

THEATRE AS COUNTER-HISTORY IN ESTONIA: THE CASE OF “BB AT NIGHT”¹

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Abstract

The theatres of Estonia celebrated the centenary of Estonian Republic by staging performances depicting different decades of the country’s history. The article discusses one of these performances “BB at Night” that staged the 1940s. The performance is based on a novel of the same title that tells the story of Berthold Brecht’s journey to Finland during the Second World War. The aim of the article is to show – by describing three particular scenes from the performance and using the theories of Jacques Rancière, more precisely his notion of *dissensus* to analyse these scenes – how a performance that is not political *per se* could be received as political. By inviting audience members to participate in certain scenes, the bodies of theatre visitors are politicized, and the performance becomes aesthetically political and politically aesthetic.

Keywords: *Brecht, participatory theatre, political theatre, dissensus.*

Prologue

In 2018, the Republic of Estonia celebrated its centenary. Estonian theatres contributed to the celebration by launching a year lasting project titled “The Tale of the Century” that consisted of twelve different productions depicting the decades of Estonian history from the 1910s to the 2020s. The performances premiered from August 2017 starting with the production representing the 1910s to August 2018 finishing with the production about the future, the 2020s. In addition to the aesthetic aim of the project, the second purpose was to make theatres collaborate with each other – so every production was staged in collaboration between two theatres,

¹ This research has been supported by the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (European Union, European Regional Development Fund).

a small and a big one. All participating theatres (23 all together¹) were paired up by lottery. The decade was also chosen by lottery. This article discusses only one of these productions, “BB at Night” that depicts the 1940s. The production was created by Mart Koldits (b 1979) from Von Krahl Theatre and Ivar Põllu (b 1974) from Tartu New Theatre². In addition to directing, Ivar Põllu was also the author of the play text. The production, highly appreciated both by the audiences and theatre critics, won the Best Production of the Year and the Special Award in Performing Arts in Estonia. The aim of the article is to show – by describing three particular scenes from the performance and using the theories of Jacques Rancière, more precisely his notion of *dissensus* to analyse these scenes – how a performance that is not political *per se* could be received as political. By inviting audience members to participate in certain scenes, the bodies of theatre visitors are politicized, and the performance becomes aesthetically political and politically aesthetic.

Introduction

“BB at Night” is based on a novel by a writer and theatre director Mati Unt (1944–2005), published in 1997. The novel talks about world famous theatre director and theorist Berthold Brecht, who in 1940 travels to Finland with her wife Helene and lover Ruth to visit Estonian-Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki. The author of the play text Ivar Põllu has combined, in addition to the novel, also materials like diaries from the 1940s (for example, by famous Estonian theatre director and theorist Voldemar Panso), his own grandfather’s letters from Siberia and other documentary materials into the play text.

The term “counter-history”, used in the title of this article, is not a theoretical notion, but has been borrowed from a headline of an article in the daily newspaper [Oidsalu 2017] analysing the performance. I adopt the term “counter-history”, because even though the performance is presenting the audiences with certain real time historic events and using real life characters like Berthold Brecht, the Estonian president of that time Konstantin Päts or a communist party functionary Maksim Unt, the performance also plays with the history by offering a somewhat different perspective to the 1940s. Despite stating the tragic events, the authors have combined comic elements without being too vulgar or mocking the horrors of that time.

¹ One position (logically there should have been 24 theatres instead of 23 to pair them up) was left empty for the purposes of involving a theatre or a group that did not exist at the beginning of the project in 2014. In the end, the Russian theatre that staged the performance about the 2020s chose *Estonian children* as their partner.

² Both of these theatres are private theatres without permanent troupe, but with their own venue and artistic director. Von Krahl is located in Tallinn and New Theatre in Tartu.

Even though the performance has not been considered a political performance, I will show, based mostly on the framework of French philosopher Jacques Rancière – who has analysed the relationship between arts and politics and uses the notion of *dissensus* – how, by making people to participate in the performance, “BB at Night” becomes a political performance that offers an alternative, more playful perspective to the 1940s, to one of the darkest decades of the 20th century.

The main theoretical notions

In his essay “The Paradoxes of Political Art” (2010) Rancière discusses the re-politicization of arts and asks for *the models of the efficacy of art* that are used when judging the political aspects of arts [ibid: 135]. In answering to this, Rancière [2010, 2006, 2004] himself presents three regimes of the “distribution of sensible” in the realm of aesthetics: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art.

In the ethical regime, the images created (Rancière [ibid] says you cannot yet talk about artworks in this regime) are defined by their function and benefit for the society. In the representative regime, art obtains autonomy¹ and is defined by the ability of art to mimic the world around us by fictionalising it simultaneously. It is the aesthetic regime of art where the redistribution of sensible is made possible – art becomes the unifier of known and unknown, art is autonomous as well as identifiable with life, so art moves between autonomy and heteronomy, between pure art and non-art [Kangro 2017: 194–197].

