

## *Contemporary Finnish drama in Estonian Theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** After regaining independence in 1991 Estonia, like other Baltic states, went through a transition period which can be described as a return to the West, i.e. Europe. By now, Estonia has joined European community and is successfully integrated with Europe. However, in regard to the country's cultural and political identity, the process of self-determination continues, particularly on the level of regional identity: whether the newly independent Baltic countries belong to Eastern or Northern Europe? Estonia tends to position itself among Nordic countries, primarily by reason of close historical ties and linguistic kinship with Finland.

In the light of current identity processes the cultural interaction between Estonia and Finland deserves attention. This paper examines only one aspect: the reception of contemporary Finnish dramaturgy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Estonian theatre. Finnish dramas had been staged in Estonian theatres since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is noticeable that their number has significantly increased since the 2000s, and the repertoire of the major Estonian theatres contains far more new, contemporary Finnish plays than well-known classics. Plays by Leea Klemola, Sirkku Peltola, Juha Jokela, Mika Myllyaho, Pipsa Lonka and others enjoy great popularity among Estonian audiences. How do these plays represent Finnish society? How were they interpreted and received in Estonian theatre? How do stage productions of Finnish plays contribute to the construction of shared Nordic identity? The paper looks for answers to these questions.

**Keywords:** Finnish drama; Estonian theatre; Nordic identity; Finno-Ugric and Northern identity; reception of stage productions

### Introduction

The post-communist transition the newly independent Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – went through in the 1990s has been commonly

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described as a return to the Western world<sup>2</sup>, i.e. Europe. By now, Estonia has joined the European Union and is widely regarded as an exemplary case of successful integration with Europe. Nevertheless, Estonia is still in search of its identity, largely for the reason that modern global processes like mass migration, rise of multiculturalism, etc. destabilize traditional political and cultural identities, while the transnational European identity appears still to be rather a problem than a solution. In such a context, the issue of the regional dimension of national identity has received special attention in Estonian society: whether Estonia belongs to Eastern or Northern Europe? Of course, this is not a matter of mere geographic affinity, but of political and cultural one.

The idea that Estonia is historically and culturally a Nordic country, and should become also politically Nordic, took form already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the period of early Estonian nationalism (see Kuldkepp 2017) and has been influencing Estonia's self-image to this day. The connection to Finland has played the key role in this process, by reason of close linguistic and cultural kinship of the two nations. Thus, in Estonia the idea of Finnish–Estonian closeness has found expression in the widely known metaphor of The Finnish Bridge. Modern Estonia, too, prefers to be regarded as one of the Nordic countries, and not an Eastern-European state. For instance, in 2015 the then prime minister Taavi Rõivas declared in his speech that Estonia's grand narrative is to be a New Nordic country (see Tambur 2016).

In addition to the aspiration for Nordic identity on the political level, but also somewhat in opposition to this idea, an alternative idea of Estonian national identity was proposed in the 1930s by the folklorist and religious studies scholar Oskar Loorits. Loorits claimed that Estonians are essentially a Finno-Ugric people whose contacts with European culture are only a recent phenomenon and whose role should be to mediate between East and West. His ideas were further elaborated by the religious poet and theologian Uku Masing who expanded Finno-Ugrianism to encompass the Northern-Eurasian cultural area. In Masing's opinion, Estonian identity is based on the affinity with Boreals ("forest peoples") as opposed to the Indo-Europeans. The image of an Estonian as a Finno-Ugric, a true northerner, began to spread more widely in the late Soviet period and became a political instrument to express the oppressed national selfhood (see Kuutma 2005: 55–56). It is worth noting here that Estonians share the Finno-Ugric identity with the Finns (since both

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<sup>2</sup> *Return to the Western World* is the title of the book, written by Estonian, Swedish and Finnish sociologists and political scientists and published in 1997.

languages belong to the Finno-Ugric family of languages), but not with other Nordic peoples.

