

# Cause of Death: *Lähiö* Stereotypes, Utopias and Dystopias in Turku City Theatre's *Varissuo*

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## ABSTRACT

As geographically and socially marginalized neighbourhoods, Finnish *lähiös* are associated with urban segregation and a set of stereotypes about their residents. Claiming to portray everyday life in the *lähiö*, in 2018, Turku City Theatre premiered a musical theatre production *Varissuo*, which was set in the city's largest and most multicultural housing unit. This article investigates how *Varissuo* was constructed and depicted both on stage and beyond the stage by analyzing several characters and their storylines, as well as material details present in the theatre building's lobby area. Drawing from Richard Dyer's notion of stereotypes as a product of assumed consensuses about specific social groups, the article first focuses on plotting how both novelistic and stereotypical characters contributed to an understanding of the *lähiö* as a locus of ill-being and personal struggle. Critically approaching Jill Dolan's conceptual utopian performatives, the article then discusses the elements of utopia and dystopia in *Varissuo*, suggesting that the representation of the *lähiö* on stage and in the theatre building erased political potential of the utopian performatives and subverted them into a counterproductive force. I argue that the utilization of *lähiö* stereotypes and *Varissuo*'s detachment from its real-life origins potentially contributes to further stigmatization and polarization between social groups.

## KEYWORDS

stereotypes, *lähiö*, *Varissuo*, musical theatre, utopian performatives, dystopia, Turku City Theatre, urban segregation

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# Cause of Death: *Lähiö*

## Stereotypes, Utopias and Dystopias in Turku City Theatre's *Varissuo*

This article focuses on the musical theatre production *Varissuo*, which premiered at Turku City Theatre in Finland in 2018. Before discussing the production, I will elaborate on the historical and social context of *lähiös* and especially *Varissuo*, where the story takes place. The article follows the chronology of a theatregoing event, first analyzing the material details in the theatre space, then focusing on the performance itself and finally reflecting on how experiencing the production at Turku City Theatre contributed to the formation of stigma and stereotypes. In addition to public statements made by members of the production team and the content in the printed *Varissuo* production program, a primary source in the analysis are my personal notes taken during a 30 December 2018 *Varissuo* performance.

### Constructing the *Lähiö*: The Trouble-Centered Narrative

The Finnish word *lähiö* was originally coined by Otto-I. Meurman and Hannes Teppo to refer to the new affordable residential housing units first built in Helsinki after World War II.<sup>1</sup> Academic research on *lähiös* emerged at the end of the 1970s when the new kind of urban environments started to spark interest in the fields of sociology and anthropology. As subjects of study, *lähiö* residents were quickly positioned as the “other.” This can be seen in well-known studies such as sociologist Matti Korteinen’s 1982 *Lähiö*, where the *lähiö* is approached from an ethnographic standpoint as a foreign and exotic working-class community.<sup>2</sup> Problem-centered narratives about *lähiös* have also been formulated by the Finnish press, as investigated by Irene Roivainen in her 1999 dissertation *Sokeripala metsän keskellä* (“Sugar cube in the middle of the forest.”) Contemporary *lähiö* research recognizes that the notion of *lähiös* as problem neighborhoods still dominates public narratives but can stand in strong opposition with lived experiences of *lähiö* residents.<sup>3</sup> Issues associated with *lähiö* living have ranged from poor public transport to the more recent urban segregation, which is a growing phenomenon not only in Finland, but across the Nordics. A 2019 Nordic Council of Ministers report defines urban segregation as “the separation of social groups at the residential level of an urban area.”<sup>4</sup> Influenced by factors such as immigration, housing policies, and socioeconomic developments, segregation is interrelated with and inseparable from the topics of integration and inequality.

### *Varissuo* the *Lähiö* and *Varissuo* the Musical

Steadily increased immigration to Finland since the 1990s has been a significant factor in how segregation, especially ethnic segregation, has manifested in the urban areas. The city of Turku has one of the highest immigrant populations in the country, and the city’s largest *lähiö*

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1 Roivainen 1999, 12.

