ALTERNATE HISTORIES AS GATEWAYS TO THE FUTURE[1]

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Abstract

The article is analysing three productions from Estonia 100 theatre series "Tale of the Century" (*Sajandi lugu*): "The Landlady of Raven Stone" (*Kaarnakivi perenaine*), "Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock" (*Eesti ajalugu. Ehmatusest sündinud rahvas*) and "Will Be / Will Not Be. Estonia in 100 Years" (*Tuleb / Ei tule. Eesti 100 aasta pärast*). These three productions had a common feature: they presented an alternate history, using either mytho-historic, counterfactual or utopian approach in interpreting Estonian history. The main aim is to demonstrate, how poetics of alternate history or utopia is explicitly or implicitly also building up politics of the future, depriving from victimisation and empowering subjectivity and agency.

Alternate histories create space for opportunities where different stories – both factual, personal and fictional – can be realized. Estonian theatre makers and audiences seem not need any more precise imitations or reconstruction of history but reflections from different point of views and with different degrees of authenticity that help them to remember and understand the palimpsestic nature of history, the current situation and possible future scenarios.

Keywords: *Estonian theatre, representation of history, alternate history, utopia.*

Hayden White has pointed out that *'belonging to history' (rather than being 'outside of it') or 'having a history' (rather than lacking one) have become values attached to certain modern quests for group identity* [White 2008: 9]. The quest is especially relevant for the representatives of small states, nations and communities, who do not only strive for self-identification with an imagined community but also for acknowledgement by others. Estonia, a piece of land of approximately

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45,000 km^2 inhabited by indigenous Estonian-speaking community, has enjoyed political freedom only for two short periods: 1918–1940 and since 1991 until nowadays. As an occupied country, it has been either left outside of history as a discursive practice altogether or has belonged to someone else's (German/Danish/Swedish/Polish-Lithuanian/Russian/Soviet or Baltic German) history. And only in the 20th century when Estonians were educated and Estonian language was developed enough and they both had acquired acceptable position in the society, Estonians started to claim their own history, written from the local perspective [Tamm 2009].

White draws parallels between physical or psychological trauma of a person and a community or society. "This physicalist conception of trauma (developed by Breuer and Freud in the 1890s) does not differ in any special way from its historiological counterpart in which the historical event is viewed as a significant disturbance of a historical (social) system that throws its institutions, practices, and beliefs into disarray and results in group behaviors similar to those manifested in the conditions of hysteria, paranoia, fetishism, and so on" [White 2008: 26]. In the contemporary framework of trauma studies, the idea is not novel, even when applied mostly in psychology and cultural studies.

The Second World War and Soviet occupation as major cultural traumas and its physical and mental consequences on Estonians have been investigated quite thoroughly after the end of the occupation, mostly through life stories [Aarelaid-Tart 2006, Kirss 2006, Kurvet-Käosaar 2014, Jaago 2018] and literature [Hollo 2016, Laanes 2017]. Eva-Clarita and Vello Pettai have also pointed out that post-Soviet memory culture in the Baltics can be characterized by exclusion of responsibility and collective victimisation [Pettai, Pettai 2015: 58–63]. Significant interest in the traumatic war and post-war period, maybe even inherited psychosis, is reflected also in films and theatre performances by Baltic directors of younger generation in the 21st century. In 2018, Estonia and Latvia celebrated the centenary of the states' independence and several art works dealing with the trauma were produced also for that occasion. Thus, victimisation is still a common strategy in dealing with historical topics in the Baltics.

Estonian Union of Performing Arts Institutions decided to set up a marathon of historical performances and a test for collaboration between theatres as a main theatrical event celebrating the centenary of Estonian independence. The aim was to present audiences a tale of the century of the Republic in twelve productions, each of them depicting one decade in the history and made in collaboration by one big and one small theatre/group. The pairs were drawn in a lottery, thus sometimes groups from different cities with different working principles (repertoire versus project based) or with entirely different ideological

and aesthetic principles found themselves in forced collaboration. Unfortunately, not all pairs were able to work together, and the plan ended up with thirteen original productions premiered from August 2017 until August 2018. Although it was not prescribed, theatre makers created relatively novel approaches to Estonian history, mostly avoiding canonical topics or ways of representation. Several productions from the series had a common feature: they presented an alternate history, the sub-genre of historical fiction with interfaces with science fiction [Singles 2013: 6], using either mytho-historic, counterfactual or utopian approach to the history. All these terms have been introduced more closely after specific empirical example. In the article, I am analysing three productions, concentrating on the issue, how poetics of alternate history or utopia is explicitly or implicitly also building up politics of the future: depriving from victimisation and empowering subjectivity and agency.