In the light of both aspects of current identity politics that were discussed above – the political turn to the Nordic countries, and the aspiration to provide new cultural resources for identity construction, using Finno-Ugrianism – cultural exchange between Estonia and Finland deserves renewed attention. This paper will examine the reception of contemporary Finnish plays in the present-century Estonian theatre. How were the plays interpreted and perceived in Estonia? Before proceeding to analysis of this issue, it will be necessary to give a brief overview of the reception of Finnish drama in the previous period – the 1990s.

### Looking back at the 1990s

Linguistic affinity, Lutheranism as the dominant religion, similar features in the history and the folkloristic heritage of Estonia and Finland form a solid basis for the interest in each other's culture and the building of cultural relationships between the two countries. The Finnish Bridge has been connecting the two nations since the time of national awakening in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With regard to theatrical relations, the first stage production of a Finnish play in 1884 (Aleksis Kivi's *Yö ja päivä* (Night and Day)) may be considered the most important milestone. Finnish drama was vastly popular in Estonia during the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s. The situation changed during the Soviet era, largely due to the fact that repertoire of theatres was controlled by the state and party officials, and all plays to be staged were subjected to censorship. The share of Western drama did not exceed one third of the total number of new stage productions. Since Finland belongs to Western countries, the list of Finnish plays, staged in Estonia in the 1940s–1980s, is relatively short and consists primarily of ideologically acceptable classics.

Significant changes began to take place already in the mid-1980s: the censorship was abolished and new authors, subjects, plays could now reach the stage.<sup>3</sup> During Estonia's so-called transition period the theatres turned to relatively new Finnish dramas instead of all-too-familiar classics, as topical political meaning or subtext of these plays attracted Estonian audiences at the time. To name but a few examples: the adaptation of Arto Paasilinna's *Ulvova mylläri* (The Howling Miller, 1988); Tauno Yliruusi's comedy *Makuuhuonet*

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<sup>3</sup> About the principles for building the repertoire of Estonian theatres in 1986–2006 see Karja 2017.

(*Bedrooms*, 1989), which tackles the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; *Viimeinen valssi Viipurissa* by Erkki Mäkinen (The Last Waltz in Viipuri, 1989, staged by the Finnish guest director Rauli Lehtonen).

As a matter of fact, the number of Finnish plays that were staged in Estonian theatres did not see a marked increase in the 1990s, since in the first place the theatres were attracted by Anglo-American drama which enjoyed worldwide popularity. Contacts with Finnish drama did not cease but its reception did not differ much from that of the previous decade. The first decade of newly regained Estonian independence saw few artistically motivated, original stage interpretations of newer Finnish drama, even though the share of classics (Aleksis Kivi, Hella Wuolijoki, and some others) kept slowly decreasing. Yet it is worth noting that in this period quite a few children's performances were based on popular Finnish dramaturgy: *Moomins*, *Herra Huu* (Mr. Boo) by Hannu Mäkelä, Sakari Topelius's fairy-tales, and the like.

If the Estonian theatre of the 1990s lacked raw realism and generally functioned "as an artistic oasis, a refuge from everyday worries" (Rähesoo 2008: 86), then in the 21st century the overall picture changed, largely due to the stagings of foreign (incl. Finnish) new drama. A fairly sharp shift to the Finnish new playwriting was prepared in the late 1990s. The key role was played by the little alternative theatre – Von Krahl Theatre, which had been established in 1992 as the first private theatre in Estonia –, and a couple of young stage directors: Ingomar Vihmar (b. 1970), and Taago Tubin (b. 1971). One of Vihmar's first stage productions after graduating from the state theatre school was *Laulu Sipirjan lapsista* (The Song of Sipirja's Children, 1998, the theatre Ugala), adapted from Timo K. Mukka's novel by Vihmar himself. The novel tells a rather brutal story about life in a remote northern village; the story moves between two time periods, World War II and the 1960s. Another Finnish novel, adapted and staged by Vihmar in 1999, brought the spectators straight to contemporary times: Ilkka Pitkänen's *Tavallisia ihmisiä* (Ordinary People) depicts Finnish everyday life and family relationships in realistic style, but exudes existential anxiety. The latter production opened in Von Krahl Theatre.

