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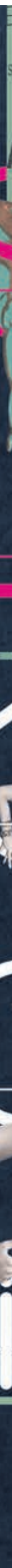
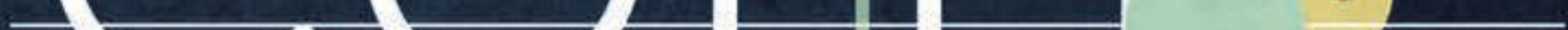
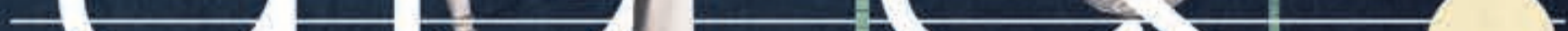
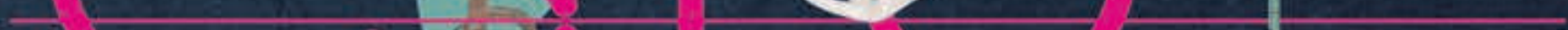
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Interview with Netti Nüganen: Estonian artists are not cynical

Maria Netti Nüganen (b. 1995) is a performance artist, who has danced, performed in a circus, and lifted weights. She graduated from the Amsterdam School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in choreography. Her video and stage works tell the stories of the characters that cohabit inside her: the weightlifter, the teenage vlogger, the detective, the cowboy, and others. Nüganen has complemented her education by taking dance courses both in Europe and in the USA, at art residencies at Kanuti Gildi SAAL and Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava in Tallinn. She currently resides in Amsterdam and tours as a performer with Florentina Holzinger's Apollon and TANZ. At the beginning of 2020, Nüganen's newest production *Victoria's Secret* debuted in Tallinn.

What kind of artist do you see yourself as?

I am a choreographer and a performer. Even if I direct (whether it is for the stage or for video), I also like to perform. I know myself and my body as material the best, and it's a good beginning point for me. Performing is a very productive experience, both philosophically as well as physically. The performance is not just the time spent on stage, it extends to before and after as well. Every experience of being on stage stays with me for some time and raises questions about how to perform the next time, what to do differently next time. The stage is very sensitive to even the slightest intention and change, and it is never a unilateral event. It is a dialogue, but you need attention and sensitivity to experience it. There is a certain power struggle there - the audience as a "democratic majority" and the performer, because of whom the whole gathering happens. For me, it is very interesting to investigate how far the dialogue can go in that kind of situation.

Let's talk about corporality. It has always been a very important and prominent part of your work. For example, you've incorporated weight lifting in your work and tried to take the body to its last limits. Why is it so important for you to join two things that are as different as the performance art and the sport of lifting?

They're not that different in my mind, and that's what makes it interesting for me. For example, when I watch weightlifting competitions, they're structured like performances. Every lifter has three attempts and they take turns lifting. A solemn atmosphere presides over every attempt, akin to what you might have at a theatre. Everyone watches the performer, sits at the edge of their seat, and after the performance they clap. It doesn't matter whether an attempt succeeds or fails - everyone claps. Just like at the theatre. During the attempt everyone is dead silent, since otherwise it may distract the lifter.

That was one link that formed for me between these two things. The other was the physical training. When you think about the field of performance art, you think of the Austrian actionists and Marina Abramovich. For them, exploring the limits of the body was a main topic. For me, a link was created between the two, because although weightlifting explores the body's limits in a different way, it is definitely about training one miniature movement a hundred million times until it stays in the body and the lifter manages to raise that enormous weight above their head. I am not that strong and, unfortunately, I didn't have enough time to train that much. I only trained for two years, but if people train longer, they actually should be able to lift double their body weight above their head. It seems impossible but if the technique is right, you can do it. That is why you need to train each little moment of each movement, so that it becomes motoric. That is how it is also about exploring the presumed limits and perhaps going beyond them. So those were the initial connections that I made.

Have you brought elements of other sports into your creative work?

At first, I started weightlifting and gymnastics. In one of my productions, which was the precursor to the weightlifting piece mentioned earlier (*BB*), I had a balance beam on the stage and practiced on it for quite some time as well. It was interesting to relearn how to do everything I could do on the mat, but this time on a ten centimetre-wide beam. To some extent, it seemed ridiculous and an absurd limit, even to me. After that, my focus went to weightlifting more.

What topics other than corporal ones interest you in art?

Many topics. I wouldn't say that this kind of physical training or corporality is my main interest. Many of my works look at various lifestyles that I like to experiment with myself. I'm interested in vlogging, video blogging. I would watch vloggers on YouTube and that led to my interest in what it feels like to vlog like that. Driving around the US, I got the idea that I would just go ahead and try, film a little - no judgement - and see what would happen. That led to a piece (*THE STORY: chatty get ready, what I eat, workouts (realistic day-in-a-life)*) that format wise was a vlog-installation, but also a performance, because I was present as well. The video had a big part in that piece.

My interest in weightlifting also began with the desire to try that lifestyle for myself. It started more abstractly, with going to the gym and bodybuilding, to train a particular muscle - to

make it look like I want it to look and be as strong as I want it to be. The idea that I can model or mould my body seemed very interesting. So that's the path I went down first. Lifestyle-wise it brought a lot of changes. The way I started to see things and what I started to think about, my habits changed. These changes were very interesting for me, and I like putting myself in situations, where I have to change myself or where I inevitably or even unwittingly change myself. Bodybuilding led to a moment, where I wanted to start doing weightlifting as a sport.

In my last production *Victoria's Secret*, we took an in-depth look at the topic of time, which is also interesting for me. It's exciting to think about when something is trending, when it seems old-fashioned, and when it becomes a classic. When is it something that seemingly nobody has ever seen before, but then it turns out to just have come back full circle from another time. So when it comes to time, I enjoy thinking about things like that and zooming out, so to speak. Vlogging is a very trendy activity right now, and often I like looking at trends with a critical eye, but at the same time jump right into them as well. I want to find out how come everyone likes doing something, where it can be taken moving forward, and whether it has occurred in some other format in the past. For example, writing diaries or writing to each other, which used to be commonplace in the past. I imagine some people regularly wrote five letters a day!

Feminism and conceptualising womanhood is also something that shines through in your work. Do you agree?

Yes, definitely. It's a complicated question, because to some extent it seems to me that if I haven't thoroughly thought about something and leaned on some kind of theory, I'm not supposed to say that I'm interested in feminism and deal with feminism in my work. I've been told that as criticism, but I don't actually agree. I don't like to lean on a theory, because it seems to me that my feminism is a very personal kind of feminism. Sometimes you can look at feminism from very far away and then these groups, casts and labels appear. In my works as well as in life overall, I prefer looking at how feminism is personally for someone and how that is expressed. But I do definitely agree that my works are feminist.

You have studied in Amsterdam and that is where you are active now. What are the similarities or differences between Estonian and Western European performance art?

The differences are definitely there. However, at first, when I arrived in Amsterdam, I thought that

it would take me forever to get to know all the performance artists here. In reality, it did not. It took about the same amount of time as it would have in Estonia. Although this place is considerably larger than Estonia, the circle of people is still rather limited. In that sense, the overall atmosphere is similar. In terms of themes, the selection here is more varied. So many different types of people converge here, and some schools teach in English, such as the one I attended. That already brings a lot of different people from outside Europe as well, who often end up staying. This is something that provides a wider range of topics to explore.

Since productions are created so often, there is a kind of simplicity to it, although it depends on where you're going to see it. Some places feature more ambitious productions, where you can tell how much money has been spent on it, but there are also random performances at bars, and often these are the ones I prefer seeing. I don't know if such things exist in Estonia. It seems to me that in Estonia presentability is an important factor. Productions have to be worked to a sufficient detail that they could be presented to a domestic audience, but if needed, abroad as well. Moreover, there is another added factor - the work should be professional to some extent. Personally, I like to watch things that haven't focused on professionalism so much. You can see that in the work of creators at the beginning of their careers, who are just starting their work as an artist. The more time passes, the less you see it here in Amsterdam too, but it's still there, which is good.

In Estonia, there is a lot of motivation and people are not so cynical. Abroad, I sometimes perceive the attitude that "this is a topic that has already been talked about so much". That leads to cynicism and sometimes people can't even be bothered to show up - oh, there's something happening, whatever. I catch myself thinking that from time to time. But when you work in Estonia, there's this new, naïve energy that surfaces: great, let's do it together! That's something that people here might learn from Estonians. Here they're trying to create a community, but it hasn't really succeeded so far. Maybe because people are constantly coming and going, their backgrounds are so different. Often it seems that the community creation is not organic, but instead comes from a feeling of having to do it. In Estonia the community-topic works better in reality. Maybe because people know each other better and real friendships are formed, but here it's something that people are striving towards.

What do you think, is Estonia headed in the same direction or will it remain less cynical and different from Western Europe?

I think it's definitely headed in the same direction, but other qualities and characteristics will rise to the fore. There are some temporal shifts here - some topics have not been explored in front of the Estonian audience, so there are blanks in the linearity that has developed in Western Europe. To some extent I like it, because I am not interested in the European dance landscape canon, which everyone knows well here. It is nice and even refreshing if some information or some names haven't reached the Estonian audience yet.

Which other factors should Estonia take advantage of in order to export our performance art to other countries? What makes the Estonian performance art special?

What I like about Estonia is that there is a lot of DIY stuff. For example, I mean Kanuti Gildi SAAL. Of course, there's the topic of money. There is less of it in Estonian performance art and more here. In the end, we should try to develop towards a smaller pay gap between an artist and a CEO. These kinds of things are certainly still a problem, but the situation is definitely better than it has been before. Private performing art organisations, such as Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava and Kanuti Gildi SAAL, have a wonderful DIY atmosphere, which perhaps also creates a feeling of community. However, of course, it's not good that they don't have that much money. I don't know how to fit these two things together. I would love to see the struggling artist be a thing of the past and something being done for the financial situation to be better.

What is your biggest career goal as a performance artist?

I don't have one, because often I don't even consider my work to be a career. I can see myself changing what I do. I use different media anyhow, for example, I also enjoy writing and performing music. Maybe one day I'll start giving concerts and then I'll consider myself a musician instead. I like to keep things in motion.

