

Theatre against Stagnation: Theatre Exchanges between Soviet Estonia and Finland during the Cold War: The Case of Matti Tapio and Kaarel Ird

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the theatre exchange between Tampere (Finland) and Tartu (Estonia) which flourished across the Iron Curtain in the midst of the stagnation of the 1970s. The ties were based on the close co-operation of two conservative theatre directors, Matti Tapio (Tampere) and Kaarel Ird (Tartu). The article reveals mutual benefits on several levels of interaction. With Ird teaching the Stanislavsky method, Tapio managed to win favour for his actors' program at the Tampere University. Ird, in his turn, was able to launch guest performances and strengthen the position of his Vanemuine Theatre. As for the Soviet Union, Ird's teaching and guest performances could be seen as an ideologically safe Soviet-Western interaction with economic benefits. Refreshing the pre-war traditions of Estonian–Finnish relations, the mutual guest performances offered a rare possibility for informal interactions. Through confidential dialogue in a mutual spirit of goodwill, professional learning, and a deep understanding of the social realities on the “other side”, the possibility of friendly ties across the border was opened up. During the Cold War, theatre exchanges between Estonia and Finland offered a way to promote cultural achievements and strengthen one's self-esteem on personal, institutional, and even national levels.

KEYWORDS

Theatre exchange, Finnish-Estonian relations, Matti Tapio, Kaarel Ird, Tampere Drama Studio, the Vanemuine Theatre.

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Theatre against Stagnation: Theatre Exchanges between Soviet Estonia and Finland during the Cold War: The Case of Matti Tapio and Kaarel Ird

Carrying out my historical research on theatre exchanges between Finland and Estonia, I was astonished how, in the 1970s, in the midst of the notorious Brezhnev stagnation and Moscow restrictions, vivacious and versatile connections could flourish between the theatre organizations of Tampere (Finland) and Tartu (Estonia). This co-operation included guest performances, guest teaching, and student excursions on a regular basis. This kind of interaction across the Iron Curtain was exceptional during that time, even more so, because between these two cities there lacked close geographical and/or historical connections (like Helsinki and Tallinn) or an official twin town agreement (like Kotka and Tallinn or Vaasa and Pärnu).

I noticed that the theatre exchange was based on a close co-operation between two men, theatre directors Kaarel Ird (1909–1986) in Tartu and Matti Tapio (1926–1978) in Tampere. Ird was the artistic director of the Vanemuine Theatre which visited several times both the Tampere Theatre and the Tampere Theatre Festival. Ird was also a regular teacher of the acting classes of the Drama Studio at the Tampere University during the 1970s. A manager of the acting classes, Tapio invited Ird time and again to Tampere and brought his own students on excursions to Estonia. At the Tampere Theatre, Tapio directed contemporary Estonian drama and performed a monologue on Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* which also toured in Estonia.

In my article, I take a closer look at the co-operation between Ird and Tapio and try to place it, from a Finnish perspective, in the larger context of the cultural relations and theatre exchange between Finland and Estonia on the one hand, and between Finland and the Soviet Union on the other. How the East/West interaction between Finland and Soviet Estonia functioned and what motivated it on different organizational levels? Why was it allowed? Why was the theatrical life in Tampere drawn to Estonia, the Vanemuine and Ird's teaching? Most importantly, what were the driving forces and mutual benefits from Ird's and Tapio's perspective?

The article is structured chronologically. The first phase starts in the years 1959–1961 when Tapio and Ird first met and worked together, this was followed by a general increase in contacts between Estonians and Finns. The second

phase starts in 1969–1970 when Tapio and Ird refreshed their contact and established new co-operation through the bureaucratic difficulties. The third phase discusses the aftermath in the 1980s when, even after Tapio's death, the Vanemuine Theatre continued its interaction with the Tampere Theatre.

The theoretical framework of the article is based on the transnational cold war studies, stressing microlevel interactions between organizations and individuals. The empirical sources consist largely of the Finnish archival material from the Drama Studio at the Tampere University and the Tampere Theatre, newspaper writings, memoirs, and interviews.

The Cold War, a Transnational Perspective

After the Second World War, the Iron Curtain divided Europe. However, as the researchers of the Cold War have shown, the border was not altogether impassable. There were countries like Finland, Austria, and Yugoslavia, that could operate on both sides and thus blurred the division between the Eastern and Western blocs.¹ More importantly, if we take a transnational perspective and look at East/West collaboration and interactions on a microlevel between organizations and individuals, we notice that, during the Brezhnev era, ideology came to play a somewhat marginal role in the exchange between ideas, innovations, goods, and people across the porous border.²

Regarding cultural and artistic exchanges across the Iron Curtain, it has been stressed that “culture was one of the softest ways to help ordinary people to understand ‘the other side’.” Thus, cultural exchanges were supported by the political leaders. However, if we take a closer look at the individual exchanges, we notice that the East/West interactions were based on mutual benefit and motivations that did not necessarily align with official ideologies.³ The transnational point of view on theatre exchanges during the Cold War asks us “to consider the motivations and objectives of the individual actions behind the ideological and political façade.”⁴

Regarding the Finnish–Estonian co-operation during the Cold War, there was yet another level of possible motivation that was observed with suspicion from Moscow. As the countries had had close cultural ties before the Second World War, the interaction could be seen as strengthening national sentiments.

