

## National Theatres in Transition

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In this essay I will discuss the changing function and rationale for National Theatres in Europe in an era of transnational political and cultural developments. The National Theatres that were created in the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe played an important role in developing a sense of national identity and national character. I want to consider the evolution of this practice into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and ask whether such theatres play a similar role today; also whether they continue to reinforce national borders and barriers in their work. By looking at specific National Theatres in various countries in Europe, and their transnational links, international repertory, multilingual performances and international touring, I will highlight some of the contradictions in the role of a National Theatre in Europe today.

First of all, I will review the general movement that led to the creation of National Theatres, the ideologies that underlay it, and some of the processes inherent in it. I will look first at their origins in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then consider more closely the 19<sup>th</sup> century developments that were allied to the rise of nationalism, before discussing more recent developments.<sup>1</sup>

The first point to make is that each National Theatre was unique in that it reflected a specific originary moment, location, set of goals, language, history, and mythology, as well as the idiosyncratic beliefs of its individual founding members. Thus it is difficult to establish a definition or a prototype for a National Theatre. In general what I will be discussing are theatres that called themselves National Theatres, made a claim to represent the nation in their cultural work, and were recognised as such by their audience and the government.<sup>2</sup> At the same time as the divergences in their practices, one can point to some distinctive patterns. There were two general types of National Theatre that were developed during the early period. The first type was established by stable autocratic governments, e.g. the *Comédie-Française* in Paris (1680), the *Burgtheater* in Vienna (1741), the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen (1748), and the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (1788). The second type of National Theatre arose in association with nationalist movements in emerging states under the yoke of foreign rule, such as the Norwegian National Theatre in Bergen (1850), the National Theatre in Prague (1883), the Finnish National Theatre in Helsinki (1872), the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (1904), etc. In addition there are National Theatres that fall

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this essay have appeared in Wilmer 2008, and Wilmer 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of prototypical National Theatres, see Bruce McConachie, "Towards a History of National Theatres in Europe" in Wilmer 2008: 50–56.

outside these two patterns, such as in Germany where the National Theatre in Hamburg, which was established in 1767, provided an interesting but short-lived experiment of a citizens' theatre, but where later attempts at National Theatres in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century evolved into court theatres. In Poland the National Theatre followed **both** patterns, since it was first created in 1765 under the Polish monarchy, but after Poland was carved up between Russia, Prussia and Austria, the Polish National Theatre took on the role of a National Theatre within an emerging nation, while Poles tried to regain their sovereignty. Meanwhile, some major countries in Europe such as the Netherlands never created National Theatres, and others such as Italy are still trying to establish them.

### Imperial Theatres

The *Comédie-Française* was founded by Louis XIV in 1680 in Paris to stage comedies and tragedies in French, primarily those of Molière, Racine, and Corneille. It received a subsidy from the state to perform both for the court and for the public. Up until the French revolution (1789), the theatre held a virtual monopoly on performing French plays in Paris and the actors were shareholders in the enterprise. Following the revolution, its name changed briefly to the *Théâtre de la Nation*, and following the arrest of its loyalist actors and their subsequent release, the company reunited in a theatre on the *Rue de Richelieu* where it has remained until today as a state-subsidized theatre, performing canonical French plays.

The *Burgtheater* in Vienna, founded by Empress Maria Theresa of Austria in 1741, was initially established as a court theatre located adjacent to the imperial palace, performing mostly in Italian and French (before later adopting a German repertory). The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen developed more rapidly in the direction of a National Theatre. Built on land provided by the Danish King in 1748, the Royal Theatre broke with the tradition of hiring French and Italian theatre companies to perform for the court by engaging Danish actors to stage new Danish plays, particularly those by the prolific Ludvig Holberg, in addition to popular French plays in translation. By the middle of the 1750s there were already 25 Holberg plays in their repertory (see Marker, Marker 1996: 61). In addition to creating a domestic repertory, the theatre grew further away from being a court theatre when the king handed it over to the municipality to operate from 1750. The company could not simply perform for the courts, but had to survive financially by attracting public audiences. Although the king would pay off the company's debts and resume financial responsibility for the company in 1770, and although the dramatic performances would have to compete with opera and ballet productions in the same building, the Royal Theatre had moved quite far in the direction of becoming a National Theatre. The German writer Johann Elias Schlegel, who was resident in Copenhagen in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was very impressed with the conception of this theatre. He felt that it might serve as a model for what could be done in German-speaking lands to encourage German language plays and the notion of

