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## SOCIALIST REALISM: THEORY VERSUS REALITY

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borrowed from there by literature' (Velsker 2000: 59). We can say that, after 1968, the tactics changed and rebels adapted to the situation; however, they did not abandon rebellion.

### Abstract

This article examines Estonian dramatic literature in the late 1950s and early 1960s, focusing on the situation of drama in the field of tension between normative criticism and dramatic practice. In Estonian drama criticism, the dogmatic understanding of socialist realism was quite vital in this period. The disputes focused on three concepts deemed obligatory for drama: contemporaneity, strong conflict, and a positive hero. Drama was routed back towards the old model of the 19<sup>th</sup> century well-made play. At the same time, the audiences in the theatre favoured national classics, staged in the traditional realistic style. This tradition presumably shaped also the contemporary drama, as far as it was influenced by the system of expectancy of the audiences. So, while criticism was forcing a simplified model of socialist realism upon the stage, the theatre strategies of the time worked in service of preserving the 1930s-style realistic tradition.

**Keywords:** socialist realism, drama and theatre, drama criticism, acting style, repertoires and audiences.

The aim of the present article is to outline the situation in Estonian dramatic literature in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In Estonia, as in the other Baltic states, this is the period of the so-called Khrushchev 'thaw'. In dramatic literature the first signs of change appeared in 1955–56, when Juhan Smuul's (1922–1971) first play *Atlanti ookean* (*The Atlantic Ocean*) and Põgon Rannet's (1911–1963) *Südamevalu* (*Heartache*) were staged, and when the young Ardi Liives (1929–1992) gained wider attention. The work of these playwrights formed the core of the dramatic literature for the following decade. A new turning point came in 1966, when Estonian poet Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966) laid the foundation of the so-called Estonian metaphor-drama

with his *Nimetu saar* (*The Nameless Island*), which has modernist aesthetics at its core. The present article, however, does not focus on the dramatic texts of the 'thaw' period by themselves, but rather on the different forces that influenced them during this period. In short, the article examines the condition of drama in the field of tension between the normative (mostly literary) criticism and the dramatic practice, which is the real 'life world' of a play.

Even during the period under discussion socialist realism was the only accepted creative method in Soviet literature. As we know, the notion of socialist realism first appeared in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1930s. In 1934 Andrei Zhdanov pointed out its main features—a correct, historically precise way of depicting reality in its revolutionary development, loyalty to the ideas of the Communist Party and its popularity. In Estonia, the theory of socialist realism was borrowed from Soviet literature and introduced by force during the Stalinist period—the second half of the 1940s. In the statutes of the Writers' Union of Soviet Estonia issued in 1943, it was defined as follows: 'Socialist realism [...] demands from the artist an authentic and historically precise depiction of reality in its revolutionary development.' The task of the artist was to 'educate and ideologically mould the working people in the spirit of socialism.' The philosophic basis of the socialist realism was thegnoseological art theory (i.e. when art is understood as a means of perceiving reality), which was supported by the Marxist classics but also by Hegel's legacy (Kangilaski 2003: 14). The sly interpolation, however, of the demand of depicting reality 'in its revolutionary development' turned socialist realism into a mere propaganda trick. What was wished for and considered an ideal had to be shown as already existing, as is well demonstrated by the words of the Stalinist critic Heinrich Tobias: 'It was necessary to know how to separate what was not typical on any particular day from what would be typical the next day; to know how to find and demonstrate the shoots of tomorrow—in short, to know how to show reality in its development.' (Tobias 1951: 115). Socialist realism thus was a theoretical construct, a certain system of norms established and enforced by the institution of criticism, which obviously followed the ideology of the Communist Party. The task

of criticism was to formulate the norms and to guarantee that the artists followed those norms, literally—to guard the purity of socialist realism. Criticism was to a great extent an institution of control and surveillance, whose power was increased by the fact that the artists' errors in following the norm could have severe administrative consequences ranging from refusal to publish their creative work to explicit repressions.