Finland and Estonia

The Estonian and Finnish languages are closely related, even though the speakers do not understand each other's language. Historically speaking, the two countries developed separately. In former times and as a part of the Baltic provinces in the Russian empire, national mobilization in Estonia was targeted against the German-speaking landholders and ruling classes. Formally part of Sweden and after that an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian empire, national mobilization in Finland was largely targeted against the Russian

1 Bazin, Glatigny & Piotrowski 2016, 2–3.

2 Michael David-Fox 2010, 261; Autio-Sarasmo & Miklóssy 2011.

3 Autio-Sarasmo & Humphreys 2010, 18–21.

4 Mikkonen 2016, 166.

government. Despite tensions between language groups, rising Finnish nationalism did not fully overthrow the Swedish language and thus the country remained bilingual. The cultural bonds and political leaning to Sweden remained important in Finland throughout the 20th century.

During the interwar period 1919–1939, Finland and Estonia were newly independent national states. Introduced in many neighbouring countries of the Soviet Union, new political ideologies sought to strengthen their geopolitical stand via co-operation; even larger political unions were suggested. As for Finland and Estonia, a new political ideology stressed the language-based kinship between the two nations and encouraged contacts and exchanges on all levels of society. Tribal sentiments were evoked, for instance, by introducing a special Finno-Ugrian day when the schoolchildren in Estonia and Finland learned about their neighbouring country (and Hungary, since Hungarian belonged to the same language group). The 1930s saw increasing goodwill including student exchanges and tourism between the two countries. An important part of this cultural policy, theatre exchanges especially between Helsinki and Tallinn became important. Divided by the Baltic Sea, the two capital cities are only 80 km's apart from one another.

In the Second World War, Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union along with the other Baltic states Latvia and Lithuania. Tens of thousands of Estonians fled as refugees to Sweden, Northern America, and Australia, while tens of thousands were deported to the Siberian *kulags*. Finland managed to maintain its independency and remains a Western capitalist democracy but was forced to remain outside the Euro-Atlantic bloc because of pressure from the Soviet Union.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet cultural diplomacy emerged. Bilateral annual programs for cultural exchanges and friendship associations between the Soviet Union and Western countries were established.⁵ Bringing the Soviet Union and Russian culture closer to Finland was part of the official cultural policy. A special organization coordinating cultural exchanges, Finland–Soviet Union Society (FSUS) was founded in Finland in 1945. Run by Moscow-loyal communists, the society gathered a great number of members representing different political ideologies and many circles of society. The official agreement on cultural exchange between Finland and the Soviet Union was signed in 1960 and activated three years later.⁶

All the Soviet artists that visited the West before the 1980s were checked and approved by the security authorities in Moscow. As a Soviet-friendly state, Finland was a relatively safe country to send delegations. Even the KGB could send along their agents in order to prevent “undesired contacts” and supervise conversations. Once the delegations had crossed the Soviet border, however, it proved difficult to maintain control over the individuals and oftentimes, surveillance was lacking altogether.⁷

A veteran of the 1930s tribal ideology, the President of Finland Urho

5 Mikkonen 2016, 164 and 169; Mikkonen 2019, 20.

6 Mikkonen 2019, 267–268.

7 Mikkonen 2016, 164.

Kekkonen (1956–1981) considered it important to support the Estonian nation under Soviet rule. While ready to relinquish ties with the Estonian emigrants, Kekkonen searched for increasing contacts between Finns and Soviet Estonians. Considered loyal, Kekkonen managed the negotiations with the Kremlin. Established in 1957 as part of the organization of the FSUS, a special Estonian subdivision was encouraged to create direct contacts with Estonian communists and enable cultural exchange. Carefully planned and supervised cultural excursions between Finland and Soviet Estonia were launched. As there was no direct ship line, the delegations travelled by train via Leningrad (St Petersburg). Theatre exchanges began in 1957 with opera singers and ballet dancers from the Estonia Theatre visiting Finland.⁸

Establishing Connection – Matti Tapio and Kaarel Ird Meet

The first exchange of theatre directors between Soviet Estonia and Finland had an official character. It was coordinated and negotiated from above, that is to say, between official organizations. Looking for ideologically suitable organization in Finland, the Soviet bureaucracy established contacts with the Association of Workers' Theatres of Finland (AWT). Although many traditional workers' theatres had already been transformed into city theatres, the AWT remained a powerful and countrywide organization of both amateur and professional theatres with a social democratic or communist background. It can be seen that Soviet interest also strengthened the strategic position of the AWT and gave new possibilities for individual workers' theatres.⁹ In the late 1950s, Jyväskylä Workers' Theatre was one of a few remaining fully professional workers' theatres. Its long-time chairman, Arvo Sepänmaa, took part in the excursions and negotiations with the Estonians and encouraged the newly elected director of the Jyväskylä Workers' Theatre, actor Matti Tapio, to seek co-operation with Estonian theatres.¹⁰

