

The WORLD¹ of ESTONIAN² THEATRE^{III/3}

1 → world

- Consciousness of the **world** and the changing identity of a person are often the main themes.

2 → Estonia

- Theatre was, and still is, a testimony to **Estonian** independence.

3 → theatre

- **Theatre** in Estonia can crop up in the most unexpected places.



THE WORLD OF ESTONIAN THEATRE

Text: Ott Karulin, Monika Larini

Translation: Tiina Randviir

Language editor : Richard Adang

Graphic design: Piia Ruber

Photo credits:

Paul Aguraiuja, Awentus and Heikmann, DeStudio, Eero Epner, Andrus Eesmaa, Estonian Amateur Theatres' Union, Estonian Drama Theatre, Estonian Literary Museum, Estonian National Opera, Estonian Public Broadcasting, Estonian Puppet and Youth Theatre, Estonian Theatre Agency , Estonian Theatre and Music Museum (TMM), Endla Theatre, Priit Grepp, Jassu Hertsmann, Ville Hyvönen, Peeter Jalakas, Kanuti Gildi SAAL, Andres Keil, Lauri Kulpsoo, Jaanus Laagriküll, Ülo Laumets, Peeter Laurits, Ants Liigus , Eva-Liisa Linder, Enn Loit, Teet Malsroos, Kaarel Mikkin, Kris Moor, No99, Tiit Oajsoo, Anete Pelmas, Alan Proosa, R.A.A.A.M, Harri Rospu, Piia Ruber, Scanpix Baltics, Ene-Liis Semper, Triin Sinissaar, Nele Sooväli, STÜ, Tõnu Tamm, Heigo Teder, Taivo Tenso, Jüri Tenson, Theatre Vanemuine, Ugala Theatre, Siim Vahur, Gunnar Vaidla, Taavi Varm, Liina Viru, Toomas Volmer/ETA/Scanpix, Mats Õun, Wikipedia/Gsitnikov.

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WANDERING THEATRE

Theatre in Estonia can crop up in the most unexpected places. The mass scale of “found spaces” and open-air theatre during the last decade has caused a situation where visitors might be more interested in the venue rather than in what is being performed or by whom. Just as much as we love our theatre, we love our brief summer, and when these two meet, Estonians’ enthusiasm for theatre becomes quite frenzied. As spectators, we are prepared to drive dozens of kilometres in the dead of night in order to get to theatre performances that start at four in the morning with a trek across marshlands, even if the weather is disagreeable and it is pouring with rain. As a result, we have [manor theatre](#), [factory theatre](#), farmhouse theatre, [river theatre](#), [castle theatre](#), [beach theatre](#) (see p 53), forest theatre, [lake theatre](#), bog theatre and [island theatre](#).



Kaarel Jõbbin

island theatre

Visitors take a boat to the island of Naissaar and are met at the harbour by a lorry that takes them to the theatre.



Ants Läger / Endla Theatre

river theatre

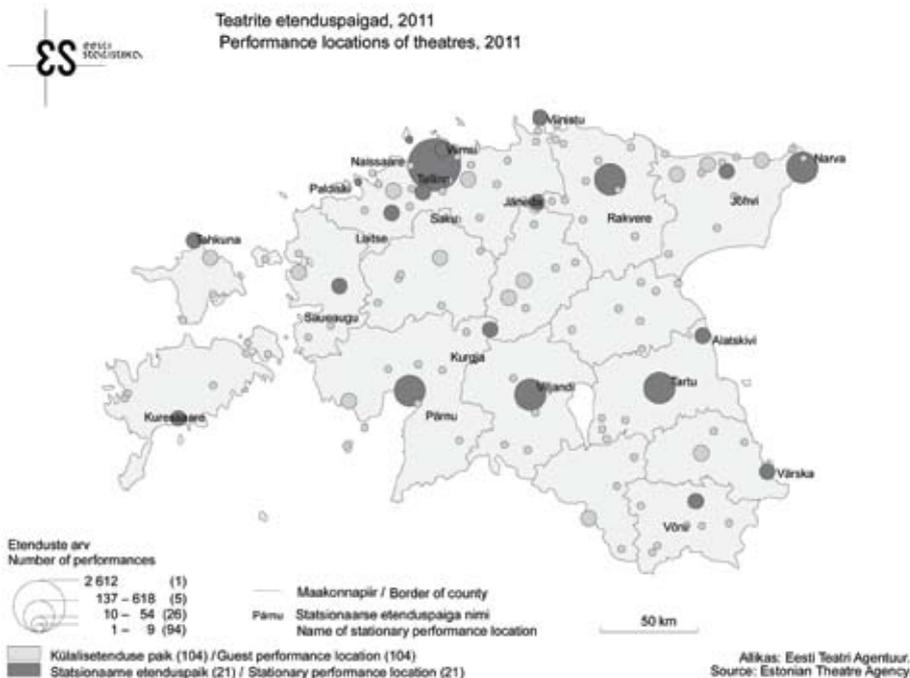
Logger Boys (2002) by Endla Theatre



Peter Jakob

factory theatre

Songs of Estonian Men (2008) by Von Krahl Theatre



Estonian theatre map in 2011.



