

How Theatre Can Develop Democracy: The Case of Theatre NO99

Eva-Liisa Linder

ABSTRACT

Twenty years after regaining its independence, Estonia is proud of its economic record, but faces challenges concerning the development of democracy. Into this situation, a small theatre company, Theatre NO99, led by stage director Tiit Ojasoo, has recently introduced a new style of postdramatic political theatre that raises questions about capitalism, civil society, racism, nationalism, the energy crisis and other sensitive issues. Furthermore, the company's European tours and collaborations with German and British companies have brought European debates to the Estonian stage. Recently, however, NO99 came up with two unparalleled and overtly political 'one time actions'. In 2010, *Unified Estonia*, a fictitious political movement, exposed the populism of the leading parties and drew 7200 people to its 'convention', thus making it one of the largest theatre events in modern European theatre history. Two years later, NO99 staged a 'first reading' of a semi-documentary play about a funding scandal that engulfed the prime minister's party, thereby contributing to provoke a series of civic and political events. This case study looks at how the theatre company has introduced itself as a morally sensitive institution (in the spirit of the German Enlightenment) and helped spark debates about national and democratic values in Estonia.

BIOGRAPHY

Eva-Liisa Linder, MA, is a theatre researcher and critic. After graduating from the University of Tartu in theatre studies, she has worked as a researcher and lecturer at the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. As a freelance editor and critic, she regularly follows children's theatre and is a member of the jury for the Estonian Theatre Union's annual childrens' theatre awards. Her main field of research is contemporary visual and political theatre in Estonia.

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Twenty years after regaining its independence, Estonia has much to be proud of. The country often promotes itself as the ‘Baltic Tiger’ or ‘E-stonia’ – it was the first among the Baltic states to adopt the Euro and considers itself a leading IT hub – but also as closely belonging to the culture of the Nordic countries, emphasizing its difference from its southern neighbours while referring to its own success story.

At the same time, the long-time impact of totalitarianism on social and cultural life has engendered a certain social passivity in the Estonian people. Due to the Soviet regime’s control of the arts and the restrictions of censorship, open comments on social issues were limited in the theatre as well as in society as a whole: people had to keep quiet to stay alive. During the totalitarian era, the theatre developed its own coded language of hints and allusions by means of which the productions could express opposition to Soviet rule, and thereby it served a specific social function.

With the loss of its importance as a metaphorical forum of resistance in the social upheavals of the late 1980s, the theatre of the newly emancipated Estonia found itself lacking the skills to deal candidly with contemporary political issues, having been subject to Soviet control for more than half of its history. During the five years of change, which covered Estonia’s partial regaining of independence by way of the Singing Revolution in 1988 and its full independence in 1991,¹ the annual number of spectators fell from 1.7 million in 1987 to around 700.000 in 1992 (in a country with a population of 1.4 million). This was a catastrophe that forced

the theatres to turn towards light commercial fare.² While attendance eventually began to improve, the one million mark was not reached again until 2007. Yet, Estonia has enjoyed one of the highest attendance levels in the EU (in 2007, 49% of the people went to the theatre at least once, whereas the EU average was 32%),³ and the number of theatre companies has increased rapidly in the last decade (from 19 in 2002 to 41 in 2012).⁴

However, during the first decade of independence, no theatre company dealing directly with local political problems was formed. There were, though, some examples of documentary theatre, some productions dealing with controversial issues within the idiom of psychological realism, and several productions after which critics noted that “the topic is also relevant today”.⁵ In this sense, the pattern of behaviour inherited from totalitarian times continued.