2 Roivainen 1999, 14.

3 Junnilainen 2019; Kemppainen 2017.

4 Tunström and Wang 2019, 6.

Varissuo has become the local locus of *lähiö*- and segregation discussion. Located seven kilometres East from the city centre, Varissuo has nearly 9000 inhabitants who represent over 60 different ethnicities.<sup>5</sup> Like with many other *lähiös*, the press has constructed a narrative about Varissuo as a troublesome, if not a dangerous place. Varissuo's reputation started to form before the biggest wave of immigration, as the *lähiö*'s lack of green areas and its densely built apartment blocks led to worries about the area turning into a "ghetto." The economic recession at the beginning of the 1990s, which also overlapped with the arrival of a number of immigrants from Iraq, Iran, Yugoslavia, and Somalia, resulted in an increase in unemployment and crime in the area.<sup>6</sup> Varissuo's stigma as a restless place persists.

In 2018, Turku City Theatre announced the premiere of an original musical theatre production about Varissuo. As a Finnish musical theatre production depicting a real-life *lähiö*, *Varissuo* was the first of its kind.<sup>7</sup> *Varissuo* premiered on 7 September 2018 and was the last part of Turku City Theatre's Turku-themed musical theatre trilogy. The first part, *Kakola*, which premiered in 2012, was about the inmates of the famous Turku prison, Kakola, and the second part, *Seili*, which premiered in 2014, told the stories of women who were trapped on the island of Seili which used to function as a psychiatric ward. Turku City Theatre's dramaturg, playwright Satu Rasila wrote the entire trilogy, and *Varissuo* was directed by Mikko Kouki, who is also the Director of Arts at Turku City Theatre. The lyricist of *Varissuo* was hip hop musician Paleface, aka Karri Miettinen. In a blog text that he wrote for Turku City Theatre before the premiere, Miettinen mentions Lin-Manuel Miranda's 2015 Off-Broadway hit musical *Hamilton* as an inspiration for the musical and narrational tools used in *Varissuo*.<sup>8</sup> According to Miettinen, *Varissuo* was Turku City Theatre's response to the trend of merging hip hop and musical theatre. Also drawing from other musical genres such as R'n'B and pop music, *Varissuo* was then marketed as an experimental urban musical which brought global theatre trends to Turku.

The musical follows four overlapping storylines: an irresponsible father needing to reconnect with his son after the mother is diagnosed with cancer; a teenage girl whose dream of becoming a singer is challenged when she becomes pregnant; a lonely man who has lost touch with his daughter and a young man who starts questioning his violent lifestyle. *Varissuo* received mixed reviews. It was praised for its dynamic and multicultural ensemble, but criticized for offering an exaggerated and cliché-filled depiction of Varissuo.<sup>9</sup> In her review of the musical, *Helsingin Sanomat* journalist Laura Hallamaa writes: "The *lähiö* on stage cannot help becoming an exotic and distant ghetto, which the theatre audience can glare at."<sup>10</sup> Hallamaa describes a dynamic where the audience observes the *lähiö* residents as "others" whose lives are a subject of speculation and curiosity. I argue that the construction of this dynamic did not only happen on stage, but also manifested in the material details of the theatregoing event, such as the lobby space and the program handout.

### **A Pastry and a Graffiti Wall: Construction of Varissuo Through the Material Details**

In her approach to live performance events, feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan takes into consideration not only the action on stage, but the overall act of theatregoing from the audience's perspective. With her conceptual performative utopias, Dolan argues that intense feelings of momentary utopia can be reached through intersubjectivity during live performance. She recognizes that the material details and environment one consumes before, during, and after a performance play a significant role in the formulation of performative utopias. As an example, in her article "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative'" Dolan describes

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5 Rasinkangas 2014, 1.

6 Lehtinen 2020.

7 More commonly than on the stage, the *lähiö* environment has been depicted in Finnish cinema: especially the *lähiös* of Helsinki area have functioned as bleak concrete settings for narratives that focus on struggling, whether it be with addiction, finances, or social relationships. Directors such as Antti J. Jokinen, Pirjo Honkasalo, and Aleksi Tuomivaara have created dark, violent, and even hopeless urban worlds, from which there seems to be no escape from. Leinonen 2021.

