

## **Building in the Daytime, Demolishing at Night**

*Jaak Rāhesoo*

In abstract terms discussions of stability and dynamics rarely lead anywhere. You can always say that the one presupposes the other, and that both are necessary. Arguments only arise in historically relativized contexts, when we can observe differences of stress in different periods. The one-hundred-year history of professional Estonian theatre (since 1906) may seem just the right length of time for a brief look at any fluctuations or cycles across the scale drawn by these two concepts.

Granted, whispering doubts tend to insinuate that the time span is too short. Complaints about the youth and smallness of our culture are endemic in Estonia. And if I am going to state in this paper that the development of Estonian culture has taken place mainly under the influence of the slogan of novelty, of dynamics, that statement may well sound entirely predictable. What traditions, what stability can you expect in the first century of its full-scale functioning, when everything is still in an incipient phase, and when, in addition, that development has been constantly interrupted by world wars and foreign occupations? On the other hand, one can say that a hundred-year span is not a short time in the history of arts: not infrequently, a beginning has soon been followed by full flowering. The theatre provides some of the best examples of this rhythm. Within two hundred years after its appearance in ancient Greece, its theatre had already passed its heyday, and the following 700 or 800 years in the hellenistic Roman empire, where every respectable city built an impressive amphitheatre, was simply a period of long-drawn-out decline. Similar processes occurred in Renaissance times in two countries with the most active popular theatre, England and Spain: Shakespeare and Lope de Vega stand in the immediate aftermath of the appearance of the first regular theatres. Thus, the number of years is not decisive in itself: sometimes traditions take root very quickly.

The development of Estonian culture was facilitated and accelerated by the fact that it could learn from older national cultures; indeed, it could take forms and institutions of high culture in a ready-made shape, only adding an outer colouring of its own. This was most clearly the practice during the early phase of national awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the usual source of cultural borrowings was the main political enemy of the period, the Baltic German upper class. This was also a procedure which, in counterbalance to the dynamics of growth, could foster certain feelings of stability, since the contours of future development seemed to be sufficiently visible. In the period attending the birth of professional Estonian theatre, from 1906 onwards, that line of thought was most consistently represented by Karl Menning (1874–1941), the leader of the Vanemuine stage in the university town of Tartu.

Menning's basic idea was that all first-rate art had to be true to its natural impulses,

i.e. to national character. The latter was no longer sought in a mythic past, as had been the habit of earlier national romanticism, but rather in present-day observable reality. Thus there was no question of trying to restore an initial purity: all long-accepted borrowings were taken as part and parcel of the “available” national character. Nevertheless that character was regarded as something deeply-rooted and relatively stable. In accordance with this conception Menning chose a realistic mode of theatre, which, although it was already a bit old-fashioned, made the actors closely observe and then to scenically re-create the actual mores of their surroundings. All other tasks – the repertoire, the stress on ensemble acting, problems of diction, etc. – seemed to be deducible from the initial choice. Menning’s ideas run through a number of his articles, e.g. *10 aastat eesti teatrit* (“10 Years of Estonian Theatre”, 1916), most easily available in a selection of his writings (Menning 1970: 121–139).

In metaphoric terms Menning was guided by the image of house-building: the foundation had to be solid and stable. Thus the usual dynamic interpretation of an initial period of development was not the only possible model. No doubt the young Estonian middle-class, which formed the economic backbone of professional theatre, also wanted to have something solid, stable, and utterly respectable. This ideal was best seen in the new theatre buildings, visible symbols of rising nationalism.

At the same time, creating a national culture necessarily involved some experimentation, inventiveness, and dynamics. These tendencies were enhanced by the fact that in the general European context the local task of culture-building fell into a period of accelerated modernity which had begun around 1870 and meant all kinds of radical changes – social mobility, urbanization, technological innovation. In the arts these forces were represented by various modernistic movements. Middle-class yearnings for “respectable culture” were thus thwarted by an active questioning of hitherto cherished models. Modernistic movements were not yet particularly active in the first decade of professional Estonian theatre, although they could already be seen in visual arts and poetry, especially in the work of the *Noor-Eesti* (Young Estonia) group. The attitudes of *Noor-Eesti* towards the theatre were mostly expressed in a collection of articles entitled *Teatri-raamat* (“Theatre Book”, 1913). But symbolism, impressionism, and expressionism reached the stage only in the 1920s, in the framework of a newly-established Republic of Estonia, which, judging by earlier political standards, could itself look like a risky modernistic experiment. Total renewal of all spheres of life after World War I also made the average public more open to accepting artistic experiments, at least for a time.

