Contemporary Drama and Theatre in Estonia. Conversing with Drama Directors Lembit Peterson, Tiit Palu and Ivar Põllu

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For a visitor coming to Estonia from a far-away foreign country with little if any knowledge of Estonian culture, the facts and statistics provided and spread online by the Estonian Theatre Agency (Eesti Teatriagentuur, http://www.teater.ee/) can look truly impressive. Estonia is one of the smallest European countries, on the shores of the Baltic Sea, but it remains a fact that between 2015 and 2017 nearly forty active theatres of the country produced annually more than 6000 performances (incl. 200 new performances, sic!), while the total number of its theatregoers (slightly more than one million people) was almost the same as the country's autochthonous (Estonian-speaking) population.

We may add that conscious Estonian culture as creativity in all branches of arts can be traced back only to the middle of the 19th century when the country's predominantly peasant population was finally emancipated from the humiliating condition of serfdom, imposed by Baltic-German landlords since the late Middle Ages (and maintained since the start of the 18th century with the benediction of Tsarist Russia)

In the following interview, we will ask some of the leading Estonian stage directors to share their experience and ideas about the past and contemporary state of Estonian theatre life and drama performances.

LEMBIT PETERSON (born in 1953 in Tallinn) has a long and varied experience working as a drama director. However, he has also been highly appreciated for his roles as an actor in different world-famous plays. Thus, he has played the lead in Molière's *The Misanthrope* (1986) and only recently, in 2018, he played King Lear in one of William Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. He worked in 1976–1979 and 1985–1988 at Noorsooteater (Youth Theatre, in Tallinn), in 1979–1982 in Viljandi's Ugala theatre, while after Estonia's restored political independence he founded one of the most successful private theatres in Tallinn, Theatrum, of which he has been at the same time the

theatr's general director and the main stage director. Among the plays he has staged, a long series of works of world drama stand out (thus, six comedies by Molière, including *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, Calderón de la Barca's *The Great Theatre of the World*, *Love Is No Joke* and *The Invisible Lady*); works by Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Beckett, Pushkin, Claudel, Fosse, P.-E. Rummo.

TIIT PALU (born in 1970 in Tallinn) works currently at one of the most famous Estonian public theatres ('public' in the meaning that in part they receive subvention from the state), Vanemuine, in Tartu (Estonia's second-largest city, often called the historical 'cradle' of Estonian culture). Palu started his creative career as an actor and stage director at the same theatre Vanemuine in 1996, but worked subsequently for about ten years also at the well-known public theatre Endla in Pärnu, Estonia's best-known sea-resort town. Tiit Palu has himself written some plays, while among the playwrights whose work he has staged there are both international authors (Nikolai Gogol, Gustave Flaubert, Yasmina Reza, Euripides) as well as Estonian authors (Lydia Koidula, Friedebert Tuglas, Mats Traat, Urmas Vadi).

IVAR PÕLLU (born in 1974 in Tootsi) studied at the 4th Secondary School in Pärnu and graduated from the Theatrical Studies branch of the University of Tartu. He has been active as a musician and singer (of the group 'Genialistid', 1995–1989), but in the last decade has become known above all as the founder (in 2008), the key personality and creative director of Tartu Uus Teater (New Theatre). At his private (non-profit society) theatre Ivar Põllu has excelled as an actor and stage director. He has staged there a long series of plays basically inspired by the work of Estonian writers (such as Mati Unt) and national Estonian topics (e.g. his own work *Praktiline Eesti ajalugu* (2017, A Practical History of Estonia).

Our first question is meant above all to those who started to work at the theatre when Estonian was still one of the republics of the former USSR.

Now you live in Estonia, a country that restored its political independence as a European state and became a UN member state in 1991. Since 2004, Estonia is one of the member states of the European Union and a member of the NATO defence alliance. In 2011, Estonia adopted Euro as its currency. Would you briefly characterize the main differences between the Estonian theatre under the Soviet rule and today? What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of both epochs, from the point of view of a stage director (and an actor)?