lake theatre

Young Estonia (2011) by Rakvere Theatre



factory theatre

Through the Glass (2011) by Ugala Theatre



manor theatre

Uncle Vanya (2002) by Ugala Theatre



factory theatre

Parsifal (2011) by Estonian National Opera



castle theatre

Misanthrope (2011) by Theatrum

On the one hand, the success of theatre in unusual venues can be explained by a two-in-one experience: the number of performances is limited and, besides theatre, people can visit some previously inaccessible places or enjoy an outing in the countryside. Thus the *genius loci* of the new venues occasionally appears in the form of a commercial sideshow, and at other times deliciously tickles our noblest emotions or intellect.



The Lamb of Vargamäe
(2011) by Albu County

Vargamäe

→↗↑ The birthplace and museum of one of the most acclaimed Estonian writers Anton Hansen Tammsaare (1878–1940). It is also the environment of his pentalogy about the life of Estonian people at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries called *Truth and Justice*. After the publication of the first part of the pentalogy in 1926 many people started visiting his birth farm curious to see the landscapes described in the novel. Since the 1970s the museum grounds have been a popular place for various kinds of open-air theatre performances. Plays based on the works of Tammsaare have been most popular though. Vargamäe is also a good place for learning about the life of the mid-19th century Estonian peasants in general. In addition to viewing the exhibition, one can take a walk in the Cultural Grove or go hiking in the surrounding bogs.



Republic of Vargamäe
(2008) by Tallinn City Theatre

However, besides the increasing number of new venues there are places where the public returns time and again. National-mythological landscapes rich in cultural sediments, such as **Vargamäe**, acquire new theatrical layers each summer. Religiously rather tepid and individualistic by nature, Estonians find a sense of community in these outings, and meet there the archetypes of their culture, whose greatness is never questioned.



Kingdom of Vargamäe
(2006) by Endla Theatre / Rakvere Theatre



THEATRE MATTERS



Manifesto of Independence

According to the main narrative of Estonian history, our seven hundred year period of serfdom ended in February 1918, when Estonia was declared an independent democratic republic. The [Manifesto of Independence](#) was first read publicly on 23 February from the balcony of the Endla Theatre in Pärnu, and a day later in Tallinn. 24 February is still celebrated as the anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. The day culminates with the President's reception, a concert and the President's speech, generally held at the National Opera or another theatre.

By common consent, 1906 is regarded as the beginning of Estonian-language professional theatre. There are many theatre [houses, still operating as theatres today](#), built at the beginning of the 20th century, that have largely been financed by donations. For Estonians, theatre in their mother tongue signified the country's national awakening and a detachment from alien cultures – in previous centuries, the Estonian territory had repeatedly changed hands, belonging to the Teutonic and other orders, as well as to Denmark, Sweden and Russia. Theatre was, and still is, a testimony to Estonian independence.



houses, still operating as theatres today

↑ The Small House of Vanemuine in Tartu, constructed between 1914 to 1918. There are three buildings used by Vanemuine, the only theatre in Estonia combining drama, dance and music productions in its repertoire.



↑ The building of the Estonian National Opera opened in August 1913. It was practically destroyed during the bombing of Tallinn in the Second World War but was rebuilt in 1947.



↑ The building of Estonian Drama Theatre opened in 1910. The architects were Nikolai Vassiljev and Aleksei Bubõr who in 2010 made their return to the Drama Theatre when a play by Andrus Kivirähk, *Vassiljev and Bubõr Made it Here* had its opening night (see p 38).



Outmar Vuolia

manifestations of national self-awareness

← Although the liberal reforms of perestroika and glasnost emerged in 1987, the rigid grip of censorship had begun to relax a few years earlier. Thus Mikko Mikiver' at the Estonian Drama Theatre managed to stage Jaan Kruusvall's *The Colours of Clouds* as early as 1983. The play examined the topic of Estonians who had fled from Soviet repression to Sweden by boat in 1944. It was one of the first productions that was able to tackle the previously taboo topic.

The importance of theatre as the foundation of the nation increased even further during the Soviet occupation, when it became the place where truth was told. Although everything uttered on stage had to be approved by censors beforehand, it was completely impossible to control how something was uttered, and thus the formally Soviet citizens went to the theatre to seek descriptions of reality, jokes about political leaders and **manifestations of national self-awareness** hidden between the lines. As the Soviet propaganda machinery wanted to take art to the masses, **several large theatres were built** and the number of theatre visits grew rapidly, **exceeding 1.5 million** in the second half of the 1980s.

exceeding 1.5 million

✓ The Soviet-era planned economy forced theatres to meet a required number of viewers. The statistics of the time are not in the least reliable, although each district (today's county) was allocated its own theatre, and guest performances were obligatory; the latter often took place in factory clubs and other unsuitable locations.

