

## Review

**Pirkko Koski**

***Finland's National Theatre 1974–1991. The Two Decades of Generational Contests, Cultural Upheavals, and International Cold War Politics.***

Routledge, 2022, 288 pages. Translated by Kayleigh Töyrä.

**Anneli Saro, University of Tartu**

Monographs, which rely on long-lasting research in archives, have become more and more exceptional as the current trend of research politics values more peer-reviewed articles published in international journals. Professor emerita Pirkko Koski has been able to achieve this goal, publishing first her exhaustive study of the Finnish National Theatre in 1974–1991 in Finnish under the title *Suomen Kansallisteatteri ristipaineissa (The Finnish National Theatre Caught in Cultural Crossfires)* (2019, SKS) and, after re-angling, questioning, and choosing different productions as case studies (p. x) the same material in English in 2022. Unfortunately, I have not had the chance yet to read both books that would enable me to conduct a comparative analysis. Since researchers investigating small cultures often face the challenge of how to make their empirical material relevant and intriguing also for international audiences, the new, international approach chosen by Koski made reading of the book in English especially interesting. Finnish theatre is not *terra incognita* for me, since I have lived in Helsinki for six years during different periods and have also visited the National Theatre, but only after 1996. My perspective on the book was thus a semi-outsider's one and my reading strategy implicitly comparative because I often compared Koski's statements and writing strategies with the discourse on Estonian national theatre.<sup>1</sup>

The book is divided into two sections titled "Operational frames" and "Programming,

---

<sup>1</sup> In Estonia, only the National Opera and the National Ballet bear the name and are financed directly from the state budget while all other theatres receive their state subsidies from the Ministry of Culture. Since no other drama theatres have the privilege, discussions on the issue have flared up several times. Estonian Drama Theatre and Vanemuine have been considered potential candidates for the title. Thus, there are no actual counterparts to the Finnish National Theatre in Estonia.

performances, and national agenda". In the monograph, the author aims to answer to the following questions: whether national approval in theatre was primarily based on artistic merit with "national" content only being a secondary consideration and what roles did upholding tradition and renewing dramatic arts play (p. 7). In the first section, Koski gives an overview of the Finnish societal and cultural framework of the period and introduces the main principles of management of the National Theatre. The second section is dedicated to the research of programming principles and repertoire. The analysis of repertoire is based on the origin of play texts: domestic and translated texts and the latter relies on the geographical location of authors. Translated texts are divided into three categories: modern dramatic classics, new Eastern European drama, and new plays from the West. Koski also makes a delicate distinction between high (for example interpretations of literary classics and historical events) and low (folk theatre, popular and commercial) genres. The repertoire categories reflect well the cultural climate during the Cold War and traditions of Finnish theatre. In addition to the last chapter where the guest performances of Eastern and Western theatres are introduced, a considerable amount of attention is dedicated also to foreign guest directors throughout the book because, as Koski states, "(t)he Finnish National Theatre represented a type of 'cosmopolitan conviviality': a combination of the national and the international" (p. 7).

In the following, I tackle some of the main phrases in the title of the book – Finland's National Theatre; 1974–1991 and international Cold War politics; generational contests and cultural upheavals.

Several notable books from different perspectives have been written about national theatres recently – S. E. Wilmer's *National Theatres in a Changing Europe* (2007), Nadine Holdsworth's *Theatre & Nation* (2010), etc. – and Koski uses this research to contextualize her own case study. She relies on Marvin Carlson's article "National Theatres: Then and Now" (2008, 21–22) to define the general understanding of national theatre: an impressive building in the capital city, government-level support and financial backing, and a repertoire that emphasises national works.

The Finnish National Theatre, like many other counterparts in Northern, Eastern, and Central Europe was established in 1872 as a national project that was "intrinsic to the formation of a coherent national identity" (p. 1). When a corresponding national state is founded and national identity formed and secured, the function of a national theatre becomes more blurred and ambiguous. Most of European national theatres have retained their privileged position in their country and are often criticised for that. This applies also to the National Theatre in Finland, which has always had a rather special position in the Finnish theatrical system. "The Finnish National Theatre's position was bolstered by its heritage, its location in the country's capital, an emerging public support that set it apart from other theatres, the Theatre's size, and its larger-than-average resources."<sup>2</sup> (p. 3) Thus the Finnish National Theatre has been institutionally a typical example of its kind.