Having studied in the first class of the Theatre School of Finland in 1943–1945, Tapio's schooling had stressed the Stanislavsky method. Tapio had launched his career as a natural-born comedian and character actor with short-term contracts around Finland. As a director, he made early success with luscious naturalism and popular comedies. Just having started in Jyväskylä, Tapio took part in the FSUS excursion to Estonia in the autumn of 1959. In Tartu, he presented an official invitation to stage director Epp Kaidu (1915–1976), wife to the theatre's artistic director Kaarel Ird.¹¹

A member of the Communist Party and able to speak Finnish, Kaidu had already been chosen on the Estonian side. She came to Jyväskylä in 1960 and directed a play by the Estonian August Jakobson (1904–1963), appreciated in the Soviet Union for his militant communist ethos and holding a position as the head of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Estonia. Written before his

8 Minutes and letters of the Estonian Subdivision 1957–1959; Rausmaa 2007, 24–33; Mikkonen 2019, 254–258.

9 TNL became the sole mediator of Soviet drama in Finland in 1963 and several Finnish workers' theatres were invited to perform in the Soviet Union. Seppälä 2020, 186–187.

10 Tapio *Kodumaa* 1.3.1961.

11 Tapio *Kodumaa* 1.3.1961.

communist turn, *Spectres* (*Kummitukset*, in Estonian *Viirastused*, 1939) was a psychological love triangle about a woman who falls in love with another man, lives in her dreams, and wants to leave her family. The moral of the play stressed a parents' responsibility to avoid divorce for the sake of the children. Although the performance was considered slow-paced, the Finnish reception admired the Stanislavskian character in Kaidu's psychologically grounded direction. The Father's role was played by Tapio.¹²

As all the cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union were to be bilateral and reciprocal, Tapio in his turn received an official invitation from Kaidu to direct a Finnish play at the Vanemuine Theatre in 1961. The Estonian (Soviet) authorities accepted that he direct Maria Jotuni's farcical comedy *The Man's Rib* (*Miehen kylkiluu*, 1914) which was already well known in Estonia and was considered ideologically harmless. At that time, Tapio did not speak Estonian. He instructed the actors in Finnish and occasionally checked "the tricky words" in a dictionary. Longer passages could be translated by Kaidu and the theatre's dramaturg Evald Kampus (1927–2017) who also spoke Finnish.¹³ During his four weeks stay, Tapio held 35 rehearsals altogether. He was helped by Kaarel Ird who rehearsed separate scenes while Tapio was working on the stage.¹⁴

While visiting Estonia, Tapio had a chance to see performances both at the Vanemuine (incl. Ird's productions) and the Tallinn Drama Theatre. Being the first foreign theatre director to work in post-war Estonia, Tapio received a lot of flattering attention. As he gave a lecture at the Tartu university, he was struck by the students' good level of knowledge about Finland and the Finnish theatre. He was impressed by the Vanemuine Theatre's solid ensemble and its working culture based on mutual esteem and polite manners which contrasted with his experiences from Finnish theatre.¹⁵

Warming up the relations between Finland and Estonia

In 1965, the restrictions on interactions between Finland and Estonia loosened. In the spring, a large group of 42 people from Tallinn Drama Theatre toured Finland with three performances. Despite the foreign language and previously unknown plot, the most popular performance turned out to be a new Estonian youth play *The Robot* (*Rops* by physicist Boris Kabur) which aligned well with Soviet cosmic utopianism and optimistic engineering. Reciprocally, Helsinki City Theatre sent two performances to Tallinn. One of them was James Baldwin's social drama *Blues for Mister Charlie*, directed by Sakari Puurunen (1921–2000), strongly raising the social issue of equality.

In the summer of 1965, these theatre tours were followed by a re-opening of the ferry connection between Helsinki and Tallinn after a 25-year interval, and growing tourism to Tallinn. In the Soviet Union, Estonia and its capital city Tallinn were seen as a developed, prominent part of the vast country. Although an ideologically delicate arrangement, Tallinn could lure Western tourists, bring

12 s.n. *Kansan Uutiset* 10.3.1960; K. S-n *Teatteri* 11/1960.

