

The emergence of the independent theatre scene in Estonia (1987–92)

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ABSTRACT

The years 1987–92 mark the first or breakthrough stage of the Estonian transition period from being one of the Soviet republics to a newly independent democratic state. The cultural processes of the transition are commonly discussed in terms of re-westernization. However, the picture is more complex, as Western influences intertwined with the legacy of the Soviet cultural realm. The article looks into the interplay between various influences, analyzing the emerging independent theatre scene from both institutional and aesthetic perspectives. On the institutional level, a range of small groups emerged that often blurred the line between (semi-)professional and amateur theatre. On the aesthetic level, one can identify three main trends: biographical and/or cultural-historical documentary theatre; theatre based on the ethnic heritage of different (mostly Northern) nations; postmodern aesthetics. Two more general patterns are 1) the radicalization of Soviet-era artistic searches, empowered by the rise of Estonian nationalism, and 2) the advent of postmodernism, triggered by contemporary Western ideas about theatre.

KEYWORDS

Estonian theatre, independent theatres, theatre system, alternative theatre, postmodern aesthetics, documentary theatre, theatre based on folklore.

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Introductory remarks

The periodization of theatre history evidently depends to a greater extent on societal and political processes than in many other arts, largely by reason of its collective and public nature, which is why theatre is often thought to be subject to formal or informal social control. Late- and post-Soviet Estonian theatre provides a vivid example of how societal and ideological factors affect both institutional and artistic changes. While the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is generally considered a symbolic milestone, the period of change in Estonia, as in the whole of the Baltics, began in the mid-1980s; it was triggered by Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika – political liberalization – which eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. From a sociological viewpoint, the timeframe from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s that saw the disintegration of the socialist system is commonly known as the transition period, and the culture of that era is referred to as transitional culture. The concept of 'transition' refers to "the systemic changes on all levels of society as a whole, which will result in the emergence of a new type of society."¹ The present paper focuses on the first or the breakthrough stage of the transition in Estonia that started in 1987–88 and came to an end in the early 1990s (1991–92). The most essential changes during this time period include strong political mobilization, and the rebirth of civil society, coupled with rapid economic decline; on the ideological level, the predominance of national symbols in the cultural field and the outburst of strong national feelings were of paramount importance².

During the transition period, profound changes occurred simultaneously in diverse arts. This multifaceted process embraced mutually related changes in aesthetics, ideology, and the institutional structure of the arts; all of them affected by broader political and economic transformation processes. Changes in Eastern-European theatre have been studied much less than the

1 Lauristin 1997, 25.

2 Lauristin, Vihalemm 1997, 82–3.

economic and sociopolitical transition³. As far as Estonia is concerned, little research has been done on transition theatre so far. Few comprehensive studies (Jaak Rähesoo's monograph on Estonian theatre history, for example⁴) focus primarily on the processes that took place in state theatres. The appearance of small independent groups has been dealt with primarily in the context of institutional changes; more attention has been paid to the 1990s and the most important independent theatres during that period, such as Von Krahl Theatre, Theatrum, and VAT Theatre.⁵ The present article seeks to provide a more complete and differentiated picture of the rather chaotic and complex field of new independent groups over the first stage of the transition period, both from an institutional and aesthetic perspective.

It is quite common to discuss cultural processes of this period in terms of (re)-westernization⁶. However, even though the period was marked by the transition to Western-type democracy and market-dominated social configurations, it was not a one-way transfer of Western ideas and practices. The real picture was much more complex, and full of inner contradictions since Western influences intersected and intertwined with the legacy of Soviet cultural reality. In this article, I will look closer at the interplay between the above-mentioned influences.

Institutional changes

By the end of the Soviet regime, the core of the Estonian theatre system consisted of ten state theatres. Like in the whole of the Soviet Union, these were repertory theatres with a permanent troupe and a long-term, planned program⁷: ideologically controlled by the Communist Party functionaries and subjected to state censorship. In the early period of the transition, the state theatres went through a deep crisis: by virtue of rapid economic decline, state subsidies became insufficient, and in 1987–92 attendance figures dropped by nearly half. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Estonia fully retained the Soviet-era system of state repertory theatres – no theatre was closed down.⁸ Such relative stability distinguished the theatre from other arts in Estonia that underwent much more dramatic institutional changes, as well as from what happened in many post-communist East-European countries.

