

# S. O. S. - A PACIFIST INTERVENTION IN HELSINKI 1929

## THE INTERCROSSING OF MODERNISM AND SOCIALISM

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The article examines the co-operation between a (Swedish-speaking) modernist author with a (Finnish-speaking) workers' theatre in 1920s Finland. It shows how modernist aesthetics and the socialist movement met in the practices of the workers' theatres and what dangers lay in this combination. I am especially interested in the moments when the radical intelligentsia - artists, writers, and theatre directors - joined forces with the workers' theatres in order to create political theatre. Political turmoil was about to occur when Hagar Olsson's play *S.O.S.* premiered in Helsinki in March 1929. The venue was the Koitto Theatre (in Finnish *Koiton Näyttämö*), a semi-professional workers' theatre run by a socialist temperance association, already known for its performances of German expressionist plays. In my paper, I ask what goals lay behind the co-operation between Olsson and Koitto – and what came out of it?

Keywords: workers' theatre, political theatre, Hagar Olsson, *S.O.S.*, pacifism, Koiton Näyttämö

Christopher Balme has argued that theatre scandals in 1920s Germany had a long-term impact on public discussions. Theatre showed its importance as a public institution and became a centre of focus.<sup>1</sup> Scandal is an appropriate word to describe the reception of the performance of *S.O.S.* and the fierce debate on pacifism that went on in public meetings and in the press. The play carried an explicit pacifist message that was interpreted as a call to political struggle. In the context of the Finnish workers' theatre movement, it was seen as an irresponsible and potentially dangerous thing to do.

In this article, I look at a unique co-operation

between a (Swedish-speaking) modernist author with a (Finnish-speaking) workers' theatre in 1920s Finland. My aim is to show how modernist aesthetics and the socialist movement met in the practices of the workers' theatres, and what dangers lay in this combination. I am especially interested in the moments when the radical intelligentsia - artists and writers and theatre directors - joined forces with workers' theatres in order to create political theatre. Furthermore, in Finnish theatre history, these have been moments of social and political mobilization or the moments of madness when the order has been shaken.<sup>2</sup> Political turmoil was also about to take

place when Hagar Olsson's play *S.O.S.* premiered in Helsinki in March 1929. The venue was the Koitto Theatre (in Finnish Koiton Näyttämö), a semiprofessional workers' theatre run by a socialist temperance association, already known for its performances of the German expressionist plays. In my paper, I am asking what goals lay behind the co-operation between Olsson and Koitto and what came out of it?

A special feature for Finland was that the professional theatre field developed late, and the amateur workers' theatre activity was not only popular, but also played an important role within the professional theatre field during the first part of the twentieth century. Although part of the workers' associations and performing at the workers' houses, the workers' theatres were able to hire professional artists. In the 1920s, the soothing Social Democratic theatre policy wanted to nurture workers' theatres as separate cultural institutions, catering for high art to a working-class audience. This meant that class-conscious and agitational theatre had to work mostly in the margins of the workers' movement within temporary amateur ensembles.<sup>3</sup>

The life and work of Hagar Olsson has interested literary scholars. The Finnish writer and film-director Jörn Donner presented Olsson and her early plays to the new radical generation of the 1960s. In the 1970s, there were several Finnish and Swedish theatre and literary scholars who wrote about *S.O.S.*, especially Lena Fridell, Yrjö Varpio, Taisto-Bertil Orsmaa and Raija-Sinikka Rantala. They saw the play and its productions as a modernist intervention and as such an important break in the theatrical tradition within Finnish and, perhaps, Scandinavian theatre history. They also described the politicized reception of the performance in the press and pointed out some similarities with German expressionist drama - which was also remarked upon by contemporaries in the 1920s. In the 1980s, Pirkko Koski included the performance of *S.O.S.* at the Koitto Theatre in her large book on the prehistory of the Helsinki City Theatre. In the 1990s, Roger Holmström completed his detailed study on Olsson's work and life.<sup>4</sup> For a

younger generation of scholars, Hagar Olsson remains a popular object of research. Olsson had many sides to her life and career - from writing letters, reviews, and prose, to writing drama. Recent dissertations focus mainly on her intellectual development as a utopian thinker, or tend to offer a gender reading of her prose.<sup>5</sup>