T.P.: To be precise, I started my theatre studies in 1992 and graduated from the Academy of Music and Theatre in 1996, thus in the era of Estonia's new independence. Yet I became seriously interested in theatre at the end of the 1980s, when I studied at the University of Tartu. In my student years I watched lots of performances at Vanemuine theatre. In that period a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere could be felt, ideologically. At theatres, topics were dealt with that would have been impossible only a few years earlier. However, the theatre language still remained basically realistic, in conformity with former times. Nobody imagined that it could be different. Information about new trends in world theatre was scarce, as the state frontiers remained closed to the majority of us. The theatre system was likewise closed and uniform: in the towns there were big theatres that had very similar features, as for their activity and artistic expression.

In the Soviet time, theatres were subjugated to the control of the communist party. In part, that control was in the function of pre-censorship. It means that once it could be foreseen that staging a play might cause problems, the play was removed from the draft of a play list. On the other hand, the same fact stimulated inventing for the stage version of a play such images and artistic means that enabled the public to receive certain messages between the lines of a complicated and ambiguous text.

In the conditions of free Estonia such means did not prove to be necessary any longer. As a result, the theatre became increasingly one-layered, easier to understand. Unfortunately, the importance of a multi-layered image has decreased.

In the Soviet time, the status of a stage director and of an artist (similarly, of a writer and an artist) was much higher than it is today. Naturally, it works both ways: an artist could play with ambiguous images, yet at the same time he still contributed to the permanence of the establishment's ideology.

In those days, theatre was also a means to spread ideology, as performances were attended by a public of hundreds and thousands of people. It allowed to spread "useful" ideas. Therefore, the theatres were better financed. The present-day system of Estonia's state theatres is a remnant of the Soviet era, with its specific problems. State support is relatively small, theatres have to earn their money for the most part themselves. This in turn puts a considerable pressure on the repertoire and treatment of performances. At the same time, one has to compete with the entertainment business – internet, cinema, concerts, TV, etc.

I.P.: I was indeed born and grew up in the Soviet epoch, but all my activity in the field of culture has developed in times of Estonia's freedom, as a state and a nation. What I have learned from history and have heard is that theatre life in the former Soviet times was on the one hand "golden" – because there was enough money and theatre's prestige was high -, but on the other hand it seems to be true that censorship did exist already at the initial level in the sense that one had to be sure what material could be staged at all and what not. Such pre-censorship does no longer exist, yet there is now a different type of censorship: for the most part, material brought to the stage has to be profitable. Either it has to please the public or it has to be a good project that convinces different foundations from which support can be sought. The main aim is to have a maximum audience. To keep the theatre full, one has to stage new plays in succession. It means that there is a hard daily struggle for existence in the present-day theatre.

What do you consider among your own most successful stage directing experiences and how would you explain the factors that may have contributed to their success?

L.P.: It is difficult for me to guess what could be for anybody the criterion of success. For myself, some staged work has been important which nonetheless has not enjoyed success among our theatregoers. For me, a successfully staged play would be the one of which the message that I intended to transmit reaches the audience. And when a play starts to "breathe", it will become "alive". I would mention Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Georg Büchner's Woyzeck, Molière's Don Juan, The Misanthrope and Tartuffe, Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing and Hamlet, Calderón de la Barca's The Invisible Lady and Great Theatre of the World, Chekhov's Uncle Vanya and compositions departing from Chekhov's short stories, T. S. Eliot's Cocktail Party, Paul Claudel's The Tidings Brought to Mary, Ivan Vyrypaev's Dehli Dance, but there are more. Luckily, I myself at least think that in most of the work I have staged I have successfully attained my goals: the plays have started to "breathe".

T.P.: As a stage and theatre director I have tried to please the audience (that is, to stage plays that "supposedly" could be liked by the audience) and also I have staged plays, so to say, for myself (I mean plays that are important to me). Quite surely the second option is the right and fruitful one because what matters to yourself will be received by the theatregoers. As theatre is ephemeral art – after a couple of seasons the performances in the repertoire have changed –, then what remains is your internal growth and satisfaction. All that was

done because "it had to be done" or had a fixed purpose, will disappear into nothingness.

Above all original Estonian plays (in which language and thought are in the foreground), as well as interpretation of classical world dramas have been important to me.