a National Theatre there. In 1747 he wrote that the “purpose of theatre is the embroidering and improvement of the mind of a whole nation. [---] A good theatre serves a whole nation.” (Schlegel, J. 1967: 88.)<sup>3</sup> Instead of touring groups of “unworthy tramps” (ibid, 75), he favored a standing theatre guided by an interest in the broad history and dramaturgy of theatre, as well as in “the customs and the special characteristics of one’s nation” (ibid, 76). When his ideas were published two decades later, leading figures in the German-speaking theatre such as Konrad Ekhof, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller took up the call for a German National Theatre. However, the fragmentation of the German-speaking population over 300 principalities, dukedoms, and free cities hindered the effort to create a unified enterprise. Without a single cultural capital like Paris, it was not clear where such a theatre might be positioned, and consequently various German-speaking cities became potential sites for a German National Theatre in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### German National Theatres

A National Theatre was established in 1767 in the *Comödienhaus* in Hamburg by a consortium of actors and merchants, with seating for 1600 people. Johann Friedrich Löwen, who became its artistic director, oversaw the change in the role of the actor from that of a wandering player to an “educator of the nation” (Kindermann 1965: 478). The National Theatre maintained an international repertoire of German, French and English plays (all performed in German), but, although the French plays outnumbered the others, it tried to create a distinctively German theatre style and to produce German plays, many of them new but often imitating foreign models.<sup>4</sup> Lessing’s comedy “*Minna von Barnhelm*” (1767) received the most performances. It indirectly called for German unity by representing the need for reconciliation between the opposing states of Prussia and Saxony during the Seven Years’ War. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of German culture, as was particularly evident in a scene where *Minna von Barnhelm*, a German lady, in response to a Frenchman who asks her to speak in French in her own country, says, “Sir, in France I would try to speak it. But why should I do so here?” (Lessing 1991: 46.)

The Hamburg National Theatre avoided the classic French style of Racine and Corneille (though Voltaire featured prominently) and, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, replaced it with plays mainly about bourgeois life. In her prologue at the opening of the theatre, Madame Löwen indicated the nationalistic and edifying (*Bildung*) aims of the enterprise to educate its audience. She argued that the theatre should “succour the state to transform the angry, wild

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<sup>3</sup> Translations from the German are by Anna Löhse, except when indicated otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of the repertory, see Robertson 1939: 40–93.

man / Into a human being, citizen, friend and patriot". (Fischer-Lichte 2002: 152.) In line with Schlegel's support for the idea of a theatre that would be responsive to the whole nation and guided by an intellectual awareness of the history of theatre, Lessing was appointed dramaturg at the National Theatre in Hamburg. As part of his duties, he wrote 104 essays (the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* ("Hamburg Dramaturgy"), 1767–1769) to keep the public informed about his views on the productions of the theatre as well his general theories about drama. In his last essay, Lessing still lamented the problem of overdependence on French culture, referring to the difficulty of "getting the Germans a national theatre, while we Germans are not yet a nationality. I don't speak about the political condition, but only about the moral character. One should almost say that this consists in not having one [national character] of our own, yet. We are still the devoted admirers of the never enough admired French. Everything that comes to us from across the Rhine is beautiful, charming, lovely, divine." (Lessing 1959: 759.)