8 Paleface 2018.

9 Gustafsson 2018; Rantanen 2018.

10 Hallavaara 2018. Original Finnish: "Lähiöstä tulee näyttämöllä nyt auttamatta eksottinen ja etäinen ghetto, jota teatteriyleisö saa pälistellä."

a community-based theatre in The East Side Latino neighbourhood of Austin, Texas. The performance venue's geographically marginalized location allows the audience to gain distance from the forms of middle- and high-brow culture that are offered and consumed in the downtown area. The performance venue hence utilizes its marginality to enable non-mainstream art which has the potential to build community in a non-hegemonic way.<sup>11</sup> With *Varissuo*, the dynamic was reversed. The geographically distant Varissuo was brought to the city centre, which is the cultural and geographical locus of mainstream theatre consumption in the city. The Varissuo presented to the repertoire theatre audience was hence geographically detached from its origins. Furthermore, I argue that the material details in the theatre building which were meant to bring the audience members closer to Varissuo in fact made the *lähiö* more distant.

The audience was immersed in the Varissuo theme right upon arrival, as the construction of a *lähiö* aesthetic began in the lobby space. In the downstairs area where the audience enters the building, the theatregoers were greeted by a large backdrop with the word "Varissuo" spray painted on it in colourful graffiti letters. The backdrop invited people to pose for pictures and keep a Varissuo-themed souvenir while being seven kilometres away from the actual *lähiö*. During the intermission, the theatre café sold apple yoghurt flavoured "Varissuo pastries". The pastries had an edible apartment block attached to them and the text #Vakke, an abbreviation for Varissuo in local slang, written with icing on the top (Figure 1). The generic urban imagery played a decorative role in the lobby space, but also positioned the audience as explorers of the exotified *lähiö*. The pastries and the graffiti wall that utilized a generic urban concrete aesthetic turned Varissuo into a concept that could be both commodified and consumed.



Figure 1: Varissuo pastry for Turku City Theatre, photo by Mikko Hietala.

11 Dolan 2001, 461.

### “Varissuo is Like This:” Stereotypes and Assumed Consensuses

The content and structuring of the printed *Varissuo* program which the audience members could purchase further positioned the theatregoers as curious visitors of the *lähiö*. On the first pages of the program is a director’s note where the director, Mikko Kouki reflects on *lähiös* and the motivations behind making *Varissuo*. Kouki writes: “When suburbs make it to the headlines, it often has to do with burning cars. Rebellion that has been smouldering and now lights up. Beer bottles foaming, gangs raging. But what is normal life in the *lähiös*, everyday life, and relationships behind the headlines? What kind of people live in the *lähiös*, what kind of stories happen?”<sup>12</sup> The director’s note assumes that the audience members are familiar with *lähiös* only through newspaper or tabloid headlines, while the “normal life in the *lähiös*” remains a mystery. The dynamic of “us” versus “them” was hence already present in the written and decorative materials available to the audience before the performance. The positioning of *Varissuo* and its residents as something distant, existing “behind the headlines,” makes them prone to stereotyping. *Varissuo* utilized various stereotypes in the representation of its characters and the *lähiö* space in general.

Before further investigating the stereotypes in *Varissuo*, it is necessary to discuss how stereotypes function. In his *The Matter of Images*, film scholar Richard Dyer draws from Walter Lippman’s theory of stereotypes. According to Lippman, stereotypes function in social thought as an “ordering process” and “a short cut” but also as a tool to create social hierarchies where one positions oneself in relation to others.<sup>13</sup> According to Dyer, stereotypes are products of assumed consensuses about specific social groups. What is assumed is that the agreement pre-exists the stereotype, whereas ideas about a given group often stem from the stereotype itself.<sup>14</sup> Dyer draws from sociologist Orrin E Klapp, who distinguishes social types and stereotypes: whereas social types represent people who “belong” to a given society, stereotypes are labeled as the outcasts; the “others.”<sup>15</sup> Stereotypes divide and categorize groups of people through a discourse of belonging. The categorization of *lähiö* residents as the “other,” which was present in early *lähiö* research, was reproduced throughout the event of going to see *Varissuo*.

It becomes apparent from the content of the *Varissuo* program that the production expected to draw audiences who are not familiar with *Varissuo*, or the *lähiö* life in general. In the program, there are two pages dedicated to *Varissuo* residents’ testimonials. The residents, most of them with an immigrant background, talk positively about *Varissuo*: family and friends are close, as well as all the services one might need.<sup>16</sup> The section in the program, titled “*Varissuo* is also like this”, also includes an informational paragraph which mentions *Varissuo*’s history and statistical information about the many cultures and languages represented in the *lähiö*. The layout resembles a textbook, which contributes to the representation of *Varissuo* as a distant and foreign place. This representation resonates with the approach of early *lähiö* research which positioned the researchers as expeditioners in the *lähiö*.