During the 'thaw' period both the literary norms and the position of criticism and its functions in the literary field underwent certain changes. The demand of educating and moulding the people in the spirit of Socialist ideology is missing from the 1956 edition of the statutes of the Writers' Union. Indeed, during the late 1950s, the political rhetoric somewhat receded and the notion of socialist realism was redesigned to emphasize its artistic aspect, that is, a realistic depiction of life and people. Topicality, faithfulness to reality, typicality as attributes of realism became the very basic criteria, sometimes understood in a wider, sometimes in quite a narrow sense. Socialist realism was still the only officially accepted creative method which guaranteed the ideological correctness of a work of art. In the Marxist criticism of the 1950s and the 1960s, the boundaries of realism became gradually more and more extended. Although the Soviet art theory had earlier supported the thesis that the only valuable art was the realistic one, still, by the beginning of the 1960s it had come to the conclusion that all valuable art of the past should be interpreted as realistic art and almost the only non-realistic direction of art was the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism (Kangilaski 2003: 21). However, everything became more complicated when estimating contemporary art, for here the ideological aspect or, in other words, the demand to estimate the work according to the criteria of socialist realism, was added. The relationship of the literary practice (in the form of different works) to the standards of socialist realism varied considerably—from assiduous compliance to stubborn denial. Criticism, in its turn, manipulated these relationships in different ways, using the inevitable gap between theory (or the abstract ideal) and actual literary works. Sometimes it was used for the symbolic destruction of a work or an author, sometimes for legitimating innovative practices.

In Estonian drama criticism, the dogmatic model of socialist realism was astonishingly vital even in the 'thaw' period. Yet it was possible to discuss it then, which was unimaginable in the Stalinist period. In this period, in addition to the criticism of dramatic literature and stage productions, a number of articles of theoretical ambition were published that tried to define the basic notions of socialist realism and to apply them to Estonian drama. These notions were often used to measure the value of a dramatic work. Naturally, those devices had often to be calibrated, and this in turn brought along heated dispute. The disputes during the 1950s and 1960s focused primarily on three concepts: contemporaneity, conflict, and the positive hero of a dramatic piece. I will now look at those disputes more closely.

The demand for contemporaneity in dramaturgy was already familiar in the post-war period. It meant a demand for reflecting the problems and topics highlighted in the resolutions of the Communist Party, in other words—strict topicality. Depiction of necessary themes was demanded from the authors, with the covert assumption that everyone could write about anything, ignorance of the subject being no excuse. The drama of the Stalinist period, especially the work of August Jakobson (1904–1963), a double winner of the Stalin Prize for literature, earned the praise of the critics above all for the topicality of the themes that depicted the contemporary hot issues such as formation of collective farms, fight against the militant imperialists, etc. Although during the 'thaw' period the restrictions on subject matter were loosened, contemporaneity in drama criticism was still defined not as a thematic, but rather as an ideological choice. Contemporaneity was declared to be manifested by the fact that a work of art was based on 'today's progressive (meaning Communist—L.E.) ideas' (Utt 1960a), and, of course, a contemporary play had to deal with 'typical social, political, ideological and economic principles' (Tamm 1961: 96). Plays not ideological enough were marked as pseudo-contemporary (Utt 1960a). The true-to-life depiction of people and settings—that is, the realistic style—was deemed insufficient; instead, there was a demand for correct ideological enlightening of life. From this aspect, both psychology and everyday matters were condemned—both words mostly

functioned as negative value judgements in the drama criticism of that time. When, during the early 1960s, several plays were published that laid emphasis on the portrayal of the social milieu, and were composed as series of pictures from everyday life—e.g. *Siiipool horisontti* (*On This Side of the Horizon*, 1961) by Ardi Liives, *Haned* (*The Geese*, 1963) by Egon Rannet—criticism treated them with distrust. These plays were said to be illustrative and thus incapable of revealing the regularities of the epoch. This had been postulated by default as the true purpose of art. Time and again the authors were accused of treating narrow personal relations, locking themselves into the shell of psychologism, poking in human psychology, etc. Aspirations towards deeper psychological analysis were described by pejorative expressions. Contemporaneity was taken as the author's position, which had to coincide with the prevalent ideology. As late as in 1964, a critic wrote that only dramatic literature 'where the victorious progress of the ideas of Communism is artistically reflected, be it on the arena of societal conflict or in the conscience of people' (Uibo 1964: 35) was truly contemporary.<sup>1</sup> Let it be noted here that at the same time criticism attentively followed the amplitude of the subject matter as such. (Covering new areas of life was considered an achievement. On the one hand, plays about the life of students, doctors, lumberjacks, etc. were praised, on the other hand, a young critic was worried because there were many fields of life not yet written about (Peep 1958: 40), and another one complained about the lack of industrial plays (Tamm 1961: 96).