The social passivity is also reflected in the ranking of Estonian democracy. According to the *Economist’s* Democracy Index of 2012, Estonia is ranked thirty-fourth among the world’s democracies, as a “flawed democracy”, with the lowest scores recorded in the category of political participation (only 5 points; while its neighbour countries, Finland and Latvia, are listed with 7.22 and 5.56 points in political participation, respectively).⁶

The only theatre that started to pay attention to social problems, albeit not systematically, was the Von Krahl Theatre, the first permanently functioning private theatre, which was founded in 1992. A great many of its productions made reference to social pain points, mostly through the import of

foreign playwrights and stage directors. For example, *Some Explicit Polaroids* (2001) by contemporary British in-her-face playwright Mark Ravenhill, or *Connecting People* (2001) by the *enfant terrible* of Finnish theatre, Jouko Turkka, criticized capitalism and pointed to certain ills of society (inequality, unemployment, poverty, etc.). A dance production turned out to be particularly influential: a version of *Swan Lake* (2003) directed by Peeter Jalakas (director of the Von Krahl Theatre) and choreographed by Russian stage director Sasha Pepelyayev. It was welcomed by critics as a “fierce political act” that epitomized the association of the totalitarian regime with classical ballet, which had been a cultural icon of the insular system.⁷ The production won the New York Dance and Performance Award in 2004, showing that it is possible to present, to the global stage, studies of totalitarianism couched in the language of contemporary dance. Standing out in a theatrical landscape populated by talking heads, Von Krahl set the stage for the following developments in political theatre.

NO99 AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL THEATRE

The first theatre to play more consistently with local political themes was founded in 2005. An old comedy theatre in the centre of Tallinn had gone into administration and the Ministry of Culture searched for a new artistic director who could breathe life into the venue. Tiit Ojasoo, the young stage director, was eventually entrusted with the post. He graduated from a drama school in 2000 and had, already in his first productions, shown a bold and compelling approach to sensitive social material. His first notable productions – e.g. Willy Russell’s musical *Blood Brothers* (2001) and Bernard-Marie Koltès’ brutal drama *Roberto Zucco* (2002) – were created together with Ene-Liis Semper, a stage designer of international renown. Their artistic partnership was to lead the new theatre.⁸

The new state-funded company had inherited a medium-sized stage; it featured up to ten actors and the dramaturge Eero Epner, who became the *éminence grise* behind the textual basis of their ambitious projects, the generator of the rich metatextual and contextual content of their productions (in

programmes, articles, interviews, etc.). The company was named Theatre NO99 – the number 99 is decreased by one with each new production, a reminder that there is no time to waste⁹: “Should every play brought to the stage not at least strive to become a manifesto?” asks Ojasoo, “And should every staged play (and every performance) not aspire to promote certain ideals?”¹⁰

The opening production, *Sometimes It Feels As If Life Has Gone By Without Love*, has been interpreted as the manifesto of Ojasoo and Semper’s theatre. Based on improvisation and works by Japanese playwright Yukio Mishima, it promoted the ideals of artistic freedom, a passionate way of life and the courage to follow one’s ideals. Its clarity of message, richness of expression and vigorous performances came to be regarded as hallmarks of NO99, in accordance with the aims of the company, whose aim right from the outset has been to bring the theatre closer to society by means of popular productions. In addition to plays, NO99 has performed a series of so-called ‘one time actions’, in which the success or failure of a somewhat outlandish idea – e.g. the ability to deliver a monologue ninety-nine times in a row – is tested along with the actors’ physical or psychological limitations. Ene-Liis Semper has conceded that in many aspects NO99 resembles more a conceptual art project than a conventional repertoire theatre.¹¹

A company with an intense approach and clear principles had been born. A recent audience survey suggested that NO99 has one of the most distinctive brand identities amongst Estonian theatres: 80–90% of the respondents described the theatre as contemporary, social, daring and with a characteristic theatrical language.¹²

Although the style of NO99’s output is varied, most of it can be described as a mixture of Brechtian epic theatre and the postdramatic theatre described by Hans-Thies Lehmann.¹³ The productions are rich in physicality, highlighting the actors’ presence and the space they share; they make expressive use of different theatre languages, pop culture aesthetics, multimedia, installations, abstract visual images, etc. The use of cabaret aesthetics has been described by the company as a way of ‘sweetening’ an otherwise bitter pill, but at the same time NO99 ad-

mits that the need for an attractive appearance is symptomatic of a crisis in the theatre, as well as in the media and politics.¹⁴ In addition to the staging of dramas or the adaptations of films, many of the best productions put on by the company are results of the rehearsal process and contain, for example, études, stories related by the actors, or extensive research into specific areas.