The way in which the program’s content is arranged suggests a specific hierarchy of voices. The director’s reflections are first, hence prioritized, and the comments of *Varissuo* residents are placed on the last pages. The structure of the program reflects the overall dynamic of *Varissuo* when it comes to whose interests and experiences of the *lähiö* the production centralized on. The program section titled “*Varissuo* is also like this” communicates that the *lähiö* on stage was meant to be descriptive. The commodified *lähiö* aesthetic in the lobby, the director’s and playwright’s points of view and, finally, the narratives on stage formed a statement: *Varissuo is like this*.

The following section discusses the novelistic characters and stereotypes that can be plotted in the storyline.

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12 Original Finnish: *Usein, kun lähiöt nousevat otsikoihin, se johtuu palavista autoista. Kapinasta, joka on kytenyt, ja leimahtanut esiin. Olutpullot kuohuvat, jengiläiset riehuvat. Mutta millaista tavallinen elämä lähiöissä on, arki ja ihmissuhteet otsikoiden takana? Millaisia ihmisiä lähiöissä asuu, millaisia tarinoita tapahtuu?* *Varissuo* program 2018.

13 Lippmann in Dyer 1993, 11.

14 Dyer 1993, 14.

15 Dyer 1993, 14.

16 *Varissuo* program 2018.

### The People of *Varissuo*: Novelistic Characters and Stereotypes

In reference to Klapp's categories of the social type and the stereotype, Dyer notes that characters under each category are used differently in fiction. Stereotypes are limited by predictable narratives, whereas social types can exhibit flexibility and growth.<sup>17</sup> Dyer writes: "Social types can figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (e.g. as hero, as villain, as helper, as light relief, etc.), whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative."<sup>18</sup> As an example of a stereotypical implicit storyline, Dyer mentions how in most films that depict an alcoholic character, their story will be one of "sordid decline or of inspiring redemption."<sup>19</sup> In *Varissuo*, both of these two storylines described by Dyer were detectable in the character of Aku (Matti Leino). The young man's alcoholism prevents him from studying and looking for employment. The stereotype of a young, unemployed, and lazy alcoholic stuck in the *lähiö* manifested itself the strongest during the musical number *Mä haluun valuu* ("I wanna flow"), during which Aku and his friends consume marijuana and alcohol while singing about wanting to "flow," which is slang for being lazy or directionless. During the party Aku gets his friend Nadia pregnant and is forced to choose between his current lifestyle and becoming sober and parenting a child. Finally, Aku is seen closing the lid of a vodka bottle and appearing at the hospital after the birth of his child. The character's narrative becomes a moralistic story about taking responsibility and accepting the consequences of one's actions.

The most stereotypical character in *Varissuo* was the Polish hairdresser Grazyna, portrayed by Minna Hämäläinen. With her 1980's style perm, stiletto heels, revealing outfits and strong accent, Grazyna was a caricature of an Eastern European woman. The stereotype materialized in Grazyna's extremely feminine, yet outdated aesthetic. In addition to the visual representation, the character was further sexualized in a scene where Grazyna was shown performing fellatio on a customer in her hairdressing salon. The audience reacted to Grazyna with amusement and laughter, clearly recognizing and responding to the aesthetic and behavioral signs that were presented through the stereotypical character. This reveals an assumed consensus of Eastern European women as aesthetically tasteless and promiscuous. Furthermore, using Grazyna as a comic relief in the plot suggests that there's a part of this consensus which allows and invites the audience to laugh at the social group and its assumed general characteristics. Lines delivered by Grazyna were not exceptionally amusing; it was the stereotype which created the amusement.

Not all the *Varissuo* characters were, however, stereotypes and could hence be categorized as novelistic characters. According to Dyer, novelistic characters are marked by a multiplicity of traits that are gradually revealed to the audience.<sup>20</sup> A surprising character development into a villain, for example, was depicted through the character of Johannes (Petja Lähde,) in the storyline of Rafa (Chike Ohanwe), a young black man living with his white mother Sarita (Riitta Salminen). Sarita starts to date Johannes. When Johannes finds out that Rafa is Sarita's biological son and not adopted as he thought, he uses a racist slur in a fit of anger and chases Sarita across *Varissuo*. At the end Rafa saves his mother, Johannes leaves them alone, and the threat of domestic violence is gone. Johannes first appeared as a caring lover, then as the villain – his character had flexibility. Rafa can also be categorized as a novelistic character rather than a stereotype due to his character development. Having grown up in the violence-fueled world of boxing and being dependent on his mother he lives with, the school-dropout Rafa makes an unexpected decision and quits boxing, moves out and starts studying again. Another novelistic character is Nadia (Lisa Nikula), a teenager who feels trapped in the *lähiö* and searches for a way out through pop-stardom. Experiencing a crisis after unplanned pregnancy, she decides to keep the child. In a scene at the hospital, Nadia holds her newborn child with her own previously distant father by her side as the child's father Aku introduces himself to the baby. Nadia's journey in *Varissuo* starts with rebellion and despair and ends with new life and hope for better relationships.