Regained independence in 1991 also introduced the market economy, which in turn led to much higher unemployment and had a direct impact on theatre visits, which dropped almost two-fold, i.e. to fewer than 800 000 visits a year. It became practically impossible to maintain the Soviet-era huge theatres and fill them with people. Besides economic strains, theatres also found it difficult to find a new aim in a situation where there was no longer any need to conceal truth between the lines, as censorship had vanished and the media openly discussed the hardships of real life. The setback, however, was temporary and when the Estonian professional theatre celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2006, theatre visits had once again exceeded one million. Although the recent recession diminished the number of viewers in theatres, the situation quickly improved and in 2011 the visits numbered over one million again. Besides long-time repertory theatres, dozens of private-initiative independent theatre companies have been established over the last twenty five years. They do not possess big theatre houses, but are even more imaginative in finding suitable venues (see p. 4-6).



Eesti Litteraarium

several large theatres were built

↑ The main building of Vanemuine, opened in 1967, has a venue with 700 seats suitable for drama, ballet and opera productions.



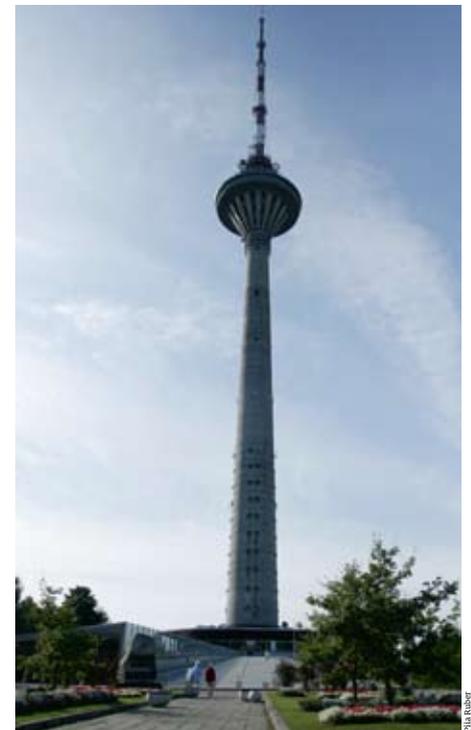
Fim Iotti / Ugala Theatre

↑ The building of Ugala in Viljandi opened in 1981 and is to date the last big theatre house built in Estonia.

When the Soviet tanks rolled into Tallinn in the early morning of 20 August 1991 in order to prevent a possible uprising, they did not head to a theatre, but targeted the **TV Tower** instead. Times had changed and the media had become the major information channel and testimony of freedom. In the evening of the same day, Estonia was again declared independent.

TV Tower

↙ ↓ The TV Tower was completed by 1980, when Moscow hosted the summer Olympic Games and Tallinn organised the Olympic regatta. The highest building in the country, at 314 metres, the TV Tower is among the symbols of the restoration of Estonia's independence. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Estonia grasped the opportunity offered by the attempted coup d'état in Moscow, and declared on 20 August 1991 that Estonia was no longer part of the Soviet Union, but an independent republic once again. This was followed by the attempt of the Soviet military to seize the Tallinn TV Tower. People gathered to defend the Tower and a handful of armed Estonians managed to shut themselves into the communications centre on the 22nd floor, thus maintaining contacts with the world outside. After thorough renovation, the Tower was again opened to visitors in the spring of 2012. It displays a permanent exhibition with a futurist design which constitutes an overview of people who have lived in Estonia and achieved worldwide renown. In addition, the Tower offers a 360-degree panoramic view of Tallinn and its vicinity from a height of 170 metres.



THE FATHER FIGURE



Ülo Õun's sculpture Father and Son in Tartu

THE FATHER FIGURE

The history of Estonians has mainly been a history of survival rather than of heroic battles. This may be the reason why the stories written for our theatre depict strong women characters (see p. 43) intent on survival instead of brave father figures. However, Estonian theatre is still a rather patriarchal system, where the undisputed father figure is the director.

The major father figure in modern Estonian theatre is certainly [Voldemar Panso](#). As a director, he was crucial to our theatre primarily because he practised Stanislavski's theatre aesthetics in a more poetic, playful and deeply psychological key, and was extremely demanding regarding literary material. Probably more important than his role as director, upon which the time where one lives inevitably sets its limits, was Panso's work as a teacher. Largely on his initiative, the first [theatre school](#) in Estonia offering higher education was established in 1957, and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that today's theatre is still being shaped by his students and his students' students.