Two years later, in 2001, the stage production of the scandalous play *Osta pientä ihmistä* by Jouko Turkka in Von Krahl Theatre proved to be the turning point in the reception of Finnish new drama in Estonia. Jouko Turkka was a renowned controversial and provocative stage director, one of the brightest representatives of the Finnish avant-garde theatre. The rehearsals of *Osta pientä ihmistä* at the KOM theatre in Helsinki were interrupted two weeks before the premiere because of the conflict between Turkka, who was directing his play, and the actors. Thus, the Estonian production (directed by the Finnish guest

director Erik Söderblom from Q-Theatre) under the title *Connecting People* became the world premiere of the play. Due to these circumstances the Estonian production got a lot of attention in Finnish criticism and a considerable number of Finnish spectators came to see it in Tallinn. In his play Turkka depicts grotesquely the romance between imaginary characters who carry the names of real, existing persons: a managing director of the cell-phone company Nokia, Jorma Ollila, and a down-an-out woman Sari Mällinen (in reality a well-known Finnish actress). The story highlights the gap between the rich and the poor in modern capitalist society, combining sharp social criticism with provocative humour, and employing a lot of obscenities in the characters' speech. Even though this kind of rough style was very rare in the Estonian theatre at the time, *Connecting People* caused mostly positive reverberations in the media and attracted a lot of audiences. Since social circumstances and human types in the play were essentially familiar to Estonians as well, the collaboration of a Finnish author, a Finnish stage director and Estonian actors was largely received as an example of social critical performance that was missing in Estonian theatre at the time. In this performance, the parody of particular (Finnish) individuals turned into generalizable social theatre, suggested a prominent Estonian critic (Neimar 2007: 198). *Connecting People* generated heated debates over ethical and political issues as well. For example, the prominent Estonian writer Mihkel Mutt was worried about what Finnish, but also Estonian, businessmen would think of such a parody and the derision of outstanding public persons; he wondered if it could be perceived as a kind of remnant of Eastern European mentality (Mutt 2001). His article received fifty-seven comments on the Internet, and remarkably most of them protected the performance, referring to freedom of speech and democracy as essential values in post-Soviet Estonia.

### Social Critique in Finnish Plays

As mentioned above, *Connecting People* proved pivotal for the reception of Finnish drama in Estonian theatre. The overall number of Finnish plays in the repertories has risen sharply over the last decades. Nearly eighty texts premiered between 2001 and 2017, which means that their number per year has grown from 2–3 in the 1990s to 5–6 in the present century<sup>4</sup>. Little alternative

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<sup>4</sup> This number includes far-reaching adaptations of classics by Finnish stage directors and collaborative projects between Estonian and Finnish theatres, which have become more frequent over the last decade. The present paper does not engage with such theatre projects.

theatres, led by Von Krahl Theatre, provide about a quarter of those new productions, as most of them premiere in mainstream state theaters. Though, most of the productions and collaborative projects take place in the theatres of small towns like Viljandi and Rakvere, as the Estonian Drama Theatre in Tallinn ranks third. Only a couple of plays have come to the stage thanks to Finnish guest directors (Kristian Smeds, Teemu Mäki) – the vast majority are directed by Estonian directors which shows their keen interest in Finnish drama. Most importantly, in the present century there has been a marked shift towards new, contemporary Finnish drama. If prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century great classics (from *Kalevala* to Hella Wuolijoki) predominated in Estonian theatre, then between 2001 and 2017 their proportion dropped to one-fifth of all stage productions based on Finnish material. Besides and instead of the classics, new plays by a range of authors, such as Pirkko Saisio, Reko Lundan, Mika Myllyaho, Sirkku Peltola, Leea Klemola, Pipsa Lonka, Juha Jokela, as well as adaptations of the novels by Arto Paasilinna, Antti Tuuri and others, were presented to Estonian audiences.

It should be noted that the boost of interest in Finnish contemporary drama was parallel to Estonia's fast integration with Europe, the milestones of which were joining both the European Union and the NATO in 2004, and the transition to the euro in 2011. However, it is questionable whether or to what extent the process of rapid Europeanization could affect the reception of Finnish drama; most likely, the impact of social processes was ambivalent.