In the drama poetics of the 'thaw' period the true-to-life principle runs victorious. A play of relatively loosely connected scenes, reproducing faithfully some sphere of life and certain human types, and lacking a connecting intrigue, is characteristic of the period. The main weakness of these works, as well as that of many other plays, is considered to be the absence of a strong conflict. It is expected that the conflict should be social, contemporary, and sharp, with the purpose of creating strong dramatic tension. Between

<sup>1</sup>By the way, Uibo also criticizes Gunars Priedē's play *Miks un Dzilna* (*Mikk and Dzilna*, 1963) staged in the Viljandi theatre *Ugala* for fixing without passion the 'flux of life'. He states that such plays are not in his opinion truly contemporary.

1960 and 1962, a debate with theoretical ambition took place in the Estonian media, in which drama critics Olaf Utt, Arnold Tamm, Grigori Skulski, and Huko Lumet participated. It was argued that conflict was an inevitable and necessary component of a dramatic work, and was defined as a clash of strong and antagonistic characters. 'The nature of drama [...] lies in the fact that it brings forth and solves vital problems through the clash between warring characters,' states Grigori Skulski (1962: 634). Olaf Utt stressed that the dramatic conflict, which reflected the conflicts of reality, was born as a logical inevitability of the process and was solved in the course of a fight (Utt 1960b: 644), and Huko Lumet called conflict the 'eternal rule of drama' (Lumet 1962). There are two aspects to these critics' desire for strong conflict in drama. On the one hand, using conflict addressed the continuing struggle against the so-called theory of conflictlessness of the Stalinist period, which had damaged drama considerably. The reverberations of this theory were also felt in the views of Arnold Tamm, who found that the period of building Communism could be depicted without antithetical conflict; what was really needed was to 'describe in majestic words the nobility and spiritual beauty of the Soviet people' (Tamm 1962: 123). On the other hand, however, this meant that drama was returned to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hegelian concept of conflict and the techniques of the well-made play. True, these disputing critics did not point directly to Hegel but rather to Lenin's reflection theory, but literary critic Ants Järv defined conflict through Aristotle and Hegel in his theoretically generalizing article from 1965. The author shared the point of view that the specificity of drama demanded depicting life 'through sharp conflict and absorbing contest between strong characters' (Järv 1965: 1103). The debate doubtless was not purely scholastic; works that deviated from the traditional dramatic poetics were attacked and defended throughout. A good example is the above mentioned play of Ardi Liives, *On This Side of the Horizon*—the play was blamed for its lack of conflict; drama critic Karin Kask at the same time claimed that the work used a new form of dramatic conflict and was thus an innovative work (Kask 1962: 1240). Juhani Smuul's plays *Atlanti ookean* (*The Atlantic Ocean*, 1956) and *Lea* (*Lea*, 1959) were also much discussed.