Although it lasted only two years because of competition from a French touring company, and did not fulfill its purpose of transforming the theatrical repertory of the day, the Hamburg National Theatre created a possible model for a German National Theatre that would perform new plays in German, attempt to create a German style of performance, and present German environments, stories, topics and characters on the stage. According to Johann Schütze, who wrote a history of the theatre in Hamburg in 1794, the theatre was taken more seriously than earlier enterprises. The audience for the Hamburg National Theatre was influenced by a society of friends of the theatre who took front row seats in the stalls and set an example for others. Schütze reports: "They came together for the daily visit to the theatre, to give their vote before and after the performances, to provide applause and condemnation during the plays, to promote morals and order in the theatre. [---] These self-appointed men set the tone and applauded good new plays or single, well-performed scenes, or even well-spoken speeches; they demanded quiet, order and silence when unjustified praise, spiteful censure, or any kind of improper comments were voiced in the audience, regardless of whether it came from the boxes or from the gallery." (Fischer-Lichte 2002: 151.)

At the same time Lessing's writings helped transform prevailing attitudes towards French culture. According to August Wilhelm Schlegel, "his [Lessing's] bold, nay, (considering the opinions then prevalent) his hazardous attacks were especially successful in overthrowing the usurpation of French taste in Tragedy. With such success were his labors attended, that, shortly after the publication of his *Dramaturgie*, translations of French tragedies, and German tragedies modeled after them, disappeared altogether from the stage." (Schlegel 1846: 510.)

In 1768 Friedrich Klopstock proposed a plan to the Imperial Court in Vienna for the foundation of a subsidized National Theatre, with the purpose of performing "German plays and a 'singing house' for the musical declamation of German poetry" (Grimm, Max 1990: 164). Although his proposal had no immediate effect, in 1776 Emperor Josef II designated the

*Burgtheater* a National Theatre, as an answer to the *Comédie-Française* in Paris. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under such company managers as Joseph Schreyvogel, Heinrich Laube, and Franz Dingelstedt, it developed a reputation for producing German classical plays such as those of Goethe, Schiller, and Heinrich von Kleist, and later of Franz Grillparzer and Arthur Schnitzler.

In Mannheim, Prince Karl Theodor had established a lively and successful theatre for German-speaking drama, and when he moved his court and the theatre to Munich, it was agreed to create a National Theatre in its place. The Mannheim National Theatre opened in 1779 under the direction of Freiherr Wolfgang Heribert von Dalberg, assisted by the prominent actor and dramatist August Wilhelm Iffland and the young dramatist Friedrich Schiller, who took the role of a National Theatre seriously. A committee of the theatre met regularly to discuss issues about performances and dramaturgy, posing questions to its members such as, "What is a national stage in the true sense of the word? How can a theatre become a national stage? And is there really already a German theatre that deserves to be called a national stage?" (Kindermann 1965: 699). In response to a question about how best to perform French plays in Mannheim, Iffland wrote of the difference between German and French styles of production: "The French give performances. The Germans representations. Their paintings of passions are splendid, ours are true. [---] Therefore we must not try to imitate their playing if the performance of their tragedies should be effective on our stages." (Ibid, 698.)

Friedrich Schiller, whose *Die Räuber* ("The Robbers", 1782), "Don Carlos" (1787) and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* ("The Maid of Orleans", 1801) represented a call for freedom in various situations, created in "Wilhelm Tell" (1804) a passionate expression of nationalist feeling that was equally resonant for German as for Swiss audiences. The portrayal of solidarity amongst the peoples of the three cantons who unite against feudal oppression and in favor of greater autonomy and democratic values (especially in the scene of the Rütli oath and in Attinghausen's final scene) provided a striking model for the unification of Germany. In Act II the committed revolutionaries gather at night in a mountain valley at Rütli to take an oath of unity in the fight for autonomy. "Our nation is a single brotherhood; / We swear to stand together through the storm. / (All repeat the words with three fingers raised.) We will be free as were our fathers free. / We yield to death but not to slavery." (Schiller 1972: 61.)