New Finnish plays that were staged in Estonia during the indicated period, represent almost exclusively contemporary Finnish society. In Finland the wave of new drama has been regarded as a reaction to and a reflection of considerable changes in Finnish society during the 1990s. Niklas Füllner observes: "Finland had changed into a service society; flexible forms of working, precarious employment relationships, and problems such as long-term unemployment and poverty suddenly appeared on the political agenda. At the same time, the following question emerged: how could the welfare state be maintained in a time of economic instability?" (Füllner 2016: 87). According to theatre scholar Katri Tanskanen, Finnish new drama is critical of contemporary society for the most part, but instead of direct political references, the authors make use of humour, satire and irony (*Suomen teatteri* 2010: 417). These statements fully apply to plays staged in Estonia. The vast majority of Finnish plays presented to Estonian audiences are critical of the market economy and the neo-liberal value system that allegedly define present-day social systems. At the same time most plays fall into the genre of comedy or tragicomedy.

What are the predominant themes and typical characters? A whole range of plays staged in Estonia tackle problems of working life. In a number of Finnish dramas the contradiction between a successful career and human happiness, or the negative effects of performance pressure on human relationships are at the root of dramatic conflicts: Mika Myllyaho's trilogy *Paniikki* (Panic, 2010<sup>5</sup>), *Kaaos* (Chaos, 2010), and *Harmonia* (Harmony, 2011); Juha Jokela's *Mobile Horror* (2012), Arto Salminen's *Varasto* (Stockroom, 2012), and others. Sirkku Peltola's *Suomen hevonen* (The Finnhorse, 2007) is one of the few Finnish plays that depict rural life – in fact, the deterioration of the traditional rural way of life that results from the EU bureaucratic regulations. A number of plays depict the breakdown of family relationships, for example Reko Lundan's *Teillä ei ollut nimiä* (in Estonian theatre – *Suurema kurbuseta* (Without Greater Sorrow, 2007)), Pirkko Saisio's *Tunnottomuus* (Insensitivity, 2004), and others.

Many central characters of the plays belong to the underprivileged ranks of society. Some plays, such as Reko Lundan's *Tarpeettomia ihmisiä* (Unnecessary People, 2009), Mika Myllyaho's *Kaaos*, Sirkku Peltola's *Ihmisillinen mies* (A Humane Man, 2013), tell the story about losing one's job and about how to cope when you are unemployed. There are a variety of unsuccessful characters, i.e. losers in the plays: old and helpless people, disabled people (including those suffering from intellectual disabilities), single parents, inhabitants of peripheral villages, and of course, a colourful gallery of drunks – as far as the latter category is concerned, it is likely that alcoholism is the biggest common problem for both Estonian and Finnish societies. The title of Lundan's play *Unnecessary People* could well describe the bulk of these literary characters.

Do theatrical interpretations of Finnish dramas highlight social, cultural, mental similarities between Estonian and Finnish societies or rather their differences? Much of the concerns mentioned above were known to Estonians; or, to be precise – they became increasingly familiar with time. Next, I will turn to the reception of the productions in Estonian criticism, in order to show how the attitudes have changed. One of the early stage productions of new Finnish drama, Pirkko Saisio's *Tunnottomuus* (directed by Peeter Raudsepp), was focused on troublesome family relationships in the welfare society. An Estonian critic held an opinion that the story could hardly be placed into Estonian context because in Estonia family relationships are largely determined by economic factors, while in Finland people are socially independent; furthermore, the living conditions depicted in the play (frequent trips abroad, luxurious furnishings, etc.) were unattainable for the majority of Estonian

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<sup>5</sup> The date refers to the premiere in Estonian theatre.

people (Karja 2005). A few years later, the same stage director chose a text that addressed issues closer to the Estonian audience and enabled empathetic identification: Reko Lundan's play *Tarpeettomia ihmisiä*. The theme of the play is unemployment, caused by the current economic crisis, and its consequences for human relationships. Now Estonian criticism pointed out that, although the director emphasized the Finnishness of the fictional world through multiple details, *Unnecessary people* did not give the impression of being mere Finnish story: the social situation on the whole and the living conditions of people appeared to be more or less the same in Finland and Estonia.

