

When Contextual Events Become Central to Fiction

Theatre, Europe in Chaos, and the Finnish Winter War

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ABSTRACT

When the Finnish Winter War erupted at the end of November 1939, it caused consternation beyond the borders of Finland; after all, mighty U.S.S.R had just attacked a small independent neighbouring country, justifying the aggression with securing its own domestic interests. I will be examining two contemporary Winter War plays and their genesis: Hagar Olsson's *Lumisota* (Snowball War, 1939) depicts the threat of a fictitious war and the conflicting reactions to that threat – reactions that were put to the test during rehearsals when the prospect of war became imminent, mirroring events in the play. On the other hand, American Robert E. Sherwood set his play *There Shall be No Night* (1940) during the Finnish Winter War as it was being waged. The former play received a Finnish performance ban right before the Soviet attack as the portents of war reached fever pitch, and the latter initially received accolades and achieved success, but performances of the play were eventually halted when events in the European theatre of war took another turn, impacting US foreign policy.

The plays under analysis keenly exemplify drama's firm connection with its surrounding realities. The pacificism of the playwrights themselves had to stand aside, or take on new forms, when a real war with all its political decision-making emerged from behind a fictitious story.

KEYWORDS

theatre history, theatre and politics, theatre and war, censorship, family drama

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The public debates surrounding the war in Ukraine in the Spring of 2022 led many people in Finland to reconsider the Hundred Day Winter War that commenced in the autumn of 1939; the significance of the Winter War was also noted abroad. In 1939, the Soviet Union's attack on Finland was preceded by Soviet territorial demands aimed at fortifying Leningrad, and when these demands were rejected by Finland, a staged altercation was manufactured at the Soviet-Finnish border, and the bombing of Finland began without warning at the end of November, thus ushering in the Winter War. Mighty U.S.S.R launching an attack on a small independent neighbouring nation gained a lot of international attention outside the borders of Finland. The theatrical world reacted to these events with unprecedented speed, even pre-empting the events themselves by exploring the war threat, prompting a counter-reaction by authorities who suppressed performances, and stipulated how far art could go when it came to staging issues related to domestic security.

There have been many plays written about the Winter War and the events leading up to it. Hagar Olsson's *Lumisota* (Snowball War) was finished by the spring of 1939. The play depicts a fictional Finnish Foreign Minister's family in that same year: negotiations with the Soviet Union are interspersed with interfamilial political tensions. During the Helsingin Kansanteatteri's (the Helsinki Folk Theatre) autumn rehearsals, societal events escalated to mirror fictive events in the *Snowball War*. The (actual) Ministry of Foreign Affairs banned the play from being performed before its opening night as the play was deemed detrimental to (real) ongoing fateful discussions with the Soviet Union, talks that would determine Finland's future. Alongside the official reasons given for the ban, it can be conjectured that Helsinki University's Student Union, the owner of the performance space, had some role to play, especially as the play itself depicted students in a critical light. Looking at the performance history of American Robert E. Sherwood's 1940 springtime play *There Shall be No Night*, it is evident that shifts in political mores heavily impacted theatrical activities at the time, and that the phenomenon was not exclusive to Finland. The play, set during the Finnish Winter War, had its performances halted in the United States after Germany had attacked the U.S.S.R in 1941. As with the *Snowball War* performance ban, the reasons for ceasing performances were both ideological and political, (as well as the national context of the play), the decision to end performances was impacted by the international atmosphere and the shift in European military events.

These plays depict war or the threat of war, that is, a transgression of state borders, though geography with its political conditions appeared differently in the middle of the threat in Finland and seen from the distant United States. Olsson's fictive play foreshadowed what became reality, and its production was censored. For Sherwood, the Winter War and Finland represented the destiny of all small states when attacked violently by aggressive larger states. His conceptual story could therefore be applied to other wars and transgressions.