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17 Dyer 1993, 13.

18 Dyer 1993, 15.

19 Dyer 1993, 15.

20 Dyer 1993, 13.

The more central characters exhibited growth and unpredictability, which Dyer recognizes as a characteristic of a novelistic character. The caricature-like Grazyna, however, remained a stereotype, existing as a manifestation of an assumed consensus about how Eastern European women act and look like. Dyer argues that fictions typically favor the novelistic character over the type due to how society in general favors the individual over the collective.<sup>21</sup> Due to this, fictions arrive at representing social issues as personal and psychological ones.<sup>22</sup> A central theme in *Varissuo* was choice-making, which resonates with the idea of presenting wider societal issues as issues of the individual. Racism, for example, was represented as a bad and surprising characteristic of Johannes rather than a structural issue embedded in society. Nadia's malaise caused by the discouraging *lähiö* environment, again, seemed to vanish when she decided to keep the child.

Other storylines in *Varissuo* touched upon a custody battle, a woman's fight against cancer, loneliness, and disconnection with one's family. All *Varissuo*'s storylines contained elements of interpersonal conflict and dissatisfaction with one's life. In other words, the narratives implied an underlying causal connection between the *lähiö* and ill-being. This reflects the stereotypical consensus that people in *lähiös* are unhappy. In the case of *Varissuo*, this consensus has been proven to be incorrect. Arttu Saarinen's 2014 study on the experiences of happiness in different areas of Turku found that the residents of *Varissuo* are happier compared to other parts of the city. Unlike what one could assume from *Varissuo*, it was found that satisfaction with one's fellow residents was one of the most significant factors contributing to people's happiness in the *Varissuo*-Lauste area.<sup>23</sup> According to the study as well as the statements of the *Varissuo* residents included in the *Varissuo* program, *Varissuo* is experienced as a communal and happy place to live. The lack of community and happiness in the musical's narratives then become an example of how strong the assumed consensus that forms the stereotype can be. In *Varissuo*, the positive research results and residents' statements were overpowered by the implicit narrative of *lähiös* as unhappy environments.

*Varissuo*'s multicultural demographics, immigrant population, and the residents' experiences of communality were diminished in the depiction. *Varissuo*'s spectrum of ethnicities and languages was vaguely implied through non-white cast members and a few scenes where single lines were uttered in languages other than Finnish. None of *Varissuo*'s main storylines followed an immigrant individual or family, which means that a significant fraction of the *lähiö* residents were underrepresented. The multicultural *Varissuo* was depicted in an ethnocentric way in which minority groups are, in the words of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, "located within the host cultures grid."<sup>24</sup> In such cases, norms and conventions are structured according to the host culture and other cultures are tolerated rather than fully accepted. The limited representation of the many cultures, ethnicities and languages of *Varissuo* residents on stage functions as an example of cultural difference being erased in order to make the depiction of the *lähiö* digestible for non-*lähiö* audience members.

### The Universal *Lähiö*

Even though *Varissuo* labeled the characters' problems as personal issues which could be fixed by taking the correct action, they were simultaneously presented to the audience as relatable and universal. In an interview, the director Kouki states: "You can watch the musical even if you are not familiar with *Varissuo*. We're talking about people and stories. This could happen anywhere else as well."<sup>25</sup> Also a blog post from Miettinen, *Varissuo*'s lyricist, separates *Varissuo* from its local context: "Regardless of where we live and how much wealth we have, we are all emotional and fallible people. *Varissuo* shows human life as it is: cruel, but simultaneously

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21 Dyer talks about "our society" without specifying what exact society he is referring to.