Let me mention some of the plays I have staged: adaptations of Friedebert Tuglas' fictional prose: Weights of Joy (2001, Endla) and Little Illimar (2006, Endla), Mati Unt's Colour of Freedom (2005, Endla), August Gailit's Ekke Moor (2002, Endla, and 2012, Summer Theatre Emajõe), Mats Traat's Dance around the Steam Boiler (2011); my own plays: The Burnt Mountain (2016, Vanemuine), Raimond (2010, Endla), Collective Labour (Talgud, 2011, Kuressaare teater), Klarissa's Letters (2016, Pärnu Summer Theatre). Interpretations of classical plays: Nikolai Gogol's The Government Inspector, Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Euripides's Medeia.

I.P.: Possibly the most successful have been *Ird, K., The Beatles of Vanemuine, BB Appears at Night* and *Practical History of Estonian Theatre.* Three of these plays are closely related to history. One of the premises for success is always that you dominate, master the material. In all these four cases material indeed was quite thoroughly elaborated, based on an analysis that would be proper to a theatre scholar. Thus, *The Beatles of Vanemuine* had a structure of a dissertation: Introduction, Development, Thematic chapters having each their own development and summaries. Theatre history and Estonia's history have been important to me.

Are you satisfied with the current state and quality of Estonian drama and theatre criticism? Are there enough theatre critics in Estonia who are able to understand your creative aspirations?

L.P.: There are good critics, but unfortunately they can be numbered on one hand. As for original Estonian drama, excellent authors are few, but there are some promising authors and a few really good drama texts.

T.P.: The current state of drama is surely better than ever. Drama writing contests have encouraged writers, while a drama writing school Drakadeemia continues its activity. Theatre moves in the direction of plays of which readymade artistic texts are no longer needed. Instead, it presupposes collaboration between the playwright and the stage director both in the preparatory phase and staging.

I write almost a half of the plays I stage myself. I get an idea that I would like to develop at the theatre and then give it a written form and turn the material into a story. I am my own playwright. Such an activity can be quite

painful because the act of handing over a play to the theatre is absent, the work continues until the first performance.

Criticism has become ever shorter and ever more superficial. In general, a critic will watch a play only once. The reason is the changed aspect and purposes of journalism. Criticism plays a greater role than before in marketing a play and theatre. Often theatres themselves recommend to the media who to order the reviews from.

Fortunately, from time to time better reviews delving deeper into a play and staging are published. Such reviews have also been written about some of my work.

I.P.: There are definitely theatre critics with a positive attitude, who are supportive and have tried to understand and analyse the play. I myself have also had some experience as a theatre critic and editor, therefore I can pinpoint both superficial flourishes and lack of insight. There are also critics for whom rhetoric is more important than analysis. Yet journalism is also to be blamed, as the print space of cultural criticism decreases more and more, while click smut in the cyber-space increases. Analysis would not be "sexy" enough, therefore one has to make an effort to be witty and sharp-tongued.

Although the total number of active theatres in Estonia is impressive, it is also true that most of these theatres are quite small, meant above all for plays with a limited number of drama characters. Theatres with a big stage and the capacity to seat several hundred people are to be found only in Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu, Viljandi and Rakvere. Do you see it as a limitation? If for instance you feel that a play you would like to stage needs more space than is available at your "home theatre", can you access big stages easily, to realize your creative aspirations?

L.P.: I think the number of big stages in Estonia is quite sufficient, the smallness of our population determines and conditions it. The relatively great number of small and minor theatres is a positive feature because it favours offering to the public a great variety of different performances. I don't have any problems with carrying over to the big stage my creative aspirations.

T.P.: The present system of big theatres has its origin in the Soviet epoch. Small theatres are in their majority private, not state-owned. Their directors have been stimulated by some ideas or concepts that they would like to turn into theatre. Small theatres are important in pioneering new directions and tendencies. The process in Estonia has been, however, to move from the initial difference between institutional and alternative theatres towards a distinction between artistic and entertainment theatre. Also, in big theatres avant-garde

performances are carried out. In that sense No99 Theatre has been quite important. It was an institutional (state) theatre of alternative art, something that can only be a nonsense. Yet, the result was that it helped alternative thinking to reach a wider public, as well as bigger theatres.