Both Olsson and Sherwood represent contemporary anti-war sentiments of the 1930s. In the evolution of their work and their attitudes towards the Winter War one can trace the

theatre's unique ability to reflect societal changes, yet one can also sense how untenable the role of pacifism had become by the end of the decade. Despite both plays having an ideological background, and their respective reputations being coloured by contemporary political events, the two plays under examination intervened in contemporary discourse in very different ways. "We never merely see a performance; we also see *through* it, even if we cannot assign a clear category to what our vision is aimed at," writes Benjamin Bennett.¹ In the performances of these two plays the fictional mixed with reality, but from a historical standpoint it is enlightening to consider how these plays interrogated contemporary society *through* performance, intervening on surrounding societies and their objectives. By examining the contextual events surrounding these two plays, I will explore how theatre can potentially mediate the outside world, and the possible role drama can play in unlocking both acknowledged and unacknowledged sentiments.

Snowball War Taking Shape and the 1939 Threat of War in Finland

When Olsson was writing the play *Snowball War*², the threat of war had escalated in Europe in numerous ways. From as early as 1935, rumours had been circulating that Germany wanted to attack Leningrad via Finland, and if Germany began a war in Central Europe, the Soviet Union would occupy Finland. The U.S.S.R started to mobilise in response to increased German aggression: the annexation of Austria on March 12 in 1938, the forced Czechoslovakian handover of the Sudetenland to Germany at the end of September 1938, and in March 1939, the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in its entirety. Despite these events, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Germany and the U.S.S.R was signed on 23 August 1939, it was assumed that the military threat towards Finland would now decrease. Covertly, Germany and the U.S.S.R had included a secret adjunct dossier to the pact concerning their spheres of interest, and alongside the Baltic countries, Finland was marked out as a sphere of interest for the Soviet Union. On the first day of September, Germany attacked Poland, and the security pacts between Poland, France, and the United Kingdom brought these two countries into the axis of war. The Second World War had started. A few weeks later the Soviet Army advanced towards East Poland.³ As the World War began, the Helsinki Folk Theatre had started rehearsals for Olsson's play.

The genesis of the *Snowball War* play text was in many ways intertwined with these escalating events, despite the real significance of these events and their impact on Finland's position not yet being fully understood. The Soviet threat had always hung over Finland, but at this stage, Finland had not yet seen it fit to adopt any kind of definitive international stance. The play's fictional chain of societal events revolves around the political threat hanging over Finland, but at the heart of the play's action is one family and the different ideological principles and political goals of its members. The Minister father wants to maintain a dialogue with the Soviet Union in order to mitigate the menace to Finland, which, in line with other students, the eldest son of the family sees as treacherous. After the youngest son who sought a peaceful reconciliation is sacrificed, the play concludes with ongoing talks between Finland and the U.S.S.R, exemplifying a belief in the potential of a peaceful resolution. Before the staging of the play was suppressed, the Theatre had written the following introduction for its programme: "*Snowball War* is primarily a family drama, with its father protagonist (the Finnish Foreign Affairs Minister), two boys, and a mother, each representing very different points of view; but the play's events also have a wider political context, which is clearly linked to current world events."⁴

1 Bennett 2005, 6.

2 Holmström 1993, 295–300; Koski 1987, 125–7 & 1992, 96–97, 254–5; Zilliacus 1979. *Snowball War* has been included in many studies. Notably Clas Zilliacus's "Snöbollskriget som frös bort" is a precise analysis of the play and its afterlives. I have written about the genesis of the play as part of the history of Helsinki Folk Theatre, and also in the book I wrote about theatre and stage director Eino Salmelainen. In his expansive work on Olsson, Roger Holmström situates the play within the context of the playwright's life and works. There are many extant versions of the script, but it has never been printed. A multitude of original sources, including play texts, can be found in Olsson's (Åbo Akademi's Library) and Salmelainen's (Theatre Museum) archives.