Do you have some topics in store that you would like to touch on in the near future in the performance art?

My next plan is to make a film. I'm stepping off stage (as a choreographer) and would like to work with video. This will be a crime story, where I'm the only actor, playing all characters. It will be a somewhat childlike approach, but in current conditions it's simplest in logistical terms. The film is about justice and innocence/guilt. Investigating a crime - detective work - is a very interesting topic for me. It's a great combination of generalisations and details. To some

extent, it is in high contradiction with my own character - as a habit, I avoid making rigid conclusions, generalising decisions. However, as a detective, you have to do just that. So my next "job" or "lifestyle" involves being a detective.

The topic of inequality is also near and dear to my heart. I'm motivated by the thought that no person embodies a norm - a norm is a superficial, imposed structure. I am interested in how to draw a person, who considers themselves normal, away from that belief, so that they would better understand those they consider strange. These kinds of topics have always been important for me. On a personal level as well, because I come from a context, where there are a lot of artists and people dubbed weird by the average person. Just saying that feels uncomfortable, because it already shows that some labels or casts have been assigned. I like playing with those stereotypes.



Where do we move from here? The next generation of the Estonian contemporary dance field

Theater is traditionally in a strong position on the Estonian cultural landscape, but from time to time questions about the ability of dance to address the wider society have still emerged. Since 2020, we have entered a new reality, where bringing bodies together in a shared time-space is inevitably and always a political act. It will be a long time before we can draw conclusions about what the possibilities of dance will be in the context of the performing arts, what new perspectives and opportunities practitioners will create, and how this can shape the social and political role and speaking power of dance. This article aims to introduce some of the most remarkable new generation Estonian dance artists working in the field of contemporary dance, whose work is definitely worth keeping an eye on within the changing circumstances of the coming years.

It's difficult to talk about the formation of Estonian independent dance without briefly opening up the context of Estonia regaining independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union. In just a decade, dance in Estonia was forced to undergo all the stages of Western dance history, which had developed there over the course of 80 years, but was impossible here due to the ideological pressure of the Soviet Union. This also helps to understand the inability of the audiences of the 1990s to adopt the newer dance language immediately. To some extent, this is also reflected in today's audience: there is an unfortunate prejudice that in order to watch a dance performance, one must have the ability to read or decipher its "language".

Describing the developments of dance outside the ballet world, it can be said that within the performing arts in Estonia dance in the 1990s was characterized by a desire to be free from earlier restrictions, and this individuality accompanies the dance field to this day. The perception and understanding of dance and the body moving on stage changed quickly. Postmodern minimalism, which raised its head in the mid-1990s, largely blurred the borders of performance and dance. The 2000s and especially the 2010s, though, are often characterized by a certain "body-centered comeback"¹ - the younger generation of dance artists and choreographers turned their gaze again to embodied movement and physicality. More and more young dance artists also boldly turn to movement research, without any fear of being seen as "self-centered" in the art field.

This is the context in which today's Estonian new dance has developed. During the last 10 years, there has been a talk about the possibility of redefining dance art. However, everything has been accompanied for decades by the fragility of the institutional support network, which inhibits

the formation of longer lasting companies and collectives with a stable crew. This is probably also the reason why solo artists, duo-ensembles at most, but rarely larger groups, are more common among the younger generation of the local dance field.

Contemporary dance is difficult to define, as each artist defines their own creative work. While in the last decade there was still a debate between dance and non-dance, looking at the current Estonian contemporary dance landscape, it could be said that the question of the relationship between dance and choreography is more prominent. Dance deals with its redefinition and self-reflexivity also in the wider social context, directing the reception of art and combining genres. Although interaction with other art forms has been rather modest in the local dance scene, one can expect an increase in these trends in the coming years - especially after the shocking beginning of this decade, which forced us to question the existing mediums. The following overview of some prominent younger generation Estonian dance artists can perhaps give a kind of overview of the local tendencies or an idea of upcoming, promising new directions.

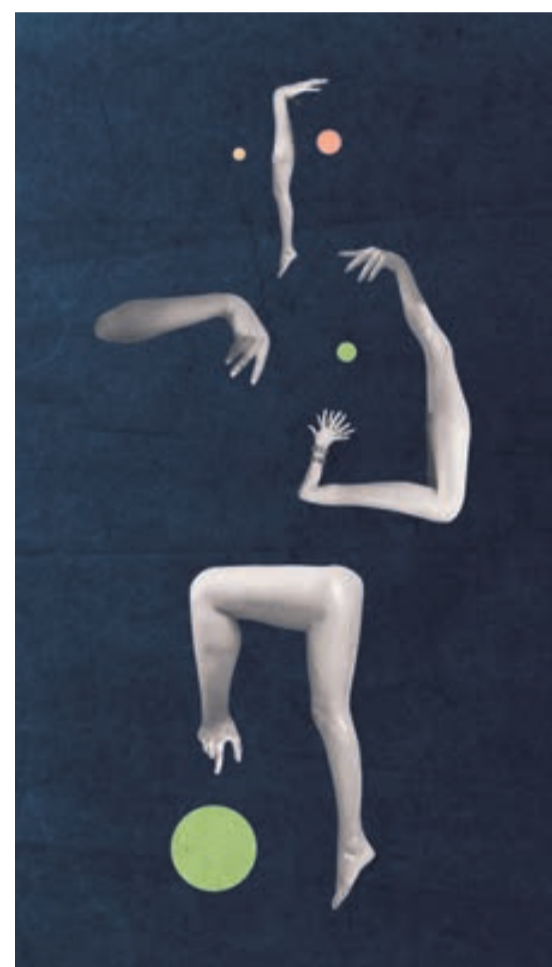
Sigrid Savi

Currently based mainly in Berlin, Sigrid Savi has worked mainly as a freelance dance artist and has recently started to explore choreography and performance art. With her first production *Imagine There's a Fish*, Savi entered the field of performing arts as a promising young artist, who wittily broke the illusion of contemporary theater and created a new context for movement. Her work is characterized by a naivety in terms of structure and presentation, yet alongside brutal honesty.

Sigrid Savi doesn't care about catering to 'good taste' and meeting expectations; instead, she ignores the canons of contemporary performing arts. The courage to communicate her non-communication and to be almost unarmed on stage gives the performer a stronger driving force. Her creative work can be described by a constant play with pre-existing canons within (performance) art and entertainment, the high-brow and the banal, the intentional tender brutality and randomness.

Maria-Netti Nüganen

Netti Nüganen graduated from the Amsterdam School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in 2019, and as a freshly emerged artist she is inspired by courage and playfulness - keywords that undoubtedly apply to her own work as well. Nüganen's video and stage works tell stories of



different characters swinging between the polarities of the banal and the mystical: a 21st century woman, a weightlifter, a teenage vlogger, a mythological siren, a Victoria's Secret Angel and others. Nüganen is interested in working within various fields (performance arts, but also visual arts and video). *Victoria's secret* premiered in 2020 in collaboration with Laura Bergen, played in a bricolage style that follows the logic of board game space-time with 21st century cultural codes, the mystical, the everyday and the inappropriate. Nüganen's current work could be characterized by the keyword 'collage', where the focus is primarily on the choreographer's extremely context-informed choreographic method.

Joonas Tagel

Joonas Tagel graduated from the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy with a degree in dance art and is currently enrolled in MA studies in Contemporary Physical Performance Making at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater. While the Western European dance landscape is haunted by a lack of female choreographers, the opposite tends to hold true for Estonia, and Joonas Tagel is one of the few male representatives of the new generation of Estonian contemporary dance. Undoubtedly, Tagel's approach and handwriting can be considered

very movement-oriented: his creation *DI*, in collaboration with choreographer Raho Aadla, has been considered one of the most refinedly choreographed works of the Estonian contemporary dance field in recent years². His work is subject to the virtuous joy of movement, but also intertwines theatrical and absurdly humorous elements. Tagel, known mainly as a dancer-performer in the Estonian dance field, has so far created either solo-productions or works for small ensembles (the formerly mentioned *DI*, *A Good Run* for the ETA Company, *Celebration piece* in collaboration with Jack Traylen).

Kadri Sirel

One of the most unique young choreographers combining a sensitive perception of body and space, Kadri Sirel's movement language is characterized by a mathematical approach to the body and the attainment of supreme presence and sensitivity. Her solo *Surrendering to Space* at the Paide Holy Cross Church has been one of the few works on the local performing arts scene that includes sacred space. Surrendering to space means a search for mutual contact between inner and outer space, relevant for all her creations. Sirel's recent work in collaboration with Chiara Cenciarini, *How to Build a Garden Gnome*, could be seen as a political statement, criticizing the progressivity of the consumer society and the inevitable decadence accompanying it. As a choreographer,

Sirel provides an opportunity to observe the invisible structures that limit and separate us, using a sensitive, poetic, but also a political body. Masterful movement language used to create coherent imagery and convey meaning can be seen more and more in the local dance field. Sirel's promising handwriting is definitely moving in that direction.

Olmeulmad

The creative ensemble Olmeulmad consists of a group of friends who have spent years studying dance together at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy. The collective creative work of Raho Aadla, Age Linkmann, Arolin Raudva and Maarja Tõnisson focuses on movement that affirms a bodily experience. Driven by somatic bodywork, contact improvisation and gaga technique among others, the team combines physical presence and sensitivity with inventive space games, site specificity and visual worlds. While the performative environment has so far been the main element of their works, their latest creation *Sanctum Textum* was more installative and sculptural than their previous works, and the sense of partnering and trust in choreography stood out even more. Although sometimes attributed to include little social criticism, their visually surreal and physical worlds, created as a journey or pictorial flow, are full of playfulness, humor, ingenuity and surprises. It is an ensemble that has found its

audience and is not ashamed to create beauty and awaken amazement in the audience.

Only time will tell how dance and its newer generation of movement artists choose to respond to the changing societal circumstances. Yet it is unlikely that dance would disappear as a social practice or theatrical expression in the performing arts. As Nadine George-Graves has stated, "Theater and dance remind us that the human body is not just another physical object, but the mechanism by which the world is made manifest and indeed existent."³ Perhaps moving bodies as a manifestation of lived experiences can now find new ground to provide access to new knowledge of the shared experience of being human in the broadest sense.