However, nobody has asked why and how this Swedish-speaking modernist writer happened to co-operate with a Finnish socialist semiprofessional theatre? I will look at the intercrossing processes that took place in the theatrical production, shifting the focus of research from a sole view of the 'heroic' avant-garde artist Hagar Olsson to taking a closer look at the workers' theatre's involvement with both Olsson and with the staging of *S.O.S.* Finally, I will consider the aftermath and the effects of the encounter between the theatre and the playwright. The concept of 'intercrossing' comes from Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann and their *histoire croisée* approach, where "entities and objects of research are not merely considered in relation to one another but also through one another, in terms of relationships, interactions, and circulation. [...] It points towards an analysis of resistances, inertias, modifications in trajectory, form, and content - and new combinations that can both result from and develop themselves in the process of crossing."<sup>6</sup>

There were several features in the production of *S.O.S.* at the Koitto Theatre that entailed crossing borders, which I will raise during the course of my article. Firstly, I will introduce Hagar Olsson.

#### HAGAR OLSSON, ART AND THE PEOPLE

Hagar Olsson (1893-1978) was a Finnish writer and critic who wrote in Swedish, which is the other official language of the country, spoken by a minority of the people. During her career, her reviews and essays had a strong impact on literary discourse, but her prose and drama were not as successful *S.O.S.* being the only exception. Having written her first novel in 1916, Olsson worked as a literary and theatre critic in several Swedish-speaking newspapers in Helsinki and was

one of the first to present modernist writers like James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser, Jules Romains, and Alexander Blok to a Finnish audience. She found the communitarian and collectivist literary movements of the time (e.g. the French and Italian Unanimism) appealing, traveled frequently, and made contacts all over Europe.<sup>7</sup>

In 1924, Olsson wrote about the new collectivism in European theatre. According to her, it became evident, for instance, in the popularity of the use of choirs. She declared: "Today's poetry has taken its words from the streets. The poet has become an orator, a prophet of the masses, a barricade-singer. He has come out of his chamber, taken the burden of the nameless, become an interpreter of those who stubbornly suffer."<sup>8</sup>

Olsson was a future-oriented idealist (who also fell for Christian mysticism). She was a pacifist and became a supporter of the Vienna-based pan-European movement led by Count R. N. Coudenhove-Kalergi. The goal of the pan-European movement was to abolish wars by bonding the nation states together with economic and political ties and to create the United States of Europe. Although the pan-Europeans stressed that their only political enemies were the communists and extreme nationalists,<sup>9</sup> in Finland they met with political suspicion. For Olsson, being cosmopolitan was linked with her ideals of the fellowship of humankind. In her works of the 1920s, the prophet-like protagonists search for humanity and communitarian fellowship within the hectic beat of modern times and capitalist culture.

In the 1920s, a fierce cultural battle had once again erupted between the Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking Finns.<sup>10</sup> Theatre institutions were seen as cultural establishments that supported, protected and tried to strengthen not only national culture and languages but also separate minority cultures and subcultures, like working-class culture in the case of workers' theatres. Up until the 1920s, there had seldom been co-operation between the Swedish and Finnish theatres. Hagar Olsson, who was

practically bilingual, translated literature from Finnish to Swedish and thus functioned as a transmitter between the two languages and cultures. Occasionally, she contributed to Finnish literary magazines by writing in Finnish. For a time, she even published a bilingual literary magazine called *Ultra*. It seems that for Hagar Olsson, the shift from being a modernist critic towards becoming an activist author took place around the year of 1928. This meant a break from the isolationism of the Swedish 'inward-looking-modernist' community and a search for new contacts and audiences. She started to write drama and address directly a Finnish-speaking and working-class audience.