3 Meinander 2012, 138–43.

4 Koski 1987, 126 (Helsinki Folk Theatre programme 1939, 1).

Finland's proximity to the U.S.S.R was a domestic security issue that the far right and Hagar Olsson approached from different angles. Germany's popularity in Finland had decreased at the end of the 1930s due to the actions undertaken by Hitler's government, with only the far right deviating from this trend. The Nordic stance was also growing in popularity, but not with the far right, for them, the pacifism represented by Olsson, the League of Nations, and even the Nordic identity were conflated with the communist threat.⁵

The play's thematic choices are purposefully ideological, and along with a preoccupation with intergenerational tensions, the play reflects Olsson's overtly pacifist stance evident in the playwright's other works. However, context dictated that the thematic would be side-lined in favour of a more nationalist narrative: the menace of war and attempts at avoiding conflict as the political situation deteriorated. Even though the contents of *Snowball War* leveraged the contextual events that surrounded its writing, the documentary nature of the play script was still subject to a fictitious narrative. As stage rehearsals advanced into autumn, fiction began to eerily predict surrounding political changes, the confluence becoming even more prominent in the period spanning the end of August to the beginning of December. Reality merged with the fictitious.⁶

The Director of the Helsinki Folk Theatre and the first stage director to produce *Snowball War*, Eino Salmelainen, claims he gave Olsson the idea for the play: he had observed a young boy caught in the crossfire of a violent snowball fight, his cries of neutrality falling on death ears as both sides of the fight pelted him. In the play, the family's eldest son represents the hard-line nationalist academic youths of the late 1930s who were against territorial cession talks with the U.S.S.R, pouring disdain on the institutions of democracy, liberalism, and the spirit of old Europe, which they felt were passé. When the Foreign Affairs Minister attempts to circumvent war by travelling to Moscow for discussions in response to demands by the U.S.S.R that Finland hand over its islands in the Gulf of Finland, radicalised students resisted the negotiations by threatening him with "Bobrikov's⁷ fate" – death. The play's victim ends up being the youngest son Outi who turns up to stop the violence without any specific political agenda. He rushes to the student meeting in order to protect his father from injury, ending up a victim of violence himself. In the early stages of the play's genesis, its working title was "Victim", "Faith and the Victim" and "Reconciliation and the Victim". The play can be read as a play about the current political context, and equally as a drama about intergenerational tensions.⁸

Olsson's approach was poetic, but he shared director Salmelainen's concern for Finland's geographical position, religion, national sense of justice, and social cohesion at a time when the entire country was caught up in a global conflict. Olsson situates the play's events around Easter. Setting the play during Easter was both symbolic and based on actual events: on Good Friday 1939 Mussolini marched into Albania. (In Olsson's previous version the accompanying text suggests that a student organisation's wall be hung with a portrait of Mussolini). Olsson inserted his own anti-war rhetoric into the play, especially in the dialogue of the youngest son.⁹

Snowball War was accepted into the Helsinki Folk Theatre's programming in the summer of 1939, and rehearsals commenced at the beginning of the next theatrical season. The handing over of Finnish islands to secure Leningrad's military position had been a topical issue when the play was written in the spring of 1939, but the actual official requests for negotiations on the handover of territories were presented in the autumn: in September for the Baltic countries, in October for Finland. The theatre had to edit the script on several occasions to maintain a comfortable distance to real events. The play's consequent suppression by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not been preserved in the archives, and information on the real sequence of events is largely based on Theatre Director Salmelainen's recollections. Salmelainen wrote that he felt that "now, if ever, we had the finger on the arterial pulse of life, we could transmit

5 See e.g. Silvennoinen 2008, 41; Vares 2018, 292, 495.

6 E.g. Zilliacus 1979; Koski 1987, 39–40, 125–6; Salmelainen 1957, 182–5; Holmström 1993, 295–300.

7 The Russian Governor General Bobrikov who was murdered in 1904 had weakened Finland's national position during its autonomy under Russian rule.