In present-day Estonia there are theatres for any taste. Everyone can establish his / her own theatre and make his / her ideas a reality. For example, three years ago I founded with a friend, an actor, Pärnu Summer Theatre, where we practiced small artistic forms that could not be performed in a big theatre, such as Vanemuine.

The Estonian theatre market is not regulated. In theatres that employ permanent troupes, people receive salaries, yet most of them have working contracts without fixed end-dates. Troupes are constantly changing, many new actors, graduates from theatre schools, are being employed.

Being a free-lancer may also be one's free choice, because in that case an actor is absolutely free in his/ her options. In a big theatre an actor has to do what stage and drama directors ask him/her to do.

Without doubt it would not be easy for a young stage director to obtain a paid job at a big theatre. However, I have the feeling that such jobs are not eagerly sought, because minor projects offer a better chance for self-realization. At a big theatre, one has to make compromises. Yet my own experience and conviction is that limitations and awareness of them may favour authentic artistic freedom. Once you cannot spread wider, you will dig deeper; in predetermined circumstances you concentrate on what is possible. A big theatre has rigid conditions, but it also has greater opportunities. In that sense my work at a big theatre is my free choice.

I.P.: Until now we have not made any special effort to find larger audiences. Rather, we have sought material that could be adapted to the existing possibilities. We have sought material for the development of our own theatre. It's true that the narrower the possibilities, the more attractive solutions will have to be, to manage and make ends meet. Without the existing narrow possibilities, we would not have gone out to make a summer performance at the former Soviet military airport at Raadi, or in the yard of Narva's textile factory on the border with Russia. We would not have performed on municipal buses in Tartu or on trains of the route Tartu-Tapa-Tallinn.

What plays of Estonian and world dramatists, staged by other directors, have contributed most to your formation as a theatre-maker?

L.P.: King Lear, by Giorgio Strehler, the stage work by Voldemar Panso, Anatoly Efros and Adolf Shapiro, Mikk Mikiver and Jaan Tooming.

T.P.: I have been influenced by innovative, contemporary stage interpretations, not by texts in theatre. Text is important, but not most important. In the first place, stage interpretations matter. Literary works have surely had their impact. I have been doubtless influenced by Priit Pedajas's staging of Madis Kõiv's texts. I have visited theatre festivals abroad and top theatres, I have been able to follow the development of some theatres and stage directors through several decades. I have quite definitely been influenced by Berlin Volksbühne and the broad scope of the work of its stage director Frank Castorf. The same can be said about stage directions by Christoph Marthaler and the whole concept of Berlin Schaubühne. There are about ten stage directors whose activity I follow. I.P.: I have been most deeply impressed by the performances of Harold Pinter's plays and, above all, of his *The Caretaker*, staged by Evald Hermaküla. There I found the essence of existence that I have sought and have found also in my own work. The plays performed by Mati Unt and Jaan Tooming have been enlightening for me. The cultural imports in the last decade by Ene-Liis Semper and Tiit Ojasoo have also been refreshing.

The history of Estonian national culture, including its drama and theatre, is quite young. Estonian drama writing and theatre had hardly attained its initial maturity in the Estonian Republic between two world wars (1918–1939), when that development was crudely interrupted by the war and the foreign (German, Russian) occupations. In your opinion, are there such original Estonian plays from the period before WWII or the following Soviet-dominated period (1945–1990), that could have permanent interest for the Estonian audiences today, at the start of the 21st century? In other words, do you have some "Estonian Ibsen" or "Estonian Strindberg" that would attract your national audience, despite the changes that have taken place in your society? What aspects have attracted you above all in the Estonian plays you have staged? What national topics are most popular with the Estonian audiences today?

L.P.: Yes, I would mention August Kitzberg, Eduard Vilde, Oskar Luts, Hugo Raudsepp, also A. H. Tammsaare. Of newer dramatists, Jaan Kruusvall, Paul-Eerik Rummo.

T.P.: I guess the plays by Madis Kõiv would provide a corpus of texts embodying our anguish, suspicions, and dreams. A long time ago, Paul-Eerik Rummo's *The Cinderella Game* was a breakthrough.