22 Dyer 1993, 14.

23 Saarinen 2014, 3. Lauste is another *lähiö* located next to *Varissuo*.

24 Bhabha in Rutherford 1990, 208.

25 Original Finnish: "*Musikaalin voi katsoa, vaikkei tietäisi tai tuntisi Varissuota. Tässä puhutaan ihmisistä ja tarinoista. Tämä voisi tapahtua missä tahansa muuallakin kuin Varissuolla.*" Gustafsson, *Yleisradio* 8.9.2018.

merciful, ugly, but beautiful. And yes, small choices matter.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of universalism of the production’s theme rendered *Varissuo* as a no-place, where the characters and events were detached from the specific local context. In these accounts of the people behind *Varissuo*, the *lähiö* turns into an imagined place, which functions as a symbol of universal human struggles with relationships and life choices.

The concept of no-place is central to Dolan’s contextualization of utopia. Dolan is informed by Marxist philosophers Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse who reimagined utopia as the communication of alternative experiences of reality rather than a place. For Dolan, the notion of a no-place resonates with possibility and freedom of expression as any “fixed, static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire that imbues utopian performatives.”<sup>27</sup> Dolan’s utopian performatives hence materialize in intersubjective feelings shared in the theatre space. In *Varissuo*, rendering the *lähiö* as a no-place functioned in two ways. The representation of *Varissuo* on stage (and in the lobby space) emphasized personal struggle over community and turned the *lähiö* into a rather dystopian world, separate from the place described by the actual residents as a pleasant environment. At the same time, the universalist approach and an element of hope in the storylines created a platform for potential utopian performatives to emerge.

### The Dystopian and Utopian *Varissuo*

In the *Varissuo* program, the playwright Rasila states that all three musicals in the Turku trilogy deal with “conditions” which an individual can neither influence nor escape. She points out that whereas in *Kakola* and *Seili* this condition was geographical – a jail and a psychiatric ward island – in *Varissuo*, the condition does not refer to the *lähiö*. Rather, in *Varissuo*, the condition in question is “an individual’s position in the chain of generations.”<sup>28</sup> However, the narratives and song lyrics speak otherwise. The first musical number of the second act is even titled “Reason of Death: Lähiö” (*Kuolinsyy: Lähiö.*) The environment is hence not only suggested to be a condition, but even a fatal one. The motif of death and survival was also present in the song lyrics of the final musical act at the end of Act II. The entire ensemble appears on the stage, singing: “Small choices, big actions, small souls, big egos, not living our lives afraid of making mistakes, but all sharing the same goal: to stay alive.”<sup>29</sup> The lyrics suggest that *Varissuo* is not a place for living, but surviving; a dystopian environment where one needs to navigate difficult situations and unpleasant fellow residents.

A dystopian environment seen in *Varissuo* and feelings of utopia, however, are not mutually exclusive. Dolan writes: “Utopian performatives exceed the content of a play or performance; spectators might draw a utopian performative from even the most dystopian theatrical universe. Utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future.”<sup>30</sup> There was a feeling of hope present in the closing scene of *Varissuo* as the main characters’ overlapping stories culminated in a number of happy endings: a father accepting a daughter’s teen pregnancy; a mother beating cancer; a young man deciding to go back to high school, and another young man deciding to fight his addiction. Broken relationships were prepared and bad habits left behind. In context of the themes which the author, director, and lyricist plotted in *Varissuo*, it could be said that the characters made the right choices, and in Dolan’s words, performed “gestures towards a potentially better future.”<sup>31</sup> Regardless of some of the characters’ urge to leave *Varissuo*, strongly implied in the lyrics, none of the characters left the *lähiö* in the end. The ending suggested that one does not need to

26 Original Finnish: *Asuinpaikasta ja varallisuudesta riippumatta me ollaan kaikki samanlaisia tuntevia ja erehtyviä ihmisiä. Varissuo näyttää ihmisen elämän sellaisena kuin se on: julmana, mutta samaan aikaan armollisena, rumana, mutta kauniina. Ja kyllä, pienillä valinnoilla on merkitystä.* Paleface, *Kulttuuriblogi* blog

27 Dolan 2005, 7.

28 Original Finnish: “...ihmisen paikka sukupolvien ketjussa.” *Varissuo* program 2018.

29 Original Finnish: *Pieniä valintoja, suuria tekoja, pieniä sieluja, suuria egoja, ei eletä elämää virheiden pelossa, mut päämäärä kaikil’ selvitä elossa.* Lyrics drawn from my own notes written during the performance.