Concurrently, the relative liberalization of Soviet cultural policy made it possible to establish new groups outside the system of state theatres. The appearance of a number of small independent theatre groups since 1987 is commonly considered the main (if not only) significant novelty in organizational

3 About changes in theatre and performance see, for example, Warner, Manole 2020, Barnett, Skelton 2008.

4 Rähesoo 2011.

5 See Rähesoo 2011, Saro 2009, Saro 2010. A collective study of Estonian theatre 1986–2006 is currently being written, led by Anneli Saro.

6 Westernization is considered “the most important systemic aspect of the transition processes” (Lauristin 1997, 31). Since the Baltic states belonged to the Western cultural realm before the Soviet occupation in 1940, they actually aimed at the re-westernization of their societies.

7 Saro 2009, 95.

8 See Rähesoo 2020, 22–3.

matters⁹. Such groups, in Western theatre, had proliferated since the 1960s at the latest, but in the rigidly controlled Soviet theatre system, any idea of creating free troupes was precluded; it was not until the late 1980s that they could legally come into being. In this respect, the theatre of the Soviet Union differed from several Eastern European socialist countries where some avant-garde non-professional or (semi)-independent groups were able to operate¹⁰. Also, the formation of small independent groups happened earlier and was livelier in Estonia than in several other Soviet republics. This can be explained by the fact that by the mid-1980s, the Estonian theatrical background was markedly different from most of the Soviet Union, thanks to the radical theatre renewal in the late 1960s that was exceptional in the field of Soviet theatre¹¹.

What were the specific organizational forms of the emerging independent theatres? How were they integrated into the existing cultural system? It was to be expected that at the beginning of the period, institutional changes would be initiated in the centre, the Soviet capital Moscow, and subsequently spread to the Soviet republics. In early 1987, Moscow city authorities enacted a statute for a new type of theatre – studio-theatres that received the rights of an independent theatre organization. The statute provided a legal and economic model to create new theatre groups without entirely severing ties with the institutional system that was being transformed at that time. Independent studios were widely perceived as experimental theatres.¹² Here, it should be noted that in the Soviet Union, a form of studio-theatre¹³ was legitimated by their glorious past that dates back to the studios of the Moscow Art Theatre (Stanislavsky and Meyerhold). Studios for studying acting actually worked at some state theatres, being part of the official theatre system.

The first studio-theatre in Estonia, Viadukt, was founded in 1987 by a leading actor of Russian Drama Theatre Leonid Shevtsov who left the theatre to create his own troupe¹⁴, but more typically they were initiated by young people studying theatre. For example, VAT Theatre was founded in 1987 by young people studying theatre directing at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute. It started as a student hobby club at the institute but was, in 1988, reorganized into a studio at the newly created Estonian Theatre Union Development Centre¹⁵. A

9 See Rähesoo 2008, 84.

10 Warner 2020, xviii–xix. For example, Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2, as well as a range of student theatres.

11 Rähesoo 2020, 23.

12 The cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* introduced the statute to Estonian readers; in an endnote, a critic Rein Heinsalu emphasized that *studio* means both a form of study and experimental theatre. See *Stuuditeatrid* 1987.

13 The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1979) defines theatre-studio as follows: "a group of artists organized to provide training in acting skills, conduct experiments in theater techniques, and stage plays. A theater-studio usually consists of people who share the same world view and aesthetic aims." <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Theater-Studio> (03.02.2021)

14 *Viadukt* was not an experimental theatre in terms of aesthetics; its aim seems to have been to bring to the stage texts banned during the Soviet era, such as Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* or Mrożek's *Tango* (both in 1988).

15 This organization was created in 1988 to promote theatrical experimentation and to collaborate with new studio theatres. Regrettably, the centre closed quite quickly.

connection with Soviet-era structures is even clearer in the case of the Tartu Children's Theatre, established by graduates of the studio, which operated at the theatre Vanemuine (Tartu) in 1985–89; this studio was run by stage director Jaan Tooming, one of the key figures of revolutionary theatre innovation in the late 1960s¹⁶.