During the years of 1927 and 1928, Olsson gathered a circle of young artists, writers, actors and actresses who shared her interest in the avant-garde and radical art. What was quite peculiar at the time, and showed Olsson's special personality, was her ability to socially unite both Swedish and Finnish-speakers. At this time, she simultaneously started writing for the theatre and for the Finnish press, including the newspaper *The Finnish Social Democrat* (*Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*). In January 1928, Hagar Olsson debuted as a playwright with *A Pantomime of the Heart* (in Swedish *Hjärtats pantomim*). The play was staged at the conservative Swedish Theatre (of Helsinki), the most natural and actually the only possible venue for all the Finnish-Swedish playwrights. *Hjärtats pantomim* with its inward-looking Pirandello-influences was regarded as the first modernist play written in Finland.<sup>11</sup>

Olsson was searching for further impulses and for a wider audience and, once again, travel abroad gave her new ideas. During her stay in Berlin in the spring of 1928, she saw Piscator's performance *The Boom* (in German *Konjunktur*) at the Piscator-Bühne. The performance dealt with the topic of international oil capitalism. The text had been carefully revised just before the premiere so that the Soviet Union and Communists would not be offended.<sup>12</sup> In her private letter, Olsson regarded the performance with suspicion. She described the decor, which combined film with actors on a revolving stage

(bringing masses and new set designs in front of the audience), and the mixing of radio sound, music, and choirs together with communist agitation. According to Olsson, Piscator's theatre meant eye-catching and technological 'Regitheater', which created a mechanical machine that engulfed the playwright and the actors and filled the stage with action and special effects. As her immediate reaction, she wrote: "It was interesting to see, but God help us if this is the future of theatre!"<sup>13</sup>

It seems, however, that Piscator influenced Olsson's ideas on theatre. She became convinced about the possibilities of theatre to seize the day and influence its audiences. In a review in August 1928, she wrote that only drama and theatre were able to express the modern, concentrated, and dramatic times, and "bring alive in a spectacular form the ethical and intellectual conflicts that touch the whole of human kind".<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, Olsson was already writing her new 'pacifist play'. The play was first printed in December 1928, after Olsson started contacting theatres. Along with the Swedish Theatre of Helsinki, she hoped to get her play performed in Sweden. She actually sent the play to the Swedish director Per Lindberg, explaining that her work "is politically relevant, so it should now have the best preconditions to draw attention. (SOS is the international distress signal which should generally be known.)"<sup>15</sup> But it was a tiny Finnish-speaking workers' theatre that got to be the first to perform the play. How on earth did it happen?

#### THE KOITTO THEATRE AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Finland had gained its independence from the Russian empire after the Bolshevik revolution in the autumn of 1917. The Finnish Civil War ended in April 1918 when the defeated Reds - rebellious industrial workers' - were pushed over the border to the Soviet Union. In addition, 76,000 Reds were convicted and put into prison camps that had to be founded all over the country. With thousands of potentially revanchist Finnish communists, the Soviet Union and communism in general were seen as a threat to the burgeoning

Finnish nation-state. The last prisoners of war from the Red blocks were freed and given political citizenship due to an amnesty in 1927. In 1928, the Communist International launched a new extreme leftist politics with revolutionary aspirations. In Finland, the emerging communist activism was met with the rise of a right-wing popular movement targeted against communism, trade unions, and labour movement in general. In this growing atmosphere, the workers' cultural activity was also met with political suspicions and carefully observed by the security police.<sup>16</sup>

The workers' theatres in Viipuri and Tampere pioneered performing German expressionist drama (Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, Walter Hasenclever) in the early 1920s. For the workers' theatres, this kind of repertoire was a way to perform hidden social criticism. Moreover, playing modernist social dramas was a way to get headlines and to draw audiences. There was, however, a line that the workers' theatres were not allowed to cross, namely, of conducting revolutionary agitation. The workers' theatres received state and municipal subsidies only if they dissociated themselves from a political repertoire.<sup>17</sup>

The Koitto Theatre was the largest workers' theatre in Helsinki, run by a left-wing socialist temperance society. It had working-class actors and working-class audiences. Despite the stage being tiny, the theatre building had a prime location in the commercial city centre. During the 1920s, the Koitto Theatre had developed into a semiprofessional theatre through their repertoire of operettas and through their policy of hiring more and more fulltime actors and actresses. Despite the turn towards a more professional theatre, most of the performers still attended the rehearsals and performances only in the evenings after their normal working day was over. Although the theatre had eleven fulltime actors by 1928, it should be noted that they all had working-class backgrounds and were more or less self-taught.<sup>18</sup>

