

Icebreakers

The Untold Story of Queer Theatre in Post-Soviet Estonia

EVA-LIISA LINDER

ABSTRACT

The Singing Revolution which led to the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, was accompanied by a cultural 'sexual revolution'. After the cessation of theatre censorship in 1988, cultural influences in repertoire shifted from East to West, allowing for the exploration of once-taboo subjects like gender and sexuality. This fostered modern queer theatre, that embraces LGBTQ+ themes, characters, and aesthetics. Estonian queer theatre quickly evolved from portraying dandy figures and gay heroes to transgender and drag characters. It embraced various styles from psychological realism to documentary, devised, and physical theatre.

This paper explores queer elements within Estonian theatre, set against the backdrop of Western queer theatre history. It focuses on the last decades, examining how queer theatre functioned as a litmus test of democracy and challenged post-Soviet norms from a cultural research perspective. Grounded in basic research of stage messages and media reception, it reflects societal attitudes and the trauma of social change. Throughout the history of Estonian professional theatre, queer themes have appeared in over a hundred productions, resonating in more than five hundred reviews and attracting an estimated one million theatre visits in a country of 1.3 million. This article marks the first mapping of Estonian queer theatre.

KEYWORDS

queer theatre, Estonian theatre, transgressive art, transition culture, cultural trauma, democracy

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Introduction

Theatre has a unique power to subvert or legitimize through public presentation. Queer theatre, in particular, is known for addressing taboo subjects and subverting societal norms. Some argue that the portrayal of queer identities on stage can challenge prevailing discourses on sexuality and encourage audiences to recognize “otherness” within themselves, as observed by queer theatre scholar Alan Sinfield.¹

The history of Western queer theatre is closely tied to the struggle for liberation, drawing the attention of controlling institutions like religious authorities, censorship bodies, and political organizations. Over time, society began categorizing homosexuals based on psychological, medical, legal, and literary discourses.² The early twentieth century saw Anglo-American plays depicting homosexuals as deviant or dandified characters, while the Cold War era added tensions, viewing homosexuals as potential traitors and security risks.³

The gay liberation movement, inspired by the abolition of theatre censorship in Great Britain in 1968 and the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, led to radical actions and pride. However, the tragic era of AIDS along with homophobic politics in the 1980s brought discrimination, and stigmatization, posing new challenges for theatre to address. Subsequently, the post-AIDS “queer” consciousness continued the legacy of the proud gay theatre while showcasing the versatility of transgressive sexualities.

Against this backdrop, various authors have engaged in discussions regarding the definition of queer theatre and the ever-evolving vocabulary that presents a particular challenge. For a long time, “homosexual” served as a more formal term, and “gay” appeared later as a self-conscious and campaigning word. In recent decades “queer” has become modish to denote transgressive and non-normative sexualities.⁴ However, Alan Sinfield argues that the concept of “queer” maintains relevance even up to the 1960s as it encompasses the obscure sense of something “not quite right,” associated with a partial awareness of same-sex passion.⁵ British theatre scholars Carl Miller and Michael Billington concur that today “queer theatre” is a widely accepted umbrella term that refers to the gay, lesbian, and other dissident sexualities movement in theatre, encompassing various genres like plays, musicals, cabaret, and more.⁶

Therefore, this paper, in accordance with prevailing research, refers to queer theatre as plays and productions featuring queer themes, characters, aesthetics, or sensibility, including cross-gender casting or camp aesthetics as a means of social commentary. However, specific terms may be used in different contexts. Additionally, theatres have used queer elements

1 Sinfield 1999, 1.

2 Foucault 1990, 43, 101.

3 Jongh 1992, 47.

4 E.g. Miller 1996, 13–14; Sinfield 1999, 5–6; Monforte 2014, 155.

5 Sinfield 1999, 5–6.

6 Billington 2012; Miller 1996, 13.

for various purposes, such as telling other stories, that may not be perceived as queer, or introducing “otherness”, or directly addressing queerness. As a result, the interpretation of the playwright, stage director, and reception may not always align.

Queer Theatre Against the Backdrop of Estonian History

In the early twentieth century, as Estonian professional theatre developed, subtle queer elements began to grace stages through hints and allusions, complementing the playful approach to gender found in Estonian traditional culture.