A smart way to legitimate an independent group was to attach it to some appropriate institution from outside the existing theatre system – the transition period witnessed a real boom in the establishment of new organizations and reorganizing old ones. Merle Karusoo's group in Pirgu¹⁷ (1987–90) offers a telling example. To promote Gorbachev's reforms in Estonia, the Development Centre of Pirgu was established in 1987 on the basis of Rapla Agro-Industrial Group, which was a typical bureaucratic Soviet organization. Merle Karusoo was an experienced female director, who had taken a negative stance on Soviet-era state theatres and worked practically as a freelancer at that time; perhaps even more importantly, she had a background in sociological studies. When the head of the new Development Centre, a sociologist, set up a memory department, he employed Karusoo with a couple of young actors there. They took on the task of collecting and studying the life stories of ordinary Estonian people that were considered the prime carriers of national collective memory. The presentation of collected materials onstage was conceived as a means for communicating the research results to local people. At first, Karusoo did not even think that their performances should be considered theatre.¹⁸ Another example is the group Ruto Killakund (1989–92)¹⁹ that operated at the newly restructured Estonian Folk Culture Development Centre.

Concerning the abovementioned groups, a recurring pattern can be identified: a stage director who tried to create aesthetically and/or ideologically alternative theatre within the existing theatre structures during the Soviet era (such as Merle Karusoo, Jaan Tooming, Lembit Peterson²⁰), now brings together his/her students to continue (and radicalize) artistic searches.

Besides studio theatres (which soon renounced a strict adherence to the Moscow statute), the second more common form for independent theatre was an amateur or, at best, a semi-professional group with a rather loose organizational structure.²¹ Many of them were short-lived and uninterested in institutionalization but others became professional over time; thus, the line between the two main types is blurred. A forerunner of the wave of such groups was a students' theatre group, Valhalla (1984–88), which belonged officially to the club of the University of Tartu but, in fact, was only loosely

16 About the theatre innovation of the 1960s see Rähesoo 2020, 20–21.

17 Pirgu is the manor in Rapla county, North Estonia.

18 Karusoo 2014, 140–41.

19 The group separated from VAT theatre in 1989; it was led by Peeter Jalakas.

20 Lembit Peterson made attempts to create a studio in the late 1980s but did not succeed until 1994 when the studio-theatre *Theatrum* opened, presently one of the most recognized private theatres in Estonia.

21 It is important to emphasize that at the same time, they clearly opposed the Soviet-era institutionalized amateur theatre (a well-established system of so-called "people's theatres"), which ideologically and stylistically replicated state theatres.

connected to it. The number of like groups increased at the same pace with the gradual democratization of Estonian society; however, only a few survived the economically turbulent transition period. The most intriguing groups of the time were the above-mentioned Ruto Killakund with Peeter Jalakas at its head, which later evolved into Von Krahl Theatre (in 1992); Gregor (1988–96), run by Toomas Hussar, who had studied at the state Drama School for a short time; G Theatre or Garage whose core consisted of the students of the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute, and the Russian-speaking youth group Teatr 4.

To consolidate the field of newly-born independent groups, a festival for studio theatres was launched in 1989, but it stopped after a few years. By contrast, an international festival Baltoscandal (since 1990) proved to be a factor of paramount importance for advancing local alternative theatre. This brings us to the issue of how Estonia's theatrical relations with the Western world changed during the period in question.

Sociological research suggests the predominance of Western countries in cultural exchange (at the expense of „fraternal” Soviet republics) to be one of the indicators of successful westernization.²²

So-called new thinking in Soviet foreign policy during perestroika triggered a dramatic rise in foreign tourism, and in diverse cultural contacts with Western countries. Estonia was increasingly opening up to the West, and Nordic countries (particularly Finland and Sweden) were marked as a top priority for historical and cultural-geographical reasons. Since 1988 manifold Western alternative theatre groups visited Estonia, such as the Bread and Puppet Theatre from the U.S. (1988), Odin Teatret from Denmark (1989), De Trust from the Netherlands (1989), Galeasen from Sweden (1991), Cantabile 2 from Denmark (1990), Theaterlabor Bielefeld from Germany (1992), etc.; frequently they were invited to perform at some of the numerous festivals of the transition era. Finnish-Estonian theatre relations that had already rapidly increased since the early 1980s became even more vibrant. For instance, the communication between young theatre-makers increased: a number of Finnish student theatres visited Estonia, and in turn, the new independent VAT Theatre performed in Finland at the invitation of the Tampere Student Theatre.

