

The “Golden Section” of Estonian Theatre History

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***Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* (Estonian Theatre 100. One Hundred Drama Stagings).**

Compiled and commented by Reet Neimar. Tallinn: Estonian Encyclopaedia Publishers, 2007.

In the beginning of 2007 a book presenting a choice of one hundred Estonian drama stagings was published. A gallery of numerous photos accompanied by relevant comments by the author as well as citations from contemporary reviews offers a survey of Estonian professional theatre that was born in 1906. In order to celebrate the 100th anniversary, the year 2006 was officially proclaimed as the Year of Estonian Theatre, and the publishing of *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* (“Estonian Theatre 100. One Hundred Drama Stagings”) obviously marked that event.

Each choice is inevitably subjective. The author, Reet Neimar (1945–2008), is an acknowledged Estonian theatre critic, editor of several theatre books and teacher of theatre history. In the preface she claims that the collection includes one hundred remarkable theatrical events. In the case of each of them, the choice could have been affected by different reasons and arguments (e.g. a revolutionary change, new aesthetics, representative meaning, success, remarkable shifts in reception, i.e. difference between opinions of contemporary reviews and later historical retrospect, a brilliant group of actors, social background, etc.). “Drama performance has always been considered to be the most localized phenomenon of arts, bearing the closest relation to its linguistic space,” Neimar argues. Indeed, in the history of Estonian national theatre, such performances have obviously been dominant. Although Neimar calls each theatre production a “unit of account” of theatre history, her choice of Estonian drama stagings nevertheless reflects the development of Estonian dramatic literature as well.

Sajandi sada sõnalavastust does not present the most remarkable or representative stagings. While reflecting historical process, the book pays attention to marginal productions as well, thus aiming to offer as manyfold a “golden section” of Estonian theatre as possible. According to Neimar, she had experimented with quite a few versions of structuring her work. I suppose that the combination of different principles of selection has assured the variety of her “mosaic history”. *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* has also recorded for the future generations Neimar’s understanding of history, her personal method and critical approach. In the preface she has fended off conceivable reproaches, which might concern the choosing of a staging. Neimar points to possible alternatives of choice. One such, for example, could be the history of the theatrical interpretations of a particular play.

Generally a double page has been reserved for each staging. The only exception to this rule occurs with the first professional productions, i.e. in the case of August Kitzberg's *Tuulte pöörises* ("In the Whirlwind"), staged by Karl Menning at the Vanemuine in Tartu, and Mait Metsanurk's *Päikese tõusul* ("At the Sunrise"), staged by Paul Pinna at the Estonia in Tallinn, both in 1906.

The composing process of the book presenting such a wealth of illustrative material was also affected by the availability and quality of photos. Therefore more attention has been paid to the later periods of history. As far as I know, the initial idea of the book was rather that of an illustrated album, and only due to Reet Neimar's personal initiative, the textual component was considerably enlarged. In some instances, the priority of photos is clearly evident. For example, in the case of the production of *Rätsepad Sillamatsil* ("Tailors from Sillamatsi", a play by the Latvian playwright Rūdolfs Blaumanis) by Priit Põldroos at 1938 at the Tallinn Workers' Theatre, a remarkable pictorial grouping of actors is presented (p. 62–63). On the other hand, a photo could have been chosen because of the fact that it presents prominent theatre people of the period, as for example in the case of Eduard Vilde's play *Pisuhänd* ("The Hobgoblin"), staged by Ants Lauter in 1927 at the Estonia (p. 48).

As mentioned above, a history of various stage interpretations of individual works was not planned, but *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* nevertheless includes examples of different stage versions of particular plays, be it a classic of Estonian or of world drama, like Shakespeare's "Hamlet". Such a comparison clearly works for the benefit of readers. August Kitzberg's play *Libahunt* ("The Werewolf") can serve as an example of how skillfully and economically the author has used the space in the columns of commentaries. Neimar manages to give an overview of a curious competition among three theatres in putting on this play in 1941 (p. 68). Similarly, in dealing with Mikk Mikiver's production of *Libahunt* at the Rakvere Theatre in 1986, she discusses as well this stage director's other interpretations of that play in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 166).

Thus, in spite of the number "one hundred" in the title of the book, the volume has been compiled so masterfully that it actually includes many more stage productions as well as theatre personalities. In her commentaries on particular productions, Neimar has sketched information about actors and stage directors. In the portrait of a children's theatre production "Little Lord Fauntleroy" from 1938, in which actress Salme Reek played the leading role, Reek's later and remarkably long stage career has been characterized in a proleptic way (p. 64). The book also presents brief but relevant descriptions of the work of directors like Kaarin Raid, Merle Karusoo, Ingo Normet, Kalju Komissarov, Juhan Viiding, etc. Neimar alludes briefly to Karusoo's Cassandra-like role in the context of contemporary Estonian theatre (p. 216), or mentions the affinity of Priit Pedajas to the plays of Brian Friel (p. 192). The treatment of specific stage productions can offer an insight into the development of a particular theatre. The author has stated that in her historical survey

provincial theatres have rather got shortchanged. In the context of the beginning of the 21st century, she has consciously aimed at including the activities of possibly all theatres and groups.