Even more anachronistic was the discussion of 1958–1962 about the positive hero. It is characteristic that drama criticism did not doubt the necessity of positive heroes. On the contrary, the presence and forms of appearance of such a hero in new plays was under constant special attention. Disputes circled around the question whether such positive heroes should be 'pure as the freshly fallen snow' or they could still have weaknesses and internal conflicts. The first point of view was above all defended by Huko Lumet, who claimed that the positive hero must have found his or her truth and had to have 'a high and clear purpose of fight' (Lumet 1958). In defence of this opinion, references were made to the program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and drama classics, where such heroes without any imperfection purportedly existed, for instance, Tiina from *Libahunt* (*The Werewolf*, 1912) by August Kitzberg (Lumet 1959: 1705). Integrity and combatant attitude were the main features of a hero typical of the Soviet society (Lumet 1959: 1708). Some more moderate critics allowed for the positive hero to develop, even to be mistaken (temporarily), but nevertheless there was a demand for grand bearers of the (Communist) spirit of the epoch and a complaint about the abundance of hesitant and erring characters, as well as ordinary ones in Estonian dramas. One critic believed that the depiction of little people had been forced upon the writers—and these heroes thus might become the typical representatives of the Soviet people, whereas pure and ideal heroes were needed instead (Tamm 1960). Conservative criticism felt danger in plays with the so-called 'misguided' heroes as central figures whom fate had taken to the camp of enemies of the Soviet order. So, for instance there was much discussion over Ardi Liives' drama *Uusaasta õõ* (*New Year's Eve*, 1958), about a man who had fought on both sides during the war and had even been imprisoned, but is depicted with sympathy. Several critics thought that such in-betweens, characters not entirely good and/or bad, should not prevail in plays. On the contrary, Egon Rannet's Mother, from his play *Kadunud poeg* (*The Prodigal Son*, 1958), was described as a crystal clear character who, having learned that her son is an enemy spy, has no hesitation in choosing between the 'zoological mother's love

(sic!—L.E.) and her public duty, behaving according to the latter (Lumet 1959: 1709).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the conservative drama critics still made use of a model of socialist realism in assessing the plays characterized by the depiction of contemporary social problems in accordance with the ideology of the Communist Party, sharp dramatic conflict, and vigorous and noble heroes. At the same time, Estonian dramatic literature was drifting farther from the Stalinist version of socialist realism, preferring material realism, the aesthetic basis of which was a true-to-life milieu, truthful situations and convincing characters. Indeed, the fact that a considerable number of plays did not correspond to the old model of socialist realism was interpreted by some critics as a retreat from socialist realism to mere realism. If the development of a writer stops between the classic and socialist realism (the latter was, of course, considered to be a higher level art), the so-called micro-Realism emerges, which is supposed to be concerned with trivial topics and people (Tamm 1961: 99). The reason is considered to be that some authors exclude 'instinctively the socialist elements from socialist realism—meaning what is new in our kind of realism' (Tamm 1961: 98). A conflict between the dramatic literature of the period and the ideal model of criticism also includes the dramatic form. If we set political rhetoric aside, the ideal of conservative drama criticism can be taken back to a rather old-fashioned model of the well-made play of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, suitable perhaps for some works of Ibsen, but no more for Chekhov, let alone the modernist drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It comes as no surprise that a gap developed with the dramas of the 'thaw' period, which were for the most part ordinarily Realist dramas based on the aesthetic of the life-like. Conservative critics could perhaps have enjoyed some plays by Egon Rannet like *The Prodigal Son*, *Karikas ja madu* (*The Goblet and the Serpent*, 1965). Rannet remains both ideologically and aesthetically within the definition of socialist realism, but the combination of the well-made play technique and vulgar Communist ideology shifts his plays into the realm of Soviet kitsch literature.

Of course, the above mentioned critics ignored the modernist forays into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even such pieces as Bertolt Brecht's model of epic theatre, which was based on a Marxist world-view, failed to attract their attention. It should be noted that the reception of Brecht in Soviet Estonia began only in the end of the 1950s. The first stage production of Brecht in the Soviet era, *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (*Mr Puntila and his Man Matti*, 1941 [directed by Voldemar Panso]) took place in 1958<sup>2</sup>, and four more productions of Brecht's plays followed in the early 1960s. Simultaneously with the critics' rather scholastic disputes about socialist realism in the beginning of the 1960s, some Estonian writers and stage directors began promoting and applying Brecht's ideas. Epic techniques were also used sporadically in the drama of the 1950/60s (including Juhan Smuul's plays); however, this did not mean a conscious takeover of Brecht's principles and there is no compelling reason to speak of this before the mid-1960s when the plays of Ain Kaalep, Mati Unt and others began to appear.

