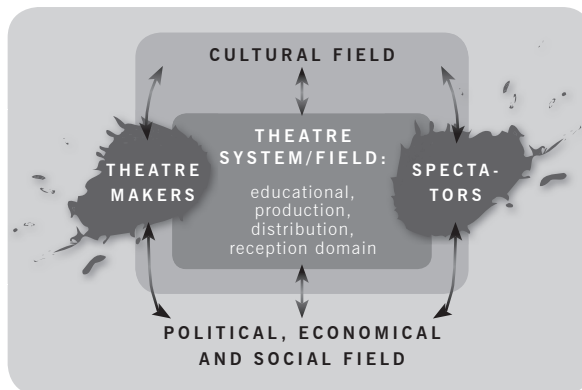


## The Dynamics of the Estonian Theatre System: in Defence of Repertoire Theatre<sup>1</sup>

Anneli Saro

This article reviews the dynamics of the Estonian theatre system throughout the course of its history, concentrating on the period of the last 23 years, known as a period of political and economical transition. Since the political, economic, to some extent artistic aspects of developments in the Estonian theatre field during the period 1985–2005 have been more closely investigated elsewhere (Saro 2004, Saro 2009), special attention shall be paid here to institutional developments. In the following, I shall consider Estonian theatre of the past decades as an integrated system (see the scheme below), and discuss the impact of this system on individual institutions and persons. For the sake of clarity, audience research will be left out. In the second part of the article, I will focus specifically on the institutional and individual aspects of repertoire theatre in the Estonian theatre field.



The theoretical framework for the analysis at hand is based on the works of Pierre Bourdieu, especially on his articles on field theory and cultural production (see for example Bourdieu 1993). In keeping with the material under study, I propose some new distinctions and adjustments to the framework. Even though theatre and cultural fields are placed in “the field of power” (political, economical and social field), some agents of the theatre field – theatre-makers and spectators – hold a special bridge position, and are located either between fields or actively crossing them. These agents symbolize the freedom and mobility of individuals, which cannot be restricted, organized, or confined by a system or an institution. In contemporary postmodern society they might not even belong to a single specific cultural

<sup>1</sup> The article has been written with support from the Estonian Science Foundation grant No. 6689.

system, but rather function as participants in several artistic (theatre, film, music etc.) and cultural fields. Usually criteria such as language, state borders, and geographical distance are used to make distinctions between different cultural fields. However, for these stated reasons, theatre institutions and individuals will be studied separately in this article.

### **Historical overview**

As is the case of many other Eastern European countries, the Estonian theatre system was originally patterned after the model of German repertoire theatre. The German theatre model, in the form it had developed by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was characterised primarily by the inclusion of multiple genres (a troupe comprised of singers, and actors with singing skills, and later dancers as well), and theatre societies that supported the theatre financially, and advised them concerning aesthetic questions as well. The establishment of such societies in Estonia began in earnest with the tidal wave of nationalist movement during the 1860s and 1870s, and putting on plays became one of the principal activities of nearly every society. Thus we can conclude that the foundation for the network of theatres covering Estonia today had already been laid down in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The first two professional theatres in Estonia, the Vanemuine in Tartu and the Estonia in Tallinn, both established in 1906, bore names identical to the societies that supported them. While the funds of the theatre and the society were held separately, members of the society initiated the establishment of limited companies (in the Estonia) or organised fundraising (in the Vanemuine and the Endla), as well as sponsoring the construction of theatre buildings. In the independent Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), actors and stage directors established many more theatres, but none could survive without the financial support of a society; thereby a reverse process was initiated – sooner or later, an eponymous society was established for all theatres. During the 1920s, the government of Estonia only financed the Estonia and the Vanemuine, but as economic conditions improved, the list of theatres receiving subsidies lengthened: from the end of the decade onward, the Workers' Theatre, and in the 1930s several others also received financial support (Tormis 1978: 131). In these cases, state subsidies formed 45% of the theatres' total revenue (Uljas 2005: 85).

An important role in segregating and supporting the artistic and social output of private companies has been played by the Estonian Cultural Endowment (active from 1925 until 1941, and again from 1994 onward), which is financed from alcohol, tobacco and gambling taxes and from investment dividends. Its primary objective is to encourage development and research in the arts and sports through considering and evaluating individual applications. The Cultural Endowment distributes its funds through specialized committees of professionals in particular fields. During the period 1925–1941, 56–72% of the money for performing arts was allocated to institutional theatres. In the 1920s, the endowment's and state's subsidies were almost equal, but in the 1930s the latter increased considerably: in the 1926/27

season, the state donated 89 000 and the endowment 84 700 Estonian crowns; in 1937/38, the state 302 500 and the endowment 34 700 Estonian crowns. (Uljas 2005: 84–85.) Thus the Estonian Republic supported theatre institutions directly from the state budget and indirectly through the Endowment, with additional limited sponsorship from municipal governments.