8 Different versions of the play can be found in the Hagar Olsson collection in the Åbo Akademi archives.

9 Zilliacus 1979, 172–3.

the feelings of the day with a freshness and a deep poeticism.”¹⁰ Despite this, the suppression of the play was welcomed, as the work surrounding the play’s staging had become increasingly difficult, and the play may never have made it to its opening night regardless of official censure.¹¹ According to Salmelainen’s memoirs, “the tragedy lay in the fact that so much of the fiction came to pass. (...) Poetry and reality had become involved in the most astonishing race.”¹² Olsson described the final rehearsals: “The atmosphere was unprecedented. Every time we were met with more lines that we had to cross out: everything felt so scary, so volatile!”¹³

Domestic Political Tensions as the Context

The link between the peace talks mentioned in the play and the real ongoing negotiations between Finland and the U.S.S.R in Moscow was sufficient justification for the play’s suppression by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as undeniably the play was classed as a threat during a politically tense situation. However, it remains possible that some of the actual reasons for halting rehearsals lay elsewhere. The play had been already written during the spring of 1939, and it was a blatant attack against right-wing and anti-pacifist students. Right-wing ideologies cannot be overlooked when analysing the reasons behind the suppression of *Snowball War*, especially as the Helsinki Folk Theatre operated out of the Vanha Ylioppilastalo (a university building owned by the Student Union), renting their space from the student organisation under whose watchful eyes they operated. The Student Union had influence over the theatre’s board, and the Union’s political stance was more hard-line than the Finnish government’s at the time.

The memoranda and correspondence of the Finnish-Swedish Olsson demonstrate a strong desire to mount an attack against both the extreme right-wing Isänmaallinen Kansanliike (IKL, Patriotic People’s Movement), and the nationalist-spirited Akateeminen Karjala-Seura (AKS, Academic Karelian Society)¹⁴ and in particular, to write in Finnish, as her main target audience were the Finnish-speaking students who had close connections to the two parties. The country’s Foreign Affairs Minister at the time, Eljas Erkkö, was also Finnish-speaking.¹⁵

Hagar Olsson had many connections to international pacifism. The programming at the Helsinki Folk Theatre, alongside key dramaturgical changes made to texts at the time, prove that Salmelainen was also very aware of the international anti-war movement¹⁶, which was not compatible with the values his landlords espoused; unsurprisingly, Olsson’s play, criticising the political zeal of students, inevitably drew comment from the Student’s Union. Salmelainen later wrote that the ministry ban betrayed an intimate familiarity with the play’s contents. In Salmelainen’s view, information about the play had to have been leaked to the government from an inside source close to the text, someone like chairman of the AKS Vilho Helanen for example, who had been vocal in resisting the play’s performance and who held sway both in the Students’ Union and IKL circles. During his 1930s residency on the Theatre’s board, he had ensured that the theatrical programming did not contradict the Student Union’s ideological agenda.¹⁷

It is impossible to accurately pinpoint what the main contributing factors that led to the play’s suppression were, as multiple factors intervened in contemporary current affairs; the slide

10 Salmelainen 1957, 177.

11 E.g. Leo Lähteenmäki 8.2.1979.

12 Salmelainen 1957, 184–5.

13 *Nya Pressen* 12.10.1957.

14 IKL was founded in 1932: amongst right-wing parties in Finland the IKL was the most influenced by fascism and national socialism, but its position weakened at the end of the 1930s. AKS was a student organisation active in Finland from 1922 until 1944. Its aims were to strengthen tribal ties and nationalist feelings within Finland, as well as strengthen the appetite for national defence. During the 1930s, the IKL and AKS shared a lot of their ideologies and followers.

15 Holmström 1993, 295–300. Yet another decisive factor in determining the language may have been the performance location as Salmelainen was a Director at a Finnish-language theatre.