13 Tapio *Kodumaa* 1.3.1961.

14 Tapio *Kansan Uutiset* 12.3.1961.

15 *Lugovskoi Neuvostoliitto tänään* 12/1961.

in Western currencies, and represent the progress of the Soviet Union. The exhaustive border formalities were needed in order to ensure that no forbidden goods, like ideologically harmful literature and magazines, crossed the border to the Soviet Union. Finnish and Estonian broadcasting companies were allowed to launch co-operation and joint productions, like a television show *Neighbour Quiz (Naapurivisa)* with musical numbers and national teams competing or actually entertainingly sharing information about their countries.¹⁶ In 1967, Finland hosted a special Estonian cultural week with exhibitions and concerts which was followed the next year by a Finnish festival in Estonia including a guest performance by the Finnish National Theatre. Based on their sister city agreement, Kotka City Theatre and Estonia Theatre in Tallinn even exchanged guest directors staging contemporary plays in 1968–1970.¹⁷

The Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, which was followed by the new Brezhnev doctrine of “restricted sovereignty” in the Eastern bloc.¹⁸ Although Finnish tourism to Tallinn could continue, the new policy meant that the rapidly emerging cultural ties between Soviet Estonia and Finland became restrained. The joint television production was closed down, new Estonian–Finnish cultural festivals were not allowed, and the theatre exchanges became more cautiously controlled and restricted. For instance, the Helsinki City Theatre was not allowed to perform a modern Finnish play¹⁹ while visiting Estonia in 1974, only Carlo Goldoni’s classical comedy was permitted. Having been invited by the Helsinki City Theatre, it took three years before the Tallinn Drama Theatre was allowed to bring Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, directed by Riga-based Russian Adolf Shapiro (b. 1939), to Helsinki in 1978. Promoting friendship among children, only Estonian puppet theatre was allowed to tour in Finland in 1972.²⁰

Pedagogical Co-operation between Tartu and Tampere Established

In the generally restrictive atmosphere of the 1970s, however, there was one example of successful and continued theatrical co-operation between Estonia and Finland, namely, the one established by Matti Tapio and Kaarel Ird in 1969–1970. These continued all the way until Tapio’s death in 1978. The co-operation started on a pedagogical basis.

This time it was Tapio who was the active agent seeking co-operation. In 1965, Tapio had moved to Tampere as a television director for the local state-

16 Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004; Salokannel 1998.

17 Sulev Nõmmik (1968, Nõmmik’s and Ülo Raudmäe’s musical *Letter Poste restante*) and Ilmar Tammur (1969–1970, A. H. Tammsaare’s rural novel *Vargamägi*) directed in Kotka City Theatre while Väinö Lahti (1969) directed in Tallinn Eeva-Liisa Manner’s *Burnt orange* before it had premiered in Finland.

18 Miklóssy 2011, 140.

19 The rejected Finnish play was Veijo Meri’s *Sano Oili vaan (Just call me Oili)*. Nivanka 27.4.2018.

20 The newspaper critics and promotion materials of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, FNUS, NAF. However, some guest directors were allowed to work in Finland. Vello Rummo directed in Vaasa City Theatre 1974, Jaan Tooming in Joensuu City Theatre in 1977 and Mikk Mikiver in Kotka City Theatre in 1978–1979. Furthermore, Sakari Puurunen was invited to direct at the Tallinn Drama Theatre. His interpretation of Maeterlinck’s symbolist *Pelléas and Mélisande* premiered in 1975.

owned broadcasting studios. Beside his main job, he was appointed to launch a special actors' training program at the newly founded Drama studio of the Tampere University²¹. Lead by the avantgarde-oriented theatre scholar, Kari Salosaari, the Drama Studio was meant to function as a course centre for advanced training. However, it opened degree programs for directors and actors and thus challenged the monopoly of the Theatre School in Helsinki.

Lacking an academic education, Tapio turned to grand-old theatre practitioners when recruiting teachers to the actors' classes. One of them was his long-time mentor and teacher, director Eino Salmelainen who had worked with Estonian actors and directed in Estonia as early as the 1930s.²² The first class studied from 1967 to 1970 but the status of the program remained very unstable. To make the situation worse, the relationship between Salosaari and Tapio was not a good one. Having first invited Tapio to start the program, Salosaari felt that Tapio refused to co-operate with him. In the spring of 1969, Tapio openly attacked Salosaari, questioned the unity of the Drama Studio, and demanded autonomy for the actors' program.²³

Later, in the same year, in the midst of this crisis within academia, Tapio received an invitation from Tartu to take part in Kaarel Ird's jubilee celebrating his 60th birthday. Seeing the opportunity, Tapio quickly convinced the university rectorate and was permitted to invite the renowned director and pedagogue (who actually lacked formal theatre education) to teach in Tampere. During his trip, Tapio used the occasion to familiarize himself with the working methods of the Estonian Theatre School in Tallinn.²⁴

Ird was eager to accept the invitation. Together, the men decided that Ird would teach Stanislavsky's method using scenes from Chekhov's plays. Tapio passed the invitation to the FSUS.²⁵ While the focus of actors' training in 1960s Finland had started to move away from Stanislavsky and stress Brecht instead,²⁶ Tapio shared Ird's theatre view on the centrality of psychological portrayal.²⁷ Replicating classical Russian theatre culture fitted also well into the larger framework of Soviet–Finnish relations. Part of the *nomenclatura*, a member of the Supreme Soviet of Estonia and the winner of the Soviet Union's State Award for Theatre in 1967, Ird was able to tackle the bureaucratic obstacles in Moscow and permitted to work at the Tampere university for a two-week period in 1970.