1 Evelin Lagle, Kui liigutus ja idee ei tühista teineteist. – Sirp, 20.03.2015.

2 Iris Viirpalu. Teater kui seisukohavõtt või kui esteetilise elamuse pakkuja: [Di]. – Teater. Muusika. Kino 2017, 5.

3 Michelle Clayton, Mark Franko, Nadine George-Graves, André Lepecki, Susan Manning, Janice Ross, Rebecca Schneider, Noémie Solomon, Stefanie Miller. Inside/Beside Dance Studies: A Conversation Mellon Dance Studies in/and the Humanities. Dance Research Journal, Volume 45, Number 3, December 2013, pp. 3–28.

Speed-date: Jarmo Reha (b. 1991)

What are you doing right now/what are your plans for the near future?

At the moment, I just completed a new production *WhiteWash*, which was supposed to be part of the Berlin Volksbühne theatre festival PostWest, where several directors from Eastern Europe were invited. Because of the crisis and the difficulties it was unfortunately canceled, however, luckily we were offered the chance to premiere the new production at Baltoscandal, the biggest theatre festival in Estonia. When it comes to my future, I have ties with Belgium, where I am working with the director Armel Roussel, as a co-director and an actor. We are working on a new production *Ether/After* (2021) and the next solo piece *Walcz* (2022).

What inspires you in everyday life?

Music. I listen to a variety of genres every day, and sometimes I stop at songs that tie in well with my current pace, emotionally speaking. I see myself as a team player, which is why I am inspired by the people around me. I set new goals and seek out complicated bottlenecks, to which I seek my own forms of expression. So what inspires me is – LIFE.

What is important for you in theatre/performance art and what is not?

What matters to me in theatre is personal and relevant accuracy. I don't think it's possible to make a bad piece, but it's definitely possible to make one that is insincere or ambiguous. I am enchanted most by complicated thought constructs and paradoxes. I believe that performing arts as a live art form has an inherent rule of being "present". The race is on for capturing the perception and time.

Name an idol of yours and how that person has inspired you.

Unfortunately, I must admit that I have no idols. I am inspired by several people and many because of fragments or moments. I am pointedly aware that people have teachers... As the "gurus" say, only their students think that they are teachers. My milestones have been and will be Pina Bausch, Werner Herzog, David Lynch, Robert Mapplethorpe.

Is there a certain place you would like to perform one day or a project you'd like to participate in?

Laura Kell

At the moment, I have to admit that my "dreams" have already come true and I don't have any new ones per se. I feel the utmost joy and an inner need to take on something myself and arrive at an artistic whole with it. At the same time, there are some people I would like to someday collaborate with, however, I understand that it is also possible to learn from them at a distance: Heiner Goebbels, Tiago Rodriguez, Frank Castorf.

What would you like to get done in performance art or what would you like to express through your art?

My goal is to change in my action and creation. I don't have a particular thing I would like to say, however, I believe that if something must be said, it must be said. I don't think you have to keep to words alone. Actions are equal to or greater than words. That is why I tend to be more sparing with words.

What kind of artist do you see yourself as?

A seeking one.

Contemporary circus in Estonia



At the end of the last century, many new and exciting things arrived in Estonia: McDonalds, coloured toothpaste, but also modern day circus, which is considerably different from the traditional one, complete with dancing bears and the great top. In the development of the modern Estonian circus, two circus schools, established around the same time, have had an enormous role: OMAtsirkus, established in 1998, and the circus studio Folie, established in 2000. Quite a number of kids, who congregated at these schools around the turn of the century, have now grown into professional circus artists.

Although both schools mainly teach circus and acrobatic courses, they also contribute to the development and promotion of the local circus scene in a wider sense: they organise workshops, performances, camps, and much more. One wonderful event they organise together, for example, is the celebration of the World Circus Day, whose highlight is a grand circus procession that tumbles through the city. Today, circus fever has spread across Estonia to such an extent that two schools can't fit everyone, even if those practicing were evenly divided in two - some could do trapeze work, while others practice on mats below - so new circus or acrobatics schools have started popping up over the past few years. The new circus is not just for children and amateurs or for popular entertainment: each year, a number of high quality, modern circus performances are staged, where skilled trickery is only part of the staged whole.

To obtain higher education in circus arts, however, young artists have to travel abroad, because the opportunity does not exist in Estonia. Most of the active professional Estonian artists have educated themselves abroad and are also active beyond Estonian borders. But since

modern circuses are so much more than just tricks (although the tricks, of course, are also important!), in addition to specific circus specialities, the students also study modern dance or something of the like, which also has an important role in a circus.

While studying abroad, people tend to find new like-minded people to perform with, which often leads to long-term collectives - for example, Kert Ridaste and his partner, aerial acrobat Saana Leppänen, with whom they formed **duo SaboK**. In Estonia, Ridaste trained at OMAtsirkus, and in the Netherlands he studied at the circus school AcaPA. Leppänen started her studies at Sorin Sirkus and both graduated the Stockholm circus school DOCH in 2018. In their productions, dance plays an important part: acrobatic elements (partner acrobatics, hand to hand elements) are combined to form a whole in their productions through dance.

Another similar example of a collective born from studies abroad is **Carousel Company**, which includes Ireen Peegel and her classmate Jaakko Repola from the Lahti circus school Koulutuskeskus Salpaus. Carousel Company's productions can best be described as physical theatre with strong circus influences: the story is conveyed in acrobatic body language, where besides the tricks, the performers' gestures and mimics are just as important.

Professional circus collectives, however, form on domestic soil as well, of course. A good example is the aerial acrobatics duo **Big Wolf Company**, which is made up of Lizeth Wolk and Grete Gross. Both girls started at the circus studio Folie, continued their circus studies at the Lahti circus school, and have performed solo as well as within various collectives. Together the pair have

staged integral productions with narrative plots, interweaved with various circus and (aerial) acrobatics elements.

Opportunities for artists from home and abroad to perform in Estonia are offered by several circus festivals: for example, the circus festival Epicirq, Hoog or the street art festival Tadaa!. One of the most prolific street artists to mention here is Anna Kristin Peterson, artist's name **Anna KRAZY**, who has performed at these festivals as well as at different community events. During her street performances, she uses the existing conditions and spaces very inventively - whether by engaging the audience or using a random mud puddle instead. The uber-flexible Anna KRAZY usually gives solo performances, where she mixes circus, physical theatre and dance.

In addition to festivals, theatre pieces that explore the borders between modern dance, performance and circus can be found at performance art centres - for example, Kanuti Gildi SAAL, which fosters all kinds of cross-genre and innovative art. Recently, they hosted the first solo performance by **Kädi Metsoja**. Skilful acrobatic movement played an important part in this performative piece. Previously, Metsoja brought her production *moiste* to the same stage, performed by the older students of OMAtsirkus. An important part of Metsoja's works is the physical presentation of the ideas, where modern dance is combined with elements of circus and acrobatics.

The landscape of new Estonian circuses has steadily grown and gained popularity over the past decades, and it has become much more multifaceted and rich in opportunities. Therefore, there is cause to believe that this art form, relatively new to Estonia, will continue to flourish and take root in the local cultural life.

ēlektron - exploring beyond art and science

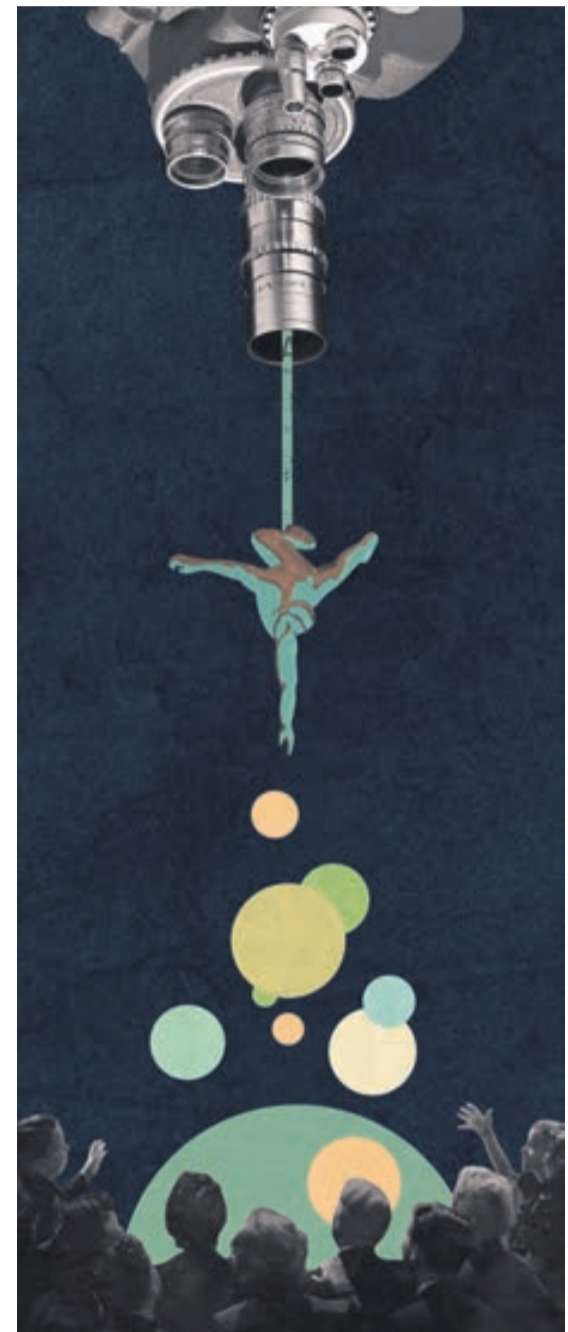
There's virtue in being dynamic and adaptable. 'Survival of the fittest', a phrase often mistakenly attributed to Charles Darwin (it was Herbert Spencer), is not about the strongest, biggest, smartest, most violent or aggressive organisms. Contrary to a mistaken assumption (survival by conquering or destroying) - 'fit' in the evolutionary process refers to those who are *most adaptable*. Not only to whatever environment they happen to reside in, but more importantly: adaptable to any changes in the environment. As such, symbiotic relationships and cooperation are commonplace in nature. The world is not a constant violent struggle leading to endless destruction (at least not until the human animal really got going!). The changes caused by the first ever global pandemic threw cultural organization into turmoil, yet a drive towards dynamic adaptability was already built into the core concept of ēlektron, even as the group had to quickly rethink some ideas and priorities which seemed so convincing mere months earlier.