In newer times, as far as I see, the question is no more in texts, but in conceptions. And the basis of a conception on the stage can be whatever: documents, memoirs, art works, films, night dreams, etc.

I guess the plays by Andrus Kivirähk, Mart Kivastik, Urmas Vadi and others are difficult for a foreign public to understand. They would surely need to be adapted to another ambience, if one wishes to stage them abroad.

Timeless new drama probably does not exist anywhere; instead, we have transcriptions and new interpretations of old topics, including those of the work of Ibsen and Strindberg. For instance, in the case of Ibsen and Strindberg, the transcriptions by Brian Friel, Patric Marber and Tom Stoppard. Successful national-ethnic topics are most evident in the plays of Kivirähk: habits that are gone or no longer understood. There is recognition and estrangement, laughter and sorrow go hand in hand.

To create such bridge-like performances that would unite the whole nation appears ever more difficult. Everything becomes fragmented: people's interests, educational levels, needs, the perception of historical events.

I.P.: Estonia has very scarce reserves of its own original plays. There are lots of drama performances adapted from Estonian novels that are continuously being reshaped, according to the epoch in which they have been made.

Estonians like to search for their roots and enjoy their suffering. It means that life is very good. A lot of national-ethnic material has been hooked to the great stories of suffering. Though, one has to accept that there has always existed something that has helped us to overcome bad times and to get out of great troubles. Less attention has been paid to these factors – despite the fact that they could well form our national-ethnic essence.

In all probability, no national-ethnic culture can limit the sources of its creativity to its own exclusive linguistic area. We can notice in your staging experience a wide openness to the world drama and theatre. If you think of some of your successfully staged foreign works, how did you discover them? Were you inspired by reading Estonian translations, seeing some staging abroad or maybe you read or watched the work first in a foreign language and then asked somebody to translate it into Estonian, to be able to stage it at an Estonian theatre?

L.P.: Indeed, I have discovered plays by different paths. Somehow the plays come to me. Some of them more purposefully, especially when I read and know

that I am interested in the topic and it concerns me. Yet, they come by diverse ways. It may be that an author or a text (for instance, Beckett) is in the centre of attention with some people whose opinion matters to me. Some professor or researcher has introduced an author or a play, and has managed to make an impression on me, to the point that I start to read more works by that particular author (this has been the case with Chekhov and Molière). I have discovered in some other authors (for example, in Paul Claudel, T.S. Eliot and Pedro Calderón de la Barca) a closeness to my own world view. Also, I have listened to lectures on some authors (e. g. Shakespeare) and have decided to have a closer look at their work. But there have also been tremendously impressive performances which have inspired me to look deeper into the work of an author. Sometimes some interesting translation of a play or fragments performed by my students have been the source of my inspiration. In a word, there has been a variety of paths to staging a play.

T.P.: Foreign literature can reach me by different ways. At theatres, paid dramaturges work who read texts and, if needed, order books and files from foreign theatre agencies. Estonia has its own theatre agency that spreads information about works and organizes their translation. In the open world one can naturally reach and discover interesting texts on one's own.

I follow regularly the repertoire of leading theatres, such as Berlin Schaubühne, National Theatre and Royal Court in London, Finnish National Theatre, Stockholm Dramaten, several small theatres in the US. They stage there such new national texts that might also attract interest abroad. We often order texts to read them even before their first performance has taken place at their home theatres.

I.P.: I myself have not staged world drama, but when working at the theatre as a dramaturge I read plays and their synopses and recommended texts that could be of interest to stage directors. In the case of foreign plays, a synopsis and a sufficiently large fragment are the best premise to understand what it is about. A lot depends on the people who write synopses.

If ever you could develop your activity in ideal conditions, what Estonian or/and world authors' works you would like to stage in Estonia in the coming years? How would you explain your choices?

L.P.: I would stage Tammsaare's *Kuningal on külm* (The King Is Cold), Kitzberg's *Libahunt* (The Werewolf), Vilde's *Tabamata ime* (Unattainable Wonder), some plays by Kruusvall. I simply have had these plays in my mind for a long time, but their staging has been delayed because of material limitations.

More recently, I have discovered for myself younger playwrights, Eva and Indrek Koff whose play *Tagasi* (Back) I am currently staging.