The aesthetics of NO99 corresponds to what Lehmann describes as 'post-Brechtian theatre', which "situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new 'art of spectating' (Brecht's *Zuschaukunst*)."¹⁵ But whereas postdramatic theatre "leaves behind the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational we find in Brechtian theatre," as Lehmann says,¹⁶ NO99 puts a strong emphasis on reason and enlightenment. Their political productions are grounded in the spread of information, research and critical assessments; they aim to heighten social awareness and promote critical thinking. In fact, two projects have stressed this didactic approach, even in their titles: *Election School* (a part of the *Unified Estonia*, 2010) and *Art School* (2013), the latter consisting of a series of mini-lectures about modern art in public broadcasting. Perhaps, after having been denied the right to develop political drama for a large part of the twentieth century, Estonian theatre needs to catch up before advancing to the purely postdramatic stage.

NO99 also shares ground with many later followers of Brechtian theatre, e.g. Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed, with its didactic approach, support of social dialogue and attempts to persuade voters to turn out. However, NO99 has so far refrained from radical political productions. Unlike Boal's 'legislative theatre', the company has refused to make 'theatre as politics' ("one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted"), but is 'merely making political theatre' ("making comments on politics").¹⁷

Notable examples of the first 'social' productions of NO99 were *Oil!* (2006) and *Hot Estonian Boys* (2007), which revolved around the energy crisis and demographic issues, respectively. *Oil!* dealt

with peak oil in a mixture of cabaret and critical theatre, echoing Brecht's call for a didactic theatre that uses entertainment as an important component.¹⁸ In terms of postdramatic theory, the style could be described as Cool Fun,¹⁹ presenting parodies and citations from pop culture and media (episodes of a TV-show, strip-tease and pop music), but in an ironically detached, 'cool' tone. *Hot Estonian Boys* dealt with the possible extinction of ethnic Estonians: an outcome, which scientists agree, is inevitable. It was presented in the style of a documentary-satirical revue (a series of études, monologues, songs and dance numbers) and portrayed a group of men who decide to take desperate measures by forming a club with the sole aim of fathering as many babies as possible.

Not only has the company broken the mould of local theatre by introducing a new aesthetic and an overtly political approach, but it has also attempted to expand the Estonian theatrical landscape, geographically speaking, by entering the European theatrical scene, which they describe as one of their strategic aims.²⁰ In addition to appearing at numerous European festivals, NO99 has established close links with German theatres, above all with the Münchner Kammerspiele. *Three Kingdoms*, an ambitious collaboration between theatres in three countries, was premiered in 2011. The play was written by Simon Stephens (the Lyric Hammer-smith, London), directed by Sebastian Nübling (the Münchner Kammerspiele), designed by Ene-Liis Semper (Theatre NO99) and performed by actors from all three theatres. In addition, NO99's Risto Kübar played the lead role in *Orpheus Descending* by Tennessee Williams, staged by Sebastian Nübling, at the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2012. Nübling has continued to collaborate with NO99. His staging of *Ilona. Rosetta. Sue* in Tallinn in 2013 dealt with the unemployment problem while hinting at the crisis of values in Western culture.

In the spring of 2011, NO99 staged a grand production on the recent history of Estonia, *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* (idea and production by Ojasoo and Semper).²¹ The amount of sensitive insights into the cultural and political landmarks of Estonia, and into questions on its identity and future were introduced in a technically complicated

way: while the actors played in the theatre building, the audience sat in a concert hall (that contained a larger auditorium) one hundred metres away, and most of the performance was transmitted on film.