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, German writer Christoph Martin Wieland could write approvingly of the growing nationalist trend in the German-speaking theatre: "German history, German heroes, a German scene, German characters, customs and habits were something completely new on German stages. What could be more natural than German spectators feeling the liveliest pleasure at seeing themselves transferred, as if by a magic wand, into their own country, into well known cities and areas, amongst their own people and ancestors – amongst people they felt at home with and who showed them, more or less, the features that characterize our nation." (Wieland 1967: 478.)

### National Theatres in Emerging Nations

Following the French and American Revolutions, nationalist movements developed in many parts of Europe, fomenting demands for self-determination and disseminating ideas about democracy, citizenship and national distinctiveness. They encouraged the use of theatre for forging notions about national character and national identity. Many National Theatres were established with a nationalist remit, and they participated in the construction of national identities and in legitimating the aspirations of nationalist movements. While they played a powerful role in instilling a sense of national commitment and future citizenship, they relied on essentialist and exclusionary notions of identity.

As Alain Finkielkraut has indicated in his book “The Defeat of the Mind” (1995), part of the responsibility for the proliferation of ideas of cultural essentialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lies with the widespread influence of such philosophers as Johann Gottfried von Herder. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, German intellectuals fostered a Romantic belief in the importance of the cultural traditions of the common people. Influenced by the ideas of Rousseau, Herder encouraged German-speaking people to take pride in their own cultural traditions and their native language, and he urged them to acknowledge the importance of the German folk poets of the past (see Herder 1877: 525–529). He believed in national distinctiveness and a *Volksgeist* (spirit of the people) and encouraged all nations to express themselves in their own individual ways. As a result of his endeavours and his admiration for folk songs and literature, Herder instilled a new respect for the German common people and German folk traditions, thereby helping to undermine the prevailing class distinctions of the day, and promoted a persuasive notion of national cultural unity, which influenced other writers.

The ideas of Herder encouraged intellectuals in countries throughout Europe to search for the unique aspects of cultural expression amongst their own peoples that would testify to separate and distinct national identities. In seeking to formulate their own notion of what tied their people together and made them unique, cultural nationalists to some extent reinvented the past, often writing ancient national histories that came to justify the creation of separate nation-states. Benedict Anderson has observed: “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past.” (Anderson 1995: 11.) Also Ernest Gellner argues: “The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred and patch would have served as well. [...] Nationalism is not what it seems [...] The cultures it claims to defend and revive are often its own inventions, or are modified out of all recognition.” (Gellner 1983: 56.)

Cultural nationalists investigated and exploited folklore, myths, legends, and local history, and also romanticized the lives of the rural folk. Medieval epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, the Nordic sagas and other legends were suddenly regarded as important and used as raw material for creating new works of art. In most European countries, the interest in folk culture

did not start from scratch during this period, but had evolved over centuries. However, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, folklore and folk culture or ethnography (as well as philology) became important reservoirs for notions of national identity.

Drama in the vernacular language was one of the principal and most visible forms of this cultural nationalist movement of “recovery” and mythification in emerging European states. Opera, symphonic poems, and folk music also proved to be powerful media for National Romanticism, such as in the work of Richard Wagner in Germany, Giuseppe Verdi in Italy, Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, and Leoš Janáček in Czech lands, Fryderyk Chopin in Poland, Edvard Grieg in Norway, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Modest Mussorgsky in Russia, Béla Bartók and Ferenc Liszt in Hungary, and Jean Sibelius in Finland. Poetry and novels (e.g. by Alexander Pushkin in Russia, Sándor Petőfi in Hungary, Karel Mácha in the Czech lands, Adam Mickiewicz, Julius Słowacki and Stanisław Wyspiański in Poland, and France Prešeren in Slovenia) as well as painting and sculpture (e.g. by Alphonse Mucha in Czechoslovakia, Hans Gude in Norway and Akseli Gallen-Kallela in Finland) were also important modes of nationalist expression.