During Estonia’s first independence period from 1918 to 1940, the burgeoning national arts emphasized modernity and alternativeness, showcasing gender-sensitive works by playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, Somerset Maugham, and Brandon Thomas more than thirty times. The overall liberal atmosphere was reflected in the hundreds of references to non-normative sex-gender practices in interwar Estonian print media.⁷ While the staging of Western dramaturgy in Estonia became restricted during the subsequent Soviet occupation period (1940–1991), these playwrights continued to be staged by Estonian diaspora theatres. For instance, Maugham’s *The Circle* with its critical perspective on marriage and a closeted gay character,⁸ was premiered by an Estonian troupe in Canada in 1961, while it was not staged in Estonia until fifty years later, in 2011.

During the Soviet Union, the socialist system sought to erase homosexuality from public consciousness, both ideologically and physically.⁹ The regime considered non-normative sexuality as a threat to the ostensibly pure and heterosexual Soviet workforce, while queerness was associated with capitalism.¹⁰ Homosexual conduct remained a criminal offense in the Soviet Union for nearly six decades. Paragraph 118 of the criminal code prescribed sentences of up to two years in prison, with or without exile, for consensual anal intercourse between men.¹¹ Consequently, over 200 men were convicted in Soviet Estonia¹² and altogether tens of thousands of individuals were imprisoned for sodomy in the Soviet Union between 1934 and 1993, while lesbians were targeted through the mental health system.¹³ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, homosexuality was decriminalized in independent Estonia in 1992.¹⁴

The Soviet occupation significantly impacted Estonian culture, resulting in a stark divergence in social and artistic life compared to the West. Ideological censorship and self-censorship influenced theatrical themes more than aesthetics.¹⁵ In addition to forbidden authors whose biographies or works were unacceptable to Soviet authorities, there existed an implicit list of taboo topics, including sexuality and intimacy, as explored by Estonian theatre scholar Anneli Saro.¹⁶

However, tiny holes appeared in the Iron Curtain, allowing for the staging of a few modern realistic plays critical of capitalism. For example, the Estonian premiere of Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* (*Vaade sillalt*, 1958), hinting at a sexuality that “ain’t right,”¹⁷ took place in the heart of the capital Tallinn, merely three years after its world premiere.¹⁸

Estonia’s short-lived theatre renewal in the late 1960s introduced not only metaphorical freedom and physical theatre, but also the new wave of Western dramaturgy that reached behind the Iron Curtain in drops and flickers. In 1968–1970, Estonian premieres delivered sexual hints in plays by Tennessee Williams, Yukio Mishima, and John Osborne; gay characters in Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* (*Mee maik*, 1969), and Peter Shaffer’s *Black Comedy* (*Must komöödia*, 1970). Since homosexuality could not be openly voiced in

7 Põldsam 2023, 52.

8 Sinfield 1999, 43–4.

9 Vērđiņš & Ozoliņš 2016, 1.

10 Moss 2015, 49; Healey 2014, 97.

11 “Criminal Case No 6.” 2015, 1.

12 Põldsam 2023, 45.

13 Viola 2015, 20; Moss 2015, 45.

14 Koppel 2022, 132.

15 Rāhesoo 2011, 435.

16 Saro 2018, 300.

17 Miller 1957, 34–5.

18 Miller’s works were banned in the Soviet Union from 1971 (Saro 2018, 289).

Soviet times, the transgression was mainly performative.

The arrival of the Gorbachev era with its watchwords “restructuring”, “openness”, and “democracy”, led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Historian Dan Healey has observed that a discursive “sexual revolution” accompanied the wider political revolution during the post-Soviet era. Openness in the realm of sexuality brought a stunning media embrace of Western ideas and values. People experienced the seismic shift as both liberating, euphoric, and unsettling. Media talked openly and explicitly about sex to an audience that was amazed, titillated, and shocked. Sex became a badge of “post-ness”, post-Sovietness, new, fresh and democratic.¹⁹