Nevertheless, theatres continued to be economically dependent on audiences, the tastes of whom were, in the most part, rather conservative: neither the naturalistic down-to-earth approach (such as Karl Menning's stagings in the Vanemuine, 1906–1914) nor modernist experiments in style (expressionist or stylized stagings, in the 1920s) gained the favour of the audiences.

The Soviet occupation in 1940 brought about major change in institutional theatre life. In the first place, all theatres were nationalized; next, many half-professional small town theatres were shut down; finally, large institutions were differentiated, resulting in a single musical theatre (the Estonia) and drama theatres (all the rest). Exceptional status was accorded only to the Vanemuine, which remained a three-genre theatre. All theatres in Estonia and in the whole Soviet Union served as repertoire theatres with building(s) and a permanent troupe, along with a long-term, planned programme.

After the restoration of independence in 1991, the Soviet-era theatre system was preserved, primarily as a result of national cultural policy. "General principles of cultural policy of the Republic of Estonia" were worked out in 1996 under the supervision of Jaak Allik and approved by the Estonian parliament in 1998. The period from 1995 (when Allik was appointed as Minister of Culture) until today has been identified as period of elitist and conservative cultural policy. (Kulbok-Lattik 2008: 141.) Clause 1 of the general principles states: "State funding of culture prioritises the activity's content, creativity and significance to national culture, rather than affiliation with cultural institutions of any given form of ownership". Only a single laconic sentence pertains to the theatre – "state funding of theatre continues". (Eesti... 2002.) Indeed, the government of Estonia has continued to fund existing state theatres, leaving practical affairs and the aesthetic programme up to each theatre themselves. Neither the significance of theatres to national culture, nor their creativity, has ever been officially analysed in Estonia for the purposes of cultural policy, as limited funds are allocated mostly with regard to the minimal requirements of state institutions.

In the early 1990s, after theatre attendance had dropped by 50% in the course of a five-year period, many troupes operating outside the capital city of Tallinn found themselves prisoners of their bulky Soviet-era buildings. On the one hand, maintenance of buildings specifically built as theatres proved to be highly expensive; on the other hand, large halls seating 500 in cities with a population of 20,000 to 40,000 inhabitants (e.g. Rakvere, Viljandi, Pärnu) were no longer needed; nevertheless, there was a reluctance to give up these theatre houses which by then had acquired symbolic significance. Thus for the past

15 years there has been continuous discussion concerning what/whom the state actually finances: professional theatre activities, troupes, or building maintenance? By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost all theatre buildings in Estonia have been freshly renovated, and this external orderliness, which some would call sterility, prompts us once again to ask about the possible relationships between theatre's external packaging and its artistic content, as well as the priorities of cultural policy. It should also be noted that the most intriguing European theatres (mostly fringe groups) commonly operate in rather modest conditions.

The above historical overview has shown that the Estonian theatre system is based very strongly on habitus, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu – "... durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends ..." (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Habitus is a covering term, encompassing all of these structures, which we can also refer to as tradition, system, or ideology. The habitus of Estonian theatre has been transmitted from one historical period to another, first of all, by ideological valuation of traditions and stability, and only after that by firm institutions (incl. buildings) and a continuously operating system.

This whole system could seemingly have worked quite well up to the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in a manner most convenient for the Ministry of Culture, if only no artistically ambitious private theatres had emerged, who now demand their share from the state's purse. We now turn to a discussion of these new theatres.

### **State theatre (incl. municipal theatre) versus private theatre**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, many Eastern European countries experienced economic troubles that resulted in the closing of many theatres. Nothing of the kind happened in Estonia, however. In 1985, there were ten state-subsidised repertoire theatres in Estonia, six of them in the capital city, Tallinn (0.4 million inhabitants), and the other four in different cities with populations ranging from 17,000 to 100,000. Unlike small-town institutions, each theatre in Tallinn had a particular profile: the Estonian National Opera, the Estonian Drama Theatre, the Russian Drama Theatre, the Youth Theatre (since 1994 the Tallinn City Theatre), the Puppet Theatre and a comedy theatre called the Old-Town Studio. In addition to the state theatres, two new municipal theatres were established – the Children's Theatre of Tartu (1989–2000) and the Kuressaare City Theatre (1998) – as well as several new private theatres and freelance troupes. Of the latter, the VAT Theatre (1987), the Von Krahl Theatre (1992), the Theatrum (1994) and the modern dance agency The Second Dance (1999) have been the most respected. It has been fascinating to observe the artistic and imagologic development of these troupes. In the early 1990s, private theatre groups and projects were regarded as free creative agents that perhaps deserved some merit as artistic anomalies or oddities. There were two primary reasons behind this attitude: peculiar postmodern stylistics on the one hand, and the

perceptible incompetence of the performers on the other. In retrospect, it appears that these two aspects were in fact directly related: postmodern stylistic eclecticism and dallying is easily interpreted as unprofessional when held up against the standard realist theatrical convention. The levelling of this gap between professional state theatres and the so-called unprofessional private theatres can primarily be attributed to the establishment in 1998 of a permanent troupe of five at the Von Krahl Theatre, comprising professionally trained and talented actors. The VAT Theatre and the Theatrum also increased their artistic professionalism in approximately the same period, although it took longer and change was more intermittent. Usually, it was impelled by project-based cooperation with renowned visiting directors and actors, who often had lasting impact on the enhancement of the professional skills of the entire troupe.