The act of building a National Theatre edifice was often a way of spreading the ideas of nationalism from the intellectual few to the masses and celebrating their communal endeavor. In Bohemia, Hungary (see Senelick 1991: 292–294) and Finland, for example, collections were made around the country for the construction of the theatre, and so the theatre became a commonly owned enterprise (at least in spirit if not in law). The foundation-laying ceremony for the Prague National Theatre took place at a time of patriotic protest as a result of the Czechs’ disappointment in failing to gain autonomy from Austria. When the Prague National Theatre was finally constructed twenty years later (it opened in 1883), the curtain tapestry facing the audience as they awaited the beginning of a performance reminded them of their spiritual ownership of the theatre in its depiction of images of the national collection of money for the new theatre.<sup>5</sup> In Finland, in response to the February Manifesto by the Tsar in 1899 that threatened the country with a policy of Russification, nationalists seized the opportunity to assert their cultural independence by building a massive granite temple near the center of Helsinki.<sup>6</sup> A national collection was made and the foundation-laying ceremony in 1900 occurred amidst a three-day singing event.

The linguistic identity of National Theatres was often one of their most crucial aspects. In Prague, the theatre staged plays and operas in Czech to challenge the hegemony of German culture. In Norway the National Stage in Bergen introduced the Norwegian language

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5 This was, in fact, the second curtain because the first, with a different design, was destroyed in a fire shortly after the opening of the theatre in 1881.

6 Although the location was somewhat peripheral to Senate Square, it was located next to the central train station and across from the Atheneum art school. The organizers were disappointed that they could not obtain a more central location.

to demonstrate its ascendancy over Danish (and Swedish). In Finnish theatre, although some of the leading nationalists (such as Zacharias Topelius) favoured two branches of a National Theatre, one performing in Swedish and one in Finnish, this position was rejected by Finnish-speaking nationalists who stressed the importance of creating a Finnish-language theatre.

The repertory of each theatre was, of course, a major concern to the nationalists. The nationalist canon often included plays about historical or legendary figures engaged in the nation-building or national liberation process or in some way representing certain nationalistic ideals, such as “Wilhelm Tell” (1804) by Friedrich Schiller in Switzerland (and Germany), the many plays about Joan of Arc in France, Smetana’s opera “Libuše” (1881) in the Czech lands, “Boris Godunov” (1866) by Pushkin in Russia, and “Cathleen Ni Houlihan” (1902) by William Butler Yeats in Ireland. The repertory featured characters from the local mythological and folkloric tales such as the Norse and Germanic epics in Scandinavia and Germany, as well as historical and rural characters, in order to provide national protagonists who would help to define the character of the “awakened” nation. While Wagner exploited the *Nibelungenlied*, Finnish dramatists used the “Kalevala” and Irish playwrights the “Taín”. For example, W. B. Yeats wrote a cycle of plays about the mythical hero Cuchulainn. Many of the notions of national identity that persist in European countries today owe their origins to nineteenth-century myth-making by cultural nationalists who were influenced by the values and ideals of Johann von Herder and German nationalism and Romanticism. Although the social circumstances in the various countries differed from one another, the process was similar and tended to homogenize national character and culture into essentialist features, which were deemed to have arisen organically in the development of the nation.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century National Theatres continued to proliferate and change their functions, as empires disappeared, nation-states were established, and fascist and Soviet eras of control were succeeded by increasing democratization, multiculturalism, balkanization and globalization. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century National Theatres are facing enormous challenges as they seek to adapt to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions in Europe. National Theatres frequently suffer from being located in large inflexible spaces, and being subject to cumbersome organisations operating an expensive repertory system with numerous technical staff and an ensemble company of actors (and in some cases opera choruses, ballet companies and orchestras). Consuming a disproportionate slice of their national governments’ subsidy for culture, National Theatres are often expected to achieve the highest production standards and artistic creativity within the country, as well as reflecting the legacy of national theatre traditions. In a competitive economic climate with numerous alternatives for entertainment and diversion, National Theatres seek new ways of attracting an audience, responding to the interests of culturally diverse populations, creating transnational and intercultural links, and trying to balance their budgets.