[Voldemar Panso](#) (1920–1977)



Tiit Sukk as **Panso** in *Voldemar* (2007) by Estonian Drama Theatre



Mait Malmsten as **Panso** in *Panso* (2010) by Estonian Drama Theatre

Just as a father cannot be a father without a son, no tradition can become a tradition without those who swim against the current, or innovators, or bigger or smaller artistic patricides. The major aesthetic breakthrough in the relatively brief history of our professional theatre was in the late 1960s, when the main innovators were the theatre directors **Evald Hermaküla** and **Jaan Tooming**. The central method of **theatre renewal** at the time was playing, which greatly encouraged improvisation. The way of relating to the dramaturgic text changed radically. **The creative work of the director, scenographer and actor** was primary and plays were not restricted to the text, which provided only an impetus. Imagery and physicality became significant theatrical concepts.



← **Jaan Tooming** (b. 1946)

Actor, director, pedagogue. Student of Voldemar Panso. Worked as an actor and director in Theatre *Vanemuine* and as director and artistic director in Ugala Theatre. He was the intellectual leader and teacher of the *Vanemuine* study studio.

Tooming is a major figure in Estonian theatre renewal, whose earlier directorial work is characterised by a keyword total theatre, which uses all possibilities at the disposal of theatre to the full, from expressive actor's technique to lavish stage effects. The subject of Tooming's earlier productions was often folkloristic; the highlight of this period was Tammisaare's *The New Devil of Põrgupõhja* and Smuul's *Jõnn of the Island of Kihnu*. He later focused on the finer psychology of actor's work and the books by Gorki, Ibsen and Shaw.

← **Evald Hermaküla** (1941–2000)

Director, actor and pedagogue. Hermaküla graduated from the University of Tartu in geology and the *Vanemuine* study studio, worked as actor and director in Theatre *Vanemuine* and Estonian Drama Theatre, was the artistic director of the Estonian Drama Theatre and Puppet Theatre, and taught at *Vanemuine* studio and Panso School.

Hermaküla was among the leading figures of theatre renewal, whose productions were often linked with the theatre's original sources, seeking for roots and rituality, which encourages a community to act and experience together. On the one hand, this search found expression in folklore-related topics and in his keenness to produce theatre for children. On the other hand, the aspect of rituality was also evident in Hermaküla's fascination with Oriental theatre traditions, which resulted in later producing the works of several Chinese and Japanese playwrights. Many of his productions aspired towards Grotowski's poor theatre aesthetics. Hermaküla's work as theatre director was strongly influenced by the fact that he was a highly organic actor, and the presence of actor Hermaküla in director Hermaküla's production often had an energetically binding effect on the rest of the group, for example Prospero in his production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Puntila in Brecht's *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*.

theatre renewal

← The opening explosion of theatre renewal, an evening dedicated to the poet Gustav Suits' (1969).

History always seems more or less clear-cut and makes it possible to draw simple borders, whereas pictures of contemporary life tend to be hazy and cannot easily be fitted into clear frames. In a small theatre environment, it often feels as if even a relatively minor production is a sign of an imminent explosion. The vials exploding in theatre laboratories aside, one thing is certain: contemporary Estonian theatre offers a vibrant selection of different directorial handwritings, and some names indeed characterise an entire theatre.

the creative work of the director, scenographer and actor was primary



The New Devil of Põrgupõhja (1967) by Theatre Vanemuine

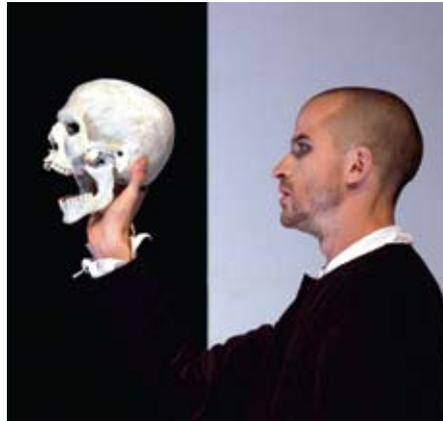


Lembit Peterson as Nikolai Kirssanov in Tallinn City Theatre's production *Fathers and Sons* (2002).

↑ Lembit Peterson (b. 1953)

Director, actor and pedagogue. Student of Voldemar Panso. Worked as an actor and director in Tallinn City Theatre, Ugala Theatre and the Estonian Drama Theatre, and taught at Panso School and Viljandi Culture Academy. Peterson's theatre work and teaching are closely interwoven, as best seen in the foundation of theatre Theatrum, which initially also operated as a studio school. The creative principles of both Peterson and Theatrum are based on serious study of the intellectual and spiritual worlds of different eras and maintaining their values via the means of theatre. Peterson has always been keen to develop the tradition of early theatre of the Occident, connect it with different theatre traditions of the world, trying to establish associations between cultures that can be expressed in theatre. During his entire career, he has greatly valued intelligent dramaturgic material, be it medieval morality plays or the works of Molière, Beckett, Maeterlinck, Shakespeare or some other world-class playwright.

We have, for example, the aesthetics of silence and religiosity of Lembit Peterson's Theatrum; Elmo Nüganen's Tallinn City Theatre, which values psychological acting;



Marius Peterson as Hamlet (see p. 35) in Theatrum's *Hamlet* (2003).