Uncapable of the Finnish language but a vivid personality with large gestures, Ird taught in Estonian with the help of a translator sent from the Helsinki University. Tapio, his students in the second class (1967–1971) and Finnish journalists were

21 In 1960–1966, the university's name was Tampere School of Social Science.

22 The annual reports of the Actors' Studio of the Tampere University, ASTU; Sainio *Seura* 15/1975; Salmelainen especially worked with actress Liina Reiman. In Estonia, he directed Hella Wuolijoki's *The Women of Niskavuori* in 1936. Seppälä 2018.

23 Salosaari 2013, 246–247 and 281–282.

24 Tapio stressed that the occasion was Ird's 35th anniversary as artist. Matti Tapio's letter to the Board of Tampere University 20.10.1969, ASTU.

25 Matti Tapio's letter of invitation to Kaarel Ird 27.11.1969 and application to the Finland–Soviet Union Society regarding Kaarel Ird's teaching in Tampere 23.1.–6.2.1970. ASTU.

26 Kallinen 2001, 185–195.

27 Veistäjä *Aamulehti* 17.12.1978; Salonen 2010, 24.

enthusiastic about the highly professional and temperamental guest. With the help of the Estonian pedagogue, Stanislavsky provided a basis for an actors' education in 1970s Tampere. From the first visit it was clear that, in addition to his teaching, Ird brought fame and (conservative) credibility to the Tampere University actors' program.²⁸

The co-operation continued. In the autumn of 1970, Tapio took part in the Vanemuine theatre's 100th anniversary celebrations in its new lodgings. A vast theatre also in Soviet terms, Vanemuine housed theatre, ballet, and opera with a full-size orchestra and a choir. Next spring, Tapio took his students to a theatre excursion in Estonia. Ird revisited the Tampere studio in the autumn of 1971, this time for a three-week period. Trying to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, Ird and Tapio privately negotiated how to formulate the invitation letters and applications to the Estonian cultural ministry. However, the actual decisions were made by the Soviet cultural ministry who was interested in receiving Ird's Finnish salary.²⁹

Among the Finnish students, Ird was considered a popular and clear-cut teacher. The third actors' class (1973–1977) had Ird teaching Stanislavsky and Chekhov for three separate periods in 1974, 1975, 1976, and the fourth class (1977–1981) in 1978 and 1979. The third and fourth class also undertook excursions to Estonia.³⁰



FIGURE 1. Kaarel Ird teaching the actors' class in Tampere. The archive of the Tuglas Society, Helsinki.

28 The annual reports of the Actors' Studio of the Tampere University, ASTU; s.n. *Helsingin Sanomat* 30.1.1970; E. N. *Aamulehti* s.a.1971; *Veistäjä Aamulehti* 17.12.1978.

29 Kaarel Ird's letter to Matti Tapio 20.4.1971; The salary was to be 1000 Finnish marks. The Soviet cultural ministry's letter to Tampere University 9.8.1971, ASTU; The minutes of the Estonian subdivision of the Finland–Soviet Union Society 22.3.1971, FSUS. NAF.

30 The annual reports of the Actors' Studio of the Tampere University, ASTU; s.n. *Helsingin Sanomat* 14.9.1971; s.n. *Helsingin Sanomat* 17.1.1975a; Krogell 17.10.2018.

Both Tapio and Ird skilfully interacted with the political powers and political currents in order to create possibilities for their organizations. Although ideology was not the driving force, their co-operation could be seen and actually was at the same time a Finnish–Estonian, Finnish–Soviet, and Finnish–Russian cultural exchange.

Considering motivations and benefits, Tapio was struggling to raise funding and receive official status for the actors' program. Having Ird teaching Stanislavsky brought credibility to the program, even among the young and radical 1968 generation who, in Finland, largely turned to Soviet-minded communism. However, the young communists looked with suspicion at the old tribal bonds between Finland and Estonia.³¹ At the same time, Tapio made use of domestic political struggles and, in his letter to the right-wing minister of education, marketed the Tampere Actors' Studio as a conservative option to the notoriously leftist Theatre Academy in Helsinki.³² Due to all his efforts, Tapio managed to regularize the Tampere Actors' Studio and extend it to a four-year program.