In Estonia, the cessation of Soviet censorship in 1988 fostered the staging of innovative Western dramaturgy, triggering a rapid change in the repertoire. During Soviet times, theatres were prescribed proportions of dramaturgy, with Russian and Soviet authors dominating. With the newfound freedom, the share of Russian dramaturgy was reduced to 6%, while Western dramaturgy, preferably contemporary and Anglo-American, began to cover up to 60% of the repertoire.²⁰ Estonian theatre historian Jaak Rähesoo recalled that aside from removing political taboos, “the end of Soviet censorship was thematically best signalled by greater openness in sexual matters. (...) That openness was not restricted to a few overpublicized productions of gay or lesbian plays, but something wider and more pervasive.” This shift brought along a reconsideration of gender, leading to performances featuring a female King Lear or a male version of Ibsen’s *Nora*.²¹

However, the transfer of Western influences was not a one-way process but rather a complex interplay with the Soviet cultural legacy. The transition period in Estonia (1987–2004) was characterized by a fragmented, contradictory, and mosaic-like culture that involved a power struggle between old and new cultural influences.²² The rising queer theatre can be viewed as part of the transition culture that “assumes that publics emerge from communist rule damaged, and need to be educated in the values of capitalism and democracy,” as described by American sociologist Michael D. Kennedy.²³

Moreover, as Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka noted, even beneficial and long-awaited social changes may turn out to be painful. The dramatic shift in post-communist societies toward democracy, capitalism, and open culture was unexpected, rapid, comprehensive, and fundamental, corresponding to the characteristics of a traumatic social change. Culture, as a repository of tradition and identity, was especially sensitive to the intensifying intercultural contact. Issues related to gender, sexual minorities, and universal human rights highlighted inequalities and injustices. The cultural clash produced phenomena similar to the psychological effects of “cognitive dissonance”, involving stages of labelling, framing, and resentment.²⁴

Similarly, the trauma can be assumed by the defensive reception of queer theatre. Among hundreds of reviews and public comments on post-Soviet queer productions, roughly one-third ignored gender and sexuality themes, one-third expressed surprise, disapproval, or shock, and one-third welcomed the queer themes. However, over time, the reception has grown more tolerant.

Parallel developments have unfolded in other cultural domains, with evolving coverage. The Estonian LGBT Association and cultural researchers have organized exhibitions, conferences, and published studies to foster the exploration of queer history and culture.²⁵ This article contributes by providing the first overview of Estonian queer theatre development and introducing the term “queer theatre” in the Estonian context. On a broader societal scale, Estonia is making progress in LGBTQ+ rights, although challenges persist in public opinion, as indicated by the Equality Index.²⁶ Estonia’s historic approval of same-sex marriage in

19 Healey 2014, 107.

20 Epner 2006, 132–3; Rähesoo 2011, 457.

21 Rähesoo 2008, 86.

22 Kalmus & Vihalemm 2017, 112.

23 Kennedy 2002, 9.

24 Sztompka 2004, 158–66.

25 Davidjants 2010; Põldsam et al. 2022; Põldsam 2023.

26 *World Equality Index* 30.8.2023.

2024, a pioneering move among post-Soviet countries, reflects this ongoing journey.

Breaking Taboos: The Sexual Revolution on Estonian Stages

In exploring the dynamics of post-Soviet queer theatre in Estonia, a delineation into two phases becomes apparent in relation to premiere frequency (Chart 1). The division is not only temporal but also aesthetic. The initial period, spanning from 1988 to 2004, is characterized by the predominance of Western plays, primarily produced in spoken theatre within state-funded venues. The second phase, commencing in 2005, witnesses the ascendancy of devised and physical theatre across various performance venues and found spaces. This analysis primarily delves into the first phase as it starkly contrasts with the post-Soviet mindset, and its concluded state allows for conclusive insights.