↑ Theatrum

The non-profit organisation Studio Theatrum was founded in 1994 by the theatre students and professors of the Estonian Institute of Humanities Lembit Peterson and Juhan Viiding², and the participants of the theatre programme of Collegium Educationis Revaliae. Their aim was to prepare and initiate a theatre school that would support and carry on the creative and methodological aspirations in acting and directing techniques of important theatre figures of the 20th century. This would then help to find the means and performing patterns for classical dramatic art and convey its values to the viewers of today. Theatrum currently acts as a project theatre with a troupe consisting mainly of two generations of actors of the Peterson family. Theatrum also serves as a stage for high school theatre students of Collegium Educationis Revaliae.



Elmo Nüganen as Signor Ponza in Tallinn City Theatre's production *So It Is (If You Think So)* (2006).

↑ Elmo Nüganen (b. 1962)

He is one of Estonia's most renowned directors. He is mostly known for his adaptations of Estonian and Russian classic novels, but he has also directed contemporary drama from Estonia, as well as other European countries. In addition, Elmo Nüganen is an actor and a film director. Since 1992 he has been the artistic director of the Tallinn City Theatre. In 1998-2002 and 2008-2012 he worked as a professor at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. Elmo Nüganen's productions in the Tallinn City Theatre include several Shakespeare and Chekhov plays. His major acting roles include Father in Rózewicz's *White Marriage*, Platonov in Chekhov's *Pianola*, Mack the Knife in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, Pantalone in Gozzi's *The Love for Three Oranges* and Lopakhin in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.



Von Krahl Theatre

↑ **Peeter Jalakas** (b. 1961)

He graduated from Tallinn University, with a speciality in directing, in 1987. In 1989, Jalakas formed an independent theatre group Ruto Killakund, which later became the Von Krahl Theatre. He has been working as the artistic director of this theatre since then. In 1990, Jalakas started the international Theatre Festival Baltoscandal (see p. 26).

Jalakas is the best-known Estonian avant-garde theatre director. He has always been at odds with the repertory theatre and its acting mechanisms, refusing to adapt himself to the expectations and demands of others.

In the productions of Jalakas, such different media as music, drama, movement and machines are often represented. He has collaborated with many musicians. His most recognized work has been the staging of a song cycle written by Veljo Tormis in three plays: *Estonian Ballads* (see p. 22), *Songs of Estonian Women* and *Songs of Estonian Men* (see p. 4), together with the famous conductor Tõnu Kaljuste; he has also worked on the award-winning production *Gilgamesh* (see p. 21).



Vilje Eivonen

Viljandi Culture Academy students performing *12 Karamazov* (2011) by Von Krahl Theatre.

the tireless experimentation of **Peeter Jalakas' Von Krahl Theatre**; **Aare Toikka's** youthful **VAT Theatre**; **Ivar Põllu's Tartu New Theatre**, which has undertaken the serious task of telling stories about Estonian theatre people; and the Theatre NO99 of Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper, which has recently performed more often in other European cities than in its home town of Tallinn.

Forum Theatre performance (2011) in **VAT Theatre**.



Aare Toikka



Pita Ruuser



Lauri Kujaso

← Ivar Põllu (b. 1974)

He is a director, singer and playwright. He graduated from the University of Tartu as theatre researcher. Põllu has worked as a dramaturge in the Endla Theatre and has been a very popular singer and songwriter in the band *Genialistid*. At present he is the head of the Tartu New Theatre, which he established in 2008. TNT is not a building, a stage, a group or a paying job, but rather an open platform for new ideas. This theatre is based on the idea that theatre can only exist on the basis of free will, not tradition, occupation or obligation.

↑ Aare Toikka (b. 1965)

He is an actor, stage director, screenwriter, producer. He studied in Tallinn University. He is one of the founders of the VAT Theatre, the first independent theatre in Estonia (1987), and has been its artistic director since 1993. He has worked as a director in the Estonian Radio Theatre, and has been a screenwriter for TV productions and movies. He also writes plays, poetry and articles. His theatre works can be mainly described as theatre minimalism, and he has adopted the principles of epic and physical theatre.

Toikka has directed over 70 productions in theatre, radio and television. Some of his works are: T. Lycos-S. Nantsou's *The Stones*, Ferenc Molnár's *Pal-street Boys*, and W. Tomczyk's *Nuremberg*.



Andreas Kell

Kaarel Ird performed by Nero Urke in [Tartu New Theatre](#) (2010).

theatre schools

In today's Estonia, university-level theatre education can be acquired in three institutions. The oldest theatre school in Estonia is the [Drama School](#) of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (also known as Panso School), which teaches acting, directing and dramaturgy. In addition to acting, the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy offers courses of props and stage design and lighting design. The Estonian Academy of Arts prepares scenographers and the University of Tartu teaches theatre studies.



Jaak Soans' bas-relief of [Voldemar Panso](#) at the entrance of [Drama School](#).