For Ird, being invited abroad to share his insights and knowledge on theatre was flattering as such. As a Soviet citizen, he was privileged to be able to work in the West, see performances and enjoy discussions with his Finnish colleagues in a free atmosphere. From the Moscow point of view, working in the West had its good sides despite the ideological risks. According to the general practice, Ird's full salary from Finland was taken by the Soviet state. In Estonia, Ird's suspected wartime activity in communist destruction troops made him a somewhat controversial figure. In Finland, his past was not known and did not disturb the visit.³³ On a professional level, his appreciation and success in Tampere strengthened his position in Estonia and the Soviet Union, and created new possibilities for him and the Vanemuine Theatre. Ird also invited journalists from Moscow to see his performances in Tartu. Favourable reviews from the leading Soviet newspapers would secure his theatre's freedom to act in Estonia. The younger, modernist generation of Estonian stage directors developed at the Vanemuine Theatre under Ird's command and protection. It should be noted that Ird lent his authority to protect Finnish anti-communist estophiles like Eva Lille, his long-time interpreter at the Tampere courses and a legendary tour operator, while she was in danger of having her visa rejected after conflicts with the official Intourist guides and Finnish communists (Lille had organized a large-scale smuggling of forbidden material to Estonia).³⁴

Co-operation Widens with Guest Performances

The co-operation between Tapio and Ird had been permitted as a pedagogical exchange in a larger framework of transmitting the Russian (Soviet) theatre

31 The relationship between Estonia and the Soviet Union caused bitter conflicts between the older generation and young radicals in Finland. For this reason, the Finnish theatre directors' excursion to Estonia in 1972 was full of tensions and ended with a fist fight. Nuotio 2017, 271–272.

32 Matti Tapio's letter to the Minister of Education Marjatta Väänänen 26.12.1976, ASTU; On Theatre Academy in Helsinki, see Jokipii 1979 and Kallinen 2004.

33 Nivanka 27.4.2018 and Lille in 19.4.2006, 2.5.2006 and 20.6.2006.

34 Ibid.

culture to Finland. Now, with Ird as a driving force, co-operation continued with guest performances showcasing Estonian theatre in Finland and vice versa, emphasizing national theatre cultures and creating friendship bonds among a wider circle of theatre professionals in the two countries. The platforms for the Vanemuine guest performances were the Tampere Theatre Festival and the Tampere Theatre, both run by (politically) conservative boards in contrast with the leftist Tampere Workers' Theatre.

Already in the summer of 1970, Ird expressed to Tapio his willingness to direct at the Tampere Theatre and bring the Vanemuine Theatre or Ballet to Tampere.³⁵ Although now working for television, Matti Tapio was a frequent guest at the Tampere Theatre as a director and actor. He now functioned as a middleman between the two theatres. The guest performance was allowed and realized only in 1974 when the Vanemuine Theatre came two times to Tampere performing folk plays. *One Ullike went on a journey* (*Üks Ullike läks rändama*) was dramatized from folktales and directed by Evald Hermaküla and Enn Vaigur's *Village songs* (*Külavahelaulud*) directed by Ird. The theatrical playfulness and the use of music and dance, along with the impressive technical skills of Estonian actors, made the performances easy to follow and they were met with enthusiasm among the Finnish audience.³⁶ In his interviews, Ird promoted popular national theatre that was based on folk culture. Putting his words carefully, Ird stressed the theatre's importance in preserving national Estonian culture in Soviet Estonia: "What means the most is the struggle for being able to perform great art to your own people".³⁷

In 1975, the Tampere Theatre visited Estonia after Ird's invitation. The tour consisted of three cities, Tallinn, Pärnu, and Tartu, and two studio performances. Maria Jotuni's *Relations* (*Suhteita*) was performed using the latest translating technology: a simultaneous interpretation for members of the audience wearing headphones was possible. By Ird's special request, Matti Tapio's solo performance in Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* did not require translation as the text had been recently performed both in Tallinn and Tartu.³⁸ The guest performances received a lot of positive attention even on television and the main Soviet newspapers in Moscow.³⁹

The Vanemuine Theatre was not the only partner from the Eastern bloc for the Tampere Theatre during the Cold War but it turned out to be the most extensive and long-lasting of them. Open-minded towards international co-operation, the managing director, Rauli Lehtonen (1928–2014), saw that foreign contacts offered new methods and experiences to his staff. He invited the Polish director Adam Hanuszkiewicz (1924–2011) to guest several times, and also hosted guest performances from Moscow and Prag. He also sent

35 Kaarel Ird's letter to Matti Tapio in June 1970, ASTU.

36 Minutes of the Council of the TT 29.11.1973 and 4.1.1974, TT; Eklund *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 27.8.1974; Veltheim *Uusi Suomi* 18.8.1974; Stålhammar *Suomenmaa* 20.8.1974; Eteläpää *Uusi Suomi* 14.1.1974; Hartelin *Aamulehti* 14.1.1974.

37 Toijonen *Maailma ja me* 1/1975.

38 s.n. *Aamulehti* 15.5.1975.