"The Landlady of Raven Stone"

"The Landlady of Raven Stone" (*Kaarnakivi perenaine*), a new play written by Andrus Kivirähk, was staged by Peeter Tammearu and produced in collaboration between Endla and Kuresaare Theatre. The decade they had to depict was the 1950s and Kivirähk located the story in 1951. The main character is young landlady Ilse (Lauli Otsar) whose parents together with many other Estonians were deported to Siberia in 1949 (deportation is almost an obligatory element in Baltic trauma narratives). Ilse lives in the past, stubbornly trying to preserve the muss in the house left after the deporters (time has stopped for her at the moment of trauma) and to imagine and vivify posh life style in the independent Estonia (the lost and forbidden world) when reading old women's magazines. Her boyfriend Heino (Markus Habakukk), who shares the same fate with Ilse, on the contrary, lives through the Soviet utopias of technological development described in the Soviet newspapers. The black and white character system of the play and the ideological struggle are typical features of socialist realism. In socialist realism, obsolete characters like Ilse driven by the past are despised and criticised, but since she represents the mentality of the dominant part of Estonians, Ilse wins the sympathy of spectators.

But Andrus Kivirähk mixes in the play the poetics of socialist realism with the poetics of fairy tales whereby the latter starts slowly to deconstruct the first. This is not a surprise because pastiche and bricolage has been detected as the main trademarks of Kivirähk [Kraavi 2003]. Estonian folkloric version of devil, Vanapagan, appears on stage, wounded and childishly helpless, as a character like others. And the household spirits – *naksikesed* – who abandoned Ilse's home after the deportation return at the end of the play when Ilse finds her subjectivity and inner power. The

magical raven stone[1] (egg) Ilse has inherited from her great-grandfather is not able to change the past (return her parents from Siberia) but it is able to influence the present and the near future (confuse people, increase fodder and repair tractors), according to the wish of its owner. Ilse uses the knowledge of the past, i.e. the magic item as a cosmic power source to control the situation. All characters in the play are divided by their devotion to the past, the present or the future. But Ilse's knowledge of the past improves the present and opens for her the future of Estonia because the raven stone is able to project also the distant future. As a matter of fact, the distant future as it is represented in the production, consists of sinister murmur and sketches of Estonian politicians of the 1990s when Estonia was announced independent again. The equivocal projection of the future empowers Ilse and the country, giving an aim to their everyday business. One should also consider that Lauli Otsar who plays the role of the landlady reminds Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid. Despite the fact that Estonian president has no political power, only symbolic one, the production suggests that the stone is probably in good and wise hands.

Hayden White argues that miraculous events as manifestations of a power outside nature are never treated as historical facts because they fall out of the worldview of natural sciences. Nevertheless, "there is a whole body of contemporary writing that suggests that the notion of event and especially the notion of event informing and authorizing a belief in the reality of 'history' is a displacement from mythical modes of thinking and actually has more in common with a religious idea of miracle than with any scientific conception..." [White 2008: 24–25]. Despite the speculative nature of the statement, it is easy to agree that the reception of both historical and magical events relies on belief that they probably are true because of the discursive context the events are presented in. Kivirähk's poetics that combines miraculous events (influence of raven stone and the appearance of Devil) with historical ones (Soviet occupation, ideology and social roles, deportations, etc.) can be characterized as mytho-historic. Oxford Living Dictionaries defines the term "mytho-historic" as something "involving or invoking a mixture of myth and history; relating to or concerned with both myth and history" [Oxford Living Dictionaries].

Kivirähk exploits the belief of spectators in realistic drama when smuggling in miraculous/magic items and characters, making them through discursive context and stylistic framework of the production as believable and real as historic events.

[1] Raven stone, in English known as thunderstone, in academic language "belemnite", is a black smooth stone that was believed to have a magical power and that could be found from raven's nest. In Estonian folklore, stories about raven stone giving to its owner knowledge, or more specifically the knowledge of the language of birds, and together with magic words had healing virtue [Eesti Rahvakultuuri Leksikon 1995: 50].