What is ēlektron? In their own words: a digital platform, a semi-virtual testing lab trying to bridge the gap between the performing arts and the sciences - a bridge they consider not only necessary, but inevitable. At the core of ēlektron, comprised of people with interest and experience in many relevant fields, is the hope to create a symbiosis between art, science and technology. They are trying to form a space where the modern concepts of theatre, the scientific method, experimental thinking and technical innovation can meet and learn from each other. They are searching for a hybrid approach that leads to *art-science*, uniting artists, scientists/theorists and the audience in acts of cooperation and new experiences. Art can act as a mediator, explicating the often obscure and opaque scientific vocabulary in ways more familiar to the rest of society while avoiding reductive simplification.

This creative laboratory becomes necessary in the search for knowledge that single individuals - artists or scientists separately - could not as easily achieve. It's no secret that artists often borrow from the sciences anyway, for in these days the machines of high technology can create the

most unique forms and materials. But this choice usually stays 'an interesting decoration'. Integrating scientists themselves into the process, in acts of creative participation (or even interference) may, however, result in creative works of much higher impact. In this sense, ēlektron seems to strike out with an almost utopian vision of creating 'art of the future', more *avant-garde* than the now old concept of *avant-garde* theatre; not merely technological theatre 2.0. ēlektron is reaching for art that has not been seen before, as it does not yet exist. While the artistic approach allows for more freedom from academic norms and rules, the group is adamant that the works should still pass rigorous scientific analysis and scrutiny.

The Festival of Spooky Action at a Distance became an initial testing ground, afterwards inspiring a series of Spooky Live Actions at Distance throughout the month of May, 2020. As the shutdown after the COVID-19 outbreak cancelled their original festival plans, the team decided to build a two-way live streaming platform in the span of a few weeks (located at elektron.live), where the performer and audience could still see and interact with each other. This allowed for a more personal and communicative encounter than regular live-streaming. On the left of the screen, a stage (the live stream) for the performers; on the right, a wall built from the web-camera images of the audience. It looks as if twitch.tv merged with Zoom, only custom built - featuring 'a live interaction on both sides of the screen simultaneously'. When this first experiment concluded, the team realized that the virtual performing arts environment has potential and could be used for more than just showing the performers and the audience. But this potentiality requires new types of creative works: hybrid forms (quite Bruno Latour-ish) that blend arts and sciences in unique ways. No one really knows yet how the end results should look, so ēlektron and their collaborators are working in a state of constant improvisation. They foresee that the end result will not be regular theatre, for the space itself lends to a different mood and the rules between performers and the audience are different. Thus, the Series is an attempt



to figure out the new aesthetics in performing arts that could survive without physical theatre spaces, while experimenting with the limitations and possibilities that a live-streaming medium provides. At the very least, it is already accessible to people everywhere and not only limited to the local cultural scene.

www.elektron.art
www.elektron.live

Interview with Maret Tamme: Co-creation is the only way to create

Maret Tamme (b. 1990) graduated scenography with a Bachelor's degree from the Estonian Academy of Theatre, and went on to complete her Master's degree in the same specialisation at the Norwegian Theatre Academy. She is a performance artist and scenographer, whose recent artistic work has been created in collaboration with the troupe *Gardenparty*, composed of her peers from the Norwegian Academy of Theatre. For the past two New Year's Eves, the Tartu New Theatre and *Labürintteater G9* staged the promenade production *All Souls' Night*, where Tamme was the stage director. In fall 2020, Tamme's newest work *Gran* will premiere in cooperation with the theatre *Must Kast*.

Which topics are most prominent in your work? What interests you in your creative work?

Actually, I don't have specific set topics yet, because I believe I am still relatively young. When I get an idea, I work on it, but I don't have a fully developed bouquet of topics ready. We did the production *All Souls' Night*, and now I am working on a production about the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. My next idea is to take on the topic of death more in-depth, but I don't yet know how and where. I know that the topic interests me, but I don't know how to talk about it in theatre. Recently I've been thinking along those lines, but I don't want to say that exploring death is the only thing I'm dealing with. The endurance production *Sentimentality TV*, was a totally different project, it was a happening. What's important is for the form and content to form a whole. A common pattern for my projects is specific locations. At the same time, if I'm being honest, the piece I'm working on now, *Gran*, is happening in a black box, so that's not specific to any location really.

I wouldn't say that I'm explicitly interested in participatory theatre either, but the need for it grows out of an idea. Karl Ristikivi's novel *All Souls' Night* didn't lend itself to any other possibilities, that was the one idea, the main idea. However, *Sentimentality TV* started from a feeling that the performers should just be together with the audience in one room and share one space that feels like home.

You said that you haven't specifically set out to do participatory theatre, however, since you have the experience, can you point out some tricks that help open up the audience in that kind of setting?

I think the tricks are the same as in traditional theatre. You have to respect the audience. I've experienced some bad examples of participatory theatre, where something is done just for the simple goal of communicating with the audience. They tell you, come here, let's hold hands, and close your eyes. But I don't



feel like closing my eyes, why can't I see what's going on? At times the pieces of a promenade production don't form a whole. But then it's just a series of various experiences: smells, tastes, sounds. It seems to me that the focus should be on the specific production and then you see what needs to be done. The audience should be respected and you can't presume that they'll want to come along. All you can do is hope that they will understand, when their contribution is necessary for the story. When the theatre makers set themselves in the same position as the audience, then the audience will come along with them.

You mentioned co-creation, when talking about a production you did with your coursemates from the academy. Could you please describe the role of co-creation in your work?

For me, co-creation is the only way to create. It's funny that I'm just now thinking about it, since I'm working on a piece, where I am the director, and in the rehearsals, all of us look for what the production will be. To me it's not about saying that this is what we're doing, so get going. That doesn't seem interesting at all. Why should anyone do anything in that case? That would mean coming to rehearsal thinking, "When is it going to be over?" Theatre would then become work, but in my opinion, theatre-making in that way is pointless. Co-creation is the only way, but then the structure and decision proportions

have to be planned ahead. The structure can be flat, which means everyone decides. On the one hand, it's very good, but on the other hand, the production can also come about from just one person's idea, and then that person prepares it and drives the whole process. I feel that this way I can steer the direction of the performance more. When you're doing group work, you never know what will happen, because that cannot be steered that precisely. Of course, it is important to get a great group together, who has a unified sense of what they want to do. Another important point is sharing responsibilities, because being responsible alone for everything is risky and impractical. From my Norwegian theatre school background, I can say that the actors there study to become artists and creators, they learn how to make a production from scratch: what they want to talk about and how to get it done both in content and form. Openness and the knowledge that theatre can also be done another way helps the whole thing move along.

Based on your experience, would you say that Estonian actors have the same knowledge?

Of Estonian actors, I have worked with the actors from *Must Kast*, who have all graduated from the *Viljandi Culture Academy*, and I definitely tip my hat to them - they've established their own theatre and they constantly have to prove themselves and claim their place on

the theatre landscape. As an artist, I have also observed the work of actors in state theatres. Actors don't have that great of a responsibility there, and I've seen cases, where they don't really do much anymore. They even lose the ability to think, but it's not their fault. The responsibility has just been spread so differently. That's not the part of theatre that interests me. For example, it seems strange to me that an actor is made to wear a costume, and it doesn't matter what they think of it. When you think about what the point of theatre is, it's strange. However, when you're talking about monumental works such as operas, of course, you have to have the whole picture, landscape or symphony, and then you probably can't have everyone pitching their opinions.

Let's continue on the topic of Estonian theatre. What does Estonian performance art contribute to international performance art? What makes us special?

When you look at the productions that are touring abroad right now, I wouldn't say that there's anything particularly special about them, but then again, special is not a goal in and of itself, in my opinion. When NO99 was active and toured, I did get the feeling that they're representing the Estonian story, the Estonian political picture, and our overall mindset towards the ways of the world. Nobody can do that but us. I think that was really cool. But when I think about those touring abroad now, I wouldn't say that they are doing something so new that it isn't done anywhere else internationally. I remember when the NO99 Unified Estonia Assembly exposition was in Prague, and my acquaintances from Norway and Latvia said, wow, what a cool project, they'd never seen anything like that elsewhere. It was just so political and so topical, such an edgy happening. That kind of thing was rare.

I think it is very cool that Estonian theatres are touring abroad and it is necessary to do that. When I think about my productions, they are not that special concept-wise, but what makes it special is that we are Estonians, we come with our mindset, impacted by our Soviet era history. Our productions reflect how things are here, and that is unique.

Your next project *Gran*, which talks about relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, premieres this fall in Tartu. How would you describe it, is it documentary theatre?

I was just reading about how documentary theatre is defined, and I discovered that the common denominator is that nobody wants to categorise their production as documentary theatre. It is an overcomplicated topic. So I thought, why not, let it be a documentary production then. We conducted a great number of interviews and we're very inspired by them. At the same time, we're not simply taking the text of an interview and transposing it onto the stage. We also had an agreement with the interviewees that we wouldn't do that outright. A lot of the material is from our personal experience too. I would say that *Gran* is indeed a documentary piece, but then that leads to the question of what is documentary theatre in the first place? When you hear the term 'documentary theatre', it feels like it could be someone telling their story on an empty stage. But that's a standard that you don't have to stick to. I

can make a documentary production that has a plot and people moving around. I would say that *Gran* is a production that is based on interviews.

You have studied scenography both at the Estonian Academy of Arts and at the Norwegian Theatre Academy. What is the role of scenography in today's performance art?

When I think about different productions, there have been interesting scenic compositions, but I would expect more great, integral solutions for the space. In a sense, scenography is still in the role of an orphan, as the saying goes in Estonian. Scenography has been stamped with the set design label, but in reality it can be so much more. For example, how we perceive architecture and the space around us. For example, when you step into a room, where personal memories or senses create very strong feelings or remind you of other things, it can change your whole day. A room has immense power - all the space that we inhabit is made up of rooms, it's how we perceive the world.