Placing dramatic works against the background of the theoretical constructs and criteria of the criticism is, however, insufficient. Dramatic texts live a double life, operating as literary works in the field of literature, and as a basis for stage productions in the field of theatre. We must also observe how the situation in theatre influenced dramatic literature of the time. During the period in question, the influence of theatre on works of drama was quite considerable, since plays were published in small numbers and slowly (meaning that they usually were staged before getting published). In the field of theatre, contemporary plays were a part of the repertoire. One of the cornerstones of the theatre politics of the 'thaw' period was doubtless the priority of contemporary material. In 1955–1965, almost two thirds of the new stage productions in Estonian theatres were based on contemporary dramaturgy and only one third on classical material. Productions of Soviet Estonian plays constituted 22% of the theatres' repertoire, which surpassed

<sup>2</sup> In the independent Estonia before World War II *Die Dreigroschenoper* was staged three times, but Brecht's impact remained rather marginal.

that of the previous decade by 5% (Kask 1987: 489). Two directors of the most important theatres of Estonia, Ilmar Tammur at the Tallinn Drama Theatre and Kaarel Ird at the Tartu theatre Vanemuine, set producing contemporary original drama as their priority, and so by the beginning of the 1960s the proportion of contemporary Estonian drama had reached one third for programmes of those theatres. The interest and initiative of the theatres was also expressed through the contemporary widespread practice of completing the dramatic manuscript in co-operation with the stage director or with his assistance. In such a way some stable creative couples were formed: the main producer of Juhani Smuul was Voldemar Panso, Egon Rannet's plays were mostly produced by Ilmar Tammur. The situation in theatre seems to have been favourable for new dramatic production.

In order to understand what the stage life of plays looked like, first some differences between theatre and literature as art forms should be pointed out. Whereas a work of literature (such as a play) is a fixed text, a theatrical performance can be conceptualised as an event. An event is dynamic and open to external influences; it is more difficult to keep it under control than a fixed text, since it contains unexpected elements. As for its reception, it is important to note that the reception of a stage production takes place simultaneously with the actual performance, and thus the immediate reactions of the spectators may more or less influence the performance. The third important difference is the institutionalised nature of the theatrical art as opposed to the individuality of literature. Stage productions are created and mediated in theatres as institutions, and the choice of texts is rather strongly influenced by the economic, political and other mechanisms to which the institution is subject.

The theory of socialist realism was elaborated on the basis of literature, but made obligatory also for other, 'lower' genres (Kangilaski 2003: 14). In visual arts, theatre, film, etc., this theory focused on the cognitive function and stressed the idea, leaving aside the specificity of those arts. How, then, did socialist realism manifest itself in the Soviet theatre? Theatre of both the Stalinist period and of the 'thaw' was focused on literature, meaning

that staging proceeded from literary text and showed little activity towards these texts. Socialist realism entered theatre primarily through a socialist realist repertoire that reproduced that style on the stage. The decree of the Communist Party of 1946 *On the Repertoire of Drama Theatres and the Means of Its Improving* demanded preference for Soviet drama. The prevalence of the Soviet drama (including Estonian Soviet drama) in the repertoires of the theatres during the period of 1944–1955—up to 60%—may be taken as the direct result of the politics of the Communist Party. (During the next decade it decreased to 52%. [Kask 1987: 489]). Yet even the state theatres of the Soviet Union were obliged to make money, which made them dependent on the expectations and demands of the potential audience. The necessity of coaxing the audience became especially important when government funding to theatres, rather significant right after the war, started to decrease. In compiling the repertoire, a compromise had to be found between the demands of the official ideology and the needs of the audience—a compromise that was accepted by the authorities, since one could not let the theatres dry out completely.

What did the audience of that period wish to see in theatre? This is shown by attendance numbers. According to theatre researcher Karin Kask, nine of the ten most attended stagings between 1955 to 1965 were based on Estonian literature, as demonstrated by the following list of the favourite productions (Kask 1987: 465).