The title of my paper illustrates this avant-garde attitude. The phrase itself belongs to a later period and is taken from a letter written in 1979 by the theatre critic Nigol Andresen to Lea Tormis (published in the yearbook *Teatrielu* '99, 2001). The immediate context was Andresen’s objection to some of the views of Voldemar Panso (1920–1977), one of the great figures of Estonian theatre. The passage in question runs: “It seemed to me earlier,

too, that Panso did not sufficiently appreciate dialectics as a necessary component of life. [---] To his mind the theatre was being built like a wall, but living things have a different way of formation: what was built in the daytime is demolished at night and then re-started.” (Tormis 2001: 425.)

I am not concerned here whether this was a just description of Panso’s attitudes, or, conversely, whether the passage fully represented Andresen’s own position. I was simply drawn by the graphic force of the image. In itself the unity of constructive and destructive forces is not a new conception. To take an old mythological example: both aspects are said to be present in the cosmic dance of the Indian god Shiva. But in fairy tales such nightly work of destruction is usually attributed to evil spirits. In our part of the world this way of interpretation is probably fostered by the Christian tradition of keeping light and darkness utterly opposed to each other. Anyway, the combination of creativeness and destructiveness exemplified by such early modernist trends as futurism, dadaism, or surrealism was still sufficiently shocking to the general public at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In Estonia extreme dynamism did not go this far. Instead, the 1930s saw a renewal of calls for stability, mostly under the slogan of a return to realism. (Cultural development had thus reached a phase where one could already return to something.) It is true that avant-garde movements were in temporary retreat all over Europe, but in Estonia that tendency was re-inforced by a need for institutional organisation of the newly-formed national culture. In the theatre the reaction came in the form of an “audience crisis” towards the end of the 1920s, when experimental productions no longer attracted the public. Stylistic innovation was replaced by conventional realism, mostly lower-middle-class in its subjects and attitudes. Constructive energy turned outward, and became extensive, spreading a network of professional and semi-professional theatres all over the country. All these theatres followed the pretty stable form of repertory companies. That network and the type of company have remained largely intact to this day. In that sense the 1930s were a productive period in the theatre. On the other hand, in light of what followed, the often idyllic and self-satisfied moods of that decade look strangely illusory.

Half a century of Soviet occupation, from 1940 onwards, first brought a period of Stalinist mass terror and destruction. Any enthusiasm for innovation disappeared, as all changes seemed to lead from bad to worse; and yearnings for stability were reduced to efforts toward elementary survival. For the remaining 35-year period of Soviet rule, however, the opposition of dynamics and stability re-acquired some sense. Again their relationship was often paradoxical. Basically the underlying structures of the whole Soviet period remained pretty rigid and immovable. Naturally the end of Stalinist terror produced an immediate sense of great relief. The very word “the thaw”, which came to describe the new situation, offered a dynamic image. Even the official rhetoric of the Khrushchev period was at least partly sincere in its dynamic hopes, promising soon to overtake the United

States in economic development. At the same time the party leadership was extremely worried not to let things go out of control. In the ensuing Brezhnev period, screws were in fact tightened somewhat, and instead of future targets, all attention turned to celebrating historic anniversaries. Essentially the powerful bureaucracy (including that branch running the arts) feared the unpredictability of innovations and preferred the familiar status quo.

Thus stability and conservatism came to be identified with suspicious and repressive state power, while the predominant attitude of the intelligentsia in the period from approximately 1953 (Stalin's death) till the middle-1970s was that of dynamism and progressivism. Actually the basic artistic procedure during the first post-Stalinist decade in Estonia was a restoration of pre-war forms and preferences as much as possible. In the theatre, for example, a sort of poetic realism returned, and the most-played authors were again the pre-war favourites – prominent Estonian writers A. H. Tammsaare, Oskar Luts, and Estonian-Finnish playwright Hella Wuolijoki. A part of the older audience sticks to these patterns even today. For the artistic circles, however, the restoration of pre-war forms was simply an intermediate step towards more radical innovations.