Scapin's Deceits (2011) performed by [Drama School](#) students.



Reading the names of candidates who have been admitted to the next round at the entrance examinations at the [Drama School](#).



Home of Theatre. Theatre of Tartu Toy Museum.

BORROWED THEATRE

Estonian folk culture has a strong tradition of storytelling, and all types of theatrical festival and spectacles have enjoyed great popularity. However, theatre in its classical form, although well-established in Estonia, is still a relatively new and largely borrowed phenomenon. Estonian national theatre was born on 24 June 1870, when a new building of the **Vanemuine** Society opened with **Lydia Koidula**'s play *The Cousin from Saaremaa* (see p. 34). The plot was taken from the German writer Theodor Körner's one-act verse comedy *The Cousin from Bremen* and adapted to local circumstances. This event inaugurated the Estonian national theatre as well as a string of stage loans in our cultural history. Even now, the biggest and most obvious loan is repertoire. Among the average 100 plays in a season, 40 of them are Estonian originals. In music and dance theatre, the percentage of Estonian works is even lower.



Lydia Koidula

Lydia Koidula (1843–1886)

A poetess, journalist, prose and drama writer, founder of Estonian-language theatre. Daughter of the leading figure of the Estonian National Awakening Johann Voldemar Jannsen. Koidula (sobriquet, meaning 'of the Dawn') became an icon of a romanticist patriotic poetess and her oeuvre, consisting of more than 300 poems, some 90 pieces of prose and four plays, constitutes a key component of the Estonian national identity. For the first Estonian Song Festival of 1869, two of her poems, *Sind Surmani* (*To You till My Death*) and *Mu isamaa on minu arm* (*My Fatherland is My Love*) were set to music. The latter, recomposed by Gustav Ernesaks in 1944, became the unofficial anthem during the Soviet occupation when the national song of the Republic of Estonia was forbidden. Lydia Koidula died at the age of 43 and was buried in Kronstadt. In 1946, her remains were reburied in the Tallinn Forest Cemetery (see p. 40, 46).



Mare Mikoff's statue of **Karl Menning** in front of Theatre **Vanemuine** in Tartu.



Lydia Koidula's *The Betrothal Birches* (1870)

In its initial years, Estonian theatre mostly followed the example of German and Russian theatre traditions. The birth of professional Estonian theatre in 1906, for example, is associated with the director [Karl Menning](#), who attended the directing classes of Max Reinhardt. As local systematic drama education was not available at home, many actors at the start of their professional careers studied in Berlin, St Petersburg or Moscow. Our largely repertoire-based theatre system is also borrowed from the above-mentioned cultural environments.

In the recent past, Estonian theatre has increasingly paid interest to world theatre as well as lending itself to the world. Estonian theatres give about 100 performances a year abroad, seen by 20 000 viewers. Cooperation, too, is quite frequent. The [Von Krahl Theatre](#) has undertaken several joint ventures with Showcase Beat Le Mot; in September 2011, [Theatre NO99](#), Munich Kammerspiele and Lyric Hammersmith premiered [Three Kingdoms](#), written by the British playwright Simon Stephens and directed by the German Sebastian Nübling.



[Three Kingdoms](#)
(2011) by [Theatre NO99](#), Munich Kammerspiele and
Lyric Hammersmith



Repertoire as a loan. [Gilgamesh](#) (2011) by [Von Krahl Theatre](#)

In addition, Estonian theatre has domesticated the choreographer Sasha Pepeljajev, the head of the Kinetic Theatre, and the Finnish director and dramaturge Kristian Smeds, the laureate of the 12th European Theatre Prize. Both have repeatedly worked in Estonia. A splendid example of theatrical loan is the playwright **Jaan Tätte** (see p. 24), whose **work has enjoyed great success not only at home**, but also abroad.

Borrowing from other cultural spaces or fields of art naturally raises questions about the essence of theatre but, paradoxical as it may seem, mixing the familiar and the unfamiliar actually strengthens self-identity rather than dilutes it. One of the most spectacular examples is certainly the production by the Von Krahl Theatre **Estonian Ballads** a few years ago, in which a form of *butoh*-theatre revealed the torments and down-to-earth beauty of tales told in Estonian runic songs.

work has enjoyed great success not only at home



Estonian Ballads

(2004) by Von Krahl Theatre

AN URGE TO LEAVE



AN URGE TO LEAVE

Estonians have always believed that the grass is greener elsewhere. Although our net migration has been negative since the restoration of the independent republic, most Estonians satisfy their urge to leave by pottering around in their summer weekend cottages or dreaming about moving to the countryside altogether. This urge to leave is often depicted in Estonian drama. One of the advocates of abandoning the everyday routine is the playwright **Jaan Tätte**. In Tätte's play *Mindless*, the father of the family suddenly decides to leave everything behind and move to the countryside for a year. He reasons as follows: "You think that a little bit more and then you can start living your own life. Just finish this project, and then... But increasingly I get the feeling that 'and then' will never come."