30 Dolan 2005, 8.

31 Dolan 2005, 8.

exit the dystopian environment in order to find better connections and happiness. The utopias which once were located outside of the *lähiö* and out of reach could, in fact, be found in other people, in this moment - in the *lähiö*.

### The Utopian Performative as a Counter-Productive Force

The elements of hope and reconnection introduced at the end of the plot resonate with Dolan's utopian performatives.<sup>32</sup> Utopian performatives carry political potential and give the audience members a chance to rehearse civic engagement as they become "citizens of a no-place that's a better place."<sup>33</sup> However, Dolan emphasises that as they are "most effective as feelings," they do not function as programs for social actions as such.<sup>34</sup> It is the intensity of feeling that can push to social action as people get inspired at the theatre and search for similar intersubjectivity in the outside world. *Varissuo* gave the audience an opportunity to empathize and feel with the *lähiö* residents on stage by connecting their personal struggles, challenges, and successes with universal themes of human connection and choice-making. In the dystopian theatrical *Varissuo* universe, there were seeds of hope and touching moments which brought the audience together and encouraged them to feel as a collective. Dolan writes that a moment of utopian performative "leaves us melancholy yet cheered, because for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences."<sup>35</sup> As previously discussed, members of the production team gave many statements about how the musical's storylines could take place anywhere, not just the *lähiö*. By producing a universalist version of *Varissuo*, the *lähiö* characters were made more relatable, and hence the commonalities were "hailed over the differences." Therefore, the shared feelings of collectivity and hope that the *Varissuo* audience members and performers could experience in the auditorium did not stem from a depiction of the *Varissuo* community, but rather the generic and abstract notions of human nature and searching for one's place in the world.

The feelings of melancholy and cheerfulness, as well as the inspiration for social change they might inspire, are strongly influenced by what kind of a reality the audience member returns to after a performance. As the content in the program and the construction of the *lähiö* in the lobby space revealed, *Varissuo* expected and targeted an audience of non-*lähiö* residents. For most of the theatregoers, the depiction of *Varissuo* on stage could have been the closest they had ever been to the area and its residents. The *lähiö* stereotypes which were performed on stage and materialized in the lobby space hence had high potential for enhancing the assumed consensus about *Varissuo*. In the *Varissuo* created on stage, the real-life *lähiö*'s spectrum of cultures and languages was underrepresented and the aspect of community which had been praised by the real-life residents was lacking. The frameworks for the utopian performatives which *Varissuo* offered through the thematic notion of hope were built on a distant and universalist rendering of the *lähiö*. *Varissuo* became a vague no-place where social and local issues specific to the *lähiö* were represented as a matter of individual decisions.

Considering the manifestation of stereotypes and emphasis on the individual over community, the feeling of shared hope present in *Varissuo* enabled what I label as counter-productive utopian performatives. The storylines in which the characters found seeds of utopia in the dystopian *lähiö* directed the audience to empathize with the imagined *Varissuo* residents, but based on the assumption that the *lähiö* is a problematic and undesirable place to live in. Because the *Varissuo* in the theatre building was detached from the real *Varissuo* in Turku, the political potential of the utopian performative was erased. The intersubjectivity and empathy provoked by the theme of hope and new beginnings then transforms into patronizing sympathy, which further pushes the *lähiö* residents to the distant category of "not-us;" "the other." The feelings of hopefulness which *Varissuo*'s happy endings produced could therefore lead to further polarization and segregation between social groups and strengthening of stereotypes

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32 Dolan 2005, 15.

33 Dolan 2005, 15.

34 Dolan 2005, 19.

35 Dolan 2005, 8.

about *lähiös*.