These institutions encounter considerable difficulty today in an environment where nationalism and national identity are increasingly contested by global, transnational, regional, pluralist and local agendas, and where economic forces create conflicting demands in a competitive marketplace. They need to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the government, the decision-makers, the critics and the general public. In some cases National Theatres have been used to formulate and revise notions of national identity, and it is interesting to investigate who has been included and excluded in such formulations, and how nineteenth-century notions of homogeneous national identity have been exposed by the reality of multi-lingual and poly-ethnic populations, and diverse religious groups. For example, it is often significant which language is used in the National Theatre and which languages that are commonly spoken in the country are not represented on the national stage. For example, Finland, which has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, only speaks Finnish in the National Theatre, whereas Swedish is spoken in a separate Swedish theatre.

It is also interesting to examine the role of the national government as a source of finance, legitimacy and control of National Theatres, as well as a vehicle for promoting their activities at home and abroad, especially following some of the more egregious abuses of governmental and ideological control of National Theatres in the past century, as in the Nazi and Soviet cases. It is also surprising to observe the ongoing proliferation of National Theatres in many countries of Europe (with recent developments in Hungary, Spain, Scotland, and Italy) and the current desire to fulfill a variety of purposes and address many distinct audiences (as in France, Sweden, and the Balkans). It is also useful to interrogate the position of National Theatres as symbols of national cultural authority in Central and Eastern European nation-states, which evolved from under Soviet influence only to see their sovereignty threatened by a new (Western, capitalist) European identity. Thus, National Theatres have to negotiate between the residual values of the nation and the nation-state, and the emerging values of a pan-European culture.

The National Theatres often serve as the flagship of theatre culture, receiving the highest state subsidies, and setting the standard by which other theatre companies within the nation are measured. They also often reflect the cultural achievement of the nation at home and serve as an advertisement for the national culture abroad. Regardless of their origins and the process that they went through for legitimization with the general public, National Theatres are almost always subsidized by the national government, and to some extent influenced by government policy. The national government is thus a source of finance, legitimacy and control for National Theatres, as well as of promoting their activities at home and abroad. Since the policy of the national governments in the European Union promote European identity and foreign trade as well as the health and welfare of national institutions, National Theatres are often regarded as having not just a national but also an international status and orientation. They help to sell the national culture abroad in foreign tours, and provide economic benefits

as part of the tourist industry to international tourists. This is especially true of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the National Theatre in London, which frequently tour abroad with the help of government subsidy, and which are used by their respective national tourist industries as part of international tourist packages. In some cases implicit pressure is placed on National Theatres to put the country in a good light through their work. A good case in point was the recent centenary of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. During its centenary year, the Abbey was expected to celebrate with a festive programme and international touring. They travelled to Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as in a limited way around Ireland. They also imported several shows from new member states in Europe: Slovenia, Poland and Hungary. Unfortunately, the theatre ran way over budget and ended up a couple of million euro in the red. (The artistic director was accused of having used the international tours to showcase his own work, which was not very well received abroad.) Eventually, the artistic director and the manager were sacked, and the government bailed out the company financially, but insisted on restructuring it in order to ensure that proper financial controls would be put in place in the future.

One needs to consider the effects of the tourist market, and the national and international touring circuit on the work of National Theatres, particularly the international festivals which they house or visit, and which act as a showcase for national as well as transnational products. One also needs to contrast the position of the National Theatres as museums or heritage sites for national classics, with their function as initiators of new domestic and international work by themselves, or in co-productions with other companies at home and abroad. Likewise one needs to assess the structural difficulties that they face which often inhibit experimentation, flexibility and imaginative creativity, and lead to their work being upstaged by that of less constricted theatre companies and artists. For example, the Abbey Theatre production of John Millington Synge's "Playboy of the Western World" was upstaged in its centenary year by a production of the same play by the small Druid Theatre from Galway in western Ireland, which also toured abroad and received better notices.