Normally, the Koitto Theatre's performances were hardly mentioned in the Finnish bourgeois press. However, it was important for the theatre

to receive recognition for its artistic accomplishments, especially when the theatre was in need of a higher state and municipal subsidy. In general, good reviews helped to solve internal conflicts within the workers' theatres. People involved in the Koitto Theatre had to convince the board of the temperance association that it was worthwhile to keep the theatre going and growing. During the 1920s, the municipal subsidy to the Koitto Theatre rose steadily while the state subsidy remained at a low level. The Social Democrats and the Communists, who had won thirty eight per cent of the seats in the last Helsinki City Council elections, supported the Koitto Theatre.<sup>19</sup>

For the Koitto Theatre, a shift in repertoire from operettas to Expressionism began in the autumn of 1927 when the actor Hugo Hytönen (1890-1944) joined the company. Acquainted with the expressionist repertoire from his earlier engagement with the Viipuri Workers' Theatre, it was Hytönen's expressionist performances that brought the radical artist to the Koitto Theatre. In October 1927, he was allowed to put on stage his signature play *Who Weeps for Juckenack* (in Finnish *Kuka itkee Juckenackia?*), a contemporary tragicomedy by the German playwright Hans Jose Rehfisch.<sup>20</sup>

### OLSSON MEETS KOITTO

Hagar Olsson did not find her way to the Finnish workers' theatre all by herself. Star actress without a theatre, Elli Tompuri (1880-1962) was the catalyst for Olsson's interest in the Koitto Theatre. Having run her own artistic theatre for a short time, Finnish-speaking Tompuri had also performed both in Germany and in the US. She was having difficulties in finding a foothold within the Finnish theatre field, which might have been due to her open sympathy towards the Socialists. Olsson, with her favourable reviews, had been one of the few supporters of Tompuri.<sup>21</sup>

In January 1928, Olsson invited Tompuri to see the rehearsals of *Pantomime of the Heart*, at the Swedish Theatre. Personally, Tompuri was not convinced that Olsson, or the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki could give flesh to the avant-garde ideas,

which Olsson and her circle of artist friends were debating. A couple of days later, after seeing Olsson's play, Tompuri went to the Koitto Theatre to see *Who weeps for Juckenack*. She was fascinated by the performance and encouraged Olsson, in her capacity as a theatre critic, to go and see the play. Tompuri thought that the actors from the workers' theatre acted with more conviction than the trained actors of the Swedish Theatre. To quote Elli Tompuri's diary: "The same evening I called Hagar and sang out that all their radicalism was just rubbish, they never fought for a positive cause - only curse around their bottles of cognac."<sup>22</sup> Tompuri immediately offered to perform Ibsen's *Nora* (*A Dolls House*) at the Koitto Theatre. Although her proposal was accepted, for some reason the play was not staged and her guest performance therefore never took place.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, Hagar Olsson followed Tompuri's advice and went to the Koitto Theatre to see *Who Weeps for Juckenack* - a German play about a lonely bureaucrat who after a heart attack realizes the importance of love. Olsson wrote a very positive review in a Swedish-speaking magazine *Nya Argus*. Calling the Koitto Theatre an intimate European stage, she compared the leading actor and the director of the play, the natural-born genius Hugo Hytönen with the best European character actors.<sup>24</sup> When the theatre staged Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (in Finnish *Ylösnousemus*) in September 1928, Olsson praised the lively and expressive mass scenes and claimed that the Koitto Theatre was the best example of a European avant-garde theatre in Finland.<sup>25</sup>

This first encounter between Olsson and the Koitto Theatre had an immediate effect on Hytönen's position in the theatre. Pleased by the good reviews, the board of the Koitto Theatre raised Hytönen to the position of vice manager, and, a couple of months later, the new manager of the theatre. Regarding the repertoire, Olsson's reviews seemed to prompt the theatre in continuing with the avant-garde line, and to establish Koitto as an artistic, intimate or studio theatre. In August and September 1928, Hytönen was planning the repertoire for the next season

and turned to Olsson. He initially thought to include *A Pantomime of the Heart* in the program and had the play translated, but the play was never staged.<sup>26</sup> It was replaced by Olsson's new drama *S.O.S.*, which she was in the process of writing, and which was thought to be better suited for a workers' theatre.