16 Koski 1992, 153.

17 Salmelainen 1957, 182, 185; Zilliacus 1979, 180. The connections are mentioned in Olsson’s correspondence. General information on Helanen’s relationship to the production: Koski 1987, 185. At the beginning of the 1930s, the Helsinki University’s Student Union had included a clause in the lease that stipulated that they had the right to ban any productions that they felt were inappropriate.

into war only becoming tragically apparent in hindsight. When rehearsals started in August, peace was still seen as a possibility, especially as it seemed that Germany and the U.S.S.R had now co-signed a treaty (its adjunct dossier carving up territories was not known about at the time). Banning the play did not fend off the attack. The scenes in *Snowball War* pertaining to students had already been cut back over the summer at the request of Vilho Helanen, but the play's "hero" was still the youngest son of the ministerial family who sought a peaceful resolution at the student rally and ended up becoming an Easter sacrifice. The play was a piece of multifaceted social commentary that enabled different interpretative approaches to be taken. However, in the autumn of 1939 the threat of war was increasingly tangible and even alternative readings were deeply enmeshed with that reality. The contemporary political situation in Finland unfolded identically to events in the play: a Minister was ready to travel to Moscow in an attempt to prevent war. In the version of events put forward by the 1939 play, the sacrificial victim facilitated the two opposing sides finding each other, but reality displayed its characteristic lack of mercy, as once war broke out, young students were soon sent to war, often to the front, and even Salmelainen considered his own physical fitness for battle in his letters.

The ban against *Snowball War* did not mean that all programming about warfare was prohibited, or that theatres in the 1930s such as the Helsinki Folk Theatre could not depict political subjects on stage. For example, in the autumn of 1939, the Helsinki Folk Theatre put on a Vilém Werner family drama about Czechoslovakia called *Uudet ihmiset* (New People). The play starts with the parents' wedding day and its second act is set during the mobilisation of Czechoslovakia, escalating to the German occupation of the country by the third act. The atmosphere could not be divorced from what was happening in the real world, where German troops had marched on Prague on 15 March 1939. Newspaper reviews reflected general Finnish attitudes: the Finnish National Radio (Yleisradio) condemned the occupation and the Finnish press printed anti-German opinions. Even the IKL condemned the act, as well as the generally pro-German Finnish officer class. The fate of Czechoslovakia did not encourage people to become apologists for Germany.¹⁸ *Snowball War* would naturally have resonated with the reality of the Finnish situation in the autumn of 1939 more deeply than depicting events in Czechoslovakia could, but in each case a real threat was present in dramatic form.

Whether Salmelainen had any active links to pacifist Finnish groups is unclear, but based on his programming choices, we can conjecture that anti-war sentiments were at the heart of his values. In the 1930s, this meant being politically positioned on the left. Pacifism was generally linked to communism, as well as psychoanalysis, support for the League of Nations, and a Nordic-leaning stance.¹⁹ In his dark memoir *Surma ja hurma* (Death and Frenzy) Salmelainen speaks of the atmosphere of those last days in November and the fear that pervaded minds at that time.²⁰

An American Viewpoint on the Winter War

After the outbreak of the Winter War, Finland received lots of sympathy and even material assistance, but large countries like the USA still made their political choices based on their own interests, which is borne out in an intriguing way by the performance history of American Robert E. Sherwood's play *There Shall Be No Night*. The Finnish Winter War depicted in the play is coloured by the author's own culture and ideologies, but the themes recall the problematics of *Snowball War*, and are a testament to the universality of contemporary political issues. The two plays also share the interlinking of a family drama with a societal crisis, though compared with the Finnish play with its intergenerational tensions, the American play has an idealised and harmonious view of family life.

Staged by the Theatre Guild company, the play's Broadway debut was in the Alvin Theatre (nowadays Neil Simon Theater) on the 24th of April 1940, with the play's director, Alfred Lunt, in the starring role, and other significant roles played by Lynn Fontaine, Charles Ausley, and Montgomery Clift. The spouses, Lunt and Fontaine, had previously worked closely with

¹⁸ Koski 1987, 122; Koski 1992, 81; Hiedanniemi 1980, 157.