Similarities between Finnish and Estonian societies were increasingly be emphasized when Finnish plays were brought to the stage. To a certain extent, this could be explained by the marketing strategies of the theatres, but on the other hand, the assertion that these stories could have happened in Estonia as well becomes a recurrent motive in criticism. Let me provide some more examples.

Sirkku Peltola's *Pieni raha* (A Little Money, 2011) gives a voice to the outcasts from society: the main characters are an old woman, suffering from impaired physical mobility, and her mentally underdeveloped son. Their story begins in warm and funny tone, but ends tragically – the irresponsible son becomes a killer because of the money. This story could also have happened in some little Estonian village with ordinary Estonians, commented the director of the play Tanel Ingi (Raidalu 2011). Some plays portray successful and wealthy people who are nevertheless unhappy. *Mobile Horror* by Juha Jokela (Estonian title: *Rabajad* (The Toilers)) is set in a small mobile phone company, i.e. the characters are middle class. The play examines fierce competition, the merciless pace of work and cult of success in business through razor-sharp humour and calls into question basic neo-liberal values. The director Erki Aule has said that although the action takes place in Finland, there is no direct reference to Finnish environment and therefore the play is quite easily transferable to the Estonian context (*Arulage töötamine...* 2012). *Paniikki* by Mika Myllyaho, which has met with great success among Estonian audiences, depicts neuroses, fears and distress of three men in their thirties who are seemingly quite well off – a graphic designer, an editor, and an engineer. This stage production perfectly fits into the present, it scores a point, wrote an Estonian critic (Truuvert 2010). Pipsa Lonka's *These Little Town Blues are Melting Away* (Estonian title: *Laulud halli mere kaldalt*)<sup>6</sup> takes place in a small faraway village, somewhere on the

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<sup>6</sup> The play won the main prize in the Finnish section of the New Baltic Drama competition, in 2011.

coast of the Baltic Sea. As the water is rising and the village is in danger of flooding, the villagers must leave their homes. The powerful image of the drowning village immediately produced associations with Estonia's emptying countryside, even to an assessment that the decline of a peripheral coastal village is likely to be even more characteristic of Estonia with its feeble regional policy than of Finland (Märka 2015). Finally, a review of Arto Salminen's *Varasto*, directed by Taago Tubin, provides an impressive example of the smooth transfer of Finnish problems to the Estonian society. The play, which is set in a building materials store, displays the survival strategies of common people in tough capitalist competition, employing humour and irony. One critic assumed that in fact the stage director intended to bring average voters and average rulers of present-day Estonia to the stage (Maiste 2012), i.e. to make use of the Finnish drama in order to criticize Estonian politics and morality. Indeed, Tubin chose *Varasto* for its sharp social criticism and black humour that were lacking in Estonian contemporary drama. The production process became very personal, since *Varasto* reflected in a way the social status of Estonian actors at that time: in a situation where an actor received less salary than any storekeeper of a decent construction shop, survival became a serious concern for theatre practitioners (see Tubin 2018).

Of course, new European and American plays that dealt with social problems were also staged in Estonia. However, new Finnish drama had (and still has) a special place due to a greater cultural closeness to Estonian society. To enable spectators' identification with characters of a foreign play – which is probably a prerequisite for the efficient transfer of ideas and problems of a play to spectators' own social context –, cultural and behavioural spaces of the countries need to be sufficiently similar. For Finnish plays this condition is usually met, partly due to the long-standing cultural interaction between Estonia and Finland, but more importantly – for the reason that everyday life of the two countries has become increasingly similar in the post-Soviet era. Thanks to these developments, Estonian audiences recognize and understand quite easily cultural and material references in Finnish plays, be they, for example, family therapy, Rammstein, films by Almodovar (*Paniikki* by Myllyaho), or, orienteering in the woods, Japanese tourists in a supermarket, Fazer candies and Karelian pies, not to speak of Moomins, in Pipsa Lonka's *These Little Town Blues are Melting Away*. A variety of such references makes it easy to identify with the fictional world of the plays, even if some of their features are unrealistic, and depicted with black humour and grotesque.