It was generally believed in the whole Eastern bloc that in the arts and in matters of everyday life the West was far ahead, and the only practical option seemed to be belated imitation of Western novelties. This worked in both high arts and mass culture. The latter followed Western fashions in clothes and pop music, despite strong official displeasure; and in the sphere of high arts there were constant efforts to introduce modernistic elements.

There was little understanding at the time that the semi-official recognition of modernism as the mainstream of art in the post-World War II West had brought about its decline into a new kind of academicism. The reason was that in the East the repressive measures of the state helped to retain the original modernistic spirit of quest and provocation. In some cases this combination of factors worked very effectively. Polish theatre, for example, acquired an international influence it had never enjoyed before. In the more restricted conditions of the Baltic republics their distinctive mark on the Soviet artistic scene was a vague but relatively outspoken Western orientation. Encouraged by certain ideas of Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski, some younger Estonian directors of the early 1970s came up with a strongly metaphoric and physical kind of theatre. By Soviet standards this was pretty exceptional – the more so as its novelties coincided with the beginning of a creeping social stagnation.

For some older artists the more radical experiments of the 1960s and early 1970s were unacceptable. But these people were not taken very seriously by the young innovators. The mood changed in the late 1970s, when the political disappointments of 1968 in Paris and in Prague had had enough time to produce intellectual after-effects. A stronger opposition to the avant-garde, independent of the attitudes of state bureaucracy, appeared in the

arts themselves. Often it was led by people who had earlier been active experimentalists. Internationally the change was probably best seen in music, where it was marked by a return to tonality and sonority. In Estonia, too, we have the conspicuous examples of Arvo Pärt, who turned to Gregorian chants, and Veljo Tormis, who turned to folk songs. In the theatre the process was slower and more blurred. There was indeed some talk in the early 1980s that the metaphorical-physical trend had exhausted its possibilities and was being submerged into older psychological realism. But instead of being interpreted as a new approach, these features were usually taken as symptoms of weakness.

The crash of communism and the re-establishment of Estonian independence have substantially changed the larger ideological context of any discussions of dynamics and stability. The formerly active identification of the notion of “conservatism” with the pro-Stalinist forces within the Communist party has lost all relevance. Today’s Estonian conservatives are largely right-wing, like their namesakes in the West, and generally use the same corpus of ideas, often in league with religious circles. To a certain extent the intellectual and artistic developments which began in the 1970s with vague references to traditional values have acquired a clearer and more rigid outlook. But parallel to this, the end of the dragging Soviet stagnation and the emergence of a radically new situation have given fresh impetus to dynamic impulses, especially among the youth. As in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they are most pronounced in visual arts and poetry.

The theatre, as usual, lags behind. At first, in the 1990s, a large proportion of the theatre community’s energy was absorbed by a purely stabilizing effort, namely keeping the system of repertory companies functioning amid the economic chaos and sudden fall in attendance figures. In this effort theatre people were relatively unanimous, although we now have some small theatres with less fixed companies, numerous freelance actors, and a fair amount of special projects. But it is also worth noticing that in stylistic terms the leading directors of the 1990s, Elmo Nüganen (b. 1962) and Priit Pedajas (b. 1954), remained relatively close to traditional modes. A third name, Mati Unt (1944–2005), who was usually cited as our prime example of postmodernistic playfulness and irony, was a somewhat more marginal figure. Various postmodernistic ideas have indeed provided theoretical background for recent innovative approaches (or their critical interpretations). But in general innovation seems to be more activated at present by simple boredom with inherited forms and a wish to do something different. Nevertheless, dynamic forces seem to be gathering among the young. The attitude of building in the daytime and demolishing at night is apparently on the rise again.

### References

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**Jaak Rähesoo** – is a free-lance translator and critic. He has translated fiction and essays by William Faulkner, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, John Fowles. His translations of plays range from Shakespeare and William Wycherley to Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Tom Stoppard. A selection of his writings on theatre and drama, *Hecuba pärast* ("For Hecuba"), was published in 1995. An English-language survey, "Estonian Theatre", appeared in 1999 (new editions in 2003 and 2008). Rähesoo was the Annual Professor of Liberal Arts at the University of Tartu for the year 1995.