Jaan Tätte (b. 1964)

who after fifteen years in theatre became the lighthouse keeper on the small island of Vilsandi² and then set out on a two-year round-the-world voyage together with his good friend, the actor Marko Matvere³.

Besides Jaan Tätte himself, who sailed the world, his plays, too, have travelled widely across Europe. Tätte is certainly the most successful Estonian playwright abroad. His two plays, *The Highway Crossing* and *Happy Everyday* have enjoyed special acclaim in Germany, where his plays have so far been staged 47 times; Tätte's world of theatre has also been presented to viewers in Austria, Australia, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Armenia (see p. 22).



a failed urban intellectual

At Grandmother's (2007) by Rakvere Theatre

Our new drama contains others who want to break free: the protagonist in Urmas Lennuk's¹ play *Boob Knows*, for example, is a **dog-man** who finds shelter with another woman despite having a wife and children waiting somewhere; in Jakob Karu's *At Grandmother's*, a **failed urban intellectual** flees to the country, although not too happily: "It was not an easy decision to come to the country, all of a sudden, to get off the treadmill. A revoltingly banal idea, isn't it? Like in a Tätte play."



dog-man

Boob Knows (2004) by Tallinn City Theatre

NON-EXISTENT THEATRE



Photo: Agnieszka



NON-EXISTENT THEATRE

“Theatre is a vanishing art – it vanishes in an instant,” has been the slogan of the Rakvere Theatre for the past fifteen years. Although Estonian theatre is largely institution-centred, there are nevertheless regular undertakings, which because of their brief duration seem to have hardly existed. For example, there is the [Straw Theatre](#), built on the Skoone Bastion in 2011 when Tallinn was the European Capital of Culture. This temporary theatre-installation briefly returned an urban region that had been woefully waiting to be used to its inhabitants, only to vanish into thin air with the arrival of winter.

Although Estonians are supposed to feel rather tepid about foreign theatre, the Straw Theatre and numerous [international festivals](#) that have been taking place for decades, such as Baltoscandal in Rakvere, NoTaFe in Viljandi, the Ballet Festival in Jõhvi and the August Dance Festival, the Treff Festival, the Golden Mask and Midwinter Night’s Dream in Tallinn, prove that Estonians, too, want to look beyond their borders – at least during the festivals. [Baltoscandal](#), held every second year, was initiated by Peeter Jalakas (see p. 16) in 1990 and is still one of the biggest festivals in the Baltic countries and Scandinavia. Several thousand theatre fans, often seen as an odd and quirky crowd by locals, gather for four light-filled summer days and nights.

↑↔ [international festivals](#)

Most festivals in Estonia naturally take place in summer, when the weather is fine and the nights light. The season is kicked off in May with the annual Tallinn Treff, including puppet, object and visual theatre. Besides the capital’s theatre halls, the festival performances invade most streets and squares in the Old Town. Whoever is keener on ballet than puppets is advised to travel to Jõhvi, where a ballet festival is organised, also in May. These are followed in late June or early July by the youth dance festival NoTaFe in Viljandi and Baltoscandal in Rakvere. The latter is the oldest and most important international festival of the performing arts in Estonia, and occasionally presents the best world theatre even before it reaches stages in influential European cities. The August Dance Festival finishes the festival summer every other year. People who do not have much faith in warm weather – there is hardly any point in planning a beach holiday in Estonia, where the weather changes all the time – find their festivals in the autumn. The festival Golden Mask, usually in early October in Tallinn, presents the best Russian productions of the last few seasons, and every other December the Tallinn City Theatre hosts the festival called Midwinter Night’s Dream, which each time has the face of a different curator, although it focuses on the actor.



[Baltoscandal](#)

Since 2004, Baltoscandal has been curated by [Priit Raud](#). He also organises the August Dance Festival and manages Kanuti Gildi SAAL, the production house of contemporary dance. For several years, the Baltoscandal programme also included the “non-existent theatre”, i.e. independent Estonian productions specifically made for the festival. Since 2010, Estonian theatre has no longer been presented as non-existent, and thus the Von Krahli, NO99, Tartu New Theatre and others share the programme with such great names of world theatre as Romeo Castellucci, Forced Entertainment and others.



↑ [Priit Raud](#) (b. 1963)

Priit Raud is a man of festivals and dance in Estonian theatre. During the Soviet period, classical ballet was the crown jewel, but after independent Estonia was restored, contemporary dance arrived here as well. In the early 1990s, Raud established The Other Dance and has fought for dance as a performance art equal to drama. In the second half of the 1990s and beginning of the new millennium, art from the newly free eastern European countries was red-hot abroad, and Estonian dance artists such as Mart Kangro and the United Dancers of ZUGA travelled widely in the world. Today, after a few years' hiatus, a new generation of Estonian performance artists have emerged, such as Henri Hütt⁴ and Karl Saks, for whom movement, word, sound and picture are all equal means of expression.