It should be kept in mind that in 1997, the Theatrum received the special award for that year's accomplishments from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia. In 1998, the now historic minimalist-impressionistic productions "Antigone" by Jean Anouilh and "Pelléas and Mélisande" by Maurice Maeterlinck (staged by the leader of the group, Lembit Peterson) were premiered there. A playful and non-realistic rendition of Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" in the VAT Theatre, picked up awards from the Bananafish International Children's Theatre Festival, and the stage director, Rein Agur was given a special award from the Drama Festival in Tartu. In the present decade, the Von Krahl Theatre has received acting awards from various festivals, a special award for the dance production "Swan Lake" in 2003 (staged by Peeter Jalakas and Sasha Pepelyayev), and a music award for "Estonian Ballads" a year later (staged by Peeter Jalakas). The Von Krahl Theatre, whose troupe consists of professional drama actors, has been experimenting on the borders of different theatre genres for a long time, causing problems for theatre evaluators by breaking genre distinctions and presenting unusual performing techniques, which are often considered unprofessional. Some of the harsher critics, as well as the aforementioned troupes themselves, have ironically described acknowledgment with these special awards as being lumped into a "handicap class". One way or the other, theatres striving for aesthetic difference, those cultivating a synthetic kind of theatre, or theatres dedicated to younger audiences, have had a difficult time gaining the recognition of art critics.

At present, the media and the younger audiences have focused on three clear favourites: the Von Krahl, the VAT, and a fresh, small and innovative state theatre – the NO99 (founded in 2004 in the process of the reconstruction of the former Old-Town Studio). Thus Estonian theatre has now reached a situation characteristic of theatre systems in many European countries: a dominant conservative centre, and a dynamic, privately initiated periphery, to use Juri Lotman's terminology (Lotman 1999: 19–20). But no theatre system is static, since everyone is drawn towards the centre: to the showering of public attention and cash flows. And so it happens that the periphery feeds the centre with its creativity and passion, and the centre, in turn, feeds the periphery. Such a dynamic, however, pushes the entire system towards increased homogenisation.

Private theatres and dance agencies in Estonia that have acquired considerable artistic quality and gained public approval apply for state subsidy in similar amounts as state theatres. This they have yet to achieve, but the subsidy of private theatres has increased annually, if only slightly. (See the Table 1.) For example, in 2005 private theatres achieved less than 4% (10.5 million Estonian crowns) from the total subsidies for theatre (278.7 million Estonian crowns<sup>2</sup>) (Eesti Teatristatistika 2005: 63). This is not significant financial support for private cultural enterprises, especially when we take into consideration that nowadays there are approximately 22–25 state-subsidised theatres in Estonia: the Estonian National Opera, 4 state repertory theatres, 4 state-established foundations, 2 municipal theatres, 10–11 private theatres and 1–3 dance agencies. (Eesti Teatristatistika 2005: 9; Eesti Teatristatistika 2006: 13). On the positive side it could be mentioned that in recent years, on average 65–70% of the budgets of state institutions and 45–50% of those of private theatres has been covered by state subsidies. (In this context it should be stressed that since private theatres work in small spaces, their audiences and the corresponding profits from ticket sales are more limited than in big institutions.) In addition to direct state subsidies, financial support of private theatres and projects by the Cultural Endowment and municipalities has increased annually: in 2005 state subsidies of the private sector increased 100% compared to the previous year, and the municipalities' share by 604%. (Eesti Teatristatistika 2005: 54–55; Eesti Teatristatistika 2006: 63.)

**Table 1. State subsidies to Estonian theatres (in millions of Estonian crowns).<sup>3</sup>**

Year	1995	1998	2000	2005
State theatres	68,2	121.3		268.2
Private theatres	0.4	2.1	3.2	10.5
Projects	0.7	0.9	0.3	

On the other hand, the Estonian government is increasingly attempting to release itself from responsibility towards the artistic and economic activities of theatres, and is fostering the establishment of appropriate foundations. Unlike state theatres, a foundation is not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, but has its own supervisory board. A foundation has the right to take a loan, but the state of Estonia, as the founder, cannot be held financially liable for any proprietary obligations the foundation may have (Sihtasutuse... 2007). The Estonian

<sup>2</sup> I have excluded the Estonian Theatre Festival from the list of state subsidized theatres because its main aim is not to put on productions but to organize festivals.

<sup>3</sup> This data has been compiled from different documents acquired from the Estonian Ministry of Culture; the principles of calculation have changed during the period, and so the chart is incomplete. For example, in the 1990s the National Opera was subsidized directly from the state budget. Recently, however, it has been financed through the Ministry of Culture.