The playwright performs hereby rehabilitation of miraculous events, bringing them back into the historical discourse, and also empowerment of conquered nation.

"Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock"

Out of the collaboration between the Estonian National Opera and the Kanuti Gild HALL (independent performing arts production house), contemporary opera "Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock" (*Eesti ajalugu. Ehmatusest sündinud rahvas*) was born. Thirteen persons are named as authors of the production without any distinction about their specific role in the process, but it is predictable that Tatjana Kozlova-Johannes acted as composer and Andrus Laansalu as the main scriptwriter.

One of the main characters is Lennart Meri (René Soom), the first Estonian president after the Soviet occupation, who is in the middle of writing a book about Estonian prehistory at some time in the 1960s. Meri's book "Silver White: Travelogue on the Winds and Ancient Poetry", an extensive hypothetical reconstruction of the prehistory of Estonia and the Baltic Sea region and an inspiration for Estonian self-awareness, was actually published in 1976 but it is probable that he started to work on the book earlier. Nevertheless, "Estonian History" seems to be rather an autobiography and legacy of the main protagonist, fictional Manfred MIM (Priit Volmer) who moves freely on the time scale between 888 BC and 2014 and seems to be omniscient and omnipresent. Manfred tries to take Meri to the crucial event of Estonian history – to the impact of a meteorite on island Saaremaa during which Estonians were born from a dogbane family (represented by vacuum-cleaner-like machines). The shock experienced in the ancient time explains also why Estonians have predominantly blue eyes and white hair. Manfred considers this historical event to be the source of Estonian identity: "But the whole sky never falls down. But they, the island people. They made from its stories and weapons[1]. Later on, they made dreams. And afterwards, when all this was forgotten, appeared that they made from it themselves" [MIM 2018: 2]. The reason Manfred needs Meri is to ground the stories with research and scientific facts.

For this journey, Manfred builds a time machine, using Estonian geology and architecture. For example, he states that waves of the fall of the meteorite have been recorded into Estonian slate and the arch on the song festival stadium in Tallinn works as a large depressator that magnifies the depression of Estonians into the time travel accelerator. Manfred uses here a technic of bricoleur: to take Meri back from the 1960s to the primal event in 888 BC, he combines the unofficial anthem of Estonia (written by Gustav Ernesaks in the 1940s), the arch of the song festival

[1] Iron meteorites consist of up to 90% of iron.

stadium (built in the 1960s) and 2014 song festival[1]. The neomythological story of "Estonian History" relies on magical realism, on the assumption that local geology and architecture contain magical power and cryptic knowledge about secrets of the existence. As in the 1960s, when exaltation about technology and science overlapped with deep interest in folklore and roots, the production is also combining myths of Kaali meteorite with present day scientific knowledge and analogue technology.

"Estonian History" starts symbolically with a scene where a coffee cup falls down into pieces and ends with the reversed scene. The pieces of the imaginary whole are a representation of the Western understanding of history in its materiality, factuality and discursivity. Manfred as a supernatural power is trying to reconstruct the pieces into a whole – into a coffee cup and a causal development of Estonian history.

Alternate histories as a genre of speculative fiction provide usually alternative versions to the current course of history, including possibilities of time travel and parallel universes. "The Landlady of Raven Stone" and "Estonian History" are in this sense not typical alternate histories, as they do not propose versions of contrasting courses of history, but rather having explanatory approach to well-known facts. They thus provide novel mythological versions of cause-and-effect relationships between different historical events. Considering the style and closeness to the historical facts of "Estonian History", the work can also be characterized as a counterfactual and ironic approach to history, since it is balancing between scientifically asserted or historical facts, historical hypothesis (especially about prehistory) and fictional imagination. The production questions clear divisions between so-called historical facts and speculations (including Lennart Meri's "Silver White"), pointing to the impossibility of historians return to the site of events under research as it was made possible to Meri by Manfred MIM. The production also mocks about national myths and symbols, using emotional estrangement and slow tempo of music as tools for bringing audiences to the level of contemplation.