The ideology of the theatre has been tackled very carefully in the book because Koski is fully aware of the contemporary cultural political contexts surrounding the institution of national theatres. The Finnish National Theatre is a Finnish language theatre with a mandate for the advancement and conservation of Finnish drama and language (p. 221) but the position can also be justified by the political and cultural history of the bilingual country. In addition, Koski leans to Loren Kruger who, in her article "The National Stage and the Naturalized House: (Trans)National Legitimation in Modern Europe" (2008), highlighted the transnational character of the concept of a national theatre, which is conditioned by its legitimation internationally. Koski addresses the issue of the theatre having words like "national" and "Finnish" in its name only in the introductory and the concluding chapter, explaining apologetically that the word "national" was taken to imply "public" and for national legitimization the theatre needed widespread public support (p. 2) and, finally, that representations of the concept of "the nation" in the repertoire became more diversified and segmented during the period (p. 196). A sign of cautiousness can be found also in the title of the book where the name of the theatre is translated as Finland's National Theatre when in the main text the Finnish National Theatre is used. Altogether, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Later in the book, Koski specifies that the Theatre's state subsidy is a fixed percentage of the government's cultural income (p. 22).

embeddedness of notions like national theatre in its historical, cultural, and political contexts are well explained and exemplified in the book.

The period covered in the book is from 1974 to 1991. This is the era when Kai Savola was the theatre director of the Finnish National Theatre. Nevertheless, the monograph is not about Savola and even his name is mentioned rarely. In the text, the Finnish National Theatre is almost given agency, since it is the theatre that makes decisions, argues with directors and informs its audience. The discourse is probably partly related to the non-transparent or collective leadership structure of the institution – a private theatre owned by the Finnish National Theatre Foundation and handled officially by the board whose members were invited (by whom?) amongst socially influential people (p. 22). If this is the case and Savola's influence on artistic profile and repertoire of the institution was insignificant, the chosen starting and ending points of the period are unjustified. Nevertheless, considering autocratic leadership strategies characteristic to the period in question, this explanation is hardly probable.

Koski stresses that the 1970s and 1980s are frequently grouped together and labelled as the era of the welfare state (p. 3). Internationally, the period was rather stable (at least when compared to the second half of the 1960s) but definitely coloured by Cold War politics that strongly affected a country like Finland that was trying to negotiate between East and West. In Finland, the 1970s were marked by fierce political and cultural debates that abated in the 1980s. The 1980s and the 1990s, on the other hand, went down in history as the collapse of the Iron Curtain, which, among other developments, enabled the renewal of cultural connections between Finland and Estonia. Nevertheless, the political events did not change the habitus of the Finnish National Theatre explicitly and remain somewhat in the background in the book. One of the reasons behind that was the theatre's political aim to work on apolitical grounds.

Koski explains this statement as follows: "Finland has had its fair share of theatrical crises, usually revolving around the real or imagined left-wing sympathies of theatres, as well as the way that drama undermined religious morals and 'family values'. These two things were often deemed to go hand in hand. However, these specific issues did not often surface in debates about the Finnish National Theatre as it was not profiled as or assumed to be a left-wing institution." (p. 187) Contrary to the public image of the theatre that is repeatedly also exemplified in the book by extracts from theatre criticism, Koski convinces her readers that this was not entirely true, or not true from her point of view when analysing performances and criticism diachronically. For example, when other Finnish theatres put on plenty of Russian and Soviet drama, the National Theatre preferred Eastern European dissident plays, when other theatres highlighted political connotations of their performances, the National Theatre tended to stress exploration of the human condition as such even when performances allowed political interpretations. Even in chapter 13, titled as *Social upheaval: pacifism, generational rebellion, environmental threats*, theatre critics of the time seemed to overlook the political connotations of particular productions, leading the author to assume that the performances might have actually resonated with audience members more than the theatre critics led us to believe (p. 177). Since the National Theatre functioned as a theatre for all the citizens of Finland and represented also popular taste, theatre critics as mediators between the institution and the audience might also consciously avoid political interpretations to pave the "everyman's" way to the theatre.

What is the story that the book tells its readers? Koski's version of the history of the Finnish National Theatre from 1974 to 1991 reminds one, to a certain extent, of the fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling* or the genre of *Bildungsroman*. An old and seemingly dusty theatre institution, which held a privileged position in the family and attracted wide audiences, was constantly teased by other family members (mostly critics) for its entertainment-led and conservative values. But slowly it started to rejuvenate and, by its nature, to diversify: the average age of theatre makers became significantly younger, and the attention of the directors shifted from text to performance and physicality. The popular repertoire was produced for or transferred to the big stage, leaving more experimental works by the younger generation to be produced on new smaller stages like Willensauna and Omapohja. An intergenerational power struggle was thus solved, and the reputation of the theatre improved. Happy end!

In conclusion, I must admit that Koski's book was able to fascinate me as an international reader only partly and there are several, mostly empirical reasons behind that. The Finnish

National Theatre seems to have been, first of all, more an actors' and less a directors' theatre. This becomes evident both in the cited theatre criticism as well as through the photos presented in the book. Without knowing the actors, their roles and charisma, it was sometimes challenging to orientate among all these names. Finnish theatre criticism and, accordingly, also the book provides much less information about interesting interpretations of drama classics, historical events or the often cited "human condition". Furthermore, set design and general aesthetic principles get little attention. Despite that, I found the general concept of the book – the investigation of a theatre institution, the national theatre as a concept, and the repertoire of a theatre – intellectually very intriguing and enhancing.