I think what often happens is that a director or troupe has a concept, but it isn't so much about the room. I understand that in a way, because that is the problem with performance art. That's the case with *Gran* too: I can't build anything big on the stage, because I don't have the space to store it and I don't even have the money for an enormous set design. These very practical concerns pop up right away: there is no storage and there is no money to rent the storage. What's more, people want the productions to go on tour, and then a huge set design is like another cross to bear. I don't see scenography as an art form flourishing and developing right now, because there are no spearheads, whose ideas would start with the space. In a theatre, the scenographer is not on the first rung of the ladder. In a way, it's a shame.

Scenography doesn't have to mean grandiose designs, but rather the production and the space in which it happens should form a whole, an event. As a scenographer, at times it seems that you don't even need any objects. You can put on a production in a completely empty room. Instead, the question is why the space is empty and how it will affect things - that is what scenography is about. That is certainly very important. I have done many set designs, where the set design is behind the audience, which brings the audience into the fold. For me, it's also a question of the form of theatre, but I'd rather not watch something that's just unfolding in front of me. I'd rather feel that I am part of the room, the scenography, the event.

Have you done set designs for state theatres as well?

Yes, in different Estonian theatres, in Norway's Trøndelag Theatre and in Germany at the Staatstheater in Hannover. I am very happy that the scenography studies in Norway developed my skills enough that I can also work in state theatres, but at the same time we did our own works as well. As I mentioned before, they teach scenographers and actors at the Norwegian theatre school, but both of them work on the productions together. As an artist, you develop some certain topics in school that you want to work with. In addition, you can acquire performing skills, so that you could

create the production together with the actors. That was actually the expectation I had when I went to that school. I felt that I am not a classical scenographer, because I got bored doing set designs in state theatres. The head of the Norwegian Theatre Academy's scenography department would always say that our task is to infiltrate state theatres and create chaos. Your skills have to be good enough that nobody at the theatre would say, "Hey, hippie, go do some other stuff!" That instead there would be an opportunity to ask why things in the state theatre are so stagnant and could we try something new instead. In Estonia it has been hard. I would like it if the design would come about at the same time as other ideas, but in state theatres you mostly have to have the set design concepts ready half a year ahead of time. Everyone is used to that, but it also sets rigid frames.

At times, I feel regret that although there are enormous resources and such talented people in state theatres, there is not much room for discovery there. As an artist, I don't think there is any point in doing anything, when you know that it works. State theatres only function along that principle - about half a year ahead of time, you more or less know what the production will look like, and then you move quickly towards achieving it. In Norway and Germany, I felt that there was a little more room for experimentation, and the whole structure of the theatre leaves more room for art. The technical director might say, keep going today, see what happens, and then let's meet up again tomorrow. It may be a bitter exaggeration, but sometimes it seems that in Estonian state theatres they don't want to hear anything about artistic concerns. But then that's absurd, because a theatre is an establishment of art!

What would you definitely like to bring to the stage in the future? You mentioned the topic of death and you have *Gran* premiering soon. What else is in the works?

For next year, I have two set designs planned in Estonia, which have presented interesting challenges, and I believe I will also be able to work with the directors. With the Gardenparty troupe, we will be restaging *Sentimentality TV* in Norway, where we'll probably have to rework it quite a bit. That's exciting.

At one point, I did a research residency at Kanuti Gildi SAAL, which looked at these gearheads or car jocks, car culture and cars as performative dancers. I would really love to keep working on that project. I feel that I should really get my driver's license for this one too. At that moment, the research proved valuable, because I could describe a car in a way that I didn't understand anything myself. But the next moment I ran into a problem - I can't get close to the right crowd. If possible, I would like to connect that project with Norway, because I did it with the Norwegian artist Hazel Barstow, and I know that there are also a lot of interesting empty factory buildings in Norway, which I could see as great locations. The way I imagine the production is with six cars dancing with each other, and things are happening both inside and outside of the cars. It's a big project, which requires cars, a very well ventilated room or a parking lot. I've put off that project for the future, but I would like to get it done. With the current crisis, car theatres are a great topic, although differently, because I would like to get the audience inside the cars as well.

Speed-date: Sigrid Savi (b. 1992)

Laura Kell

What are you doing right now/what are your plans for the near future?

I work with projects that are either long-term processes or ones that need better formulation, documentation. I think about intentions and results in word and form – in other words, how to painlessly transport spontaneous connections that pop up on their own. I seek traditional, linear narratives in symbolically abstract positions. And preludes.

What do I offer or what could I offer? An intimate and public image on the horizon. Full-length sentences and completed thoughts. The production of a tangible collective experience. Free charges in channelled environments. Positive, proactive, legal electron holes.

In the future, I'll collaborate more with artists from different fields. I've come to understand that you don't have to think every visual detail through to its completion all by yourself, and that there are a lot of gifted artists around, who add value and quality through their visions and practices.

What kind of artist do you see yourself as?

Solid body and luminous liquid in a consecutive frequency with sparse gas. An active artist, an ephemeral artist, a repeating artist, a confessing artist, a figurative artist.

Certainly a very protracted one. I take quite a long time for observation and for sorting through my thoughts. The spirit of the process starts to accumulate naturally, as specific images start to form or when thoughts start running in parallel instead of crossing and distancing. Some like to stay in the studio all the time and be inside the process, but I definitely can't manage that. Perhaps I like maintaining this kind of romantic and independent relationship with creative activities in general, travelling as far as possible into thoughts, experiences and different positions, to then come back to the process.

I'm interested in trends, but in reality I am certainly sentimental instead. Naïve art, flamboyant and dark art, overanalysed symbolism – bring it all.

What inspires you in everyday life?

Accessories, work, perspectives that depend on the tempo and density, esthetical demands and offers, nautilus culture, aspirations, aspirational communication, aspirational symbolism, entertainment, passive aggressiveness, repeats, landings, desperation, journey, fitting, banality, haut culture, macho culture, dead ends, picture games, the brink of death, photographic memory, an expected shock, effect hunger, clutch, break, gas, redundancy, bulging forms, "the-good-old", nature and animals, repeats, clumsiness, slants, thighs, easiness, pride, faith, back door, matted, spokesmen, symbol, omen, perineum, "not me", inaccessible, cysts, cycles, chakras, periphery, prairies, resilience, hopeless translation, rehearsal, mutual impact, resistance, pathetic, enlightenment, instant gratification, cooperation, best before, story, east and west, antibody, booms, pyramids, self-satisfaction, recent past, inter-course, king-size, bingo.

Notes and thoughts on the sound design of contemporary performance art in Estonia

Henri Hütt

I remember one sentence from the beginning of my professional artistic career that my teachers at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy performing arts department said to me. I have carried this sentence with me for quite a while now: "If someone tells you after the show that the sound design was really great, then it means that the performance itself was not that successful." In 2020 I would rephrase this sentence into a question: how can different components that create a performative act work together in harmony without underestimating the potential of any layer? What role do sound and music have in the contemporary performing arts context? To forward the standalone story? To support the atmosphere or highlight other layers? While in the context of traditional theatre the role of sound design has been to express the emotional state and support the storyline, then in contemporary performing arts the transformation has been made towards more independence.

In order to understand the skeleton more clearly, I have divided sound design in the Estonian contemporary performing arts scene into three categories:

sound design that helps to support the atmosphere or organize timings in the timeline; sound design that is conceptually part of the whole, but has more of an independent role and more dominant parts; sound design that plays a physical role in the production.

Sound design that helps to support the atmosphere or organize timings in the timeline.

Examples of performative acts where sound and music are playing a supportive role can be found in local contemporary dance and in more traditionally oriented postdramatic theatre fields. In 2019, the Estonian Dance Agency produced A

Good Run, choreography by Joonas Tagel and sound design by **Argo Vals**, where previously created patterns really helped the dancers and the audience to follow the pulse and to understand the choreographic structure. Vals has created sound designs for dance and theatre pieces before, and his personal creation is usually very dreamy. A similar atmospheric and supportive approach can also be found in the Estonian Dance Agency's production *Ainukordus* (2018), choreographed by Marie Pullerits and Maria Uppin, where local sound artist **Sander Saarmets** created soundscapes specifically for the piece to visualize the storyline by using music. Sander is also a member of a duo called V4R1 and his creation has a hypnotic, dark and slow touch.

Another good example is Estonian Dance Agency's production *dream dancers: THE PROCESS OF UNCLENCHING A FIST* (2019), choreographed/performed by Christin Taul, Joanna



Kalm, Rūta Ronja Pakalne and Madli Paves. In this production, the sound was designed by **Triin Niinemets**, who supported the processes on stage by performing a DJ-set. Triin Niinemets herself is a very sunny character and her selection of music gave an extra dimension to this contemporary dance piece. Another production where a sound design format comprised of being partly live and partly a DJ set accompanied a dance production was *My Name is Xiaodie but You Can Call Me Baby* (2019) by Indrek Kornel (co-produced by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava), where the Estonian singer and pop-star **Hannaliisa Uusma** performed a selected composition on stage. The mentioned piece is quite remarkable, because it connected a well-known musician and the less mainstream experimental art field of contemporary dance.

Sound design that is conceptually part of the whole, but has more of an independent role and more dominant parts.

The Estonian choreographer and sound artist **Karl Saks** is in search of a certain state and presence in the context of sound design, and his performative acts are highly sound-dependent. It is quite rare that a choreographer creates the soundscapes for himself. Saks has practiced this approach throughout his active period. Productions like *Tõud* (2010), *The Drone of Monk Nestor* (2011), both produced by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, and *State and design* (2016), co-production by Kanuti Gildi SAAL, are examples of how performativity in sound design has developed from supporting the narrative towards playing an important standalone role.

Sound design that plays a physical role in the production.

Artjom Astrov is also an artist, who experiments boldly with how sound design can be independent, yet part of the act. His more experimental approach can be found in collaborations with choreographer Ruslan Stepanov in the production *Невесомость* (2018), co-produced by Kanuti Gildi SAAL, and *Performance @ STL* (2019) by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, where sound design transforms from concert-like moments to sound check to minimalistic signal tone and beyond. Astrov has created sound designs for different dance and theatre pieces mostly premiered in Von Krahl Theatre and Kanuti Gildi SAAL. In each of his works, different experiments with format and content are well calculatedly present.