In the summer of 2011, NO99 presented a temporary installation in a theatre in Tallinn's city centre. A black box theatre made of straw, partly intended as a place for leisure activities: it contained a playground, a library and a café under trees and with a view to the sea. For five months, the Straw Theatre hosted guest performances by a variety of established names within world theatre: the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, Berliner Volksbühne, Gob Squad, She She Pop, Sebastian Nübling, Oskaras Koršunovas et al. (the full list can be found on the home page pohuteater.no99.ee).

In these ways, Theatre NO99 has changed the theatrical landscape of Estonia, not only with its generally entertaining, artistically demanding and formally intriguing productions on provocative topics – nationalism, racism, capitalism, the energy crisis, the negotiability of power, etc. – but also by attempting to put Estonia back on the map of European culture and political identities.

UNIFIED ESTONIA TURNS SOCIETY INTO A HUGE SPECTACLE

A further attempt on the part of the company to map the situation of Estonian society was the mega-project *Unified Estonia*²² in 2010. It was preceded by two and a half years of groundwork: gathering material, interviewing politicians and political analysts, sociologists and communication experts, and researching different techniques of political propaganda. The ambition was to reflect and expose the populism and corrupt practices of all the major parties and to draw attention to the theatricality of politics.

Unified Estonia was launched on 24 March 2010 with a press conference, at which the speakers presented a new theatre project, which from that moment would make use of forms of rhetoric similar to those of certain major Estonian political parties. As Tiit Ojasoo explained, there are “1.4 million people in Estonia, but the decisions are made by approximately twenty people. We wanted to know why.”²³

According to Ojasoo, “it is probably not possible to become more alienated from politics than people are now. But it is time that everyone realizes that if you don't deal with politics, politics will deal with you.”²⁴ The theatre reflected that an ordinary production would not be able to deal with the issue in a sufficiently powerful way, so they conceived a six-week project meant to simulate the inner workings of a political party and its election campaign, whereby they could also interact with the media and a large part of society. The leaders of the project monitored the situation constantly. If the public began to perceive the project as a mere theatrical performance, NO99 would start hinting that they were prepared to move more seriously into politics, and vice versa, whereby they deliberately blurred the boundaries between politics and theatre, just as one controls hot and cold water taps. In this way, they seemed to be staging a massive *Mouse Trap* reminiscent of the one in *Hamlet*.

During the next forty-four days, the fictional political movement *Unified Estonia* organized a host of events, culminating in the convention of the party, and all the while the question that most frustrated the public was: “What is Theatre NO99 really up to?” Seen from different perspectives, it could be seen as criticism of the state of democracy in contemporary Estonia on an unprecedented scale, as a massive publicity campaign for an imaginary political ideology, or as the birth of a new political party.²⁵ In any case, *Unified Estonia* drew colossal attention, editorials, opinion pieces and analyses appearing in the major newspapers every week, while the organizers, Ojasoo and Semper, were invited to appear on television and radio, and members of the parliament, opinion-makers, intellectuals and columnists publicly vented their opinions on the new party. As the convention drew closer, the debate about whether a new party would be established became increasingly heated.

The project included two warm-up actions. The first event, *When 200 Becomes 6500*, experimented with techniques of mass propaganda, while *Doing Is Cooler Than Watching* was a flash mob (a sudden gathering of people in a public place) that included a rehearsal of the *Unified Estonia* anthem with the audience.



Total view of *Unified Estonia* in the arena Saku Suurhall. Photo: Rainer Kurbel. Courtesy: Teater NO99.

In addition, NO99 recorded six video lectures with the title *Election School*. A new lecture was uploaded on the internet every week, in which an actor explained, in a mock-serious way, how political parties operate. The topics ranged from the management structure of a party and the propagandistic use of youth associations, to the elimination of the opposition and the invention of populist slogans.²⁶

Satirically exposing the shortcomings of politicians and parties, the beginning of the campaign alone was sufficient to keep leading politicians on their toes and inadvertently expose their own mistakes. They voiced their concern that the project might escape the control of the theatre. The Minister of Culture, Laine Jänes, argued that while the project had the power to irritate, it also had the power to heal. Conversely, political scientist Rein Toomla warned that the theatre might not be able to prevent real politicians from taking the stage at the convention – i.e. those politicians who are not members of any party but who long to play a part in mainstream politics.²⁷