Taking into account the main patterns of the reception, one may suggest that insofar as new Finnish dramas exhibit the seamy side of the Nordic welfare

society, and tackle concerns that largely coincide with Estonian ones, they have to some extent served as a tool for tackling critically local concerns. All the more so, since Estonian original drama of the time mostly lacked political ambitions; instead, Estonian theatre went through the boom of historical (mainly cultural historical) drama, and fantasy games prevailed over realistic depiction of contemporary life. At least until the end of the 2000s theatre critics were pretty sceptical about the ability of Estonian theatre to generate social discussion at the local level; social critique in Estonian plays, if any, tended to be mild and/or expressed in a post-dramatic form, which are not easily understood by the general public.<sup>7</sup>

However, the importing of foreign stories may not always be beneficial. *Harmonia* (Harmony), a piece of post-dramatic theatre, staged by the Finnish performance artist Teemu Mäki in Von Krahl Theatre in 2008, could be an example of a somewhat problematic cultural import. *Harmonia* was ironically dedicated to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia and labelled by its creators as a “show of anger, economy and enjoyment”. In the first part the actors performed short sketchy scenes, which combined documentary material and theatrical imagery and were aimed at criticizing Western consumer society with its built-in mechanisms of desire, in the second part they read aloud a few utopias that describe, by definition, a kind of ideal society. Yet, if seven years earlier Turkka’s *Connecting People* had worked as a critique of Estonian society, *Harmonia* did not really fulfil this task, since neither the documentary material, used in the performance, nor scenic images succeeded in creating sufficiently strong links with Estonia. For instance, interviews with prostitutes in Finland, not in Estonia, were shown on the video-screen, and the concept of exploitation was visualized with the help of pretty universal metaphorical images. Thus, *Harmonia* criticized a global economic model in a global theatrical language. Von Krahl could have successfully performed the same production on the anniversary of the Latvian Republic, a critic commented ironically (Kaus 2008).

To summarize the above argument, I would use two metaphors: a window and a mirror. In Soviet era Finnish television that Estonians (at least those living in the northern part of Estonia) were able to see, operated as a window to the (imaginary) West: Estonians created their image of Western life, largely proceeding from TV series and shows that were broadcast on Finnish TV. In

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<sup>7</sup> A series of devised political performances in Theatre NO99 (from *NO93 Nafta!* (Oil!, 2004) to *NO72 The Rise and Fall of Estonia*, 2011) was a big exception on the Estonian theatre landscape in this period.

the 21<sup>st</sup> century the representations of Finnish society in drama and theatre have become a mirror where Estonians attempt to see themselves. When social concerns of Estonia are seen in this mirror, the emphasis falls on features and problems which Estonia shares with old Western democracies (like Finland), and not on differences that could and should be explained by Soviet legacy or by the postcolonial situation specific to Eastern European countries. In terms of identity, it becomes possible to identify with the Western model of society, more specifically – with Nordic society, and to believe that Estonians are truly a Nordic people, since their lifestyle and social problems are the same as in a Nordic welfare state.

### “Northern Madness” on Estonian Theatre Stages

To be sure, the reception of Finnish plays in Estonia is more complex and ambivalent than the above examples testify. As might be expected, Finnish drama also deals with topics that some Estonian audiences would perceive as strange or distant, not because they do not exist in Estonia, but because they were not widely known, or were (some yet are) considered sensitive or taboo subjects. Again, perceptions and attitudes have been changing with time. For example, when Finnish KOM-theatre gave a guest performance in Tallinn with Reko Lundan’s *Tarpeettomia ihmisiä* in 2005, one critic noted: the prevailing attitude about domestic violence in Estonia is that this is not a serious social problem but rather a marginal and irrelevant one, while in Finland this is a topic of discussion, as well as an important issue for Finnish theatre (Paaver 2005). When *Tarpeettomia ihmisiä* was staged in Estonia four years later, it helped to draw public attention to the above-mentioned issue; by now domestic violence is generally considered a most serious problem in Estonian society.