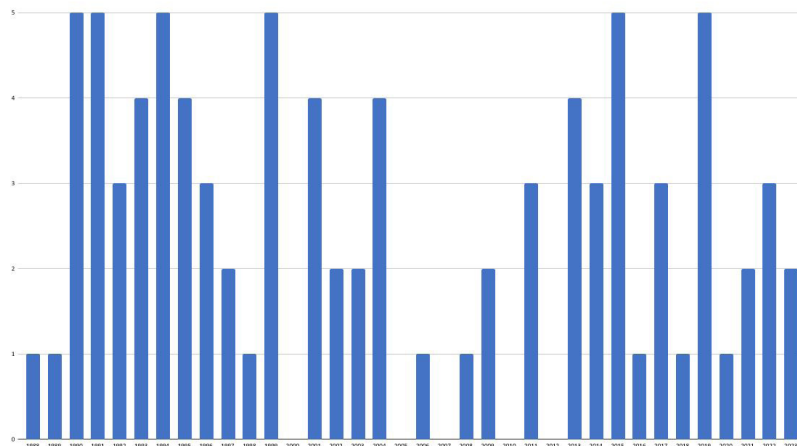


Chart 1. Queer theatre in Estonia: Number of premieres per year, 1988–2023

During the inaugural stage, authors like Oscar Wilde, Peter Shaffer, John Osborne, Shelagh Delaney, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and others were reinterpreted in increasingly bold ways. Additionally, Estonian premieres of queer stories by Frank Marcus, Joe Orton, Noël Coward, Terrence McNally, Tony Kushner, Nicky Silver, Mark Ravenhill, and many more found their way onto the stage. In the rush of freedom, some plays ran simultaneously in various venues around Estonia, sometimes with varied translations and under different titles.

Even before homosexuality was decriminalized in 1992, Estonian leading directors started exploring queer themes through a psychological, comedic, or absurdist lens, striking a balance between provocation and social commentary. The year 1990 witnessed a sudden rise in the field. The farce *La Berlue* (*Silme ees läheb mustaks*) by French authors Jean-Jacques Bricaire and Maurice Lasaygues became a sensation at the Estonian Drama Theatre, the unofficial national theatre in Tallinn. The play portrayed lesbian and transgender members of a high-class French family, embodied by starring actors. Despite the audience crisis influenced by the Singing Revolution, diverting attention from stages to streets, the production garnered full houses and a total of 56,000 theatre visits, signalling not only a demand for entertaining stories and vibrant roles but also an exploration of newfound freedom in sexual themes, deemed scandalous by some critics.²⁷

In May 1990, the first conference on sexual minorities in the Soviet Union was held in Tallinn, marking the starting point of the Estonian LGBTQ+ movement.²⁸ At the same time,

²⁷ Laasik 1990.

²⁸ Estonian Lesbian Union was established in 1990 and Estonian Gay Union in 1992. (Koppel 2022, 128, 132)

Joe Orton's play *What the Butler Saw*²⁹ was premiered by the new independent theatre troupe VAT Theatre in Tallinn. Orton, British theatre's *enfant terrible* of the sixties, is regarded as the first homosexual revolutionary, challenging prevailing myths about sexuality and advocating for a life free from the oppression of guilt. His work defied all forms of authority, including that of parents, law enforcement, and religion. The play, known for its satire on medicine and psychiatry, evolved into an orgy of cross-dressing, gender confusion, homosexual discussions, and hierarchical inversion.³⁰ Although the Estonian performances were held in a small venue and received no reviews, archival photos revealed that the staging closely followed the plot, including scenes with a half-naked secretary and a hotel boy in pants.³¹ The production's avant-garde design by Ene-Liis Semper foreshadowed her style in subsequent decades.

During this period, several Estonian directors began exploring queer themes through their distinct artistic lenses. One notable example is Kaarin Raid, a master of Stanislavskian psychological theatre, who directed plays featuring homosexual and lesbian characters. Her artistic focus expanded beyond the psychological nuances of dissident sexual identities to encompass a broader concern for societal prejudices and xenophobic attitudes. Raid premiered Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (*Kass tulisel plekk-katusel*, 1990) at the innovative Ugala theatre in Viljandi. The staging depicted a sombrely dressed, depressed Brick with a plastered leg and crutches at centre stage, highlighting symbolically his struggle with homosexual feelings as his inner wound. The culmination featured Brick confessing to Big Daddy his fear of how society views "things like that". The reception revealed a generational gap among critics, with older reviewers struggling to understand Brick,³² while younger ones praised the portrayal of his "absolute introversion,"³³ indicating his repressed love.