Olsson, along with her circle of critics and artist friends, openly supported the socialist workers' theatre; in their minds the Koitto Theatre had a radical artistic potential. One might even think that Olsson had an ulterior motive for writing the play for the Koitto Theatre. By doing so Olsson was hoping to bring about a modernist intervention to Helsinki and to Finnish cultural life. After all, in Helsinki there was a felt need for an independent artistic theatre. According to a letter in the theatre's archive, despite Olsson's sympathies towards the workers' theatre, Hytönen had to work hard in order to convince Olsson that the Koitto Theatre would be the right place for the first premiere of her new play. After all, it was very exceptional that a professional writer would let a semiprofessional workers' theatre stage the first production of her play. Therefore, it was not before January 1929 that the board of the Koitto Theatre announced that *S.O.S.* was going to be performed. The play premiered at the Koitto Theatre on 16 March 1929, and it was staged at the Swedish Theatre of Helsinki five weeks later.<sup>27</sup>

The collaboration between Hagar Olsson and Koitto Theatre was clearly a larger risk for Olsson than it was for the workers' theatre. It offered her a possibility to write for a wider audience, but it also meant that Olsson had to face the political prejudices of the time. By letting a Finnish workers' theatre stage her play, she had broken both with her Swedish-Finnish community and her bourgeois bonds. From the hegemonic anti-Communist point of view, she was playing with fire. For liberal artists in 1920s Finland, co-operating with the workers' theatres meant crossing a border that stigmatized those who dared to cross it.

#### ART OR AGITATION?

*S.O.S.* is an anti-war play with three acts and two interludes. The protagonist, Patrick, after developing a lethal gas in his laboratory, realizes the negative implications of his invention and therefore wants to destruct his own creation. He is chased by the military and police and therefore has to go into hiding; he escapes with the help of Maria. Later, Maria leaves her father, stealing his money in order to help Patrick whom she sees as a pacifist "prophet". At the end of the play, Maria returns to her home in a state of mental illness and is captured by the police. Maria explains to her father the essence of the struggling pacifism: "[Peace is] a destructive fire that will burn down the evil by the root. It is not directed towards specific political conditions. [Peace] aims at reshaping the whole of society like it reshapes each individual. [- -] For individuals, peace means awakening, conversion and a great mission: We are the soldiers and the missionaries [of peace]. We have gone to the world like crusaders, not to rob graves but to win life."<sup>28</sup>

Considered as an avant-garde intervention, both the play and its decor utilized many modernist innovations and applied them for the first time into a play of Finnish origin. Olsson introduced cinematic effects like montage and collage and a choir of human voices yelling and singing and creating a sonic or acoustic backdrop in the expressionist interludes of the play. Olsson's close friend, renowned sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen (1894-1966), designed the decor and lighting. A year before, he had staged her earlier play *A Pantomime of the Heart* (at the Swedish Theatre). His set-design for *S.O.S.* was described as being cubistic. The stage was lit entirely by two spots, because the tiny stage did not have modern lighting equipment. A positive effect of the poor lighting was that Aaltonen was able to create an intimate atmosphere. Having worked successfully on the Koitto's modest stage, Aaltonen became sceptical toward the omnipotence of German stage technology.<sup>29</sup>

At the premiere of *S.O.S.*, Olsson was present and received a laurel from the theatre. She thanked the theatre afterwards saying that: "I am

deeply indebted to the theatre for the most wonderful artistic interpretation of my play. With their fine and devoted work, the director and the actors have greatly added value to my play. For me this co-operation has only brought joy."<sup>30</sup> Although Olsson and Aaltonen had expressed critical opinions towards German expressionism, reviewers compared S.O.S. with Piscator and the German plays. The artistic achievements of the production were recognized and supported by the liberal critics, but most of the bourgeois press chose to ignore these sides of S.O.S. because of the political reception of the play.<sup>31</sup>