Drama Theatre, the Russian Theatre, the Rakvere Theatre and the Ugala currently function as foundations. A special position in the field is held by the Estonian National Opera, which operates as a body governed by public law according to the National Opera Law passed in 1997 (amended in 2002). At the turn of the century, the Estonia was financed directly from the state budget and not through the Ministry of Culture like other theatres, but for now the subsidy system of theatres has been unified. All these steps were taken for securing functioning of the opera as an institution of national importance. There are also two municipal theatres (the Tallinn City Theatre and the Kuressaare City Theatre), which get their production funds from the cities and their salary fund from the state. Other Estonian municipal governments have resisted taking any binding responsibility for local theatre, justifying their decision with limited financial resources. (For example in 2005, several state theatres received some finances from the local budget, but this formed no more than 1% of all subsidies, except the Vanemuine – 4%, the Rakvere Theatre – 8%. Budgets of private theatres are more dependent on local authorities, but the size and number of allocated grants are not significant. (Eesti Teatristatistika 2005: 63.)) In effect, what we are currently observing is the slow emancipation of state theatres from under “mother nation”, the decentralization of power and responsibility, as well as the state’s increased concern for the support of private theatres.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a similar decentralization process took place in most Western European countries, but in the 1990s many governments made a U-turn in their cultural policy, attributing their decisions to the economic recession. Another explanation is related to the devolution of power to nation states. (Nygaard 2001: 20.) At any rate, from an artistic point of view, the decentralization of the cultural field has had quite controversial effects in different parts of the world. Positive features are usually seen in cultural democratisation. Nobuko Kawashima, who differentiates between cultural, political, and fiscal decentralization, observes a major problem – the inability of political and fiscal instruments to achieve the objective of cultural decentralization, which often has remained unspecified. Also, political decentralization can involve increased central control and decreased diversity and flexibility at the regional and local levels. (Kawashima 2001: 109–118.) Since the decentralization process has been rather slow and careful in Estonia, it is early to say what kind of influence it has had on the theatre field. However, the history of the Children’s Theatre of Tartu (1989–2000) illustrates Kawashima’s observations quite well. The city government of Tartu did not have clearly-articulated cultural aims for the institution, but at the same time was quite hesitant about different artistic experiments (both about minimalist children’s productions and postmodern works), which created alternatives to the mainstream theatre represented by the Vanemuine.

### **Theatre employees with indefinite-term contracts *versus* freelancers**

Let us now move on from the macroscopic elements of theatre, its institutions, to the microscopic elements, the people. A regular troupe comprised of a certain number of actors

and stage directors is the common core of any given repertoire theatre. Whereas in Soviet Estonia drama groups with indefinite-term contracts consisted of 30 to 40 people on average, this figure dropped down to an average of 20 to 30 actors during the 1990s (Table 2), even though the number of new productions increased considerably at the same time – from 77 in 1985 to 101 in 1997 (Table 3). This dwindling of creative staff was primarily for economic reasons: the social security of the socialist system was replaced by the utilitarianism of the early capitalist system. The indefinite-term contracts effective in the Soviet Union allowed theatres to employ actors who were unable to get a role for years, or who only played minor roles. In the Republic of Estonia, such actors were laid off and the rest entered into contracts with two to three year terms, with a couple of exceptional five-year terms.

**Table 2. Number of performers in Estonian theatres, 1980–2005.**

<b>Name of theatre</b>	<b>1980<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>1997<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>2000<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>2005<sup>7</sup></b>
Estonia: singers + choir	43+56	29+41	27+63	26+59
Estonia: ballet troupe	68	53	68	55
Estonia: orchestra	79	86	104	99
Estonian Drama Theatre	46	46	43	38
Russian Drama Theatre	47	30	36	29
Estonian Youth Theatre / Tallinn City Theatre	35	24	24	25
Estonian Puppet Theatre	19	11	17	15
Old-Town Studio / Theatre NO99	9+2 <sup>8</sup>	15	18	4
Vanemuine: actors	41+7 <sup>9</sup>	32	33	25
Vanemuine: singers + choir	21+42	22+44	16+40	10+37
Vanemuine: ballet troupe	30	33	29	40
Vanemuine: orchestra	56	61	68	69
Endla	32	27	25	15
Ugala	26	25	29	30
Rakvere Theatre	26	16	17	21

4 Teatrimärkmik 1980.

5 Teatrielu '97.

6 Teatrielu 2000.

7 Teatrielu 2005.

8 Employees with short-term contracts.

9 Supporting staff.



**Table 3. Number of new stagings in Estonian theatres, 1980–2005.**

	1980	1985	1997	2000	2005
Estonia	6	5	9	10	8
Estonian Drama Theatre	8	8	14	14	13
Russian Drama Theatre	10	8	11	8	7
Estonian Youth Theatre / Tallinn City Theatre	14	10	4	5	7
Estonian Puppet Theatre	6	8	4	7	7
Old-Town Studio / Theatre NO99	2	3	5	6	7
Vanemuine: drama	8	4	11	11	8
Vanemuine: music and dance stagings	22	6	4	6	8
Endla	7	8	13	11	11
Ugala	11 <sup>10</sup>	11	16	11	7
Rakvere Theatre	7	6	10	9	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>89</b>