Following this, Raid presented a contemporary version of Shelagh Delaney's modern classic, *A Taste of Honey* (*Mee maik*, 1991). The play stands as a milestone in addressing "otherness" in 1950s–1960s British queer dramaturgy, featuring a positive homosexual character – an art student who comforts a working-class pregnant girl, Josephine, abandoned by her mother and heterosexual black boyfriend. In the daring Estonian premiere, staged by Epp Kaidu (1969) during the Soviet era, Geoffrey had been portrayed as a slim boy with long hair and effeminate gestures, corresponding to the contemporary stereotype of a homosexual character in Western dramaturgy. Critics described him as a positive figure, possessing a good temper and a tender heart, exuding joy and confidence, albeit deemed "peculiar" in his manners.³⁴ Notably, Geoffrey's homosexuality was not explicitly mentioned in Soviet feedback as a counter-strategy against censorship.³⁵

Now, after Estonia had restored its independence, the play premiered simultaneously in three cities during autumn 1991. In Raid's version, performed by drama students, Geoffrey appeared cheerful and active, wearing modern-cut jeans. The media referred to him as "homo Geoffrey" and described him as embodying goodness, having "a calming effect" on Josephine and her mother.³⁶

Similarly, in contrast to the veiled approach of the Soviet era, Miller's ambiguous story *A View from the Bridge* (1996) witnessed a vastly different interpretation by the prominent director Mikk Mikiver in free Estonia. Depicting the conflict between Eddie, the conservative head of the family, and the illegal immigrant Rodolpho, the new production allowed room to view the feminine Rodolpho as an obvious homosexual, accepting Eddie's insulting kiss.³⁷

29 In Estonian, the play was staged under the title *Geraldine Barclay vägistamine ja surm ehk Pealaest jalatallani* [*The Rape and Death of Geraldine Barclay, or from Head to Toe*] at VAT Theatre in 1990 and as *Püksid maha!* [*Pants Off!*] at Endla Theatre in 1993.

30 Jongh 1992, 94, 100; Clum 2000, 98, 102.

31 VAT Theatre 2023.

32 Tonts 1991, 51.

33 Karja 1991, 22.

34 Laid 1969, 3.

35 Saro 2018, 293, 297.

36 Värk 1991.

37 Ehvest 1996, 14.



Figure 1: A View from the Bridge, 1996, directed by Mikk Mikiver, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo from Estonian Drama Theatre's archive

In the mid-1990s, a brief wave of lesbian plays emerged. Initially, an openly lesbian story rose to the limelight based on German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (*Petra von Kanti kibedad pisarad*, 1994), directed by Madis Kalmet in the Tallinn City Theatre. It included enthralling love scenes between fashion designer Petra and her naked-breasted lover, photos of which illustrated many reviews and evoked mixed reactions. Estonian writer Mihkel Mutt's review was humorously titled "Now we are in Europe!".³⁸

Additionally, Frank Marcus's lesbian play *The Killing of Sister George* (*Õde George'i tapmine*, 1995), premiered a week apart in different translations in the capital and the smaller city of Viljandi. The scenes between the despotic Sister George and her partner, the young and naïve Alice, featuring their cross-gender dressing "carnivals", were reflected as expressions of lesbian love, but also in a wider frame of oppressive interpersonal relations in the early-capitalist post-Soviet state.³⁹

Georg Malvius, an internationally renowned stage director from liberal Sweden, began to change the game from the mid-1990s and on, bringing five openly gay productions to the stage. Known before in Estonia for his masterful large-scale musicals, he now aimed to reshape the Estonian cultural atmosphere by delving into taboo subjects of the hypocritical and xenophobic post-socialist society.⁴⁰ His interpretation of Argentine author Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (*Ämbliknaise suudlus*, 1994) at the Estonian Drama Theatre's small hall marked a significant milestone as Estonia's first openly queer production, presenting a homosexual main character who shattered the prevailing closeted or comic stereotypes. The staging featured Molina, a tender, self-ironic, and emotionally rich man, comforting his fellow prisoner, the masculine Valentin, with imaginative stories and caring gestures. The two political prisoners

38 Mutt 1994b, 10.

39 Õun 1995, 11.

40 Malvius & Kuningas 1994, 8.

opened up to each other and shared a kiss, seen as a triumph of humanity.⁴¹ In the media reception, issues of taboos, love, and tolerance prevailed. A critic even pondered whether a “sexual revolution” was underway in the previously conservative repertoire of Estonian theatres.⁴²



Figure 2: Kiss of the Spider Woman, 1994, directed by Georg Malvius, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo by DeStudio, Estonian Drama Theatre's archive

Malvius continued pushing boundaries with the Estonian premiere of Tony Kushner's groundbreaking play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (Inglid Ameerikas, 1996)* in the Estonian Drama Theatre's big hall. The play, referred to as “the best-known and most influential gay drama” by theatre scholar John M. Clum,⁴³ parallels two couples whose relationships are falling apart. A gay man and a former drag queen Prior, living with AIDS, is abandoned by his lover Louis. A gay husband Joe admits to his homosexuality and leaves his valium-addicted wife. These and other intertwining storylines are set against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic as a contemporary plague, and Reagan's queer-hostile politics.