Especially dangerous were the expressionist interludes of the play. In the first interlude of S.O.S., the League of Nations, USA, Soviet Union and Pan-European Union are quarrelling over disarmament. The second interlude is set between the earth and the moon with three Furies and three Riders. Patrick arrives with a red flag and addresses the audience on the threat of war and the responsibility of humankind, stating that: war is just a reflection of the human soul.<sup>32</sup> Several national anthems can be heard, and the last and most powerful of them, the communist Internationale. When the collage of anthems fades out, Patrick shouts, the struggle over the souls is continuous, there is a traitor among us. Nobody is safe, nobody is without responsibility, no one can retreat. The signal is given! I call you all to the last fight!<sup>33</sup> The letters S.O.S. are projected on the walls - this could be read as a call to socialism (in Finnish *sosialismi*). At the premiere, a part of the audience at the Koitto Theatre started to sing along with the Internationale and express their political standing. This could be interpreted as a symbolic demonstration, perhaps creating a bond between the actors and audience.

The critics, in their search to analyse the performance, had trouble defining whether they had seen a modernist intervention by a workers' theatre or a communist intervention through modernist aesthetics. The majority of the bourgeois critics opted for the latter opinion and labelled the performance as political agitation. They wrote that S.O.S. smelled of Moscow and that the premiere had turned into a communist

demonstration, and finally that Hagar Olsson had also turned Red.<sup>34</sup>

The pacifist and pan-European writer Erkki Vala, commented on the right-wing critics in his review by asking: "all this anger towards an anti-violent play, all these lies about being subordinates to Moscow, where does it come from? Why do they terrorize our whole intellectual life by uttering the word Moscow?"<sup>35</sup> And Olsson wrote that, "'Communist' - a mystical word that people in Helsinki turn to in every ambiguous case in the fields of art, literature, dance, theatre, journalism, business, eroticism, and politics."<sup>36</sup>

It really seems that the audience made all the difference; for what was not seen as appropriate for a workers' theatre could be suitable for bourgeois audiences. When S.O.S. was performed at the Swedish Theatre of Helsinki in April of 1929 and at the Turku Finnish Theatre in February of 1930, the critics were pleased with the modernist achievements and did not refer to agitation of any kind.<sup>37</sup>

After the premiere, Hagar Olsson continued to promote ideas of pacifism, especially through the pan-European movement. She took part in public discussions, suggesting a pacifist program in the spirit of Count Coudenhove-Kalergi. It included abolishing xenophobia from the press and from schools, introducing an international language (Esperanto or English) and abolishing social exclusion and a class based society.<sup>38</sup> During the same year, Olsson published the novel *På Kanaanexpress* (*On the Canaan Express*) with a pacifist protagonist named Johnny. Through the protagonist, Olsson declares that all art, all literature, all critics must serve as a weapon to reach an idea, otherwise they are worthless: "There is no neutrality in a struggling society."<sup>39</sup>

For Hagar Olsson, the public debate that had started with the performance of S.O.S. at the Koitto Theatre led her to be stigmatized by the Finnish conservative press, which attacked her personally and called her a Swedish-speaking communist (not to mention attacking her gender). The right-wing press wanted to see her sent over the border to the Soviet Union along with other pacifists. An activist she may have been but she

was not a communist. Her next play, *Det blåa undret* (The Blue Miracle 1932), depicted a clash between fascists and socialists within a bourgeois family. The traditional drama was performed in the Swedish Theatre of Helsinki and won no success. In this polarized cultural climate, Olsson fell between two stools. As a left-leaning intellectual she had difficulties in finding a space within Finnish cultural life for the next fifteen years. It was only after the Second World War, when she made her triumphal comeback as one of the leading literary critics of the country, that her articles and novels would be published in Finnish.<sup>40</sup>

In Sweden, with the exception of the director Per Lindberg's adaptation of *S.O.S.* for the radio (in 1929), the play was solely staged and performed by amateurs. Lindberg wrote about how Olsson's works stood out as sparkles, and how people would later be surprised to notice that they were not performed in the time they were written.<sup>41</sup>