The influx of new artistic ideas (first and foremost, from Scandinavia) may have invigorated the emergent independent theatre scene. However, looking at the Estonian theatre of the time more broadly, it must be stated that short visits of Western avant-garde groups had a rather weak impact on its stylistics.

Against such a background, the launch of the aforementioned international festival of alternative theatre Baltoscandal²³ should be considered an event of principal importance. Peeter Jalakas, a leader of Ruto Killakund, who initiated the festival, benefited from the contacts he had established while studying in Denmark (at the Odin Theatre) and in Germany in 1988–90. So, the first Baltoscandal (held in 1990 in the popular seaside resort Pärnu) featured

²² Lauristin 1997, 30.

²³ About Baltoscandal see Toms 2018. The name of the festival refers to the geographical area (initially most performers came from Baltic and Scandinavian countries), and “scandal” adds a connotation of alternative or avant-garde theatre.

alongside six Estonian groups twelve avant-garde groups from the Baltic and Nordic countries²⁴. The festival introduced its not so big but enthusiastic audience to an impressively wide range of avant-garde theatre trends: absurd theatre, puppet theatre, contemporary dance, street theatre, pantomime, performance, happening, etc. In the words of Jaak Rähesoo, “it was probably a dadaist-surrealist-absurdist-anarchist line that dominated Baltoscandal at first.”²⁵ Even more importantly, since all participants were asked to stay in Pärnu throughout the week-long festival, theatre-makers could not only socialize, but they got to know each other’s theatrical ideas, strategies, and techniques. Thus, Baltoscandal contributed notably to bringing new artistic practices into the Estonian independent theatre field.

Aesthetic changes I: documentary theatre and theatre based on folklore

As pointed out above, the emerging field of independent theatres was unstable: little groups appeared and disappeared, while only a few attracted the attention of critics for a longer time. Rather, they gained notoriety all together for being a new phenomenon that was welcomed as a manifestation of the democratization of the theatre field but were assessed very differently when it came to artistic values. At first, critics expressed the hope that the new amateur groups would give birth to new aesthetics and new spirituality, but later, a leading critic called them “occupationally amateurs” who were uncompetitive with state theatres.²⁶

As mentioned above, new aesthetic trends in the Estonian independent theatre field are an under researched area. Innovations are usually referred to as the advent of postmodernist stylistics²⁷. However, putting an equal sign between “independent”, “alternative” and “postmodern” simplifies the real theatre situation too much. The term “alternative” has been used in Estonian discourses with regard to more radical aesthetic searches but also to all non-institutional groups.²⁸ However, some of the new groups were rather commercial, i.e., created to provide actors of state theatres additional opportunities to earn money; such groups employed established artistic techniques. The groups that were alternative both institutionally and aesthetically, in turn, used different artistic strategies, not all of which were postmodernist.

What were the main artistic trends in Estonian independent theatre during the breakthrough period? How did they relate to the Soviet-era theatrical tradition, on the one hand, and to the prevailing ideologies of the time, on the other? On the aesthetic level, one can identify three prevalent trends, all of them underrepresented or missing in state theatres at that time: 1) biographical and/or cultural-historical documentary theatre; 2) theatre based on folklore and ethnic heritage (mostly that of Northern nations); 3) the advent

24 These were: Latvia (Ansis Rütentāls’ Movement Theatre), Lithuania (Šėpa theatre), Finland (HOMO \$, Tampere student theatre, Albatross & Kemi city theatre, Motelli Skronkle), Sweden (Lindforsa theatre), Norway (Juni Dahr), and Denmark (Cantabile 2; Den Blå Hest). At the next festival (1992) participated, among others, Danet from Russia, and Leo Bassi from Italy.