It is relevant to note that based on press interviews and the *Varissuo* program, the central people in the production team were not known to have a strong connection with *Varissuo* or *lähiös* in general. In the director's note, Kouki mentions that he lived in *Varissuo* for one summer as a teenager, and in the text positions himself as an outsider observing the life in the *lähiö*.<sup>36</sup> In an *Yleisradio* article, Kouki makes a statement about why Miettinen, aka Paleface, was a suitable lyricist for *Varissuo*: "I don't know Paleface's background, but he stinks of *lähiö*."<sup>37</sup> The comment shows that Kouki, as the director of the musical, understands the *lähiö* as a characteristic or a measurement of "street credibility" rather than a real place. Furthermore, the quote reveals that in the formulation of the production team, first-hand knowledge and experiences of *Varissuo* or *lähiös* was not prioritized.<sup>38</sup>

Dyer notes that "it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve."<sup>39</sup> As stereotypes have the potential to categorize people into insiders and outsiders and hence create distinctions between social groups, it is important to reflect on the source of these stereotypes also in fiction. The makers of *Varissuo* took a real-life *lähiö* and rendered it digestible to non-*lähiö* audiences, which put the performance-attendees in a voyeuristic position: the everyday life of the geographically and socially distant *Varissuo* was performed on stage through recognizable stereotypes and generic struggles which erased the local context. The *lähiö* was not constructed and defined based on the lived knowledge of *Varissuo* residents but assumed consensuses of what the place and its people are like. Due to this, *Varissuo* did not fight the stigma and prejudices surrounding *Varissuo* and *lähiös* in general. Rather, it served the interests of Turku City Theatre by drawing in audiences who were eager to see what kind of stories take place in the distant *lähiö* environment.

## Conclusion

*Lähiös* and their residents have been subject to stigmatization since the beginning of their existence through the trouble-centered narratives in the press and academic discourse. As suggested by Kouki in the director's note, *Varissuo* wanted to show life behind the headlines and offer a non-speculative depiction of the infamous Turku *lähiö*. I have argued that the execution of the production resulted in an opposite effect. This article has discussed how *Varissuo* utilized *lähiö* stereotypes in a way which did not dismantle them but reproduced them both on stage and beyond the stage. The language in the production program, as well as the material details such as the "Vakke-pastry" and the graffiti wall in the cloakroom area positioned the theatregoer as an explorer entering the unknown *lähiö* universe. *Varissuo* and its residents were hence presented as the "other," which put the audience in a voyeuristic position. On stage, *Varissuo* was depicted as a dystopian place where the storylines followed a narrative of struggle and survival and where the utopian elements of hope and human connection were dependent on making the correct choices in life. Societal issues such as alcoholism, domestic abuse, and racism were presented as personal problems caused by the individual and their decisions. *Varissuo* lacked narratives that centered the real-life *Varissuo* residents' testimonials about happiness in the *lähiö*. Additionally, multiculturalism as a positive phenomenon and the spectrum of languages and ethnicities in *Varissuo* were underrepresented.

It must be emphasized that *Varissuo* never claimed to be a documentary or community theatre play but was presented as an urban musical inspired by a real place. However, this does not mean that the production cannot contribute to *Varissuo*'s stigma and maintain assumed consensuses that, in turn, can strengthen harmful stereotypes about *lähiös*. As Jill Dolan suggests with her utopian performatives, live performance can offer intersubjective feelings of hope which can contribute to social change. The representation of *Varissuo* in *Varissuo* created what I have described as counterproductive utopian performatives, which are based on distant sympathizing rather than empowering experiences of hope and togetherness. I argue that

36 *Varissuo* program 2018.

37 Gustafsson 2018. Original Finnish: *En tiedä Palefacen taustaa, mutta hän haisee lähiöltä.*

38 There is no information on Satu Rasila's background, but also no mentions found of her connection with the *lähiö*. Karri Miettinen has mentioned that he grew up in a middle-class family. Niittymäki 2015.

39 Dyer 1993, 12.

the outcome could have been radically different if the production had, from the start, actively engaged with real-life *Varissuo* residents by listening to their stories and incorporating them in the dramaturgy. Instead, *Varissuo* emphasized the generic theme of life's tough choices, and the stories of joy and community were reduced to a page in the program.

In December 2021, it was announced that Turku City Theatre had launched a research and outreach program together with the Cultura foundation with the aim to make theatrical activities more accessible to language minorities. The project was conducted through interviews, questionnaires, and discussion groups conducted in Finnish, English, Arabic, and Russian.<sup>40</sup> This outreach initiative shows a willingness to engage a variety of voices and people who might not usually make their way to the auditorium. In possible future productions depicting stigmatized places and people, I would wish for institutions like Turku City Theatre to invest in reaching out to said communities and formulate the narratives through active dialogue and engagement. I argue that such an approach would, rather than enhancing existing stereotypes, show its audiences theatre's potential to unite people through shared moments in the auditorium and other sites of performance.

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40 Turku City Theatre 2021.

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