On 7 May 2010 *Unified Estonia's* convention took place in Saku Suurhall, the largest arena in Estonia. The show, which lasted approximately four hours, was completely sold out and played before more than 7200 people, making it one of the largest performances in modern European theatre history.²⁸

From the outset, the project tested the boundaries between politics and theatre, using ambiguous symbols and double coding. Since many of the crucial issues they raised dealt with the line between fact and fiction, my analysis will partly draw on the questions of the theatre semiotics of Erika Fischer-Lichte: were the signs theatrical ('signs of signs') or were they primary signs? Was the communication simulated or real? And what was the

internal code of the performance?²⁹ The audience struggled to find answers to these questions, faced for the first time with a one-time political action on such a scale, they were confused by the lack of a traditional theatrical frame and by the veiled internal code, until the very end of the performance.

In its audiovisual design and performance style *Unified Estonia* employed its own form of conservative, patriotic symbolism. The emblem of the party (which was used on flags, posters, flyers, in TV commercials, etc.) and the members' wardrobe drew inspiration from Estonian national symbols and made use of the blue, black and white colours of the national flag. For example, the national flag was drawn on the cheeks of party members on promotional photos, and the *Unified Estonia* anthem (lyrics by Tõnu Oja and music by Tõnis Mägi), which was sung by NO99 performers and the local Eurovision star Lenna Kuurmaa, carried a feel-good patriotic message. Praising liberty, courage, strength and the support of friends, it included phrases like "together we can do it" and "if we all agree", before culminating in a chorus: "For Estonia!" In this way, the movement employed iconic symbols that could be associated with any party, thereby suggesting the degree of populism employed in all the campaigns across the political spectrum.

Furthermore, the venue, Saku Suurhall, was probably not chosen only in order to house the largest possible audience, but also because it was a 'found space' with a special atmosphere and significant background. Apart from hosting large concerts and sports events, the arena was the site of the foundation of one of the leading Estonian parties, the Res Publica Party, in 2001.

The performance employed a whole spectrum of sign systems, from the choice of space to the



The podium of Unified Estonia. Photo: Anna Tuvike. Courtesy: Teater NO99.

expressive lighting-show, and included polysemantic linguistic and paralinguistic signs (incl. the applauding and shouting of claqueurs). The interior and exterior of the venue were draped with the posters and flags of the movement, and actors, dressed and made up as befitted 'serious and proper' politicians, were constantly moving around, conducting (staged) interviews with 'ordinary people' and welcoming the gathering audience with questions like: "What would you like to change about Estonia?" Thus, the congress involved various topics right from the beginning, from regional politics to emigration, and from demographics to childcare. The interviews were displayed on large digital screens, thereby becoming part of the show. Although, in retrospect, it is clear that the actors were merely playing universal icons of politicians, it was unclear until the end of the performance whether they were indeed real politicians, and this constant and subtle oscillation between the two semiospheres continued to puzzle and intrigue the spectators.

Furthermore, Election School No. 7, *How To Organize A Convention*, was released as part of the convention. It included a scene in which the lecturer stepped out of the video to carry out the rest of the training session amidst the members of Unified Estonia. In this way, the whole convention took the form of a huge lesson in political manipulation, the various forms of which were introduced and analyzed during the performance itself: it explicitly discussed how one finds a proper venue, invites the right members of the party (i.e. those willing to re-elect the present leadership), suppresses the opposition in advance, buys off the voters, etc. Even the best arrangement of the members' seats in the congress hall (which depends on the positioning of the TV cameras), the hiring of claqueurs, the involvement of youth associations and the creation of a suitably emotional atmosphere for the elections were touched upon. The corrupt practices were revealed not only by bringing to light how the systems of parties function, but also by showing real

evidence, e.g. a voting manual from a leading party's convention with marked names to indicate the 'right' leader candidates.