The term “distribution of the sensible”, especially from the perspective of politics, refers to the given order of things at the society, the “law that defines the forms of partaking [...]”. This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation” [Rancière 2010: 36]. It means that as citizens we are to follow the given rules and structure of the system, being “included in” or “excluded of” certain activities. It is the “dissensus that creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the ‘inadmissible’, i.e. a political subject” [Rancière 2004: 86]. So for Rancière the idea of politics and of democracy is to create *dissensus*, to confront the existing forms of partaking. *Dissensus* does not have to be executed through revolution *per se* but rather it should be a constant process of the society and its relationship to politics. I argue that “BB at Night” creates *dissensus* and through this becomes a political performance even though it was not titled directly political either by the makers themselves or theatre critics.

¹ Compare to the Kantian notion of disinterestedness (e. g. Van Maanen 2009: 178–183).

The definition of political theatre in the 21st century is very vague, and “BB at Night” is a good example of the versatility of this genre. Estonian theatre researcher Madli Pesti [2016: 54–58] has proposed to distinguish between four types of political theatre: thematic (the subject matter of the production is political), functional (the purpose of the production is political), ideological (she asks whether a performance should defend or present some kind of ideologically loaded ideas) and aesthetic (political theatre defined based on aesthetics). It is the fourth definition that could be used to describe the politics of “BB at Night”: even though the subject matter and the main character Berthold Brecht, seen as one of the pioneers of the political theatre of the 20th century, might make one assume that “BB at Night” would be also thematically and ideologically political, I argue that the politics of this performance conceals in the ways audience members participate in the performance, creating an aesthetic world that creates the possibility for *dissensus*.

Participation and politicized bodies

“BB at Night” takes place in two locations – in the train (either from Tallinn or Tartu) and at the train station of Tapa, in the city between these two cities. The performance starts already at the train stations of the two mentioned cities where all the theatregoers get headphones that they are asked to wear during the whole performance. The second part of the performance takes place outside and inside Tapa train station¹.

The first part of the story of Brecht arriving to Helsinki (that is literally taken from the novel) is told to the audience members as a radio drama that they listen to through headphones during the train ride. Idealistic communist Brecht is presented by being quite ignorant of the realities of this regime and therefore he already becomes an ironical main character. The realistic sounds of the radio drama (harbour and street noises, different languages spoken, different inside locations marked by familiar sounds) take the audience easily back to the 1940s. Concurrently, listening to the radio drama of Brecht, the audience members are aware of the symbolic meaning of the train ride itself to the final stop of Tapa – during the mass deportations of the 1940s, Tapa was one of the central train stations from where people were sent to Siberia.

As theatre visitors are not separated from other passengers and are sharing the carriages with them, they are aware of the fact that unlike the thousands of Estonians in 1941 they are free to leave the train at any stop if they feel like it. They are free to

¹ The performance can be seen having a third part – the train ride back to the train station the theatre visitors started the performance from (ride back is also included in the ticket price). But as the third part is not directed or staged in any ways, I will not consider it as part of the production.

choose the seats in the carriage, free to remove the headphones if they do not like the performance. Some of the audience members are even able to sleep during the train ride. Quoting Rancière [2010: 136–137]: “The efficacy of art resides not in the model (or counter-model) of behaviour that it provides, but first and foremost in partitions of space and time that it produces to define ways of being together or separate, being in front or in the middle of, being inside or outside, etc.” The dialectic role of a theatre visitor who is at the same time also an ordinary passenger is blurring the boundary between reality and fiction, questioning the normal behaviour of a regular theatre goer and regular train passenger¹. The concurrent inclusion into the smaller group of theatre goers and bigger group of passengers offers the possibility of being together and being separate at the same time. In addition, the audience members are literally brought together by trains, are guided to move around in groups, but are able to choose their own personal space and position during the whole performance. By participating in the performance, they are able to choose their own role and the way of being.

When the train stops at Tapa, theatre visitors are asked to leave the train (the train continues its journey as usual). It is especially the next scenes where audience members are invited to participate actively and where their bodies are politicized no matter if they choose to actively participate or not. One might even say that the audience members are “forced” to participate and therefore partake in the performance either way which will be shown in the following descriptions.