One should pay attention to the balance of theatrical decades depicted in *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust*. Although Neimar has chosen 15 productions from the 21st century (the general number throughout the book varies from 6 to 9 productions per decade), the evident leader of the volume can, in this sense, be called the period of the 1970s. It has generally been accepted in the discourse of Estonian national theatre history that this decade was characterized by a remarkably rich and many-faceted theatrical life, and the author's choice (23 productions solely from the 1970s!) could be taken as an affirmation of this statement.

In the volume's pictorial and textual "kaleidoscope" readers can find depictions and descriptions of some memorable theatrical scenes, like the meeting of the Prince and the mysterious Mistress, the latter in a wheelchair, in the production by Evald Hermaküla of Paul-Eerik Rummo's *Tuhkatriinumäng* ("Cinderellagame") in 1969 (p. 102–103), or the legendary dance by Mikk Mikiver in the role of Lopahhin in Adolf Šapiro's staging of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" in 1971 (p. 110–111), or the apocalyptic final scene in Jaan Tooming's 1976 stage version of *Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan* ("The New Vanapagan from Põrgupõhja"), a novel by A. H. Tammsaare (p. 130–131).

The book also makes it possible to compare certain stagings through comparisons with later interpretations of the same play. A case in point is Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" by Mikk Mikiver in 1970 and a later stage version by Ingo Normet in 2006 (p. 108). Parallels are drawn also between a particular native interpretation and a version of the same play staged by another Estonian director abroad. Gombrowicz's "The Wedding" by Mati Unt in 2000, for instance, is linked with Elmo Nüganen's version in Poland (p. 194). Neimar has paid special attention to certain bits of history, such as the theatre programmes of Mati Unt's productions, some brilliantly conceived minor roles or a promising acting debut. She also weaves into her text examples of general overviews or of social background, like stating that the year 1914 was a depressive one in Estonian theatre (p. 32), or that Grigori Kromanov's production of Gorky's "The Lower Depths", in 1968, marked the beginning of more severe process of searching for truth for Estonian theatre in general (p. 100).

Neimar's webbing of comparisons branches into different directions – it's one of the characteristic features of her style. At the same time she is well aware of the whole structure and keeps expanding it. Plurality of viewpoints and inner polyphony of text(s) is characteristic of her work in general. In *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* this polyphony is created by the panorama of her examples. Quotations from contemporary critics support her choices. Additional citations illustrate the development of national theatre criticism as well as the dynamics of its "personnel" through different historical periods. The Estonian theatre community knows Reet Neimar's deep devotion to the plays by Chekhov, and in the pages

dedicated to Kaarin Raid's production of "Uncle Vanya" in 2002 the author has allowed herself to step gently into the critics' circle (p. 203).

Reet Neimar has always been a highly emotional critic and theatre historian, a well-known and enchanting storyteller. Therefore it's not surprising to find in *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* statements like: "It was a production that was loved by the audience as well as by actors on stage" (concerning Adolf Šapiro's version of "The Three Sisters" in 1973 – p. 118). "The slowest performance in the world," she has argued about "Waiting for Godot" staged by Lembit Peterson in 1976 (p. 132). A bit hyperbolic statement, isn't it? – but somehow very typical of Neimar, and metaphorically relevant as well. Her emotionality can also be revealed in the sudden use of nicknames like Gorba and Koma (Mikhail Gorbachev and Kalju Komissarov, respectively – p. 162). (Here I hesitate for a moment and wonder if future generations would discover the right persons behind these nicknames.)

I would like to touch here upon one more subject, namely the relationship between theatre and critics. The book includes an example of how destructive reviews might affect creative natures, specifically concerning the production of "Edith Piaf" by Ülo Vilimaa with Velda Otsus in the leading role in 1977 (p. 140). With this historical episode, and touching upon the responsibility of critics, Neimar seems to send her message to all those who practice theatre criticism.

In the preface the author uses a significant metaphor when talking about the web of scenic unravellings. The very last staging to be portrayed in this volume concludes with the following commentary by Neimar: "In spite of all the differences of theatre in different historical periods, theatre of each and every country has its own and distinctive "mushroom spawn". We should not destroy it, even if we know that edible boletus can seldom be found" (p. 221). *Sajandi sada sõnalavastust* serves as a praiseworthy, deep and absorbed glimpse into Estonian theatre history. Bright and expressive, subjective yet generalizing, the book meets the criteria for teaching theatre history as well as for recording the theatrical memory of a nation.