However, when it comes to the aspect of "well-known-ness", **Hendrik Kaljujärv** is certainly one of the people who has influenced how the current generation designs sound in Estonian theatre. He has created designs and compositions for pieces that premiered in Theatre NO99, Von Krahl Theatre, Estonian Drama Theatre, Kanuti Gildi SAAL, as well as directed sound art-dominant performative acts himself; for example, *Rising Matter* (2014), *Overexposure* (2016) co-produced by Kanuti Gildi SAAL, and *all tomorrow's parties* with Inga Salurand (2016) by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. Kaljujärv produces elaborate atmospheric soundscapes and is also really talented in establishing the physical presence of sound in space.

The connectedness of sound design and physical presence has also been well executed by

Andres Lõo, who has recently collaborated with the performing artist kadrinoormets in artworks like *Landed promise* (2018) in Kanuti Gildi SAAL and *Mobiilsed definitsioonid* (2019) at the Tartu New Theatre. Lõo has presented his creation in a concert format during a theatre performance, similar to musician and sound designer **Jakob Juhkam**, who has also composed sound designs for performances in a concert format, postdramatic theatre pieces, and even for experimental musicals. Most of Juhkam's works are connected with Theatre NO99.

Physically present sound design can also be found in the contemporary dance piece *Breathe! Do Not Breathe!* (2019) produced by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, choreography by Liis Vares, sound design by **Taavet Jansen**. In this artwork, a microphone situated in a performer's nose forwards the atmosphere, tension, action and even empathy. The breathing sound can be ambiguously interpreted - for example, a first breath symbolizing the beginning of everything - while the final goal is the immersion of sound design and the artwork on stage.

The spectre range of sound design in Estonian contemporary performing arts is thoughtfully wide. From atmospheric to punctual, from safe to questioning, from unnoticeable to impossible not to notice. Can that be inherent for a country that stereotypically has a rather introverted temperament? The speculations can be endless, but there is something I am sure of: sound design is expanding through experimentation and moving towards a better connection with other subjects that create unique artworks.

Young Estonian dramaturgs – still like boys in the rain¹

Priit Põldma

In the following, I will sketch a miniature portrait of four young dramaturgs, who have arrived on the scene in the second decade of the 21st century. Three of the authors – Karl Koppelmaa, Mehis Pihla and Johan Elm – studied dramaturgy and stage direction at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and are currently active as stage directors. The fourth newcomer Oliver Berg graduated Estonian literature at the University of Tartu and is also active as a poet, prose author and literary critic.

Karl Koppelmaa, whose texts bring together dramatic and essayistic rudiments, stands out for his unique handwriting. Koppelmaa himself has emphasised that what interests him in theatre is the stories. However, that does not mean jumping to the conclusion that the main value of his plays is captivating narratives. Instead, Koppelmaa approaches a story as a cultural phenomenon or a memory mechanism, explores how stories impact people's lives and how people sculpt stories out of their lives. This ties in to one of the central themes of his plays – 21st century escapism, opportunities to escape into virtual reality, into the worlds of literature, films and series, into the grasp of addictions. Koppelmaa's handwriting is characterised by openness, a deliberate lack of final finishing touches. He shies away from singular and predictive solutions, leaving the ends open on purpose for the reader/viewer to tie up themselves.

Koppelmaa's characters are often weirdos, lonely outsiders, who keep away from the mainstream of their own volition. For example, in the play *AV Maria* (2019), the main characters are a father and his adult daughter, who are connected by a life-long dependency, constructed by relationship patterns straight out of fairy tales and literary classics. Or in the play *taught to fear snakes* (2019), where a female alcoholic, who is taken with Bukowski and a romantically minded male taxi driver, who meet over the course of a brief night.

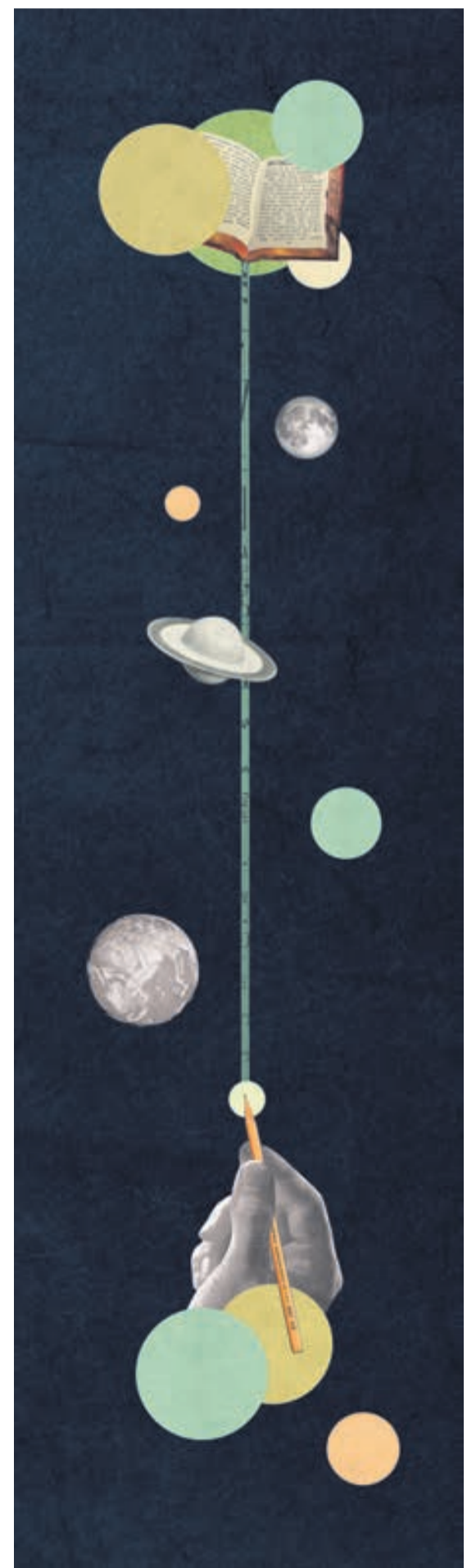
One of Koppelmaa's most complete texts is *Singing Green* (2018), which won first prize at the Nürnberg Staatstheater's XIII play competition "Talking About Borders". Through retrospective monologues, the dystopian play describes processes and events that led to the Third World War in the year 2031. The author's position is a combination of an analytical essayist's view, which monitors societal developments, and an empathic dramaturg's eye, which understands the pain of different peoples and cultures. A captivating, secret-laden plotline completes the play. The text is a fine demonstration of how personal traumas and the feeling of abandonment

pile up into a global catastrophe. Koppelmaa doesn't offer up any ready-made prescriptions as a solution, but hints at the possibility of shifting viewpoints and human contact.

Immediately after graduating theatre school in 2016, Koppelmaa and some of his likeminded fellow graduates established the theatre KELM. This is also the theatre, in which he has directed most of his plays. KELM is characterised by the aesthetics of a poor theatre – the reasons are probably in the meagre material means, but perhaps also in the desire to focus on the story and the text.

The most multifaceted and prolific of the three writers in the quartet in question is **Mehis Pihla**, who works as a dramaturg at the Estonian Drama Theatre since 2018. Both Koppelmaa's and Pihla's works have a perceivable social sensitivity, but in completely different ways. While Koppelmaa ties current social topics together with existential and eternal ones, Pihla has fostered a more journalistic style of theatre, giving voice to politicians, various interest groups and representatives of different worldviews on the stage. At the same time, his texts couldn't be labelled documentary dramaturgy, because Pihla constructs a fictional narrative into these topics, focusing on the perspective of the layperson, whose daily life is impacted by political decisions. The hyperbolically expressive musical fragmentarium *Forest Forte* (2018) talks about Estonian environmental policy and clearcutting, shining a bright light on the foundational, insurmountable differences between the different stakeholders. The comedy *Влады и Мирь* (2019) begins with a plane crash, as a result of which in a far corner of rural Estonia Vladimir Putin lands in the backyard of a young couple. From there, the action unravels in parallel in the couloirs of the Kremlin as well as in that Estonian family. Under the captivating and clever surface, the play points out complicated ethical problems, as well as topics related to power and responsibility.

A characteristic feature of Pihla's texts is absurd humour, whereas he is especially creative and deft in wordplay, which not only provides the necessary levity in the midst of serious topics, but also moves the narrative forward. His journalistic approach and tasteful sense of humour organically come together in the genre of stand-up comedy: Pihla has written smart monologues for several cherished Estonian comedians. He has also penned two adventurous plays for the younger viewer: *Curse of the Dragon* (adapted from a novel by Helen Käit,



2018) and *Secret of the Golden Lily* (2019). In both plays, two children stumble into magical worlds, where their task is to restore justice, which has lost ground. These adventure stories also demonstrate Pihla's wonderful fable-writing skills, however, what the plays lack is character: the philosophical background of the adventures is rather sparse.

Johan Elm studied graphic design at the Estonian Academy of Art before going to theatre school, and seems that the visual arts impact both the form and the context of his texts for theatre. The rather classic structures of his text remain fresh thanks to sensitive composition, perfectly polished expression, the line and stage direction, the poetry of the beats, the pregnant pauses. Elm's play *Copper* (2017) ties complicated contradictions in art ethics with a gradually revealed entanglement of relationships. The point of departure is a paraphrase of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*: an older couple is visited by a younger one, and strange, cruel games commence. However, in Elm's work, the older couple is two men: a painter losing his sight and his long-time model and assistant; the younger couple is intimately connected to the older through past events veiled in secrecy. As a playwright, Elm stays away from the current political scene and topics related to nationalism, focussing instead on ethical and deeply psychological questions, which is why *Copper* is well suited for staging absolutely anywhere. Elm has also worked as a production

dramaturg: in collaboration with stage director Jan Teevet at the Paide Theatre and their troupe, he completed the text for the panoramic summer production *Estonian Gods* (2019), which looks at Estonians and what it means to be Estonian on a sacral and apocalyptic scale.