The arrival of the new leader represented one of the emotional highlights of the performance. Here, the whole firework of symbols was put to use: the heavy beating of drums, the burning of torches, the claqueurs rising in ovation, and finally, the entrance of the leader flanked by his entourage of ambitious young people who had worked their way up the party ladder. The clearest reference to the theatricality of politics was made in this scene, inspired by Hitler's arrival at the party congress in Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will* (1935).

In their speeches, the party members gave voice to universally patriotic and humanitarian messages (liberty, concerted efforts, a better future) that could be interpreted as a satire of modern election campaigns, but they assumed a more serious tone when berating the leading parties and their values, the meekness of the voters and the loss of faith in

change. The strongest condemnation, however, was reserved for the indifference of the voters. In addition to the actors, some real public figures also gave speeches, e.g. Rein Einasto, Professor of Geology at the Tallinn University of Technology, and an 'unexpected' leader candidate, Allar Jõks, the former Chancellor of Justice. These interventions complicated the picture, but the theatrical manipulation became increasingly evident in the course of the assembly, especially as the results of the vote to elect the new leader turned out to be fictitious. The ballot (SMS-vote) taken at the venue resulted in the majority of spectators giving their support to Allar Jõks. However, this result was surpassed by the authorized (fictional) votes from the 'party's regional centres', which unanimously supported Tiit Ojasoo. The videocameras constantly followed the audience, and their reactions were displayed on large screens, but in the voting scene they tended to assume the role of 'spect-actors' (Augusto Boal), which involves both self-conscious reflection and active intervention.³⁰ However, it was impossible for the spectators



Unified Estonia, playing on nationalist sentiments. Photo: Maria Aua. Courtesy: Teater NO99.

to this novel form of performance to distinguish between theatre and reality and the question of the social position and borders of the project thus remained open until the very end.

At the closing of the convention, Tiit Ojasoo finally stepped out of his role to deliver a speech in which he revealed that *Unified Estonia* was born out of a concern for Estonia and its people. He criticized what he called, 'the serf mentality' of the Estonians, calling upon the citizens to voice their opinion and participate in public life. The closing line – "You are free!" – contained an ambiguous message that could be interpreted as the formal ending of the show and a permission to leave the venue, as a freedom of choice, or as a newfound freedom from political manipulation.

Although *Unified Estonia* did not establish a new party of artists and intellectuals, as many had hoped, it exposed the theatricality of politics by involving the media and a large part of civil society as participants. It helped create awareness of numerous forms of political manipulation and called on all citizens to speak out for a change in society. Stephen Wilmer has described the project as a case of "subversive over-identification": an artistic-political tactic which allowed the actors to appropriate the symbols, texts and principles of political systems, thus turning the affirmation into its opposite and creating an imaginative space for potential reflection and re-evaluation.³¹

The reception was ambivalent, however. The polysemantic messages of the project had generated a real hope of the arrival of a new political factor. It had created fear within the political establishment, which tried to respond with ridicule (Edgar Savisaar, leader of the Centre Party and mayor of Tallinn, dubbed the movement "the fools' party").³² Finally, it provoked dismissive comments from skeptics who believed that artists should not engage in politics since they lack the expertise and since it takes more than a stage show to change the political system.³³ But these critical voices may also be seen as indications of the novelty of the project in the context of Estonian theatre and society as a whole. Though a few reviews followed suit, *Unified Estonia* was, nevertheless, selected as the best production of the year by the Estonian Theatre Union.

FROM A 'FIRST READING' TO A POPULAR INITIATIVE

The real impact of *Unified Estonia* would not become fully evident until two years later.