¹⁹ Jalonen 1985, 110–11.

²⁰ Salmelainen 1957, 5–11.

Sherwood. The play received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the show was a Broadway hit that went on tour around the United States and Canada. Aina-Maria Lagerstedt writes that a film project based on the play was also planned for the summer of 1941, though the venture eventually came to nothing.²¹ Performances of the play had to be stopped in December 1941 when the Soviet Union, who had been the aggressor during the Finnish Winter War, was now seen more favourably by the US government after the Soviet Union was attacked by Germany. The plot of the play no longer aligned with American military interests.

The scene for Sherwood's play is the home of the Finnish-American Valkonen family in Finland, with the exception of the first two scenes of Act III which are set in a room in the Kämp hotel and a school on the Bay of Vyborg (both actual real locations in Finland). The first act takes place in October 1938 with the next two acts spanning the stretch of time from October 1939 to the end of February the following year.

In the first act, American journalist Dave Corween radios an interview to the United States via Geneva, interviewing the Nobel prize-winning internationalist pacifist Dr Kaarlo Valkonen. The first act introduces the different members of the Valkonen family: Kaarlo's wife Miranda is American, and his maternal uncle Waldemar is a Finnish musician. The family's student son, Erik, returns from constructing the Mannerheim defence line on the U.S.S.R/Finland border with his girlfriend Kaatri. There is a sense of quiet confidence in Finland's position, but the conversation reveals the writer's views on Europe in 1938: the people in the play generally still hold sympathetic views towards the Soviet Union, but anti-German sentiments are hard-line, and the threat of war is focused on Germany and central Europe. The geographical borders in the play are seen from a distant and imprecise American perspective, as shown by the fact that the fortification of Finland's Eastern border is justified not by fears of the U.S.S.R, but by the idea that Nazis could attack Finland through the Eastern flank. Later in the play, an American pilot claims to have seen German troops near the Finnish border. The author was not very familiar with Finland's geographic or political context at the time of writing.

During the following acts, the Soviet Union attacks Finland. Erik goes to the war front, Kaarlo Valkonen is displaced from his laboratory to hospital work, and the family's helpers go into voluntary work service. Erik is injured, marrying a pregnant Kaatri at the hospital before his death, with Miranda persuading Kaatri to seek safety in Boston. Kaarlo has joined the medical corps at the front and is appalled by the news of his son's death, eventually taking up arms himself and dying alongside Polish and American volunteers. In the final scene Miranda and Uncle Waldemar bid farewell to the Americans covering the war and remain in Helsinki to await the Russian (and possibly German) troops, ready to set their house on fire ("a Finnish custom") and see the War out to its bitter end. The play ends with Uncle Waldemar playing "a Finnish folk song" on his grand piano.

In the foreword, Sherwood explains how he wrote the play in January-February at a hectic pace, fearing the situation would pass by before he finished his play. R. Baird Shuman adds more context to the genesis of the play: Sherwood spent the summer of 1939 in England and had his pacifist views challenged by the rising power of Germany. On Christmas Day 1939 he listened to William L. White's radio report "Christmas in the Mannerheim Line", an experience that helped him broaden his thinking, as his views had reached somewhat of an ideological impasse. He started making notes about the situation in Finland and began writing the play. Less than a month later he sent his manuscript to Lunt and Fontaine who were interested in it.²²

The Winter War itself came to an end during the play's rehearsals, yet Sherwood still saw the play's narrative as resonant, and the war in the play does not end with a truce. In contrast, the play makes apparent the playwright's lack of faith in Finland maintaining its independence. Shuman interprets the play's ending thus: Kaatri has made it safely to Boston and represents the future, whereas Erik and Kaarlo are dead, a fate that will follow for both Miranda and Uncle Waldemar as enemies overrun the country. Nevertheless, sometimes through warfare a more humane world can be created, something that Kaarlo hints at in the letter he wrote for Kaatri in

²¹ Lagerstedt 2011, 67–8.