Before writing plays, **Oliver Berg** published the novel *A Brother's Love* (*Venna arm*, 2017) and the collection of poetry *Gray Tones* (2018). His literary vein also characterises his dramatic texts, however, that does not mean they are static, but rather sophisticated and verbally abundant in style. Berg delves into the depths of psychology and intimate situations, explores the complicated roots and hidden traumas behind seemingly quotidian communication. Compared to Elm's pithy style, Berg's dialogues at times overflow with words, however, the fact that Berg's characters love to talk is significant in and of itself: the poetic flow of text hides and at times reveals the characters' inner insecurities, loneliness and inability to make contact, verbalise what really matters. The play *Winter's Night* (2019) is set in the end of the 00s, during the economic crisis, among a group of young people, where ambitious ideas for fixing the world collide against powerlessness and indecisiveness. The play *Timelies* (2019) looks at the fragility and strength of family ties, against the backdrop of such important topics as bereavement, mid-life crisis, yearning for freedom, fear of loneliness. Berg aptly portrays the perceptions and desires of the modern person; hopefully his

texts will soon find a congenial director, who will convincingly translate them onto the stage.

This quartet does not include aggressive destroyers or forceful radicals. These young authors are adept in the rules of dramaturgy and use them in fresh and playful ways. Often glimpses of the well-made-play structure shine through their texts, and they don't attempt to hide them from the reader. Instead, they insert self-references into the text, which make the structure unusually transparent. This four is a group of erudite writers, whose sense of life is infused with literary and artistic traditions. They don't hide their idols, but instead underline the fact that the new dramaturgical whole is formed at the crossroads of cultural texts that are important for the author. Among social processes, all four artists seem to be interested first and foremost in the individual, his or her sense of life, sense of self. Loneliness and fragile, constantly breaking threads that tie people together, these could be the leitmotifs of this generation of dramaturgs. This is how these four men stand and reflect the world – just like boys in the rain.

1 The title is a reference to Jim Ashilevi's (born 1984) first play *Like Boys in the Rain* (2005). Over the past decade, Ashilevi has been one of the most unique newcomers to Estonian dramaturgy. Ashilevi is characterised best by his supple poetical perception coupled with a cuttingly sharp approach to problems.

Laura Kell

Interview with Jan Teevet: On the possibilities of boundless communities



Jan Teevet (b. 1994) graduated stage direction from the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2018. Part of the XXVIII graduating course, he and four of his classmates moved to the small town of Paide, population 10 000, located in the very heart of Estonia, in order to create what is now known as the Paide Theatre. Over the course of two seasons, he has worked with pieces such as *RICHARD³*, *Protected Area* (Kaitseala), *How to Dig a Ditch* (Kuidas kaevata kraavi), and *Estonian Gods* (Eesti jumalad), among others.

In Estonia, you are known first and foremost from Paide Theatre, where you and your classmates headed immediately after graduating. What has establishing your own theatre as your first job taught you and how has it impacted your development as an artist?

I think that creating your own theatre is the biggest dream for many theatre makers. At the

same time, when it somehow comes to fruition, the responsibility is rather heavy. Last year at a German festival I met an Irish actress, who had worked with a great figure in French theatre – Ariane Mnouchkine, who said something to the effect that maintaining a troupe is the most complicated thing you can ever do in your life, but without a troupe you can't do anything in theatre. I agree that creating your own theatre is terribly complicated and requires immense effort. In that sense, the creation of the Paide Theatre really is exceptional. Since it was founded right after we graduated, what's important is that we are still developing as a troupe. That's the path that might be developing in a different way – after all, how often do you have troupes form of people, who have already found their ideals and who understand that they have common, overlapping ideals. It seems to me that a major keyword for us is searching – what the hell are we doing? At the same time, for me personally, it is very important to do theatre as long as it is fun. And

that's not a second rate issue. I'm not talking about creating an amusement park and I'm not saying that it's all about constant jokes and laughter and pink balloons, not at all. However, if at some point I don't understand what or why I am seeking, it doesn't make sense. At the Paide Theatre, we are constantly looking for what is our own. I think that at first, we all seek on our own, and then at some point our paths will converge – we are looking for our own language in which to converse.

Paide Theatre is also oriented towards international collaboration.

Yes, of course. I have a hard time thinking in terms of Estonian fine art and Estonian theatre and Estonian sculpture, and so on. When it comes to good theatre, language is not a barrier. I've seen pieces in Polish, French, Swahili, which have really touched me, regardless of the fact that I didn't understand the words. But

international collaboration... It seems to me that in these times it is just immensely important and that the time and world in which we live demands for different perceptions of the world to come together.

Your credo is creating a community through theatre. How do you focus on community-making in international projects?

We are interested in that specific point, the space where theatre and community come together. What are the possibilities, in general, for theatre, modern art and community to meet? It seems to me that in Estonia there is still a prevailing understanding that modern art, including theatre, is something elite. Something that happens in the capital city, if you have a master's degree, if you have money. That mindset of "Oh, nevermind me, I don't understand it anyway" - how do you overcome that? One characteristic of theatre is that the performance happens on location. A performance is a meeting in one particular space and time. That's the phenomenon of theatre. Meeting in one space is the first prerequisite for creating a community. I think that it's the given and the ideal for each production that we start to create a community. How people leave after the performance - in a sense, they take with them that feeling, the message, understanding or confusion with them. Of course, from the Paide Theatre perspective we only have the experience of one town. Internationally, there are all kinds of towns and cities, some the size of Paide, some bigger, some smaller. There are certainly some things, experiences most of all, which can be exchanged. What you've done can be attempted elsewhere. I think that it is possible in any case.

One theatre that has inspired us for a long time is the NTGent theatre in Belgium, which chose Milo Rau as their artistic director a few seasons ago, when Johan Simons was sent off. However, Ghent in Flanders is a much, much bigger city with 250 000 inhabitants as opposed to 10 000 in Paide. The scale is something else. The Ghent city theatre is a pompous, classical edifice; their troupe, their theatre's technical and financial means are in a different class than here. At the same time, what they do is extremely attractive.

Have you had a chance for such kind of international collaboration?

So far we have not collaborated internationally with the theatre - after all, we have existed for only two seasons. Next spring, we have a production coming in collaboration with a Belgian director, but the community aspect as such is not a prominent feature. In any case, when it comes to the whole community issue... Our primary goal in Paide is theatremaking. We want 'community' to be a thin red line that runs through our activities, however, that does not mean that each of our productions should talk about community. That can be gleaned from everything, after all. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is also set in a king's court and that is a community in and of itself too! The real question for us when we're creating works (for example, the second new piece this season is George Bizet's *Carmen*) is how to open up the rehearsal process to the community. Is it possible, how does the director perceive it, what are the opportunities for joining with the community, what are the opportunities for making them aware of the fact that there is something happening here, and can they somehow participate in the process of creation?

How important is it for you to bring classics and the modern day together? How much do you interpret and how often do you start from zero?

For me, it is important to point out that Paide Theatre is not the Jan Teevet Theatre. It has always made sense to me that other people direct in Paide as well. Last season I didn't direct any of the productions because after the four premieres in the first season, I needed to take a moment to analyse and adjust. I taught British students at the Drama School in the meantime instead.

What's important is when we reach a consensus, when we invite a director to work with us or when we choose this play or that material, from that moment on, every project has complete artistic freedom. Whether they take a new path or whether they work with existing material... I must admit that I'm more interested in creating structures from zero, without material to base it on. I'm interested in how the structure will assert itself, how we create an atmosphere. It's not just a question of content, it applies to form just the same. What kind of bricks do we use to build a world, what is the contribution of all those, who have gathered in that space, into what we create in the end.

How important is the word for you in performance art?

Immensely important. You have to be precise. But the word is not the only option. It's just that if you're going to use a word, it has to be a very good one. If you don't, it suits me just fine, because as a dramaturg, I don't see dramaturgy as the art of writing words, but rather creating structures. It's also much easier for me to understand the role of a dramaturg in the rehearsal process as one of essentially being the director's right hand, the one who asks uncomfortable questions. The one, who talks about the background, who to a certain extent keeps himself separate from the process, in order to constantly have as fresh of an eye as possible. In other words, the dramaturge's responsibility is mindboggling. But finding a great dramaturge is a stroke of luck and a complicated task all at once.

You already mentioned that for good theatre, language is not an obstacle. In your opinion, is it possible to limit performance art to one state or one cultural space, and if so then how?

The reality, of course, boils down to which state is financing what you do. But I would say that in the performance art, we really don't have climatic limits, especially in the European context. I understand that pears tend to grow better in Belgium because it's warmer there, but in performance art, the climatological question does not exist. Of course, it impacts how we perceive the world and so on. But I would like to see less of that kind of limitation. There should be more models that would help lay the foundation for potential collaboration. At the moment, collaboration is oftentimes rather random, because someone knows someone. There are all kinds of festival opportunities, however, for a small theatre such as the one in Paide, the capacity to go to festivals is dubious. However, the direction in which we should move is a pan-European one. I think it should be logical that, for example, at the Estonian Drama Theatre, a troupe from La Comédie Française performs. And vice versa, whether it is subtitled or not.

You just completed a research residency at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. What did you take away from that?

The research residency lasted for this past year, and in the end I pooled by thoughts under a title that will fit quite nicely with the rest of what I've said: *Landing or 99 opportunities to meet modern art and communities*. The main question for a long time has been whether an artist, especially in light of his or her community, should be an activist or a poet. One is a very social approach, where an artist takes it upon himself and tries to make the world a better place by actually building a homeless person a new system of tents. The poetic approach is one, where I focus on my work of art - which doesn't mean that it should be aesthetically escapist or art for art's sake - however, in form it stays within the bounds of performance art more clearly.

To sum up the STL research residency year, I became interested in how the Paide Theatre has been active in Paide for two seasons, and a beautiful intertwined circle of people has formed around us, who really come to see all of our productions, some even all performances. The community around the theatre has been created. However, that community consists of a few hundred persons. Paide is home to 10 000 persons. My question or hope isn't about having all 10 000 come to the theatre all of a sudden, that's not possible. Just like in a democratic state there will never be a moment, where every single person votes. About 10-20% will never vote, you just can't convince them. I'm also not interested in getting those 10 000 people to the theatre, I'm not that much of a utopian. However, I am interested in how we can make it so that by the end of the third season there wouldn't be a single person, who wouldn't have some kind of relationship with the theatre: be it hate, be it love, be it annoyance, be it confusion about why those guys are on the streets every day. Those 99 acts are all meant for bringing theatre from the theatre context to the street. What does street rebellion mean in theatre, what does Banksy mean in theatre?