39 The annual report of the Tampere Theatre 1975, TT.

performances abroad when it was economically possible.⁴⁰

Lehtonen later emphasized Tapio's ruthless persistence in generating Estonian co-operation: "He brought Estonia to the people's consciousness in Tampere". According to Lehtonen, Tampere was at the receiving end in the exchange. For the Tampere Theatre, the Vanemuine Theatre's willingness and interest in co-operation was flattering and the excited reception and celebrations in Estonia improved the self-esteem of the Finns. Belonging to the pre-war generation, Lehtonen saw interaction between the two neighbouring nations as natural. At the same time, he blamed the cumbersome practicalities, which exceeded everything he had experienced with other countries, on Soviet bureaucracy.⁴¹

In 1977, Vanemuine once again visited the Tampere Theatre Festival, this time with Mard Raud's and Valter Ojakäär's rural musical *A Midsummernight's wake* (*Suveöö ilmsi*). While the performances were well attended and the Estonian actors once again charmed the audiences, the Finnish critics considered the play and Ird's direction old-fashioned and naïve.⁴²

While Vanemuine was allowed to visit Tampere only with harmless folk musicals, Tapio took the initiative and single-handedly brought contemporary Estonian drama to Tampere, directing two Enn Vetemaa's (1936–2017) plays at the Tampere Theatre in 1974 and 1975. It seems almost as if he wanted to show the Finnish audiences that there was more to Estonian theatre than the travelling folklore performances. Unsuitable for guesting, the Vetemaa plays (translated by Eva Lille) depicted Soviet reality in pessimistic and satirical tones. The realistic family drama, Vetemaa's *Dinner for Five* (*Illallinen viidelle*, in Estonian *Õhtusöök viiele*) introduced an uncomfortable educated couple living in a rough mining community. Hugely popular at the Tallinn Drama Theatre, the play had a decent run in Tampere too, although the allegorical dimensions of the play were not emphasized.⁴³

In 1975, Tapio next directed Vetemaa's *Saint Susanna or the School of Masters* (*Mestareiden Pyhä Susanna*, in Estonian *Püha Susanna ehk Meistrite kool*), a satirical comedy openly mocking Soviet reality. The Finnish audience may, though, have concentrated more on the farcical plot which depicted a batty old lady and brutal repairmen trying to rob her. The production was a successful one.⁴⁴

In his main job as television director, Tapio became absorbed in large documentary dramas about Finnish political history and the diplomatic background of the Second World War. Challenging the official Soviet truth with objective research, Tapio's *Men of War and Peace* (*Sodan ja rauhan miehet*,

40 In the 1970s, TT performances toured among migrant Finns in Sweden and North America. Lehtonen 1997; Rajala 2004; The annual reports and newspaper clippings of the 1970s, TT.

41 Lehtonen 1997, 376–380.

42 Uexküll *Helsingin Sanomat* 22.8.1977; Eteläpää *Uusi Suomi* 22.8.1977.

43 The annual report of the Tampere Theatre 1974, TT; Lilja 2017, 254–256; Lilja *Keskisuomalainen* 13.2.1974; Markkanen *Kansan Uutiset* 6.2.1974; Härkönen *Savon Sanomat* 12.2.1974; Veistäjä *Aamulehti* 3.2.1974; Pohjola *Hämeen Kansa* 5.2.1974; Veltheim *Uusi Suomi* 6.2.1974; Uexküll *Helsingin Sanomat* 5.2.1974; Vetemaa 1974.

44 The annual report of the Tampere Theatre 1975, TT; Vetemaa 1975.

1978) unveiled the details of the notorious Molotov–Ribbentrop pact⁴⁵ of 1939 and managed to upset the Soviet ambassador to Finland and the Finnish communists alike. As Finnish television broadcasts could be seen in northern Estonia, the documentary was ideologically dangerous in Soviet eyes.⁴⁶



FIGURE 2. Matti Tapio instructing Herta Elviste and Einari Koppel at the Vanemuine Theatre. The archive of the Vanemuine Theatre, Tartu.

Preparing for a new guest direction in Tartu,⁴⁷ Tapio died of renal cancer in December 1978. Ird, now already 71 years old, returned to Tampere University to finish his courses with the fourth actors' class in 1979.⁴⁸ It marked the end of an era. However, it was not the end of the co-operation between the Vanemuine and Tampere Theatres.

Towards Official Partnership

In the 1980s, the awareness of the many downsides and the feebleness of the Soviet system grew. Protests and criticism within the Soviet Union were met with brutal force. At the same time, tourism from Finland to Estonia kept increasing. In 1981, the Finnish media launched a worried debate about the increasing

45 Preceding the outbreak of the Second World War, the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany defined the future border between these great powers and defined the Baltic states and Finland as belonging in the Soviet sphere of interest. The pact was followed by the Soviet Union's war against Finland in 1939–1940 and the occupation of the Baltic states in 1940.

46 Salonen 2010, 15–21.

47 Tapio was planning to direct his adaptation of Ilmari Kianto's rural novel *Jooseppi of Ryysyranta* at the Vanemuine Theatre.

48 s.n. *Helsingin Sanomat* 3.12.1979.