There has been a major transformation of National Theatres since the 1960s. In Western Europe, we have seen the decentralization, devolution, democratisation, and proliferation of National Theatres in France and Sweden, and, by contrast, the disappearance of German National Theatres since the integration of East and West Germany into a federated political structure. Some countries have established National Theatres outside the capital or instituted a policy of touring. France, for example, has created five National Theatres and many regional National Theatres. In Sweden, in addition to the Royal Dramatic Theatre (*Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern*) in Stockholm, there is a national touring theatre (*Riksteatern*) that has no theatre building of its own. In Spain, following the end of the Franco regime, regional theatres were created, including the *Teatro Nacional de Catalunya* which opened in Barcelona in 1997 and performs in Catalan rather than in Spanish. A more recent example is the new

National Theatre of Scotland (2006) which has no building of its own, but intends to move its whole enterprise from one building to another for months at a time. This possibly helps to foster a more local or regional relationship with the audience (by seeing audiences as distinct rather than homogenous) and can generate more local or regional types of repertory.

Moreover, it seems that National Theatres in western Europe have become more transnational in their approaches in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. They seem to promote more performances by foreign companies in National Theatres in foreign languages (often with the aid of simultaneous translation and surtitles). In particular two of the French National Theatres, the *Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe* and the *Théâtre National de Strasbourg* have adopted a transnational policy, with the *Odéon* regularly staging international theatre, and the *Théâtre National de Strasbourg* performing frequently in German as well as in French. The programme of the *Odéon*, according to its website, is “fostering joint projects with stage directors, actors, playwrights and other figures involved in the dramatic arts in Europe, to present new works and breathe new life into Europe’s artistic heritage”<sup>7</sup>. According to David Whitton, “In practice this means a mix of foreign-language productions produced in-house or imported, and foreign works in French translation.” (Wilmer 2008: 159.) The *Théâtre National de Strasbourg*, located on the German border, is similarly transnational in its approach. According to Whitton, “Typically, of the 15–20 productions presented each year, 4 or 5 will be by the resident company, 3 or 4 will be co-productions with other European theatres, and the remainder visiting shows including a number of foreign-language productions.” (Ibid, 160.) Other National Theatres such as the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the National Theatre in London invite foreign productions, which are staged with surtitles.

In Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union, some National Theatres, as in Poland and Bulgaria, have continued to thrive and remain important places of experimentation and excellence despite the political and economic changes since 1989. However, in 2002 we saw the opening of the new Budapest-based National Theatre, which resembles a nineteenth-century building and yet is trying to find a position for itself as representative of the national culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (by, for example, inviting theatres around the country to perform in the new building). The new building indicates that the Hungarian authorities still take the concept of the National Theatre very seriously, even though the theatre community have laughed at the result. The National Theatres in the Balkans have managed to survive and increase in number amidst ethnic and linguistic rivalries, territorial transformations, and conflicting local, national and transnational governmental structures. In the rapid transformation of the Baltic States from Soviet control to a brief period of

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7 <http://www.theatre-odeon.fr/english/odeon/ft>

national sovereignty, to entry into (and subjection to) the European Union, the financial and structural problems in these countries with the introduction of a market economy and limitations in government subsidy have resulted in major changes and increased problems since independence. In the National Theatre in Vilnius, the artistic director tried to dismiss the permanent ensemble company of actors, whom he regarded as limited in talent and too expensive to maintain, and to open up the theatre to become a venue for the theatre companies from around the country. He failed to do so and lost his job in the process of trying. Now the company has difficulty balancing its budget and uses the venue for many different kinds of functions that will pay for its use. In Estonia the Estonian Drama Theatre made a bid after independence to become the National Theatre of Estonia. However, other theatre companies, who were afraid that their own state subsidy would be jeopardised if the Estonian Drama Theatre succeeded in its ambitions, resisted the move. Thus, while it has a national opera house, Estonia remains without a National Theatre for drama, even though the Estonian Drama Theatre resembles one.<sup>8</sup>

