ee. The collection is available for visitors to read plays at the Agency, borrow to take home or request to be e-mailed as a computer file. By the way, you are also welcome to send plays that you have written to the Agency, so that they may reach production by an Estonian theatre company through us. In addition we hold play competitions to discover new playwrights and play texts, the winners of this year's competition will be announced in October. Plays are dealt with by the Agency's dramaturge Heidi Aadma.

3. The Estonian Theatre Agency publishes theatre information via our website and newsletters. The Estonian language homepage www.teater.ee provides the performance schedules for theatres throughout Estonia, information about premieres and tickets, and many other things. If you'd like to know what's going on in Estonian theatre, get in touch with us. We are launching a brand new homepage in two languages in spring 2018, which will make it much easier to find

information. We can also help you find kindred spirits and people to collaborate with, because we have the contacts of all theatres and theatre organisations in Estonia. Theatre information is dealt with by the Agency's coordinator Liisi Aibel.

4. The Estonian Theatre Agency has been collecting statistics on Estonian theatre with uniform and comparable data since 2004. From 2012 the performance activity of Estonian theatre companies has been converged into a database available through our website www.teater.ee. The statistics enable users to find clear results about the repertoire of Estonian theatres, economic figures and audience numbers. By the way, our statistics database received the Pearle Award in 2012. With the pure art of theatre translated into the lingo of figures and spreadsheets, this realm is administered by the Agency's theatre info editor Tiia Sippol.

5. The Estonian Theatre Agency runs a showcase festival of Estonian performing arts named draamamaa weekend which is aimed at international theatre managers, curators and producers. Each November curious theatre lovers across Europe gather in Tallinn to take a peek at the most current cross-section of Estonian performing arts. This year the festival is held between 2 - 4 November and it showcases 7 - 9 productions that have been carefully selected by the experts at the Agency. Details about the festival can be found at draamamaa.ee. The festival arrangements are handled at the Agency by Liisi Aibel.

6. The Estonian Theatre Agency organises events related to theatre. We promote a brand of seminars binding theatre and society in a series named theatre | ... The brightest minds in the republic have been able to debate topics such as theatre | state,



Tiia Sippol, Heidi Aadma, Liisi Aibel, Kirsten Simmo
theatre | language, theatre | taboo, theatre | space etc. Could the next in line be theatre | readiness, theatre | media or theatre | cosmos? We avoid setting boundaries for ourselves because we keep a finger on the pulse and initiate discussions where a thought needs strength to take root. New initiatives and exciting collaboration projects are the field of the entire professional collective at the Agency, so the best way to contact us about that is by writing to info@teater.ee.

7. The Estonian Theatre Agency is based at Telliskivi Loomelinnak - the most fashionable hipster neighbourhood in Tallinn where you can find a delightful bunch of shops, restaurants, cafes and bars, and most importantly an abundance of creative people with their soaring ideas. Telliskivi Loomelinnak is also home to the theatre building of Vaba Lava together with Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. And that cosy spot in the bosom of two theatre companies is where the Estonian Theatre Agency has weaved its nest, too. So come read a play, come meet people or just pop in to talk - in any case, you can count on a steaming pot of tea and some friendly company.

Useful contacts

Estonian Theatre Agency

www.teater.ee

www.draamamaa.ee

Address: Telliskivi 60a, C1, 10412 Tallinn

Phone: +372 628 2342

E-mail: info@teater.ee

Estonian Theatre Union

www.teatriliit.ee

Address: Uus 5, 10111 Tallinn

Phone: +372 646 4518

E-mail: teatriliit@teatriliit.ee

Estonian Association of Performing Arts Institutions

www.eeteal.ee

Phone: +372 5561 4972

E-mail: info@eeteal.ee

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Translator: Kaur Sinissaar

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