On 22 May 2012 Silver Meikar, a prominent member of the Prime Minister's Reform Party, published an article in *Postimees*, a major daily newspaper, initially under the title "Election School, Part 4: How Parties Are Funded", which was changed by the editors, however, to "On the Financing of Parties: Honestly".³⁴ In the article, Meikar confessed his own involvement in the illegal funding of the party and hinted at the rampant scale of this practice. He claimed to have been approached by the then General Secretary of the party, Kristen Michal, who proposed that Meikar should have sizable sums transferred to his account by unknown sources in order to donate them to the party's general office. Michal went on to become Minister of Justice and the party's Chairman. "It's about time that we tell the truth to the public, for otherwise we will not only lose a chance to make politics more honest, but we will jeopardize Estonia's national security, future and independence," Meikar wrote. He added that "NO99 was right when they said in the political play *Unified Estonia*: the washing machine is in full cycle – everyone is involved in the scheme, no one knows who is behind the money and, more importantly, to whom it's owed." He confessed that he had allowed the money laundering to continue unhindered by agreeing to the payments rather than reveal them to the public.³⁵

This immediately started a scandal, which the media dubbed 'Silvergate', and which reached its climax when the Reform Party attacked Silver Meikar for what they claimed to be disloyal behaviour and dependence on personal motives. Viewing this as an attack on the freedom of political expression, NO99 launched a new 'one-time action': a first reading of a new play by Eero Epner, Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper, which was "based on real events and other facts" and carried the title *The Board Meeting of the Reform Party*. The motto of the play was a quotation by the Estonian poet Aare Pilv: "When truth is threatened, it should seek shelter in fiction in order to remain truth".³⁶

The play depicts a long board meeting in the offices of the Reform Party, and for the first time in the history of Estonian drama such a large number of real-life people – mired in a real-life scandal that continued outside the theatre – were portrayed in a quick-reaction play. The semi-documentary play drew on details drawn from articles and interviews, but also on inside information from the party's mailing list and similar sources. If the public had known that many of these details were factual, they would have made extra headlines. After having been sought after by various news channels, the play was finally published, in its full length, ten days after the performance, in the weekly *Eesti Ekspress*, which testifies to the extraordinary media interest in the play.

The dialogue imitated colloquial language, thereby enhancing the effect of credibility, while fine situational details appeared alongside broad generalizations. The stage directions conveyed the intense physical atmosphere of the meeting (the trickling of sweat, the nervous tapping of fingers, etc.), in contrast to the signs of life from the outside: the spring air, the scent of lilacs, the voices of children playing. The ideological conflict between a party and its members wanting to change the system was precisely captured. The characters were portrayed as if they were chess pieces, the readers gaining several insights into their positions, reactions and mistakes. The play also exposed the centralized and dictatorial hierarchy of the party and its manipulation of public opinion through the media, including the use of spin doctors. It suggested that the ruling parties were more interested in staying in power than in representing the electorate, thus suggesting that democracy might have been replaced by a marketplace.

While the reception was vigorous, written reactions were confined to the political columns, the political commentator Ahto Lobjakas noting that NO99 brought democracy 'home' in a way that the government or the elections had failed to do.³⁷ Theatre critic Meelis Oidsalu, one of the few reviewers to consistently analyze the products of NO99, surmised that the company was testing the ability of the audience to navigate in the political terrain while stressing the need for all citizens to understand that they, too, are actors on the political

stage.³⁸ He concluded that if parliament shapes the laws, NO99 shapes values.³⁹

Meanwhile, the conflict that had prompted the response of NO99 showed no sign of abating. As the Reform Party opted for a strategy of silence and made no apology or acknowledgement of their responsibility, the newspapers continued to publish article after article and the heated debate continued in the social media.

On 30 July 2012, Kristen Michal, the Minister of Justice and a member of the Reform Party, was formally proclaimed a suspect in an investigation conducted by the Estonian Public Prosecutor's Office, for money laundering and illegal party financing.⁴⁰ Two months later, however, the Public Prosecutor was forced to declare the case closed, apparently because the evidence required for the indictment was insufficient.⁴¹ Still, the prosecutor publicly released the details of the investigation, leaving the final verdict to the public. Since no charges could be brought against the leadership of the Reform Party, Silver Meikar was expelled from the party on 24 October 2012.