Many challenges face National Theatres in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as how they might operate in the future in a changing Europe, where transnational agenda compete with national concerns, where poly-ethnicism and multi-lingualism are displacing assertions of homogeneity, and where National Theatres and their artists and productions spend as much time abroad as at home. The twentieth-century dichotomy between the capitalist west and the communist east (and their alternative approaches to the functions of a National Theatre) has broken down and in some cases reversed itself. For example, the National Theatre in London has quietly deleted the word Royal from its name, is arguably promoting a new form of socially engaged writing, and is acting as a venue with civic responsibility; whereas, on the other hand, the National Theatre in Vilnius has become more of a commercial venue, rented by anyone who can afford it. While it is difficult to generalise about National Theatres because there are so many of them (35 in the Balkans alone) with such diverse practices and social contexts, there are many common problems facing National Theatres today and various possibilities for their survival.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Professor Anneli Saro, the Estonian Drama Theatre does not have the attribute “national” in its name but everybody considers it to be national or a paragon for others: Estonian plays and world classics in the repertoire, the best actors and directors, a prominent location for the theatre building, etc.

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## Muutuvad rahvusteatriid

Steve Wilmer

Artikkel käsitleb Euroopa rahvusteatriite muutuvaid funktsioone ja tegutsemisprintsipi transnatsionaalsete poliitiliste ja kultuuriliste arengute perioodil. Rahvusteatriid, mis Euroopas asutati ajavahemikus 18. sajandi lõpust kuni 20. sajandi alguseni, täitsid tähtsat rolli rahvusliku identiteedi ja karakteri tajumisel ning arendamisel. 20. sajandil jätkus rahvusteatriite õitseng, kuid nende funktsioon muutus, sest impeeriumid olid lagunened, rahvusriigid loodud ning fašistliku ja nõukoguliku kontrolli ajastule järgnes süveneva demokraatia, multikultuurilisuse, balkaniseerumise ja globaliseerumise periood. Tänapäeval kannatavad rahvusteatriid tihti sellepärast, et nende hallata on suured monofunktsionaalsed ruumid ning kohmakas organisatsioon, mis teenindab kallist repertuaarisüsteemi koos arvuka tehnilise personali ja suure näitetrupiga (mõningatel juhtudel ka ooperikoori, balletitrupi ja orkestriga). Kuna rahvusteatriid kulutavad ebaproportsionaalselt suure osa valitsuse kultuuridotsioonist, oodatakse neilt tihti riigi kõrgeimate lavastusstandardite ja kunstilise loovuse saavutamist, aga ka rahvusliku pärandi ja teatritraditsiooni kajastamist. Konkurentsitihedas majanduskliimas, kus on hulgaliselt alternatiive meelelahutuseks ja vaba aja veetmiseks, otsivad rahvusteatriid publiku ligimeelitamiseks uusi teid, tulles vastu kultuuriliselt mitmekesise elanikkonna huvidele, luues transnatsionaalseid ja interkultuurilisi sidemeid ning püüdes hoida tasakaalus oma eelarvet.

Antud artikkel küsib, millist rolli on need teatriid mänginud ajaloos ning kas nad täidavad sarnast rolli ka tänapäeval: kas nad rõhutavad oma tegevuses endiselt rahvuslikke barjääre ning piire. Uurides lähemalt mõningaid rahvusteatriite erinevates Euroopa maades ning nende rahvuslikke funktsioone ja transnatsionaalseid sidemeid, rahvusvahelist repertuaari, mitmekeelseid etendusi ja külalisetendusi välismaal, tuuakse välja vastuolud rahvusteatri funktsioonis tänapäeva Euroopas.

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