²² Sherwood 1941, XXIX; Shuman 1964, 32–3.

the event of his death.²³

The play is preoccupied with Central European tensions as American supporting characters follow the fates of Czechoslovakia and Poland, as well as participating in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the republicans. It seems as if the playwright assumed that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939 would guarantee peace between its signatories, and that without the right leadership, the U.S.S.R would carry out Germany's dirty work. The secret adjunct dossier carving up spheres of interest for both countries was only discovered after the Winter War and does not seem to have impacted the text.

Thematically, the play follows a shift from the pacifist thinking present in Sherwood's earlier work, to a new sense of righteousness justifying war. In the prologue to the printed edition of the play, Sherwood expounds on his own metamorphosis from the warring years of World War I to the late 1930s. Sherwood, like other liberals, had believed in the Soviet Union's desire to maintain the peace, but attacking Finland was a sign that instead of peacekeeping, the U.S.S.R was about imperialism and power politics. Writing the play was Sherwood's way of taking decisive action, in contrast to US officialdom who were adamant on staying clear of getting mixed up in European crises.²⁴ Don B. Wilmeth describes the writing of this Winter War play as a condemnation of militant American isolationism.²⁵ Sherwood himself resented this approximation that placed him on the same side with jingoists, especially as he had been a vocal advocate of disarmament, but fears about Hitler's growing power base, Charles Lindbergh's pro US isolationism speech, and the Finnish Winter War, had all irreversibly shifted Sherwood's views.²⁶ He had to defend himself against accusations of war mongering, though he was able to represent his own points of view in his influential roles in President Roosevelt's administration.²⁷

The Fate of Pacifism Amidst War

After 1941, Sherwood shifted the play's *There Shall Be No Night* events to Greece and performances continued at the end of 1943. The 1957 televised version was set in Hungary during the 1956 Hungarian popular uprising.²⁸ The play and its prologue hint at why Sherwood was so quick to move the play's centre of action to these countries. Interest in Finland and its Winter War had probably faded from the headlines, having been replaced by other news from the stages of war, yet Sherwood still found the play's themes resonant. His connections to Finland were circumstantial and his core interest lay in central Europe. The play's strong anti-German stance took on a new shade of meaning once Finland started the Continuation War in 1941 alongside Germany, as Sherwood's own attitude towards Nazi Germany remained unchanged. In his eyes, the communism represented by the U.S.S.R had now lost its reputation as a bringer of peace due to the Winter War, but the long-term enemy was still Germany and fascism.

At the end of the foreword to the printed edition of the play (when Finland and U.S.S.R are at peace during the temporary truce period and Finland's German connection is still ahead), Sherwood references the vulnerability of small countries as targets of attacks, mentioning the German occupation of Denmark and Norway as examples. This reinforces the idea that Finland stood in for the general vulnerability of smaller countries, and that Sherwood's interests were anchored in anti-Hitler sentiments. From this perspective, transplanting the play's events to a

23 Shuman 1964, 77.

24 Sherwood 1941, XXVII.

25 Wilmeth & Miller 1986, 352.

26 Dunn 2013, 207–8.

27 Sherwood 1941; Shuman 1964, 32–33; Wilmeth & Miller 1996, 352. *There Shall Be No Night* was printed in 1941 and the playwright himself describes the publishing of the play in the lengthy prologue (the "Preface" is signed on 13 September 1940), situating it within the context of his own output and ideological thinking. Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller describe Sherwood as a well-intentioned man of big emotions, who tended to favour simplified solutions for complex problems. R. Baird Shuman describes Sherwood as primarily a moral pacifist, rather than a political one; an internationalist whose shift in thinking was profoundly influenced by Hitler's rise to power.