1. Oskar Luts, *Tootsi's Wedding*
2. Oskar Luts, *Spring* (Tallinn Drama Theatre)
3. Oskar Luts, *Summer*
4. A. H. Tammsaare, *Vargamäe* [*Truth and Justice I*]
5. Juhani Smuul, *Kihnu Jõnn*
6. Ardi Liives, *A Vienna Stamp*
7. Oskar Luts, *In the Backyard*
8. Venta Vigante, *Palm Trees are Always Green*
9. Oskar Luts, *Spring* (Vanemuine Theatre)
10. A. H. Tammsaare, *The Master of Kõrboja Farm*

indication of the preferential status of a nostalgic, classical repertoire depicting a historical and mostly rural landscape.

A closer look at the most popular classic on stage reveals that the formula for a successful stage production among audiences was Estonian subject matter plus effective national characters plus popular comedy. This is, in effect, still the formula of the 1930s, and the preferences of the audiences indicate the continued vitality of the folkish-realistic tradition. This tradition presumably shaped also the contemporary drama, to the extent that the authors were interested in gaining the audience's sympathy. Indeed, the most successful among the new plays largely followed the traditional templates: a lifelike milieu, aspects of the everyday life, ethical problems, true-to-life characters, with frequent emphasis on character and language-based comedy. The ideological nature of the audiences' favourite plays is mostly ornamental, and their connection with the socialist realist model of drama constructed and proposed by criticism is rather tenuous. It is noteworthy that the top attendance rankings do not include plays by Egon Rannet, the favourite playwright of Communist Party-based critics<sup>4</sup>, whereas one can find, for example, the amateur writer Albert Uustulud in these lists, whose sea-themed plays were enjoyed by the audiences in Rakvere. One could postulate a hypothesis that the audience pressure helped to legitimise the more realistic style of drama that followed the tradition of the 1930s. On the other hand, it also helped to defeat the modernistic innovations that indeed appeared later in Estonian drama than in poetry and prose.

The question, what the socialist realism in acting was, is not easy to answer. It seems that the socialist realist style was basically a simplified and ideological version of the so-called Stanislavsky system. The core of Stanislavsky's system is the impersonation of a character on the basis of identification with a character's motivation—it is the acting method of realist theatre—but, interpreted simplistically in Stalinist theatre, it frequently

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, some of Rannet's later dramas, such as *Kriminaaltango* (*Criminal Tango*), staged in the second half of the 1960s, were very popular.

Seven of the ten are dramatizations of novels and stories by beloved Estonian classic authors—Anton Hansen Tammsaare and Oskar Luts—and two are new, original Estonian plays: Juhan Smuul's folkish *Kihnu Jõnn* (1965) and Ardi Liives's comedy *Viini postmark* (*A Vienna Stamp*, 1964). The only translated work was *Palmes zaļo vienmēr* (*Palm Trees are Always Green*, 1959) by the Latvian author Venta Vīgante (1913–1994). If we take a look at the top ten performances of two larger theatres, Tallinn Drama Theatre and Vanemuine, the picture is similar: At the Drama Theatre the best attended shows were six works from Estonian classics, two contemporary plays (Smuul, Liives) and two translations and at the Vanemuine it was five Estonian classics, three Estonian contemporary plays (Smuul, Liives, Liidia Kompus) and two translations (both from Finnish literature) that were most popular. So we can see that the audience preferred local drama to translated plays<sup>3</sup>, and from local drama it was the classics that most certainly were preferred. The works of Oskar Luts and Anton Hansen Tammsaare had reached the stage already in the 1930s; the new productions of Hugo Raudsepp (whose plays had been forbidden until 1957) and August Kitzberg's plays were popular, too.