In Malvius's spectacular staging with an international team of artists, set designer Ellen Cairns from Scotland designed the Statue of Liberty, standing out from a field of ice cubes, inspiring thoughts of rising or falling democracy. The expressive acting style and subversive physical scenes contributed to the emerging avant-garde theatre and the corporeal turn in Estonian theatre. It became one of the most politically charged and debated productions of the 1990s, drawing comparisons in its notability to Krzysztof Warlikowski's legendary staging in Poland in 2007,⁴⁴ and leading to questions as to whether Kushner's play was a

41 Mutt 1994a, 14.

42 Visnap 1995, 89.

43 Clum 2012, 196.

44 Lease 2016, 123.

landmark in the development of theatre during the political transition.⁴⁵

Angels in America received significant attention, with approximately forty pieces of media coverage, compared to the usual roughly ten for ordinary productions. It sparked discussions on topics related to the LGBTQ+ community, AIDS, and tolerance. While many praised the grandiose show,⁴⁶ it faced a backlash for its daring content, including the imitation of homosexual intercourse and the first explicit same-sex kiss on Estonian stages. Some critics questioned, “What is wrong with Estonian Drama Theatre?”⁴⁷ Others, such as writer Tõnu Õnnepalu, known for the first Estonian gay novel, *Border State* (*Piiririik*, 1993), praised the beautiful, clear, and camp-style scenes, sarcastically noting that the audience was dying of embarrassment.⁴⁸ However, the play performed to full houses over two years, drawing more than 6,000 spectators. Additionally, Malvius organized open lectures by Swedish AIDS scholars at the Drama Theatre,⁴⁹ utilizing the multifaceted potential of theatre as a public sphere.



Figure 3: *Angels in America*, 1996, directed by Georg Malvius, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo by Henno Saarne, Estonian Theatre and Music Museum

In the early 2000s, Malvius continued his endeavors by raising awareness of the historical Nazi persecution of homosexuals through his productions of John Kander’s musical *Cabaret* and Martin Sherman’s *Bent* (2003). In interviews, Malvius emphasized the relevance of discussing human rights, especially as Estonia prepared to join the European

45 The Polish premiere of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* took place at the Gdansk theatre in 1995, raising questions about the prospects of political theatre during the transitional period (Sosnowska 2021).

46 Kapstas 1996, 7.

47 Jürna 1996, 15.

48 Õnnepalu 1996, 6.

49 Kapstas 1996, 7.

Union.⁵⁰ His concern proved prophetic as conservative voices gained power in the late 2010s. Prompted by their homophobic statements, Malvius wrote an open letter to the Estonian interior minister, defining himself as a proud stage director of gay productions, and advocating for the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ people in democratic Estonia.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Estonian directors had continued their explorations. Throughout the 1990s, Mati Unt, a prominent figure in the renewal of the Estonian theatre, showcased a postmodern, playful, and metatheatrical approach in exploring transgressive sexualities, androgyny, and queer erotica. Welcoming the end of censorship, he introduced role-play in Jean Genet's *The Maids* (*Toatüdrukud*, 1988), expressing his fascination with female roles written by homosexual authors.⁵² Further, Unt delved into gender fluidity with Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (*Irma Vipi saladus ehk Noorsooteatri libahunt*, 1993) and employed cross-gender casting in his adaptation of Ibsen's classic play, transformed into a story of a house husband and a powerful wife, titled *A Doll's House, or Norbert* (*Nukumaja ehk Norbert*, 1995).