Scene 2.1. Crowd celebrates the train arrival. The people coming from Tartu find themselves in a movie set when they get off the train in Tapa. They realize instantly, that the time of this scene is the present, because the movie director and assistant are dressed in contemporary outfit. The theatre visitors are treated like stunts who are there to take part in some mass scenes – they are asked to walk slowly and silently, pretend that the weather is awful etc. At one point, people are asked to form one big group on the platform of the station. The movie director teaches the group how to “wave like in the 1940s”, because he wants to film a scene how a joyful group of people are shouting “hurray” and welcoming an arriving train by waving at it cheerfully (Figure 1). After rehearsing the waving for a few times, a real actor playing an amateur actor among the audience members, asks whom they are waving at and from where the train is coming from. The following dialogue is taking place:

Actor 1: Okay. Wait... I'll ask again. Where do they come from?

Film Director: From the train.

¹ This blurriness becomes particularly visible by the surprised looks of the regular passengers who have no idea why some people are wearing similar headphones. Clearly some people are therefore behaving differently than usual.

Actor 1: From the train?

Film Director: From the train.

Actor 1: Like, directly from the train?

Film Director: So, to speak. The train is bringing back a delegation from Moscow who delivered the declaration that asks Estonia to be accepted into the Soviet Union.

Actor 1: I see. Right.

Film Director: That's right.

Actor 1: Could have said it before.

Film Director: Yes, and you believe these changes are good.

Actor 2: Changes can't be good for everyone [Põllu 2017: 24].

After listening to this dialogue between the film director and an amateur actor, the theatre visitors know why and whom they are waving at but keep doing it anyway. The waving has also a real-life effect when the theatre visitors from Tartu are asked to welcome the arriving train from Tallinn by waving at them and shouting hurray very cheerfully. The people from Tallinn are invited to join the group and the scene of waving and cheering is finally recorded by a real camera.



Figure 1. Audience members are filmed while they are waving at the arriving train in the style of the 1940s. (Photo by Gabriela Liivamägi)

Scene 2.2. People don't listen to their own president. After the first scene, the audience members are directed to stand on the grass at the side of the train station. Estonian first president Konstantin Päts, played by the same actor who just played the film director, is standing at the second-floor window making a speech to the crowd i.e. the audience members standing outside. The crowd, led by the communist party functionary Maksim Unt, played by the actor who was just playing the amateur actor asking all these questions in the previous scene, is now asked to boo and huzza at the speech president is giving. The theatre visitors are still wearing the headphones and the Narrator is asking them to boo with Maksim Unt. For example, in the following manner:

Maksim Unt (*in the middle of the crowd*): Boo! Boo!

One can hear the unruly crowd shout both "boo" and "huzza".

President: If you want to interrupt with these calls then I won't speak...

Maksim Unt: Don't need to!

President: But – but if you want that – if you think workers are not part of our people you are very wrong.

Narrator: Shout "huzza". Huzza!

One can hear the unruly crowd shout both "boo" and "huzza".

President: I – I have not differentiated between workers or peasants or artisans or intellectuals in the term "our people".

One can hear the unruly crowd shout both "boo" and "huzza".

Narrator: Those standing on grass shout "boo" and those on asphalt shout "huzza" [Põllu 2017: 29].

When in the first scene, the actual events (waving at the theatre visitors arriving from Tallinn) overcome the real historic events (waving at the communist party members arriving from Moscow), the second scene blurs the border between fiction and reality much more. Even though the scene with the President clearly depicts the real speech given in June 1940 and could be therefore first of all received as representing history (different from the first scene in which the audience members are clearly in the present, playing the crowd at mass scene shooting, where it is much easier to imagine "it is just a movie" because of all the visible cameras and film crew around the audience members), the commanding voice of the Narrator asking people to boo the President's speech makes the theatre visitors question their actions in this situation. They are aware of the real historical consequences (Soviet army invaded Estonia and the occupation started) and even though they cannot change the course of the history, the type of aggressive participation – meaning booing the President of Estonia – makes you question between the reality and fiction of one's actions.

Both of these described scenes can be received as political or aesthetic so I argue that even though we cannot go back to history to take a different political stand, we can, guided by the director and by the aesthetics of this performance, think it over now. “The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. [...] Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done”, states Rancière [2006: 38–39]. For Rancière the fiction re-frames the “real” and through this the framing of the *dissensus* takes place. New relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective are built in these scenes [Rancière 2010: 141].

While in the first two scenes people are asked (forced?) to participate, the fourth scene “The Crowd Eats Free Soup” seems to offer a different participation strategy, i.e., no active participation¹. At the beginning of this scene, the audience members are finally guided inside the train station where they are offered some free soup. After finishing the soup, they are asked to sit down inside the train station. Two characters, The Poet and the Painter (Figure 2) enter the scene giving the following dialogue:

Painter: But no. Passionless, bland, tormented. What’s the point? In living like this?

Poet: Silent submission... Some kind of Oriental survival model... Sad... Image... I was hoping for something... Bigger... I did everything for them to have... Some kind of resistance... Maybe for them to suddenly... Find... A wild... But they did not... Find it... They stayed... As if in agreement... Till the end...