The number of opera and operetta singers in the Estonia and the Vanemuine declined on the same scale as the drama actors. The size of ballet troupes, however, has undergone several increases and decreases during the past 20 years, and the number of orchestra members in both theatres has increased: from 79 to 99 in the Estonia, and from 56 to 59 in the Vanemuine. Theatre managers have explained this aspect by the need to ensure artistic quality and to perform full-scale opera and ballet works.

An analysis of the dynamics of theatre staff reveals the speed at which changes in the membership of troupes took place, which has proved to be similar in different theatres. During the period from 1997 to 2000, 20–30% of troupe members turned over, and during the period from 1997 to 2005, there was a turnover of 40–50% of troupe members. The star actors of a theatre usually display considerable loyalty to their home theatre, whereas the troupe that surrounds them can alter considerably. High fluctuation in the dynamics of the acting staff in Estonian theatres is substantially influenced by the fact that typically any actor graduating from drama school is immediately offered a contract by one of the larger institutionalised theatres; in the first three or four years that follow, the actors themselves, the stage directors, and the audience make judgments about their capabilities.

The number of freelance actors and stage directors has been steadily on the rise since the mid-1990s. Whereas initially this was a sign of dubious or undiscovered creative potential, by the turn of the century many well-known and highly regarded actors (Raivo E. Tamm,

---

<sup>10</sup> Concerts.

Katariina Lauk, Andrus Vaarik, Marko Matvere and others) switched from a steady salary to earning their livelihood as freelancers. Freelance employment is, however, merely one side of the coin. Increasingly, theatres are employing visiting actors and stage directors, who may have contractual obligations with another theatre. (In addition, there is a multitude of independent staging projects, to be discussed below.)

The high mobility of actors has raised problems and discussions in many theatres, because it has made planning of rehearsals, programs, as well as repertoire more and more difficult. In addition, directors complain about decreased work motivation and creative energy of actors, who are simultaneously involved with a new production in their home theatre and some other project elsewhere. “Serving two masters” is causing certain ethical hesitations as well; thus some theatres have prohibited actors from working outside their home institution.

Dispersal of the theatre field also presents a problem for those who write on the topic of theatre history: while for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the history of Estonian theatre can be handled institution by institution, since the repertoire and image of a given theatre was indeed shaped by the stage directors and actors employed by that theatre, then this picture becomes much more complex by the end of the century, requiring several cross-cuts or some other alternative approaches in research. In order to study this elaborate and shifting system, one could make use of Actor Network Theory, in which a network is considered to be “a string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator”. (Latour 2005: 128.) Since most of Estonian stage directors do not have a prominent artistic signature, other participants (influential actors, set designers, dramatists, managers, etc) in the production and distribution domain, and the aims of their activity should be studied just as thoroughly.

In Estonia, the mobility of stage directors and actors has not only blurred the orderly nature of institutions, but also boundaries between state and private theatres or independent projects, and those between mainstream and experimental theatre. However, as there is a specific group of actors at the core of all state theatres, on whom the repertoire of that theatre relies, it was perfectly natural that sooner or later all private theatres would take the road to forming a standing troupe. In the long run, managing the work based solely on freelance actors is unnecessarily complex and artistically ineffective. Thus, if in the beginning private theatres tried to create not only artistic but also institutional difference, situating themselves somewhere between the working principles of repertoire and project-based theatres, then starting from the end of the 1990s, the Estonian theatre field became institutionally more and more homogeneous.

There is no single, clear answer to the problem of the virtues and vices of a troupe working together for many long years. On the one hand, one may end up in a creative rut; on the other, this may offer the feeling of security and certainty. In any case, the social position of actors and stage directors, as well as other theatre personnel, has changed fundamentally during the past 20 years. Regardless of organisational form, artistic practice

remains intimately entwined with the financial world, and many creative employees have mentally become private entrepreneurs, perpetually engaged with self-marketing, constantly calculating each of their performances and minutes spent working into cash flows.

### **Repertoire theatre versus project-based theatre**

The central topic of the second part of this article is the controversial phenomenon of repertoire theatre with its many friends and foes. While critics of repertoire theatre have mostly come from outside the system, theatre people themselves have demonstrated rather contradictory behaviour, defending the system publicly while privately criticising its concrete forms<sup>11</sup>. From the early 1990s onward, a rigid opposition between repertoire theatres *versus* project-based theatres has become ingrained in Estonia's cultural discourse. In the following, I will only present a few of the more colourful examples of this public discourse, while conceding that more profound research is needed before making more definitive statements about this field.