Interludium

It seems symptomatic that when more distant history was tackled quite boldly and freely mixing facts and fantasy then when approaching to the present day, the theatre makers of the project "Tale of the Century" were trapped by their own personal bittersweet memories and/or social stereotypes of certain decade. The so-called simple people invaded the stage: young people trying to adapt to new circumstances and old people burdened by the grinding wheels of life. Estonians as the victims of history have become the victims of capitalism. The representations of nowadays were

[1] This was a historical song festival with maximum number of singers – 33,000 – and participants – 153 000 tickets were sold.

openly realistic or tragicomic but mostly with a happy end. Estonia seems to have impeccable façade abroad, but theatre makers tend to resist this image. The fact that political theatre is rather marginal feature in the Baltics, has made me look for political messages that are expressed implicitly and also in traditional forms and styles like comedy or realistic drama.

For example, is a happy end just a dramatic convention or also a political statement? A theoretical framework that helps to explore the politics of representations in arts is offered by Jill Dolan's book "Utopia in Performance. Finding Hope at the Theatre". Dolan argues that "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" [Dolan 2010: 2]. Utopian performative as her main theoretical tool is described as "small but profound moments in which performance [..] lifts everyone slightly above the present" [Dolan 2010: 5] and is informed by the sense of partiality and process [Dolan 2010: 7]. Thus, utopian performatives as they are tackled in the book are not necessarily utopias describing better futures but rather moments in productions – dealing also with the past –, which create the sense of opportunities of better futures. It also means that alternate histories can work as utopian performatives.

The power of audiences who come together in theatre to imagine the future together with performers can also shape the future outside of theatre. Performance as a ritualistic practice unites embodied and imagined visons and energy to start a new process in – and outside of theatre. Unfortunately, utopian performatives do not take place very often, either due to the lack of intentions of theatre makers, or the inability to engage audiences. "The Landlady of Raven Stone" and "Estonian History" had both potential to work as utopian performatives but, in the following, I am going to analyse a performance that makes a strong claim as a utopian performative.

"Will Be / Will Not Be. Estonia in 100 years"

Ironically enough, the production about the future of Estonia "Will Be / Will Not Be. Estonia in 100 years" (*Tuleb / Ei tule. Eesti 100 aasta pärast*) was made by the Russian Theatre in collaboration with children. Formally, it was a pure coincidence because as stated above, the decades and theatres were paired by a lottery. Due to an uneven number of theatres that participated at the drawing, the last theatre remained alone with the hope that a new theatre would be established during the period who would be willing to participate in the project. Symbolically, the proposition that the future of Estonia and maybe even the whole world is highly dependent on Russia is not utopian one.

Based on the texts and pictures sent by children of the age between 3 and 19 from all over Estonia, five utopias were formed by stage director Artjom Garejev and four

dramatists, representing both Estonian and Russian speaking theatre community: Karin Lamson, Mari-Liis Lill, Jelena Tšitšerina and Laura Kalle. Spectators could vote among the utopias by cell phones during a performance, thus no performance was exactly alike. Artistically, the production did not have a strong impact, but it made spectators think about three essential questions the humankind is facing already today: how we shape our ecological, technological and cultural environment.

I have attended two performances: one during the theatre festival DRAAMA in Tartu on 9 September 2018, and the second in the Russian Theatre in Tallinn on 27 December 2018. According to my observation, in Tartu, the audience consisted mostly of international guests of the festival and Estonian-speaking spectators; in Tallinn, mostly but not entirely of Russian-speaking spectators.

First, attenders of the production had to choose the level of difficulty of the performance. In both cases, audiences preferred the difficult level and performance started with the information technological utopia. The production consisted of presentations of different utopias. When a utopian world was introduced, spectators had the opportunity to choose, should Estonia proceed in the selected path or not. If a utopia was affirmed by audiences, it became a dystopia in the course of performance and after that it was possible to vote again and select a new direction of development for Estonia until a consensus was found in the audience about the future. In Tartu, the performance lasted three hours forty minutes and ended with the nation and language-based utopia supported by a slight majority of votes. But the world was far from an ideal! The utopia depicted the TV-show "The Last Russian" where spectators – based on the cultural performance and knowledge of Estonian by a Russian family – could vote, either the family will be deported from Estonia or not. In Tallinn, the performance lasted two hours forty minutes and ended with an ecological utopia (52.2% of votes), which was playfully rejected in Tartu[1]. (The Tallinn audience had chosen multicultural scenario with 58.8% of votes and rejected it with 50.6% of votes but the national and language-based utopia was not selected in that performance.) In the ecological utopia, plastic, meat and alcohol are forbidden and the society is based 100 percent on renewable energy, including body warmth as a source of energy. Human bodies are thus an important energy resource for the society that is regulated by different kinds of restrictions.