25 Rähesoo 2020, 25.

26 Visnap 1990, 76.

27 For example, Saro 2009, 96.

28 Rähesoo 2020, 23.

of postmodern aesthetics. Before describing them, it must be emphasized that more radical artistic changes were made possible by changes in Soviet cultural policy. The policy of glasnost that aimed at greater freedom of speech and freedom of information brought about, among other things, the abolition of state censorship.²⁹ Aside from removing political, sexual, and other taboos, the end of censorship meant that approval of the literary text before rehearsals began was no longer required. This paved the way for more creative dramaturgical practices, for example, the practice of devising performances that had been hitherto absent from Estonian theatre.

The first trend is most closely connected with the political upheavals of the time, and, in terms of ideology, to the rise of the wave of Estonian nationalism. The sense of loss and the idealized image of the past – of the imaginary sphere of authentic existence before the Soviet occupation – had supported an ethnically grounded identity model and national nostalgia throughout the Soviet era.³⁰ It is no wonder that over the time period, when the main goal was to restore lost independence, (neo)conservative values and an emphasis on nationalism, directed at re-affirming national identity, activating collective memory, and rediscovering national cultural heritage prevailed. With the liberalization of the regime, the theatre turned to past events and authors, which had been underestimated or banned from the official historical narrative. Another essential task was to integrate into domestic culture the experience of exile Estonians who had fled their homeland at the end of World War II. To be sure, similar cultural and historical topics were depicted on stages of state theatres, but independent theatres (primarily Valhalla and the Pirgu group) distinguished themselves from these through a strong emphasis on a documentary approach and a minimalist style.

Valhalla's productions introduced authors (e.g., an exile writer Karl Ristikivi), and literary groups (e.g., Siuru)³¹ whose interpretations were ideologically distorted in the official literary history of the Soviet-era. A particular politically sensitive production was *The Vorkuta Verses* (1988): performers recited poems written by Helmut Tarand from the 1950s when he was deported to Vorkuta coal mines as a prisoner.³² Valhalla also organized events of predominantly political significance, as *Age of Awakening* in October 1987, where students who portrayed the leaders of the nineteenth-century national awakening, gave patriotic speeches. Valhalla set educational and political rather than artistic goals; therefore, great emphasis was placed on an in-depth reproduction of the historical context by means of authentic documents, lengthy quotes from the work of the writers and critics, and the like.

Cultural-historical themes, Estonian patriotism, and documentary style were also characteristic of the group *Varius* (created in 1988), who was generally

29 Officially in 1990; actually, the censorship mechanisms stopped working already from 1988 on.

30 Annus 2018, 10–11. Annus tackles the issue of national nostalgia in the theoretical framework of postcolonial studies.

31 The production portraying a historical avant-garde group *Siuru* (in 1985) was followed by interrogations by the KGB. About *Valhalla* see Tonts 1998, Visnap 1988.

32 His poems were published only by exile Estonians in Sweden (in 1981).

seen as a successor to Valhalla's mission. Varius focused on exile Estonian culture, bringing to the stage productions about a poet, Kalju Lepik, a dancer Ella Ilbak, and others.

While Valhalla and Varius were amateur student groups that focused on cultural history, then the Pirgu Memory Department group, run by a professional director Merle Karusoo, was committed to working through national traumas. Their primary purpose was to give voice to social groups marginalized and silenced under the Soviet regime. They made use of various ego-documents, such as life story interviews, diaries, correspondences, etc., which they regarded as an authentic source for restoring oppressed discourses of memory and revealing a "true" history of Estonians.³³ Pirgu's performances were minimalist and static; actors presented memory texts verbatim, since Karusoo aimed at building theatre performances from what she viewed as the authentic speech of ordinary people. For example, *The Report*³⁴ (1987) was very simple: four actors read aloud the diary of a farmer's wife, who had been deported to Siberia, and sang popular songs from this woman's songbook while photos from her photo album were projected on the back wall.

Like Valhalla, Karusoo's group did not prioritize artistic innovation but rather treated their work as social therapy in a sense. They believed that bringing to light the lives of repressed Estonians would rehabilitate them. Performances in the Pirgu manor cellar (which could accommodate only sixty people) primarily addressed local people.³⁵ Thus, their work can be viewed in the context of community theatre, as well as that of political theatre, since, in the transition period, national memory became a battlefield of political significance. A determined nationalist attitude and good professional skills brought them critical acclaim. The Pirgu group can even be called a kind of visiting card for the emerging independent theatre³⁶.