Figure 4: *A Doll's House, or Norbert*, 1995, directed by Mati Unt, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo by Peeter Laurits, Estonian Drama Theatre's archive

Unt also premiered David Henry Hwang's notorious love story, *M. Butterfly* (1999), which unfolds the romantic tale of a French diplomat and a beautiful Chinese singer who turns out to be a man working as a female impersonator and a spy. Some critics labelled it "a shocking story" and "a challenge for the audience",⁵³ while others perceived it as the "exotic of oriental and homosexual" and interpreted the scenes containing male nudity as an expression of beauty.⁵⁴

50 Laasik 2003, 17.

51 Malvius 2020.

52 Unt 1993, 15.

53 Kapstas 1999, 10.

54 Maiste 1999, 18.



Figure 5: *A Doll's House, or Norbert*, 1995, directed by Mati Unt, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo by Peeter Laurits, Estonian Drama Theatre's archive

At the same time, Merle Karusoo, a leading figure in Estonian documentary theatre, delved into queer topics with fine politically resonating details. For instance, her documentary production *Snows of Sorrow* (*Kured lained, kurjad ilmad*, 1997), grew out of a larger interview-based research project about the love lives of Estonians throughout the past century. The work featured the first Estonian confession about a lesbian love story. In 2002, she collaborated with drama students on a devised piece titled *HIV*, addressing the tragic epidemic from the viewpoint of teenagers. The staging included a poignant scene of schoolboys joking about unprotected homosexual intercourse against the backdrop of the deadly disease.



Figure 6: *HIV*, 2002, directed by Merle Karusoo, Estonian Drama Theatre, photo by Harri Rospu, Estonian Drama Theatre's archive

At the turn of the millennium, queer themes manifested in various styles. For example, Jerry Herman's popular musical *La Cage aux Folles* (1999) introduced cross-dressers' club life to wider audiences. The dramatization of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (2001), in the debut staging by Kristel Leesmend and Ene-Liis Semper, took the audience on a journey with the title character who transitioned from a prosperous man to a poor woman through time. Similarly, the romantic dramatization *Sebastian* (2004), based on Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, offered a retrospective look, focusing on the love story of the troubled aristocrat Sebastian and his friend Charles.

At the same time, a subwave of *in-yer-face* dramaturgy, featuring works by Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, introduced radical characters such as a crossdressing sex slave and an anarchist transformed into a career woman. These plays were labelled as scandalous by some, while others referred to them as "belated shock plays".⁵⁵ Additionally, the provocative farce *Family Affairs* (2001) by Finnish writer Rosa Liksöm stirred controversy when staged in Estonia's "summer capital", Pärnu. Depicting an unconventional family with a homosexual father, a drug-addicted mother, and her transgender friend, the play's dialogues contained indecent language, and the production was removed from the repertoire after only ten performances. It marked the first noticeable act of self-censorship in independent Estonian theatre, regretted by some reviewers.⁵⁶

In essence, from 1988 to 2004, there was a rapid shift in modern queer theatre, moving from portraying closeted characters to openly addressing queer themes and employing various aesthetics. Director Malvius notably set a precedent for full-scale shows. His last queer production, Jonathan Larson's rock musical *Rent* (2004), marked the conclusion of this initial stage, coinciding with the end of Estonia's transition era and its accession to the EU and NATO. However, the transformation period continued, as differentiated from the economic and political 'transition' by sociologists. It denotes deeper social and cultural changes, including shifts in attitudes and patterns of behavior.⁵⁷

Embodied Stories: Queer Narratives in Devised Theatre

The second stage of queer theatre, from the mid-2000s to the present, sees a rise in devised texts and projects. In contrast to the translated plays in the "theatre of talking heads", this phase is dominated by rising physical and dance theatre, performing arts, and special projects exploring queer culture.

Since 2005, Theatre NO99 emerged as a prominent force in Estonian theatre. Although it focused on innovation and political theatre without being unequivocally tied to the queer theatre movement, it supported LGBTQ+ rights and co-produced the first Estonian drag show, challenging the politicized atmosphere fostered by conservative circles. Some NO99's performances featured queer characters, often portrayed by actor Risto Kübar, who continued his work abroad. His innovative collaboration project *Spectacular Lightshows of Which U Don't See the Effect* (Munich Kammerspiele and NO99, 2013) was categorized as a living installation, offering insights into the daily episodes of a gay couple. Kübar is one of the few individuals in Estonian spoken theatre who publicly came out, in 2014, to oppose homophobic tendencies in society.⁵⁸

Further, the first Estonian original full-length queer plays emerged. Renowned playwright Martin Algu introduced *Postmodern Households (Postmodernsed leibkonnad)*, (2009), the first play featuring an interracial gay couple. The play won the New Drama Competition organized by the Estonian Theatre Agency. Other notable works were launched through the competition, like Johan Elm's *Copper (Vask)*, (2017), exploring the art world through the love story of a gay couple, and Katariina Libe's *Sprouts (Võrsed)*, (2021), featuring a central lesbian character. All these texts have been promptly presented at first readings and/or stage versions.