Kalju Komissarov, stage director: "The problem may be that musicals have usually been project-based in Estonia. [---] Yet it is well known that the sole purpose of projects is to rake in money as fast as possible." (Haav 2006.)

Anti Reinthal, actor: "As an actor, I hope that by 2010 repertoire theatre will still exist in Estonia, that this onslaught of project-based stagings will cease, that people will come to their senses and realise that it may well be fine and dandy, but from now on we will do things the way it is best in local circumstances. I hope that actors will be able to work freely in any Estonian theatre, without the management board putting brakes on this, without any bad blood between managements because of this – we won't give our actor to you now because you didn't give us yours back then. When a theatre's management board directly blocks an actor's development, that's total bullshit, excuse me for saying so, because actors only develop when they are able to work with different partners. [...] There is of course the possibility of going freelance, of course there is... and freelancing isn't bad, not bad at all. The only thing is that then you sometimes have to do jobs that you wouldn't really care to, but you simply fall back on one simple thing – that is, money. [...] Let's say, when you are hired by a theatre, there is a 98% possibility that they won't put anything like that [like some project-based companies – A. S.] into the repertoire. As a manager of a theatre in 2010, I would hope for a balance between repertoire and project-based theatres, that four or so repertoire theatres would remain, and that these would be very-very excellent, with 28 or so members in their regular troupe of actors, which you could fill in by adding freelance actors. And then there would be the various project-based theatres. I would gladly see no actors working in different theatres that would damage the repertoire..." (Reinthal 2006.)

Thus on one side of this dichotomy (as seen also in Komissarov's and Reinthal's

---

<sup>11</sup> The latter statement is based mostly on my experiences interviewing artistic staff of the Estonian Drama Theatre for a documentary and for research purposes.

comments), is tradition-perpetuating repertoire theatre that signifies stability and quality, while on the other side there is project-based theatre, which is seen as a recent and dangerous phenomenon signifying commercialisation and poor quality. Such a black and white opposition, in which repertoire theatre is defined through project-based theatre, stifles any critical analysis of repertoire theatre as a structure. The current dichotomous position, in which repertoire theatre is defended in public discourse but criticised in practice is thereby illustrated by the above comments, despite the fact that there is no need whatsoever to defend the existence of repertoire theatre. Neither the Ministry of Culture nor theatre managers, nor anyone else, have proposed to demolish the repertoire theatre system. Granted, in an ever-changing sociocultural situation there probably is an ongoing need to redefine the very notion and aims of repertoire theatre and to adjust the system to the needs of theatre-makers, audiences, and society.

Project-based theatre – that is, the organisation of creative and technical staff for a single production – has not been a widespread or artistically influential phenomenon in Estonia, being usually limited to a few musical projects and summer productions played in found places, often reflecting commercial aims. But the position and the reputation of project-based theatre have started to change slowly since the year 2004, with the establishment of foundations for project-based opera (the Nargen Opera) and documentary productions (the R.A.A.A.M). The foundations have demonstrated serious artistic aims and outcomes, which have been rewarded by several annual prizes: Hendrik Toompere Jr. was nominated for best male actor for his role in “Portrait of a Freezing Artist” (2004, the R.A.A.A.M) and for best director for production “Hell Stuff” (the R.A.A.A.M, 2005, both based on the dramas of Mart Kivastik); Helen Lokuta received a prize for musical productions for her roles in operas staged in the Estonia and the Nargen Opera in 2006. All of the aforementioned persons have been working in repertoire theatres and were well-known artists before the advent of these projects.

What, then, are the pros and cons of the repertoire theatre system? From the point of view of politicians, supporting repertoire theatre is the easiest way to understand, promote, and also to control the theatre field, compared to the alternative – a more disparate, labile, and diverse project-based theatre system. In some respects, this standpoint coincides with attitudes of society in general. From the point of view of potential or real audiences, the repertoire theatre system guarantees stability and the continuation of traditions of theatre practice and theatregoing, a diverse program, and hopefully also longstanding connections between the institutions and local communities. On the other hand, the stability and potentially interminable accessibility (good productions have a long run) might have quite a hypnotic influence on audiences, so they never actually go to the theatre. Both as an art form and as a signifier for certain artistic groups, theatre has lost its quality of eventfulness.

The most complicated dimension of all, however, is evaluating the repertoire theatre

system from the point of view of theatre-makers. First, as discussed in the previous section of this article, there is the factor of the stable troupe, with its virtues and vices. For actors, at least, repertoire theatre provides more security and less creative freedom than other structures. Such an institution supports a creative team with professional technical and administrative services, all of which is quite costly and makes the production system inflexible. For instance, according to the new subsidising system of Estonian theatres, valid since 2005, approximately 2.5 other full-time staff members are allocated per actor (Karulin 2007): a theatre with a troupe of 20 actors can hire 50 technical and administrative workers. (The model is worked out based on the working principles of medium-size drama theatres in Estonia (Kask 2007).) Private theatres and theatre projects can hardly afford this kind of luxury. To give just one example of the inflexibility of large institutional theatres, we can point to the fact that the set and costume designers must usually complete their work two months before the premiere, when the director begins rehearsals; since the construction and sewing workshops have a tight and strict timetable, it is very complicated to make any changes in the set or in the costumes later on. Repertoire theatres are often compared to factories, since the working system is based on specialisation, which brings with it a certain mechanisation in the mentality and actions of employees. Thus every positive feature also has its negative side.