The second trend is best exemplified by the Tartu Children's Theatre whose governing idea was to introduce young people to the folklore of diverse nations. The members of the group created performances based on folkloristic material, combining fairy tales, folk songs, spells, traditional folk music, and the like.^{Aside} from Estonian folklore, they employed the ethnic heritage of other Finno-Ugric (Veps, Khanty, Udmurt) and northern (Norwegian, Sámi) peoples, up to American Indians and Australian aborigines. The main emphasis was placed on text and music, while a visual side (costumes, props, etc.) remained secondary. Only later, from the production based on Inuit fairy tales *Quartsilluni* (1992, directed by Anne Törnpu), did the use of stage, light, and musical design

33 Their work paralleled the life story collection campaigns that were organized in the late 1980s under the auspices of the Estonian Literary Museum and pursued the same goals. About Karusoo's memory theatre see Kruuspere 2010. Her theatre has been compared to Anna Deavere Smith, see Monaco, Kurvet-Käosaar 2002.

34 The title indicates that this was the first report on the work done by the memory department.

35 Performances of *The Report* were free. Moreover, the performers arranged transport to the manor for elderly people.

36 When theatre people from the Nordic countries visited Estonia in 1989, they were shown a performance by the Pirgu group, in addition to the leading state theatres. The group was also invited to Moscow to participate in a festival of small theatres. See Karusoo 2014, 140–1.

become an increasingly vital means of expression.³⁷

Tartu Children's Theatre continued and furthered the trend of Finno-Ugric (more broadly Boreal) theatre, which emerged in the late 1970s – early 1980s.³⁸ In the context of identity politics, this trend manifested opposition to the Soviet identity model. According to Kristin Kuutma, "The intensive manifestation of Finno-Ugric identity in arts and culture became a political instrument in the presentation of selfhood and in the constitution of that selfhood. It concurred with the struggle for authenticity in cultural expression to oppose the de-authenticating decontextualization of the over-politicized Soviet culture."³⁹ Thus, their theatre served to (re)invigorate Estonian national identity utilizing new alternative cultural resources. From the perspective of both identity politics and aesthetic preferences, the turn to the Finno-Ugric folkloristic heritage and interest in non-European cultures exhibit the wish to rest upon an indigenous premodern cultural ground in place of following modern Western models.

To a significant extent, the two above-mentioned trends took root in Soviet-era theatre experiments. Karusoo's memory theatre dates back to a couple of biographical productions of the early 1980s⁴⁰, while Tartu Children's Theatre was strongly affected by Jaan Tooming's interest in indigenous cultures and a commitment to Lutheranism that were manifest in his Soviet-era productions. Indeed, there existed "enclaves" of artistic alternativeness in or at large state theatres (like studios or smaller groups of like-minded actors). The Estonian "theatre revolution" of the late 1960s, one of the key figures of which was Jaan Tooming, is one example. They can be described by Alexei Yurchak's term "deterritorialized milieu": a zone that occupies an oscillating position, being "a part of the system and yet not following certain of its parameters" at the same time⁴¹. There, it was possible to generate meanings that were not assumed but were enabled by the system itself and to move borders between what was allowed and what was forbidden.

Aesthetic changes II: the advent of postmodernism

In contrast to the two trends discussed above, the third and aesthetically most radical trend (exemplified by the early VAT Theatre, *Ruto Killakund*, and *Gregor*) was affected by Western postmodern theatre, which, in retrospect, can also be called post-dramatic. Here we see an attempt to synchronize with Western developments.

VAT did not try to elaborate any definite artistic profile during their first, i.e. studio theatre period (1987–91). Instead, the group experimented with a variety of styles and genres; among other things, few performances of contemporary dance occurred under VAT's auspices. From the very beginning, the group adopted a method of collective creation, and occasionally they employed a

37 Türnpu 2000, 3–4.

38 See Epner, Saro 2020, 159–61.

39 Kuutma 2005, 55–6.

40 *Our Biographies* (1982) was compiled from life story interviews with theatre students who also performed it; *When the Rooms are Full...*, based on the same material, was banned before the opening night, as taboo topics (deportation to Siberia, the Berlin wall) were discussed onstage.