Based on rather careless and insensitive texts and pictures of children, "Will Be / Will Not Be" presented the immersive sense of dystopia and danger. Since all utopias were developed to an extreme, audiences had difficulties to accept them, thus there was a tendency to reject the proposed fictional worlds at first and after a longer duration of the performance to accept the imperfection of the world. (It is stated in the

[1] I did not take notes about the percentage of votes at the Tartu performance.

beginning of the production that a performance may last from two to forty hours, depending on the choices of audiences.) Also, Dolan resists the efforts to find representations of a better world because a fixed and static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire. She makes a reference to Marxist philosophers Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, who suggest that an alternative world could be expressed rather "through the communication of an alternative experience" [Dolan 2010: 7–8].

The production also highlighted and naturalised the constant presence of alternative experiences and *dissensus* when inviting audiences to vote between different alternatives. It seemed that a considerable number of spectators started voting only when the opinion of the majority was visible on the screen to balance the inequality of votes with their counter-opinion. Can this playful resistance towards voting as a tool of democracy and towards sociological construction of homogeneous groups be compared with the behaviour of people in politics and everyday business? The latest developments in Estonian political life at least support the opinion and there is even a word for that – protest voting (for example, performative and controversial Indrek Tarand with little political experience was elected to the European Parliament with 100,000 votes in 2009). But the most important impact of the production is the raised awareness that our future depends on the decisions made in the past and in the present, and every person and community can make and is making their choices every day. The refrain of the final song warns: "If you do not decide by yourself, someone will decide for yourself."

Nevertheless, the Russian Theatre ended the production with a song by actors of different Estonian theatres, praising humanistic values over all kind of realities. Considering the historical and current social and cultural realities of Estonia, tensions between Estonian- and Russian-speaking population, the scene was definitely intended as a utopian performative uniting citizens of Estonia despite of their mother tongue. Aesthetically it made visual references to the national awakening in the 19th century and musical references to the songs of the second independence movement at the end of the 1980s, to the periods when Estonian citizens showed extreme unity and expressed the sense of national belonging. It is a pity that many spectators interpreted the utopian performative as naïve and superficial.

Kathleen Singles has introduced notion of future narratives in the discourse of alternate histories. She states that majority of narratives, including most works of science fiction, which may claim to narrate a future scenario, possess events as if they had already happened. A true future narrative "is one that preserves the characteristic feature of future time, namely that it is yet undecided, open, and it has not yet 'crystallized' into actuality". In addition, they should contain at least one node or nodal situation, which allows more than one continuation and often it depends

on receiver how the story or discourse proceeds [Singles 2013: 4]. Future narratives share significant resemblance with utopian performatives because as was mentioned above, Dolan also stresses the sense of partiality and process in utopian performative [Dolan 2010: 7]. "Will Be / Will not Be" is a good example of future narratives, since the structure contains several nodes, which activate audiences and lay the future in direct (development of the performance) and indirect (the future of Estonia) sense in the hand of spectators.

Conclusions

The discipline of history is considered to be based on facts. Personal histories are considered to be born out of lived experiences and recollections that both are coloured by emotional memory. But alternate histories create space for opportunities where different stories – both factual, personal and fictional – can be realized. Estonian theatre makers and audiences seem not need any more precise imitations or reconstruction of history but reflections from different point of views and with different degrees of authenticity that help them to remember and understand the palimpsestic nature of history, the current situation and possible future scenarios. Nevertheless, theatrical performance is not only a medium of knowledge and comprehension but first of all a space for collective meaning making and imagination and a process that might lead to utopian performatives that are able to change the world and the future. "Tale of the Century" (13 productions) was an unconscious and collective attempt of theatre makers to take back the discourse of history from professional historians and politicians, to express their own vision of, i.e. to write their own history through the tools of performing arts and to make the histories practical tools of empowerment of the state and the nation.

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