E-mail: [jaak.rahesoo@mail.ee](mailto:jaak.rahesoo@mail.ee)

## Päeval ehitades, öösel lõhkudes

Jaak Rähesoo

Eesti kutselise teatri saja-aastane lugu on lühike, siiski ilmnevad siingi mingid stabiilsuse ja dünaamika tsüklid. Ettearvatavalt kulges rajamisperiood peamiselt dünaamika tähe all, samas oli juba Karl Menningut suunanud vundamendikujutluses tugev stabiilsuse- ja kindlusenõue. Eelkõige lähtus Menning arusaamast, et enda omapära leidmisel tuleb eesti teatril suuresti läbida samad etapid, mis olid vanematel teatrimaadel juba läbitud. Realisminõudest paistsid tulenevat kõik muud valikud.

Ühtaegu sattus eesti kultuuri rajamine perioodi, mis kogu Lääne tsivilisatsioonis tähendas u 1870. aasta paiku alanud kiirendatud moderniseerumist. See tõi põhjalikke muutusi kõigis eluvaldades, ja seda kunstides väljendavad modernistlikud voolud küsimärgistasid seniseid mudeleid ning otsisid palavikuliselt uusi. Eesti teatrisse ulatus nende mõju 1920. aastatel. Just siis kehtestus avangardistlik päeval-ehitad-öösel-lõhud-hoiak, kuigi vahetult pärineb sinne pealkiri ühest Nigol Andreseni 1979. aasta kirjast. Siiski ei läinud äärmusdünaamika Eestis kaugele, vaid juba 1930ndatel pääsesid maksvusele stabiilsusnõuded, tookord peamiselt loosungina „tagasi realismi juurde”. Stiiliotsingute intensiivsus asendus teatrivõrgu väljaarendamise ekstensiivsusega.

Nõukogude perioodi esimeses järgus, stalinistlike massirepressioonide ja hävituse ajastul, polnud dünaamika ja stabiilsuse arutlustel mingit mõtet. See mõte naasis aga Stalini-järgse 35-aastase lõigu vältel. Tollastes oludes kehastas stabiilsust ja konservatiivsust eeskätt umbusklik repressiivne riigivõim, kõiki uudsusi kartev kunstibürokraatia, samas kui kunstnikud ise nägid end progressi kandjatena. Nii massikultuur kui kõrgkunstid püüdsid Lääne suundumusi võimaluste piires matkida. Võib öelda, et Idas säilis modernismi opositsioonilisus ja otsiv vaim, samas kui Läänes tõi poolametlik tunnustus kaasa muutumise „uueks akademismiks”. Eesti teatris kehastus otsingulisus teravaimini 1970. aastate alguse metafoorilis-füüsilises suunas.

1970ndate lõpupoolel toimub nii Läänes kui Idas teatav mentaliteedimuutus, kunstides tekib tugevam opositsioon avangardismile. Kommunismi varing ja Eesti taasiseseisvumine on neid tendentse osalt süvendanud, andes „konservatiivsusele” tagasi valdavalt parempoolse tähenduse. Samas on kogu olukorra järsk muutus tugevdanud dünaamilisi hoiakuid, eriti noorte hulgas. Teater oli 1990ndatel suuresti ametis repertuaartrupiliku aluse säilitamisega ega pürginud enamasti teravale uudsusele. Kuid päris viimasel ajal paistab päeval-ehitad-öösel-lõhud-hoiak siingi tugevnevat.

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**Jaak Rähesoo** – vabakutseline tõlkija ja teatriteadlane. Ta on tõlkinud William Faulkneri, James Joyce'i, Virginia Woolfi, T. S. Elioti ja John Fowlesi ilukirjanduslikku loomingut ning esseistikat, aga ka näidendeid alates Shakespeare'ist ja William Wycherleyst ning lõpetades Eugene O'Neilli, Tennessee Williamsi, Edward Albee', Sam Shepardi ja Tom Stoppardiga. Valik draama- ja teatriteemalisi artikleid pealkirjaga „Hecuba pärast” avaldati aastal 1995. Ingliskeelne uurimus „Estonian Theatre” ilmus aastal 1999 (kordustrükkid 2003 ja 2008). Rähesoo oli 1995. aastal Tartu Ülikooli vabade kunstide professor.

E-post: jaak.rahesoo@mail.ee