41 Yurchak 2006, 128, 132.

practice of devising. Their rather minimalist but playful productions include, for instance, a clownish adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy *Silent Hamlet*⁴² (with a minimum of verbal text), and a happening, *One day in the Zoo* (both in 1989). In the latter one, the visitors of the zoo saw the performers sitting in cages and embodying various human characters – a drunkard, a newspaper reporter, a prostitute, etc.⁴³.

One Day in the Zoo was arranged by Peeter Jalakas who soon separated from VAT and continued with Ruto Killakund⁴⁴. After graduating from Tallinn University in 1987, Jalakas had traveled to Europe to study with Eugenio Barba at Odin Teatret and with an avant-garde stage director, Roberto Ciulli, in Germany. He was also strongly influenced by the work of Pina Bausch and Richard Foreman. Such an educational background, in association with ongoing direct contacts with Western avant-garde groups (among others, via Baltoscandal), may account for Jalakas' keen interest in alternative modes of performance that differed sharply from the Estonian mainstream theatre of the time. Ruto Killakund defined itself as a clear opposite to institutional theatre and predominant realistic style alike. The group highly valued openness to the West, which meant working in the context of contemporary Western theatre, in the first place, perceiving themselves as a natural part of it. In the words of Jalakas, the theatre must be completely free with regard to artistic choices, so: "Let us give green light to every kind of bizarreness!"⁴⁵

Ruto's productions were typically created by a long process of collective improvisation, various theatrical means were used on a non-hierarchical basis, and the verbal part was usually rather scarce. Due to their non-narrative, associative structure, performances were meant to affect audiences similarly to musical works, where not every motif and phrase needs to be apprehended exactly.⁴⁶ The collaboration with an exile Estonian, Hillar Liitoja⁴⁷, called *Meaninglessly* (1990, at Baltoscandal), offers a vivid example: in different parts of a spacious attic, formally dressed performers read Estonian contemporary poetry and performed illogical acts to the accompaniment of symphonic music. According to a critic, the performance was as difficult to describe as abstract art or music⁴⁸.

One might assume that Ruto's postmodern artistic strategies were primarily informed by (neo)liberal ideas and values (openness, unlimited creative freedom, individual self-expression, and the like) as opposed to conservative nationalism but, somewhat surprisingly, Ruto worked with Estonian folklore

42 This production premiered as a guest performance in Finland, Jyväskylä.

43 About VAT Theatre see Avestik 2005.

44 About *Ruto Killakund* see Ruus 2005, and website of Von Krahl Theatre, currently available only in Estonian: <https://vonkrahl.ee/info/ajalugu> (08.02.2021).

45 Roheline tee 1991, 51.

46 Garancis 1997, 7.

47 Liitoja resides in Canada. He was trained as a concert pianist but in 1982 he founded a theatre company DNA in Toronto. See <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Hillar%20Liitoja> (05.02.2021)

48 Rähesoo 1990, 7.

and Finno-Ugric mythology as well⁴⁹. Imaginative productions that combined archaic material, personal experiences of the performers, and postmodern artistic strategies, may have been their most original contribution. So, Estonian games. The giraffe moves on (1991), the result of free collective improvisation, was a collage of Estonian folk games and beliefs, intertwined with motifs from the performers' dreams and intimate memories.

At the beginning of its activities, Ruto focused on professional self-development, adopting and adapting the ideas and practices of Western alternative theatre, while their fairly small audiences primarily included friends and acquaintances. Yet, the other pole was a series of attractive large-scale outdoor shows in different found spaces⁵⁰ under the umbrella title Turn. These performances comprised only little text, if any, employing the expressive means of street theatre and carnival instead: there were fireworks in a dark sky, drums were beaten, performers wore big masks, walked around on stilts, etc.