Going to the theatre could be considered a kind of social ritual, in which the society shows its belief in a certain social order and system of values. By observing the repertoire and simultaneously taking into account the preferences of the audience, it is possible to get to know the system of expectancy guiding theatre; also the ideals and myths that the society (public) had needed in one period or another (see also Paavola 1992: 13–16). Concerning Estonian audiences in the 1950s and 1960s, one can claim that for the spectators theatre remained primarily an institution with national importance; one of its main functions was to retain links to the national past and to cultural traditions. The analysis of the most popular plays gives a clear

<sup>3</sup> Taking also into account the top-ten lists of small theatres, we can see that translated dramas are mostly represented by the works from the neighboring countries—Finnish (Maria Jotuni, Teuvo Pakkala, Finnish-Estonian author Hella Wuolijoki) and Latvian (Günārs Priede, Venta Vīgante, Vilis Lācis). The ground for these preferences of the Estonian public is cultural closeness and similar historical experience.

produced stereotypes and fended off both psychological depth and theatrical means of expression. Although during the late 1950s there is a turn towards a more nuanced understanding of Stanislavsky's method, there is nevertheless a reason to reproach Estonian actors for using external and internal clichés, and striving towards simplicity for the simplicity's sake. But a critic also notes: 'Our actors are more talented than their creations' (Kask 1961: 6).

It should be emphasized that the theatre of that time relied more on acting than on stage directing: it was the great actors that people went to see in theatre, rather than intriguing stage interpretations. The actor's work is born during actual performances and through interactions with the audiences, whose feedback has an influence on the interpretation of a role. Synchronous criticism remains silent on what really happened in theatres between the spectators and the actors. Yet this aspect is revealed in actors' recollections. For example, there is a story of a masterful actor who disliked a primitive role in contemporary drama, but when the spectators arrived and started to react, he could not help but play his character as an interesting one. Actress Lisl Lindau recalls how one of Tammsaare's characters, who was interpreted by Stalinist criticism as a 'product of putrefying capitalism', was in her interpretation rather a woman in search for happiness because 'the audience wanted us to be that way and began to see us that way' (Vellerand 1982: 72). In 1949 the young actor Voldemar Panso wrote in his diaries about the production of Johannes Semper's play *Murrang* (*The Crisis*, 1949), which described the foundation of collective farms; he states that 'the vitality and impetus, the simplicity and cordiality of the characters was so effective that this ideological play, which had seemed so anaemic when read, was very warmly accepted by the public' (Panso 2007: 125).

All these examples come, true enough, from the Stalinist period, but apparently the art of the actors had a similar effect also in the 'thaw' period. Presumably, the acting could transform and enrich the characters of contemporary drama to such an extent that they shifted away from their basis of socialist realism, probably again towards the tradition of realism. But there are two sides to this coin. The techniques and strategies of acting may

have diluted the forced ideology of the drama texts, yet at the same time they could have made the (Communist) ideology more 'palatable', if the ideological characters and situations were turned into more believable ones on stage.

Thus the theatre as a life world of drama—an art contingent on audiences—made various corrections in the theoretical model of Socialist Realist drama. I agree with Jaak Rähesoo, who sees in theatre of that period the reaction against Stalinist artificiality and a tendency towards authentic realism, often combined with poetic depiction of everyday feelings and events. For the Estonian theatre it largely signified a return to pre-war patterns, Rähesoo says (1999: 58). The drama of the 'thaw' period existed in the tension field between two opposite forces: criticism was forcing the theoretical model of socialist realism upon it; at the same time the theatre strategies worked in the service of preserving and updating the 1930s-style realistic tradition in drama.

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### THE EPIC THEATRE OF JUHAN SMUUL: A CENSOR'S REPORT<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The present article is primarily an empirical case study of the plays by Estonian author Juhan Smuul (1922–1971), but it also has two more far-fetched aims. Firstly, the article aims to blur the black-and-white contrasts and contradictions in the history of Soviet art between such oppositions as Communist *versus* dissident, political leaders *versus* the people, socialist realism *versus* modernism, etc. The second aim is to investigate the strategies and functions of the epic theatre in Soviet Estonia.

The first part of this article presents a general overview of the concept of epic theatre. Next, the paper investigates chronologically the epic strategies and the reception of Smuul's plays. Smuul's experiments with the dramatic form encouraged a wave of modernisation in Estonian and also in Soviet playwrighting and theatre. The concluding part of the article presents a general overview concerning the emergence of epic theatre in the Soviet Union after World War II.

**Keywords:** epic theatre, strategies of episation, modernisation, Baltic theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> The present article has been created with the help of the grant 6689 of the Estonian Science Foundation.