In actual practice, we have been able to observe how the emergence of economically profitable and/or artistically successful theatre projects have exerted a positive influence on Estonian repertoire theatres, pushing them to undertake projects based on visiting performers or productions played *en-suit* only for a limited number of times. With just a bit of exaggeration, we might say that contemporary repertoire theatres are increasingly turning into particular brands, into production units that treat productions as freestanding projects. Meanwhile, the best principles of traditional repertoire theatre, such as the compilation of a varied repertoire, the consideration shown towards an actor's development and workload, the cultivation of a public, are being increasingly relegated to the background. Thus Estonian repertoire theatres – some more, some less, depending on their ideology and working principles – have differentially acquired the several advantages and disadvantages of project-based theatre: more freedom in organisational and artistic matters on the one hand, and stricter economic boundaries and time frames on the other.

### Conclusions

Niklas Luhmann describes art as an autopoietic system in the following manner: "The art system has no reality except at the level of elemental events. It rests, one might say, on the ongoing dissolution of its elements, on the transitory nature of its communications, on an all-pervasive entropy against which anything that persists must organise itself. Concepts such as connectivity or recursive reusability indicate this process, but they do not explain it. They only show that the stability of a system based on time-sensitive events must be a dynamic

stability, a stability that depends on the continual change of the system's resources." (Luhmann 2000: 49.) Specifically for the topic of this article, it is not possible to discuss the repertoire theatre system as something constant amid changing socio-economic and cultural conditions and volatile human assets. Whether we like it or not, the surrounding cultural environment inevitably influences both the artistic and the organisational side of theatre. Moreover, even in the postmodern world, art has failed to relieve itself from the modernist obligation to produce novelty, or at least variety. It seems that smaller associations with less material and symbolic capital are more motivated to strike a dynamic balance both organisationally and artistically, whereas in such a structure, every individual feels more responsible.

Jon Nygaard states that the institutionalised theatres in the Nordic countries have been sentenced to death in almost every decade over the past 50 years by new generations of actors, directors, critics and theatre researchers, but that every time the Nordic governments have intervened in the process. Explanation for this conservative cultural policy can be found for social-democratic nation-states, which are trying first and foremost to strike a balance between protecting important national symbols and providing everyone with equal access to culture. (Nygaard 2001: 11, 21–22.) During the last 15 years, Estonia has had rather rightist governments and rightist ideology in the economic and social spheres; at the same time they have also been proponents of the image of Estonia as a Nordic country which shares a natural environment and values with other Scandinavian countries. As concerns attitudes and strategies with respect to culture, the similarity to Nordic states is quite obvious – both theatre institutions and works in the indigenous language are considered to be national symbols, and theatre-makers an important national resource that are beloved by wide audiences and protected by cultural policy. However, as we know, symbols are resistant to revision or turnover because they are based more on belief and habitus than on reason. This article has striven to open up discussion and research about the pros and cons of repertoire theatre as it has functioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and nowadays, in the postmodern intercultural world, stressing the interdependence of institutions and cultural field(s).

---

## References

- Bourdieu, Pierre** 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre** 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. by Randal Johnson. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Eesti...** 2002 = Eesti riigi kultuuripoliitika põhialused. – <http://www.kul.ee/index.php?path=367>, updated 08.05.2002, consulted 15.09.2007.
- Eesti Teatristatistika** 2005, 2006. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliidu Teabekeskus.
- Eesti Teatristatistika** 2006, 2007. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliidu Teabekeskus.
- Haav, Margus** 2006. Marilyn – merevaiku kinni jäänud liblikas. – *Postimees*, 2.12.