Additionally, a devised piece *I Have a Story for You... (Mul on sulle üks jutt..., 2015)*, directed by Auri Jürna centred on the contrasting views surrounding the cohabitation agreement

55 Avestik 2002, 16.

56 Pedo 2002.

57 Lauristin et al. 2017, 1.

58 Kübar 1994.

debated in parliament, performed by students at Tallinn's X-Bar, the oldest gay bar in the Baltics. A documentary project named wryly *Real Women, Real Men and Real Others* (*Tõelised naised, tõelised mehed ja tõelised teised*, 2015) featured authentic representatives of various occupations, including a school teacher, a drag queen, and a media scholar, who shared their experiences with gender inequality, premiering at a performing arts centre Open Space.

In physical theatre, choreographers took the lead. A series of *Drag Shows*, staged by Jüri Nael (with Ingmar Jõela) introduced a new genre of magnificent spectacles that reached wider audiences since 2017. In the field of solo projects, artist Rene Köster explored LGBTQ+ community expectations and stereotypes, drawing often from his personal experience, like in works titled expressively *Masc* (2017) and *Masc II Masc* (2021). Choreographer Raho Aadla contributed by observing societal assumptions and gender-related issues in his series of contemporary dance pieces *Genderless* (*Soota*, 2015–2016), inspired by Erik Olin Wright's ideas of genderlessness.⁵⁹ Therefore, the recent developments reveal a proliferation of devised works across genres and venues, affirming the agency and vitality of Estonian queer theatre.



Figure 7: Genderless, 2015-16, solo project by Raho Aadla, photo by Jana Solom

Conclusion

The sexual revolution in Estonian theatre began in the midst of the Singing Revolution. It gave rise to modern queer theatre, tracing a developmental trajectory similar to Western queer dramaturgy, albeit roughly four decades later and in a crash course. The initial phase of modern queer theatre, spanning from 1988 to 2004, showcased over forty productions, primarily based on Western texts or adaptations of classics by Estonian dramaturges. These productions found a home in state-funded theatres, with a key venue being the unofficial national theatre, Estonian Drama Theatre, highlighting Estonia's liberal atmosphere within the post-communist Eastern

⁵⁹ Wright 2011.

European landscape.

Over a decade, Estonian stage interpretations evolved from predominantly Anglo-American queer dramaturgy of the fifties and sixties, e.g. Delaney, Williams, Orton, and Marcus, to that of the eighties and nineties with works by Hwang and Kushner, followed by *in-yer-face* dramaturgy. The second phase, starting in the mid-2000s and still continuing, introduces devised texts and physical theatre projects, along with increasing versatility in genres, styles, and performance venues, extending to community clubs and bars.

Throughout last decades, queer theatre has acted as a transgressive art form, challenging social norms and addressing taboo subjects like dissident sexual identities, and queer erotica. Portraying queer characters posed performative challenges, from dandy figures and gay heroes to trans and drag characters.

Initially perceived as scandalous and shocking by many post-Soviet audiences, which is explainable within the frame of cultural trauma theory, queer theatre soon began to function as an ambassador of democratic values, promoting plurality, equality, tolerance, and human rights. It combated discrimination and gave voice to previously silenced groups, demonstrating the active use of theatrical public sphere as a discussion zone.

Queer issues became a litmus test of democracy, emerging as one of the most politically charged themes in Estonian theatre. This research underscores that queer theatre played a role in breaking the icy Soviet atmosphere, reintegrating Estonia into the vibrant and diverse European cultural sphere, and will continue to shape Estonia's theatrical landscape for years to come.

AUTHOR

Eva-Liisa Linder is a theatre researcher and lecturer at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Holding an MA in theatre studies from the University of Tartu, she is currently engaged in doctoral studies at Tallinn University. Her research is centred on the changing theatrical public sphere during the Estonian transition period. In addition, she works as a freelance critic and editor, with experience in editing collections on cultural history.

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