With regard to aesthetics, Gregor⁵¹ moved along paths similar to Ruto. This project-based group (a separate troupe of performers was assembled for each production) cultivated practices of collective creation. The core of the group was fascinated by the aesthetics of surrealism, thus, they created some productions out of surrealistic poetry, for example, Laaban's evening (1989), dedicated to exile Estonian poet Ilmar Laaban. More interestingly, several fairly absurdist productions of Gregor employed strategies characteristic of performance art. The most radical reaction against theatrical conventions was Lågmälda⁵² at the Baltoscandal (1990). Spectators were shown an almost empty stage for twenty minutes, without any performers: there was a table with an ashtray on it where a cigarette was glowing, two chairs, one of them upside down, and a wrinkled newspaper on the floor – like an implicit proposal to reconstruct a dramatic event out of remaining traces.

The third trend, that of postmodern aesthetics, had practically no roots in the Soviet-era theatre tradition, nor did this trend have artistic parallels or equivalents in contemporary mainstream theatre. This is why contemporary criticism tended to view the productions in "peculiar postmodern stylistics" as "artistic anomalies or oddities".⁵³ However, in the long run, the trend proved viable.

Concluding remarks

Two processes that mutually complemented each other – the institutional change and the ideological/aesthetic change – eventually led to the reorganization of the Estonian theatre field. Although Estonia maintained a system of state repertory theatres, new theatrical forms and practices enriched and diversified the field. All the more so as small independent theatres kept emerging throughout the

49 Consider the group's name. Ruto is an evil deity in Sámi mythology, "killakund (kildkond)" is an Estonian dialect word meaning "community". As pointed out above, the group worked at the Estonian Folk Culture Development Centre.

50 For example, in the ruins of Pirita (St. Bridget's) convent in Tallinn, on Toome Hill in Tartu.

51 *Gregor* operated at intervals from 1988 to 1996.

52 The title refers to Ilmar Laaban's poem in Swedish.

53 Saro 2009, 96.

1990s. Changes did not occur in a revolutionary way but rather step-by-step, at the same pace with the democratization of society. New opportunities that opened up due to the politics of *perestroika* were taken advantage of in full measure. The main strategies for institutional innovation were: first, to follow a freer all-USSR model (studio theatres, connecting a theatre group with some legitimate institution); second, to define oneself as an amateur group in order to be able to operate separately from the state cultural system. Some groups assembled around a well-established stage director with original handwriting but, in most cases, new theatres adopted Western democratic practices (such as collective creation) and valued non-hierarchical in-group relationships.

The groups active in the late 1980s and early 1990s were mostly unstable and short-lived. Only a few (e.g. VAT Theatre, Varius) survived and still operate today. Tartu Children's Theatre was transformed into a municipal theatre in 1991 but was closed down by city authorities in 2000. In October 1992, the first permanent private theatre in Estonia, Von Krahl Theatre, was founded on the basis of Ruto Killakund. The participation of the Minister of Culture of a newly independent Estonia in this festive event, highlighted its symbolic meaning as a milestone on the way (back) to the Western world.

With regard to the aesthetic profiles of the new theatre groups, two more general patterns emerge from the trends examined above: first, the artistic radicalization of the Soviet-era search for alternative styles, which was in turn empowered by the rise of Estonian national ideology (documentary theatre of life-stories, theatre based on the indigenous folkloristic heritage); second, elaboration of postmodern artistic strategies, largely triggered by contemporary Western ideas about theatre and performance.

Karusoo-style documentary theatre rapidly merged into the mainstream. This is less true for theatre based on ethnic heritage, which is, today, a marginal but colorful phenomenon in the Estonian theatre landscape. As to the main novelty, a postmodern aesthetics, it was cultivated and furthered by Von Krahl Theatre that became the flagship of alternative theatre in the 1990s. Even though this trend was for a long time viewed as peripheral, it had become "normal theatre" by the twenty-first century and is widespread in many individual variations in today's Estonian theatre.

In Estonia, like in other Eastern and Central European post-communist countries, alternative theatrical trends have represented "an aesthetic resistance to the culture of systematic unification and political rhetoric that served the totalitarian state."⁵⁴ Independent theatres contributed to the democratization not only of the theatre system but of the broader aesthetic field, and ultimately to the general democratization of Estonian society.

54 Warner 2020, xxiii.

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