Russian influence in Estonia and the future of the Estonian language and culture. With Ird as their figurehead, a group of leading Estonian intellectuals took part in the Finnish debate aiming to calm it down. They declared, "The crocodile tears of the Finnish amateur estophiles who are crying for the extinction of Estonian culture are all for nothing. We are absolutely certain that Estonian culture is flourishing stronger than ever."⁴⁹

In 1982, Ird and the Vanemuine Theatre once again visited the Tampere Theatre Festival with two performances. However, this time, the Finnish reception became utterly negative and marked growing controversy with Ird's Vanemuine. Directed by Ird and Hermaküla, Pogodin's communist Lenin-play *The Kremlin Bells* was taken almost as a provocation by the Finnish theatre critics. Not paying attention to the fact that the theatre perhaps had little choice in choosing its touring performances, the critics considered the whole theatre as being outdated and uninteresting. They also refused to accept Hermaküla's avantgardist interpretation of the Finnish classic, Brecht's and Wuolijoki's play *Mr Puntila and his Man Matti* (*Puntilan isäntä ja hänen renkinsä Matti*), which had abandoned Brecht and realism.⁵⁰

Brezhnev's death in 1982 meant a beginning of a more flexible era allowing increasing interaction across the Iron Curtain all over Europe. Theatre exchanges between Estonia and Finland increased and individual theatres were allowed to invite performances and directors more freely. In Finland, there was a growing interest in dissident voices, emerging theatres, and younger directors from Estonia. From this perspective, the Vanemuine Theatre was of little interest anymore. After all, it was already familiar to Finns and seen as being part of the conservative establishment.

Although new contacts and new connections were established⁵¹, they did not overthrow the old ones. The warm relationship between the Vanemuine (Ird) and the Tampere Theatre (Lehtonen) continued. In 1984, the Tampere Theatre visited Tartu and Viljandi with Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. The new main director of the Vanemuine Theatre, Ago-Endrik Kerge, was invited to direct A. H. Tammsaare's peasant drama *A Time to Come, a Time to Go* (*Aika tulla – aika mennä*, in Estonian *Aeg tulla, aeg minna*) at the Tampere Theatre in 1986. Having been requested earlier by Ird, even Lehtonen directed in Tartu Erkki Mäkinen's war play *The Last Waltz in Viipuri*, (*Viimne valss Viiburis*, in Finnish *Viimeinen valssi Viipurissa*) in 1989.

As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Estonia restored its independence along with the other Baltic states. After having been going on for twenty years, the vivid theatre exchange between Tampere and Tartu received an official

49 Ird et al. 1981.

50 Mattila *Aamulehti* 16.8.1982; Kajava *Helsingin Sanomat* 17.8.1982; Paavola *Ilkka* 17.8.1982.

51 Already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, new connections were established, for instance, between Kotka City Theatre (Markku Savolainen) and Tallinn Drama Theatre (Mikk Mikiver) and between Jyväskylä City Theatre (Ari Kallio) and the Estonian Youth Theatre (Kalju Komissarov and Mati Unt). Also the Finnish National Theatre (Kai and Terttu Savola) developed intensive connections with the Youth Theatre and Unt in the 1980s. The Estonian guest directors Jaan Tooming (1977 and 1981 in Joensuu City Theatre) and Eino Baskin (1984 in Lahti City Theatre) were also admired in Finland.

status in 1992 as the two cities signed a twin city agreement.

Conclusion

In my article, I asked how the theatre exchanges between Tampere and Tartu could flourish in the midst of the stagnation of the 1970s. It turned out that the co-operation was carried out by two theatre directors who were considered conservatives in their respective countries. Although partly a label for the older generation, being conservative in the 1970s had a different meaning in the West and the East. In Soviet terms, it meant being a Moscow-loyal communist which also was a condition for being allowed to travel to the West. In Western terms, conservative practically meant non-socialist which was, of course, not a term of merit in the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the radical leftist or “progressive” theatre in 1970s Finland, Tapio’s path was more of a conservative one. He sought psychological truth with the help of Stanislavsky, social truth behind the Soviet façade with Vetemaa plays, and ended up seeking historical truth with his television documentaries. Interestingly enough, with Ird teaching “classical” Stanislavsky, Tapio managed to win favour for his actors’ program at the Tampere university as a conservative alternative to the Finnish Theatre School.

Looking at the theatre institutions involved, the controversially conservative character of the exchange is even clearer. The counterparts were the largest theatre of Soviet Estonia and one of a few bourgeois theatres still existing in Finland. This mismatch did not prevent the development of warm ties of friendship. Finally, considering the contents of the exchanges, the Stanislavsky method and folk plays seemed already somewhat outdated in the West. To conclude, the conservative character of this particular case of East/West co-operation was well aligned with the conservative atmosphere of the stagnation in the Soviet Union of the 1970s.

However, if we forget about the ideological antagonism and consider the interaction in the framework of Estonian–Finnish relations, the picture changes. In this regard, especially for the older pre-war generation, refreshed cultural contacts between Estonians and Finns were considered valuable as such. Guest performances of any kind offered a possibility for interaction and relaxed conversations with colleagues during the visit. Through confidential dialogue in a mutual spirit of goodwill, professional learning, and a deep understanding of the social realities on the “other side”, the possibility of friendly ties across the border was opened up. During the Cold War, theatre exchanges between Estonia and Finland offered a way to promote cultural achievements and strengthen one’s self-esteem on personal, institutional and even national levels.

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