Current sensitive or controversial issues in Estonian society are largely concerned with sexuality and immigration: homosexuality, lesbianism, transsexuality; the migrant crisis and immigrants, etc. I would add the issue of religion (religiosity)<sup>8</sup>, which is very rarely addressed in Estonian original drama. It can be assumed that cultural affinity has helped Estonian spectators to accept more easily the taboo topics addressed in Finnish dramas (as compared to, for example, German or American drama), all the more so because they are frequently played out in a comic key. However, as regards the last argument, one must admit that in Finnish plays under consideration a comic key often means

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in Pipsa Lonka’s *These Little Town Blues are Melting Away*, God makes his appearance.

roughness, brutality, vulgarity. When “politically incorrect” content combines with bad language, obscenities, use of violence and nudity on the scene, etc., the result might be quite shocking for some spectators. Since such an in-her-face style has been much rarer in Estonian contemporary theatre than on the other side of the Gulf of Finland, Estonian audiences might feel reluctance or distaste. In the opinion of the Finnish theatre scholar Outi Lahtinen, Finnish audiences would accept aggressiveness and robustness of original comedies, “since the same things make us angry and we believe that the anger is justified” (Lahtinen 2007: 38)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, this is a matter of shared emotions. Whether or how could Estonians become part of this community, “us”?

To discuss the question, I will take a look at Leea Klemola’s plays that were staged in Endla theatre, in Pärnu, by the above-mentioned stage director Ingomar Vihmar: *Kokkola* (2007), *Kohti kylmempää* (Into the Cold, 2010). These are the first two parts of Klemola’s so-called Arctic trilogy. *Kokkola*, set in a small Finnish town of the same name, is populated by a number of colourful and weird characters. The main character Marja-Terttu is a sixty-year-old drunkard who has deep affection for her twin brother Saku; at the end of the play she turns into a seal – true, temporarily. Klemola demands that a male actor play the role of Marja-Terttu.<sup>10</sup> The other characters include the wheelchair-bound wife of Saku, Marja-Terttu’s daughter who falls in love with another girl, Piano Larsson who runs a small bus company and is ready to help people in all kinds of troubles, and others. In the second part of the trilogy *Kohti kylmempää* Marja-Terttu runs the Polar Grill in Greenland, and organizes an expedition to find the coldest region on the Earth. Both tragicomedies could be seen as a trip to the limits of tolerability and acceptability. “No aspect of the human experience is off-limits to Klemola’s politically incorrect and unashamed plays,” writes Hanna Helavuori; hybrid identities and the bizarre range of human existence populate her Arctic trilogy (Helavuori 2011: 25). One of the most striking features of the trilogy is the subversion of gender roles, as Outi Lahtinen has pointed out: „harsh, obtrusive, and aggressive female characters dominate caring and gentle male ones” (Lahtinen 2015). Klemola also exposes homosexual and even slightly incestuous relationships between characters. One could expect that the issues of sexuality and corporeality (associated with animality) that are depicted in a rude way would meet non-acceptance from the large part of Estonian theatre audiences. Nonetheless,

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<sup>9</sup> My translation.

<sup>10</sup> In Endla the role was played by the very popular guest actor from Tallinn, Andrus Vaarik.

especially *Kokkola* enjoyed a remarkable success among the audiences (the interpretation of Ingomar Vihmar actually belongs to the most popular stage productions based on Finnish dramaturgy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century), as well as among theatre experts and critics.

On the website Nordic Drama Corner *Kokkola* is described as “a crazy, coarse and moving play [...] Its robust language and repeated use of male nudity require a great deal of courage from both its performers and the audience, but underneath lies a rough beauty and arctic, cold sensitivity” (<https://www.dramacorner.fi/en/finnish-authors/klemola-leea>). Endla Theatre introduced *Kokkola* on their website as “an extreme vision, a quintessence of northern madness” (<https://www.endla.ee/lavastused/arhiivilavastused/kokkola>). Essential keywords here are “arctic sensitivity” and “northern madness”, both referring to a very particular emotional structure.