T.P.: The only limiting conditions are the possibilities of the theatre (one has to think how to fill the auditorium with theatregoers) and actors (in that respect, Vanemuine has a strong and capable troupe).

I would like to go deeper into classical texts. For instance, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Gorki, Strindberg, our Estonian Eduard Vilde and A. H. Tammsaare...

If ever possible, I would like to deal in the next five years with Shakespeare's tragedies.

I.P.: Until now I have not sought existing plays but instead topics that could fit the moment and the theatre troupe and, more regrettably, also our economic and artistic capacity.

If you have had also some experience staging works at theatres outside Estonia, can you tell us something about it? Was your staging experience abroad very different from your work in Estonia, or was it just the same, without much difference?

L.P.: I have staged in Spain and in Poland. I established a great contact with their actors. Good actors are similar everywhere. I overcame language barriers by learning the language and relying on interpreters. Yet between theatre people a special language beyond words develops, something like music. At a certain stage of work, the intention of the drama director becomes understandable without any further explanations. Once the goal (the purpose) has been established, the actor can "read" the director, to be sure that moving towards the goal develops in a proper, nice way. A kind of a special relation is established between both, which makes words superfluous.

T.P.: I have been invited to stage abroad, but circumstances have not been right. It would surely be an interesting experience, but I hardly see it as a goal in itself.

Theatre is a very national-ethnic art form, it is deeply tied to local habits and traditions. There is hardly any sense in simply transferring or importing performances, they would never be understood in another context in the same way as they were understood at home.

My plays and stage performances have indeed been presented in a number of countries, yet only to an Estonian public: in the US, Canada, Finland, Ireland, Belgium, Luxemburg, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom.

I.P.: Until now I have not staged abroad, outside Estonia, so I cannot say anything of my own experience.

Now, the final question. Have you ever had in mind staging any drama written by an Oriental writer, for instance, by some Chinese dramatist? If not, what have been the main hurdles and limitations that have conditioned your area of interests?

If offered a chance to stage some work (Estonian or foreign) at a theatre in China, would you accept the challenge?

L.P.: Oriental authors have been for me as if on the "waiting list": they attract me, but I have not yet had a chance to reach them. A long time ago, when I was in South Korea, the work by their actors impressed and moved me deeply. I intuitively started to grasp what Oriental civilization meant. It is boundlessly interesting, in a way, intimately close, home-like and attractive. Asian air and atmosphere arouse in me an unexplainable feeling of longing and at the same time satisfaction, like a morning. Yet my fate has been until now to work in Europe, the Occident.

I think I would accept the challenge. Though, also in my homeland and other parts there are lots of interesting and necessary tasks. Yet, I believe, such an experience would inspire me.

T.P.: I am greatly interested in the cultural space of the East, but until now I have not thought of any concrete performance or text originating from there, to try to stage it here. I have the feeling that it would require greater knowledge and going deeper into Eastern culture. In Estonia, Eastern theatre has inspired for instance Juhan Viiding and Evald Hermaküla (who are not among us any more).

It's also true that I lack information, for instance, about contemporary Chinese drama, its translations have not reached me yet. It's a good idea, I indeed should look around with this possibility in mind.

In any case it would interest me. The rest will depend on the circumstances. Above all on if I am capable of grasping for myself the context: the local-national expectations, the way the theatres work with it, habits, etc.

I.P.: For some time I have had in mind staging some Japanese material. Not much is known about Chinese works here. A limitation is that my home theatre has been orientated to staging our own Estonian drama. Therefore, a special stimulus to stage some Eastern work has been missing. For Estonia, the East means above all Russia. China, India and Japan seem to be very far. Staging and reception of their material sounds exotic. Yet Estonians like terribly their own Estonia. Looking at the East they don't see much beyond Russia. One can stage here Chekhov till exhaustion...

Most likely, I would accept such a proposal. Naturally it would depend on the material and the concrete situation. But surely, to have some new

experience. It would be great to find Estonian material that would make sense for the Chinese audience. I believe such material exists in Estonia. It would be also challenging to find Chinese material that could perhaps be adapted in a new way for the Estonian audience.

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