This development led to the establishment of the independent political movement Enough of Deceitful Politics a few days later. The movement, which spread through the social media, demanded more honesty and transparency from the political establishment. Its members introduced themselves as 'ordinary citizens' and emphasized their lack of previous affiliations with political parties or movements. These people came from areas as diverse as the arts, pedagogy, real estate and IT, and also included many students. In October and November the movement organized four political demonstrations and debates in Tallinn and Tartu under such slogans as 'Enough lies', 'Power corrupts' and 'We cherish the freedom of information'.⁴²

Moreover, 14 November 2012 saw the signing of the so-called Charter 12 by seventeen prominent public figures, mostly academics and intellectuals, who called for greater democratic accountability on the part of the authorities. The immediate backdrop of this private initiative was the unwillingness of the Estonian government to take responsibility for a financing scandal in which one of the parties of the ruling coalition was involved.⁴³ Finally, on 6 De-

ember 2012, the Minister of Justice, the key figure in the scandal, resigned.

The story does not end here, however. The events of these two years brought about changes in political attitudes, at least temporarily. Awareness of the fact that a theatre company is alert enough to engage in political debates has encouraged people to react in public. The readiness of NO99 was further tested during a scandal that started in November 2013 when the notorious writer and businessman, Kaur Kender, was appointed the interim editor of the cultural weekly *Sirp* and many senior editors fired. The saga culminated in the resignation of the Minister of Culture, Rein Lang. Theatre NO99 reacted immediately with their second 'first reading': *Last Days of the Minister*,⁴⁴ a play by Eero Epner, which gave an all-round picture of the scandalous events and also criticized people from the arts.

Two weeks later, NO99 received the annual Public Relations Award by the Estonian Public Relations Association for interpreting politics clearly and understandably for ordinary people, and for reacting promptly and reflecting events important for Estonia.⁴⁵

The success of NO99 may be seen as an indication of the need for theatre in a post-totalitarian democracy to assume the function of an ethical and enlightening institution. The company helped develop a kind of 'cultural software' that enabled citizens to discuss issues of national identity, recent history and future visions, and that supported the freedom of subjective expression, thus reminding us of the real meaning of 'democracy' as 'rule of the people'.

Furthermore, while there had been no consistent political line in Estonian theatre before – apart from a few examples of political theatre during the first independence period (1918–40) and the metaphorical theatre of the Soviet times – Estonia saw the rise of a strictly political theatre with NO99. Although the last decades have seen the emergence of many smaller companies, which experiment with contemporary dance and physical and visual theatre (e.g. the Tartu New Theatre, the Cabaret Rhi-zome, and the Kanute Gild Hall), rarely have they followed the line of postdramatic political theatre.

The fictitious political movement, *Unified Estonia*, launched by NO99 introduced "a new norm of performance", to use Erika Fischer-Lichtes term,⁴⁶ which redefined and broadened the boundaries of theatre. The project was planned from the outset as a performance (without any intent of going into politics), and the actors were merely embodying generalized icons of politicians, thereby exposing the manipulations of the real parties and pressuring them to confess their wrongdoings. The very novelty of the undertaking helped blur the boundaries between theatre and politics, raising questions of the ability of artists to engage in politics and the political effectiveness of theatrical satire.

Although NO99 has not come up with any grand political projects since then, they have continued their exploration of new forms of artistic expression. They have continued to collaborate with British and German companies and have brought foreign actors as well as increased awareness of European values onto the Estonian stage. In addition, they have, amongst other things, completed their first film, a documentary on *Unified Estonia* (titled *Ash and Money*), hosted dance productions and turned their café into a canteen appropriate for audience conversations.

Estonia's second period of independence has seen the reshaping of the country, not only in terms of buildings, infrastructure and city planning, but also in terms of its image and values, and in many respects the theatre company NO99 has managed to take the lead in its support of civic initiatives and its redefinition of Estonian theatre. The remaining question is, in what ways Estonians will continue to turn this foray into political art?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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