What would you definitely like to do in the future? Name a project or festival that you would like to reach.

There might be a more concrete answer that is just not coming to me right away, but otherwise, the bulk of our attention goes to the next season. Preparing one production is such a strangely intense thought process that it requires a focus all its own. Even when you feel that you are completely away and you're not actually working, about 1% of your brain is still working on that topic or that material. I really think that I believe that the next production will be the best one, the most important one. And that the last one will disappear quickly. What I am interested in, well, it's not a major life goal, but it is a little thought I'd like to try... For the opening production of Paide Theatre, we created *Protected Area (Kaitseala)*. It is first and foremost one structure, one option to play, one key to play - taking that structure and testing it with different troupes, with different casts. It actually doesn't even require rehearsals, it requires a very strong presence, strong trust. Trust in letting go and perhaps making mistakes.

Speed-date: Keithy Kuuspu (b. 1994)

Laura Kell

What are you doing right now/what are your plans for the near future?

The current situation has impacted me more in a positive way. I have had enough time (and at the same time no time at all) to think myself into knots and then gain clarity again, to look into myself and understand values, what really matters to me right now. I reached peak boredom - by making isolation even more lonely, by cutting myself off from all kinds of information sources, while going nuts in my own living room with the best music and all sorts of oddities my brain managed to generate. Besides this all-encompassing letting go, I've had time to focus on a production I have coming out in April 2021 at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava - that has kept me on the rails, it has inspired me and moved me in all kinds of directions. While during the entirety of the lockdown studies at the Academy of Music and Theatre's programme Contemporary Physical Performance Making (CPPM), where I'm currently working on my Master's degree, were online, starting from the end of July, we started to meet in person again. I have to start preparing myself - what do I do with this "new" me and how do I make the gained experiences work to my benefit.

What inspires you in everyday life?

Oh, I'm inspired by so much and I wouldn't separate daily life from my creations. Daily life

is what inspires me most. At times, we joke with a friend of mine about where that person is, who will bring all of Keithy's ideas to life? I'm like a sponge, which sometimes can be quite exhausting. On the other hand, it provides the opportunity and skill to filter out the best ideas from among all of them. I like giving my ideas time to settle. That process of change, which always happens. Only time can provide the necessary metamorphosis for some ideas, which allows to find more and more new and interesting sides of those ideas.

I am interested in exploring the borders between authenticity/neutrality and artificiality - where does one stop and the other begin. People's impact on each other's energy is also very interesting. I work with that same energy in both the interpersonal relationships of the performers as well as the space between the performers and the audience. Because of my introverted nature, often in social situations I observe from the sidelines, not chiming in. At the same time, an infinite number of analyses are running through my head - getting them all verbalised is a challenge though.

Another inspiration is conceptualising the world and the objects within it - how self-determination works through the external rather than the internal world. I create through visuals - I enjoy the process, when I get different images in my head and I can make them move on the stage through objects and subjects.

Is there a certain place you would like to perform one day or a project you'd like to participate in?

Even though I am an overthinker, both ahead of time and in retrospect, then when it comes to projects and offers, I tend to relatively live in the moment. My guiding principle is that it is what it is and what will come will come. When I think about it now, I don't think I have a specific place or project in which I dream about participating. Instead, I dream more about persons with whom I would like to work. Sometimes not even based on who inspires me but, for example, who seems to be a tough person to work with, either due to differences in principles or didactic in some other way - that is inspiring in a way. I like to place myself in different situations in which I have never been before and that seem like they could be complicated. After all, that's how we develop. I would like to have the opportunity to be at someone's or some place's service, so to speak, in order to then sense the sweetness of freedom as a contrast. Perhaps I do dream of a certain collective, with whom I would work and then create things on the side independently as well. People inspire me - often, when I feel stuck and I have nothing left to give, I go out instead, meet my friends. The people I've come to be surrounded by are so full of ideas and surprises, discoveries and just the love of dialogue - that nourishes me to a great extent.

Where do Estonian performance artists come from?

Karin Allik

When turning a professional eye towards young performance artists, it is useful not to underestimate the role that education plays in the development of their style, technique and overall "handwriting". Although at times theatre schools are notoriously accused of "destroying the personality", in the end, the role of education is not about forcefully dictating the future creative path of a young artist. Instead, education in the performance art should direct students onto a road that will force them into engaging in introspection, liberating themselves from unnecessary restrictions, and adopting the necessary knowledge - in other words, obtaining professional as well as general knowledge and skills.

It is precisely through this knowledge transfer that the multifaceted educational institutions have a diverse, albeit clearly a significant, impact on the Estonian performance art. Therefore, what remains is the question: from where do young

creatives come onto the Estonian performance art landscape and what kind of preparation does their education provide?

There are two theatre schools in Estonia - one in Tallinn and one in Viljandi. **The Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (EAMT)** includes the Drama School, which of the two schools has a longer history, having been established in Tallinn in 1957. Since the first headmaster of the school Voldemar Panso was educated in stage directing by Konstantin Stanislavski's former students at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts in Moscow, the Drama School was also born in a Stanislavskian spirit and had strong influences from the Russian school of theatre.

Currently, the school is cultivating young actors and directors as well as dramaturges, and the skeleton of their studies is still formed by Stanislavski's principles of psychological realism.

However, the supervisor of each year is the one who puts the meat on those bones, so to speak, depending on his or her personal artistic preferences and ambitions. So every graduating class obtains universal professional skills along with general cultural education, but is also unique because of the supervisor's work. Considering that the palette of supervisors has become rather multicoloured over the years (including, for example, Tiit Ojasoo and Elmo Nüganen), the "faces" of the graduating classes also noticeably vary.

In Viljandi, theatre studies have been taught since the 1990s, currently as part of the **University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy's (UTVCA)** performing arts curriculum. In a sense, the system there resembles that of the Drama School in Tallinn: admissions every other year, teachings largely based on Stanislavskian basic principles, and the programme duration is four years. Although the two schools have many common

elements, the younger one has constantly sought out ways to distinguish itself, to create a clearer identity. The opportunity to do so was found in interdisciplinarity.

The curricula for the actors, directors, dancers and theatre technicians were structured to mimic a miniature model of a theatre. The future creative and technical workers were put to work in their studies as a collective, shoulder to shoulder, to emphasise the collective nature of the performance art. Starting in fall 2020, an even bolder change will be implemented – combining theatre arts, dance arts and visual technology students together under one curriculum, which will bring these specialties even closer to each other. Furthermore, the stage direction part of the curriculum is positioned between theatre and dance arts, which will foster the development of performance artists with a wide range of skills and knowledge.

For starters though, a stage direction student has to learn the techniques required of the specialisation: for theatre students, this means working with actors, for dance students it means learning the main points of ballet as well as modern dance. Dance studies at UTVCA also include dance pedagogy studies, thereby emphasising the importance of pedagogical skills. Although choreography and dance pedagogy are similar in essence, knowing both of these fields on the Estonian dance landscape will be beneficial. Oftentimes it is not simple to make ends meet with a project-based choreographer's salary, however, teaching offers a stable income to supplement the work.

In addition to UTVCA, **Tallinn University** also offers dance studies. Their curriculum title is "Choreography", however, it also allows for specialising in stage direction as well as teaching. Unlike in Viljandi, where each course has a specific supervisor, dance studies in Tallinn do not follow this masterclass method. They try to form dancers who think, who seek out their own personal corporal and physical ways of expression, develop a handwriting all their own. This feat is hard to achieve in three years' time, which is why dance studies in Tallinn will be extended to four years starting this fall.

That means one of the very few three-year courses in the performing arts is scenography at the **Estonian Academy of Arts**. Although the head of the scenography department Ene-Liis Semper admits that these artists too should study four years, they have managed to condense the studies into a shorter, yet more intense period. Each semester focuses on a different area of work: abstract composition, spoken theatre, film, musical theatre or modern theatre and installations. Over the entire duration of their studies, the students work with practitioners, for example, going to rehearsals and film sets.

A newcomer in Estonian performance art education, however, is the EAMT international Master's programme **Contemporary Physical Performance Making (CPPM)**, which was created in 2019 by choreographer and professor Jüri Nael. He describes the resulting creative master's programme as "a meeting place for experimentally minded young performance

artists", where body-based contemporary theatre and the performance art meet. Although the first class of this new programme has yet to graduate, the master's students have already enriched the Estonian performance art scene with, for example, a bold drag show, solos inspired by Greek tragedies, and a 99-hour endurance performance.

The master's programme, composed of two-month cycles, will bring a host of performance artists from renowned groups to Estonia, such as Jan Fabre Troubleyn, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, and Rimini Protokoll. Since the curriculum is meant for, first and foremost, already active performance artists from around the world, after their two-month sessions, the students have the opportunity to return to their troupes and creative work, in order to put what they learned to practice right away.

In several ways, therefore, performance art education has a special status, starting with even the duration of the curricula, which do not conform to the usual 3+2 higher education system. On the other hand, performance art education has maintained the individual approach that is so essential to creative fields: the classes and groups are smaller, which leaves teachers more of an opportunity to actually keep an eye on their development, counselling and supporting as needed. It is possible that precisely due to this close relationship education in the performing arts in Estonia is in constant flux, adapting to the needs of young artists and fostering new flashes on the cultural landscape.

The Estonian Theatre Agency

The Estonian Theatre Agency is a foundation dedicated to promoting Estonian performing arts in Estonia and abroad. We handle the performing rights of most of the contemporary Estonian playwrights, gather theatre statistics for the Ministry of Culture, handle performing rights of foreign plays, organise play competitions,

and maintain a library collection of plays. These activities make us an excellent partner for sharing information about and developing the field of performing arts in Estonia.

The Estonian Theatre Agency annually organises an Estonian contemporary performing arts

showcase festival called draamamaa.weekend for foreign theatre managers, curators and programmers. During the three-day festival, our guests can see and experience a concentrated selection of Estonian contemporary performing arts with international potential.

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