Painter: Passion! There’s little of it... There is! Something dignified? But... falls off!

Poet: Don’t put it... So... Simply... It doesn’t rise up... Into the heights...

Painter: My people! Suffer! Even in silence. But eventually! Resist! And resist! Themselves. And then again. Suffer! But here...

Poet: Don’t start... Saying... Bad things...

Painter: Just... Like that... Like that... Like... nothing...

Poet: Say it! Simply.

Painter: Simply... [Põllu 2017: 33–34].

The scene is staged very poetically – first of all, the characters Painter and Poet are depicting Hitler and Stalin; a piece by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, the most played living composer of the world [Tambur 2018], is used as a soundtrack.

¹ Of course, every theatre performance is a form of communication and therefore always includes active participation, here the word “active” refers to the partaking of previous scenes (See, for example, White 2013:4).



Figure 2. Two characters, (from the left) the Painter (Henrik Kalmet) and the Poet (Tõnis Niinemets) in the scene "The crowd eats free soup". (Photo by Gabriela Liivamägi)

The two most hated men of the 20th century are presented as intellectuals discussing the eastern spirit of the numbness of people who do not fight back even when given a chance. Subconsciously the audience members are reminded again of the course of Estonian history – would things have been different if the political leaders and Estonians themselves had acted differently in 1939 and 1940, had stood up against the Russian invasion? Sitting in the old and tainted train station, packed together in the uncomfortable seats, the visitors are invited to imagine the same kind of situation more than half a century ago – frightened and suspense people crammed tightly into Tapa train station probably not grasping the personal and collective tragedy of that moment.

Dialectics of Brecht

The idea of reframing the "real", the idea "that such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated" [Rancière 2010: 141], is also similar to the idea of the dialectics used by Brecht himself to "demonstrate and provoke awareness of the individual's place in a concrete social narrative" [Brooker 2006: 210].

The dialectics have a distinct function in the performance. In the novel itself, the author Mati Unt is very ironic about the idea of dialectics and the creators of the performance are following this ironical line of thinking and using dialectics deliberately during the whole performance. The alienating acting does not allow audience members to engage with the shown events realistically – for example, the same actor is playing the movie director who wants people to cheer at the train bringing devastating news from Moscow and then the President of Estonia. Even in the third scene, where the theatrical illusion is the strongest, emphasised (of course ironically) by the music and the theatrical space itself, the alienation comes from the fact that the two actors playing Hitler and Stalin are foremost well-known comedians from television.

Due to the use of the dialectical approach, audience members are in one way aware of the theatrical frame that reminds theatre visitors that “it’s just theatre”, but at the same time, they are often put into the situations where the “real” meets the “fictional” and through these scenes the possibility of *dissensus* is created. When shouting “boo” at the Presidents’ speech, are they just participants in the theatrical scene, or are they actually doubting the right of freedom of Estonian Republic by participating? When waving at the train, are they just doing it because the actors ask them to do these things, or are they cheering for communist regime that killed millions in the world? The audience members have the right to decide whichever role they choose to participate in the performance. Paradoxically, even remaining silent (not doing what is told or asked from us) in these described scenes, the bodies cannot escape the political role they are given just standing or sitting quietly through these scenes. The bodies are politicised, the performance becomes political in its aesthetics, retaining its poetical aesthetics.

David Barnett [2016: 9] discusses in his article about dialectics and Brechtian tradition that for Brecht the dialectics was “like a montage form in which the parts communicate with each other suggestively rather than logically”. In the case of “BB at Night”, logically the audience members should use the representational frame to look at the performance talking about the historic events of the 1940s and realise the consequences of the devastating decade. However, by participating actively (or passively) theatre visitors can connect the scenes suggestively, placing themselves in different positions in these scenes, maybe trying out different ways of participation, different roles, getting a different perspective of the decade. “Activity is a central component of dialectical practice” [ibid: 10] and the three scenes previously described prove the point.

Conclusion

"Artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination", argues Rancière [2010: 140]. "BB at Night" is not just presenting history even though some of the characters depicted and situations presented in the performance are based on real people and real events. By providing the audience members the possibility to play along, they may get a different insight into this decade. I argue that therefore "BB at Night" is a performance of the aesthetic regime and its aesthetics offers a possibility of *dissensus*. And through this possibility the performance also becomes political (actually not functioning like it or aiming for ideological change) without defining itself political *per se*.

"Knowledge, for Brecht, has to start with an observation of processes, and these are likely to change over time, and so knowledge, too, will never be stable", writes David Barnett [2016:11]. The knowledge about history is on the one hand based on facts, but on the other hand matter of perspective, memory and representation. "BB at Night" also is an example of ways knowledge about certain events (especially traumatic historic events) can also change and even the painful events can be staged as playful without becoming vulgar or comic.

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