28 Bigsby 1985, 1; Lagerstedt 2011, 67–8.

Greece occupied by German troops was a logical shift.²⁹

Snowball War, on the other hand, was soon forgotten during the war and the years that followed, only performed for the first time at the semi-professional Jyväskylä's Huoneteatteri (Room Theatre) in the autumn of 1958. The production focused on the family drama aspects of the play, and it was praised for the universality of its political conflict. The play was still deemed topical in 1958, when the Finnish neutrality question, the country's post-war relationship with the USSR (determined by the so-called Paasikivi³⁰ strategy), and political realism, were all still very much at play. The play was described by reviewers as "a pathos for human liberty". The play's origin in the 1930s elicited a connection to the Finnish nationalist spirit at the time that was, according to Kari Salosaari, "inherently Germanic, at least in Olsson's eyes."³¹ The play also spawned a Swedish language translation and three radio adaptations in the mid-1960s. In those productions, the political was side-lined by the "spirit", and especially the character of Outi, the youngest son, represented "compassionate humanity".³²

Johanna Enckell's dramatised *Snöbollskriget / Lumisota* (*Snowball War*) at the Lilla Teatern (Swedish-language theatre) in Helsinki in the early 1980s did not centre on the family drama, but also showed how the radical political years had been left behind. The frame of this production was still the difficulty of remaining neutral when trying to exist between major political powers, but the performance itself explored the problematics of being human in a world increasingly gone astray. In her dramatisation, Enckell added text from the following expressionistic plays by Olsson: *S.O.S.* (1928) and *Det blåa undret* (1932), as well as the novel *Chitambol* (1933), and the essay *Jag lever* (1948).³³ Director Kaisa Korhonen interpreted the play's narrative as a Paschal mystery. The war was relegated to an auxiliary role, and Olsson's pacifism was mystified.

Conclusions

The debut performances of Hagar Olsson's and Robert E. Sherwood's plays are a particular compelling example of how pacifist ideas are forced aside in favour of militarism when the international political situation deteriorates. As is customary with the arts, theatre sided with the people forced to suffer, and the ensuing narrative structure is an ancient one: the war between two adversaries, where the weaker party perseveres and beats a seemingly more powerful adversary, is a popular narrative motif. By strongly connecting with the surrounding world and breaking dramatic boundaries, these performances encouraged viewers to see *through* the performance into their own environment³⁴, the performances themselves becoming part of contemporary society and its various goals. The Finnish Winter War initiated a fascination that was eventually co-opted to serve other purposes.

The two plays examine their contemporary realities through differing perspectives. In Finland, the threat of war was tied to pervasive fears of the U.S.S.R and communism, and the criticism Olsson's play received from the far right, who attacked the play's conciliatory and pacifist approach, was rooted in the same distrust. In Sherwood's play the context of the Soviet attack was also seen in conjunction with the larger German threat and the events were framed by Central Europe's crises.

In Hagar Olsson's play *Snowball War*, the Winter War and the political reality inhabited the background of the drama's world, eventually impacting the play in a tangible way by leading to its suppression. Robert Sherwood's target was the war itself and the impact it had on people, and the ideological catalogue created by the writer reflected wider global political frontiers outside of Finland. Olsson was a poet, Sherwood a realist narrator of events and a journalist. Olsson's more layered and literary style enabled the discovery of new angles as the world evolved. Sherwood had written a more one-dimensional play that needed a new political crisis

29 Sherwood 1941, XXIX–XXX.

30 Juho Kusti Paasikivi, Finland's President 1946–56.

31 Salosaari *Uusi Suomi* 6.12.1958. The opening night was covered by several newspapers.

32 Zilliacus 1979, 176.

33 Enckell, Johanna & Olsson, Hagar, "Snöbollskriget." Playtext. Åbo Akademi Library. This version also exists as a German translation by Gisbert Jänick. Vega was also the name of one of the novel's characters.

34 Cf. Bennett 2005, 47–8.

to facilitate its dramatic revival. Both plays exemplify how strongly drama can be enmeshed with the society that surrounds it.

Translated from Finnish by Kayleigh Töyrä.

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