#### THE OUTCOME FOR THE KOITTO THEATRE

As for the Koiitto Theatre, *S.O.S.* turned into a Pyrrhic victory - an immediate success with a very controversial outcome. It became the centre of attention, but not in the way the theatre had hoped for. However, the first months after the performance were positive for the theatre. During the summer of 1929, the theatre made a costly renovation, enlarging its stage and auditorium and renewing its lighting equipment. In August of 1929, the director Hugo Hytönen presented an ambitious repertoire for the next season. The opening play was to be Toller's *Hoppla; were alive* together with Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. The theatre advertised more than ever before and new billboards appeared in the city - one of them being a large ball-shaped red lamp set in the tower of the theatre building.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, hard times were coming. The theatre fell into debt because of the continuous renovations during the autumn of 1929. When the new avant-garde theatre opened its doors, the middle-class audience (that the theatre was hoping for) failed to show up because of the theatre's

'communist' reputation propagated by the right-wing press and its repertoire. And when the theatre board refused to hire more professional actors in the spring of 1930, the director, Hytönen, resigned. When the temperance association that upheld the theatre ran out of money, their plans to cut down the expenses caused a large clash with the board of the theatre.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, a large right-wing popular political movement, Lapuan like (Lapua Movement), aggressively suppressed all communist activity in the country. The workers' houses were forced to close their doors and the labour newspapers abolished. Echoed by the government, the new anti-Communist legislation was introduced in the summer of 1930. In that summer, Koiitto was also closed by the police because of communist suspicions regarding the temperance association, the theatre's backing organization. When the theatre re-opened, ideological and political control had increased and detectives were sent out to observe each performance.<sup>44</sup> All in all, the theatre chose to return to an entertaining, popular repertoire of operettas and farces, and the radical artists lost their connection (and interest) with the theatre. In 1933-34, the Koiitto Theatre merged with another popular theatre, which was even heavier in debt, *Kansan Näyttämö* (the People's Theatre), after a governmental initiative. The public theatre policy no longer favoured separate workers' theatres.<sup>45</sup>

In Finland, *S.O.S.* was distributed by the Workers' Theatres' Association (TNL) and was performed by several amateur-based workers' theatres. It seems, however, that the right-wing attack against the Koiitto Theatre and Olsson had taught a lesson. In the spring of 1930, the magazine *Workers' Theatre* (in Finnish *Työväen Näyttämötaide*) described how a board of a small-town workers' theatre was planning their repertoire for the next year: "It is not a good thing to perform modernist [drama]. Hagar Olsson has been labelled as communist only because she wrote *S.O.S.* The play fits better in bourgeois theatres than in ours. In the bourgeois theatres [the play] is considered as a remarkable



modernist art event, in our theatres it would be taken as clear political agitation."<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the mind of the board members of the workers' theatres, they were better off staying away from the modernist drama.

The staging of *S.O.S.* at the Koitto Theatre in 1929 started as a fruitful involvement between the radical intelligentsia and the socialist movement. On the one hand, the performance was seen as an artistic victory for the workers' theatre, but at the same time it generated a scandal, which eventually led to the collapse of the theatre. Hagar Olsson and Wäinö Aaltonen provided the Koitto Theatre with strong aesthetic impulses and increased the theatre's artistic ambitions. Despite their involvement, the Koitto Theatre was, for political reasons, rejected as being 'a leftist-avant-garde-theatre'. The theatre also miscalculated their

economic possibilities. It seems like the contradictions were caused by the workers' theatres' professionalization tendencies, its search for a wider middle-class audience, and the question of artistic independency. These kinds of identity problems were quite typical for the Finnish workers' theatres in general, bringing up questions whether they should only cater for a working-class audience by supporting political work, teaching socialism and raising class-consciousness, or if they should search for a wider artistic and/or economic success, and by this, entertain and bring fame and wealth to the workers' movement? Running a workers' theatre was about the balancing act between the three aspects of: economics, aesthetics, and politics. In this sense, one can say that the Koitto Theatre lost its balance and fell.

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