- Karulin, Ott** 2007. Ehk AITAb? – Sirp, 23.03.
- Kask, Merit** 2007. Müstiline AITA – eesti teatritegijate pidev kaaslane. – Postimees, 10.02.
- Kawashima, Nobuko** 2001. Decentralization in Cultural Policy: Unsolved Problems. – Nordic Theatre Studies. Cultural Politics – Global, Local and National. Vol. 14, pp. 109–121.
- Kulbok-Lattik** 2008. Eesti kultuuripoliitika ajaloolisest perioodiseerimisest. – Acta Historica Tallinnensia, No. 12, pp. 120–144.
- Latour, Bruno** 2005. Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lotman, Juri** 1999. Semiosfäärist. – Semiosfäärist. Tallinn: Vagabund, pp. 7–35.
- Luhmann, Niklas** 2000. Art as a Social System. Trans. by Eva M. Knodt. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Nygaard, Jon** 2001. Dead Man Walking!? The Institutionalized Theatre in Nordic Theatre Policy. – Nordic Theatre Studies. Cultural Politics – Global, Local and National. Vol. 14, pp. 11–23.
- Reinthal, Anti** 2006. Interview with Anneli Saro for documentary. 15.09.
- Saro, Anneli** 2004. Formation of Events: Estonian Theatre and Society under Loupe. –Theatrical Events. Borders, Dynamics, Frames. Ed. by Vicky Ann Cremona, Peter Eversmann, Hans van Maanen, Willmar Sauter, John Tulloch. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, pp. 343–356.
- Saro, Anneli** 2009. The Interaction of Theatre and Society: The Estonian Example. – Global Changes, Local Stages. Ed. by Hans van Maanen, Andreas Kotte, Anneli Saro. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi. (To be published.)
- Sihtasutuse...** 2007 = Sihtasutuse Eesti Draamateater põhikiri. – <http://www.draamateater.ee/index.php?lk=84&show=127>, consulted 15.09.2007.
- Teatrielu** 1985, 1991. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Teatrielu** 2000, 2001. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit.
- Teatrielu** 2005, 2006. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit.
- Teatrielu '97**, 1998. Tallinn: Eesti Teatriliit.
- Teatrimärkmik** 1980, 1983. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Tormis, Lea** 1978. Eesti teater 1920–1940. Sõnalavastus. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat.
- Uljas, Jüri** 2005. Eesti Kultuurkapital 1921–1941. Tallinn: Eesti Kultuurkapital.

---

**Anneli Saro** – is an Associate Professor of Theatre Research at the University of Tartu (Estonia). She has published articles on audience research, performance analysis and Estonian theatre history. Currently she is studying Estonian theatre systems in the working group “Project on European Theatre Systems“ and is a member of the executive committee of the International Federation for Theatre Research.

E-mail: [Anneli.Saro@ut.ee](mailto:Anneli.Saro@ut.ee)

## Eesti teatrisüsteemi dünaamika: repertuaariteatri kaitsel

Anneli Saro

Artikkel käsitleb Eesti teatrisüsteemi dünaamikat läbi ajaloo, keskendudes viimasele 23 aastale, poliitilisele ja majanduslikule üleminekuajale. Teatrisüsteemi arenguid vaadeldakse siin eelkõige institutsioonide kaudu, võttes lähtepunktiks repertuaariteatrite süsteemi, mis on eksisteerinud Eestis alates 19. sajandist. Artiklis puudutatakse ka süsteemi ja institutsioonide mõju teatritegijaile, kuid publik on selguse huvides kõrvale jäetud. Teoreetiline raamistik põhineb Pierre Bourdieu' töödel, eelkõige tema välja-teoorial ja kultuurilise tootmise käsitlustel.

Kutseline eesti teater loodi aastal 1906 rahvuslikele seltsidele ja asjaarmastajatest koosnevatele näitetruppidele tuginedes. Kogu eestikeelne teatritegevus jälgendas kohalikku saksa teatrit ning see omakorda Saksamaa teatriinstitutsioone. Kaasaegne Eesti teatrisüsteem tugineb suuresti sellele ajaloolisele, 19. sajandi pärandile. See süsteem on olnud suhteliselt stabiilne peamiselt tänu rahvuslikule kultuuripoliitikale.

Pärast Eesti teatrimaastiku ajaloolist ülevaadet käsitletakse lähemalt järgmisi aspekte teatri lähiminekiviku kontekstis: riigiteater (s.h munitsipaalteater) versus erateater, tähtajatu lepinguga teatritegijad versus vabakutselised, repertuaariteater versus projektiteater.

1980. aastate lõpust alates on Eestis teatrisüsteemi lisandunud hulgaliselt uusi vabatruppe ja erateatreid. Paljudel näitlejatel-lavastajatel on tulnud valida või on nad eelistanud valida vabakutselise staatuse. Sellega seoses ja uute võimaluste avanedes on hoogustunud ka projektipõhine teatritegevus, mille suhtes eksisteerib üsna palju negatiivseid eelarvamusi, tihti just vastanduses repertuaariteatriga. Mõlemad teatrivormid on Eestis aga üksteist rikastanud ja see lubab väita, et iga teatristruktuur, s.h repertuaariteater vajab pidevat (ümber)mõtestamist lähtuvalt muutuvatest sotsiaal-kultuurilistest tingimustest.

---

**Anneli Saro** – teatriteaduse dotsent, Tartu Ülikool (Eesti). Ta on avaldanud artikleid publiku-uuringute, etenduse analüüsi ja eesti teatri ajaloo teemadel. Praegu tegeleb ta Eesti teatrisüsteemide uurimisega töörühmas „Project on European Theatre Systems“ ning on Rahvusvahelise Teatriuurimise Föderatsiooni täitevkomitee liige.

E-post: [Anneli.Saro@ut.ee](mailto:Anneli.Saro@ut.ee)