In this respect, there are two main reception strategies in the criticism of Estonian stage interpretation of *Kokkola* and *Kohti kylmempää*. Some critics distance the fictional world of Klemola’s play and its “northern madness” from Estonia, place the emphasis on Finnishness, and describe Klemola’s work as something quintessentially Finnish. But more often the critics establish the connection with Estonia by arguing that since both Finns and Estonians are Finno-Ugric peoples, they actually share a Northern (or Boreal, according to Loorits and Masing) identity and its corresponding emotional structure. The use of “we” in one review of *Kokkola* appears quite telling: “Because we are like that – here, under the Northern sky. Brutal and tender, depressed by *kaamos* [the polar night], obsessed with our fixed ideas, sexually confused, but yet crazily funny” (Kordemets 2007: 33)<sup>11</sup>.

Motifs such as northern madness (or melancholy, in its milder version), the depression caused by *kaamos* (even when there is no polar night on the territory of Estonia), arctic hysteria and the like repeatedly appear in the criticism of stage productions of modern Finnish plays. Usually these motifs are believed to elucidate a so-called national character or mentality of the two kindred peoples, as well as to highlight their shared cultural distinctiveness in the European context. One of the most influential stage productions in that regard was Arto Paasilinna’s *Jäniksen vuosi* (The Year of the Hare), directed by the Finnish director Kristian Smeds in Von Krahl Theatre (2005) – the story about a burned-out journalist who suddenly abandons his job and his family, and heads into the wilds of Finland, to find peace of mind. Estonian writer and theatre critic Jan Kaus opined that the play combined anxiety of the late

<sup>11</sup> My translation.

Nordic capitalism with escapist values, and therefore represented impressively the charm and pain of a European Finno-Ugric man (Kaus 2007). Watching the plays by Klemola, Paasilinna and others, Estonian spectators could look in the mirror (with slightly masochistic pleasure), where they saw themselves as somewhat exotic Northerners, but still Europeans.

Naturally one can also identify tensions between Nordic and Finno-Ugric identities, but their closer examination remains beyond the scope of this paper.

### Concluding Remarks

In the 1990s and the 2000s, the newly independent Estonia underwent relatively rapid political, economic and technological development aimed at European integration. Estonia moved from a totalitarian Soviet regime to democracy, borders opened and the cultural situation as a whole changed dramatically. In the context of this paper, shifts in the value system appear to be pivotal for the cultural scene. According to sociological studies, the values of Nordic countries have served as a benchmark for Estonia during the 1990s and the 2000s; as a consequence, Estonians seem to have become very close to the Scandinavian mentality in terms of the perception of basic human values (Lilleoja, Tart 2011: 57, 61). These shifts form a broader context for rapid changes in Estonian theatre's foreign relations: the theatre opened up to the West, cultural relations increased steadily over the next decades and took on new forms. Not surprisingly, Finland as the closest Western country to Estonia in terms of language and culture, became the most essential partner of the Estonian theatre during this period.

The most important trend is the boom of new Finnish drama in Estonian theatre of the 2000s and the 2010s. It is difficult to identify any direct influences of Finnish drama on the Estonian literary scene. However, one can identify some shared sources of influence, like so-called in-*yer-face* theatre style that has affected Finnish new drama as well as a few Estonian authors.

If we look at the perception and the reception of Finnish dramas in Estonia from the perspective of identity politics, we can observe that, among other things, Finnish dramaturgy supported the attempts of Estonians to position themselves in post-socialist Europe. Based on increasingly similar social and cultural circumstances of the two countries, stage productions of Finnish plays allow Estonians to perceive Estonian society as an ordinary Western/Nordic society with common concerns and lifestyle – in contrast to an Eastern European state with its heavy post-Soviet legacy. On the other hand, some

Finnish dramas (together with the corresponding trend in Estonian original drama) allow them to stand out in the overall Western European cultural space as somewhat exotic Finno-Ugrians whose mentality is shaped by the northern environment.

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