The Drone of Monk Nestor (2011) by Karl Saks⁵



Magic Stuff (2011) by United Dancers of ZUGA⁶



Start. Based on a True Story (2001) by Mart Kangro⁷

It is quite clear that these undercurrents of non-existent theatre will never become the mainstream, and there is no need, as theatre in Estonia has always been the bearer of national identity. Our language, which only a few people in the world can speak, probably sets its own limits as well, and hence Estonian contemporary dance is much more international than our drama. However, at least once a year everyone interested is able to watch selected Estonian productions of the last two seasons in translation and with explanations at the festival **Drama**, which takes place in early September in the university town Tartu. The festival New Dance happens every other year and is hosted by Haapsalu. In addition to Estonian and world theatre, all these festivals also enable visitors to enjoy locations in Estonia, which normally remain non-existent to tourists.

Drama

The showcase festival of Estonian theatre called Drama was initiated in 1996. For many theatre-lovers, this September event in Tartu constitutes the highlight of the whole year. Although the festival has tested various principles of choosing its productions, the circle has been completed with a return to curators. Every year, one Estonian theatre-maker - in 2010, for example, it was the theatre critic Madis Kolk⁵, in 2011 the man of festivals and dance Priit Raud, and the actress Anu Lamp⁶ in 2012 - selects eight new productions from the last two seasons, which are supposed to form a meaningful whole. In addition, Drama has a sub-programme and the more resilient can watch over fifteen productions within a week, which makes Drama the best place to get an overview of current Estonian theatre. A large number of the productions are provided with simultaneous translations into English.



The approach of the festival **Drama** is usually announced by red sofas and chairs appearing all over the city of Tartu. Even the sculpture by Tiiu Kirsipuu, depicting the famous Irish writer Oscar Wilde and the Estonian writer Eduard Vilde (see p. 40), in front of a house where the festival office is located, gets a new look during the Drama.



ON THE BORDERLINE

Theatre, amongst other things, is an art of probing or shifting borders and at its most exquisite moments it treads at the borderline. Theatre, to some extent, is expected to reflect life. We flirt with the idea that art can change the world, as long as it does so indirectly, without actively interfering, using the means available to the art.

A mere twenty-odd years ago we were used to reading political messages between the lines and cloaked in images. We have now become a nation ranked among the top four in the world in terms of freedom of speech, but the public's expectations of finding astute political messages in theatre are practically non-existent.



↑ ↗ [Convention of Unified Estonia, election campaign](#) (2010)

Convention of Unified Estonia's programme promised to reflect the populist features of the bigger political parties, and all the preliminary introductions arranged over two months before the performance were presented as an election campaign.



↑ [huge hall](#)



"Banks have to take the responsibility for unjust loans."

However, when such a message occurs, it can be truly blinding, as if a bright spring sun along with a searchlight were shining right into your eyes, and the border between a theatrical event and the reaction to it becomes scarily fuzzy.

The most remarkable example in recent years, if not in the whole history of Estonian theatre, of how theatre can infiltrate into life so that it becomes impossible to distinguish between reality and play is the [Convention of Unified Estonia](#) by Theatre NO99. It was performed just once, to about 7200 viewers, in a [huge hall](#) which normally hosts sporting events and touring pop stars, and where the Eurovision song contest took place in 2002. The event constituted a fictitious political movement invented by the theatre, culminating in a performance where the audience in fact expected to witness the birth of a new political party. NO99, known for its socially sensitive productions, organised a press conference 44 days before the performance. They announced that after having studied the situation behind the scenes of various political parties for a few years, they had decided to organise a movement called the *Convention of Unified Estonia*.



Although they laid it on really thick and exaggerated the usual political propaganda, the media nevertheless soon began talking about the artistic heads of Theatre NO99, **Tiit Ojasoo** and **Ene-Liis Semper**, as likely initiators of a new political party of creative people. Waiting for the convention became a more significant event than its inventors had probably ever dared to hope. Besides theatre-lovers, political circles were suddenly confronted by the unpleasant thought that a new party might emerge that would make a clean sweep, take all the votes and leave quite a few career politicians sitting forlornly at the foot of **Toompea Hill**. However, it turned out that during the performance the theatre troupe stayed within its limits, going through all the motions of a political party convention, but not actually forming a real political movement, thus causing some disappointment in the political landscape.

This undertaking of NO99 clearly revealed the vulnerable nature and mechanisms of political games, which goes to show how unexpectedly and forcefully a group that no one had taken seriously before can climb onto the stage where a country's life is decided. The action of the *Convention of Unified Estonia* again proved how significant theatre and its makers are in our broader cultural and social space.



↑ **Tiit Ojasoo** (b. 1977)

He graduated from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2000. He subsequently worked at the Estonian Drama Theatre as a director. In 2004, he was elected the new artistic director of the Old Town Studio, which later changed its name to NO99. Ojasoo has been the artistic director and director of Theatre NO99 since 2005.

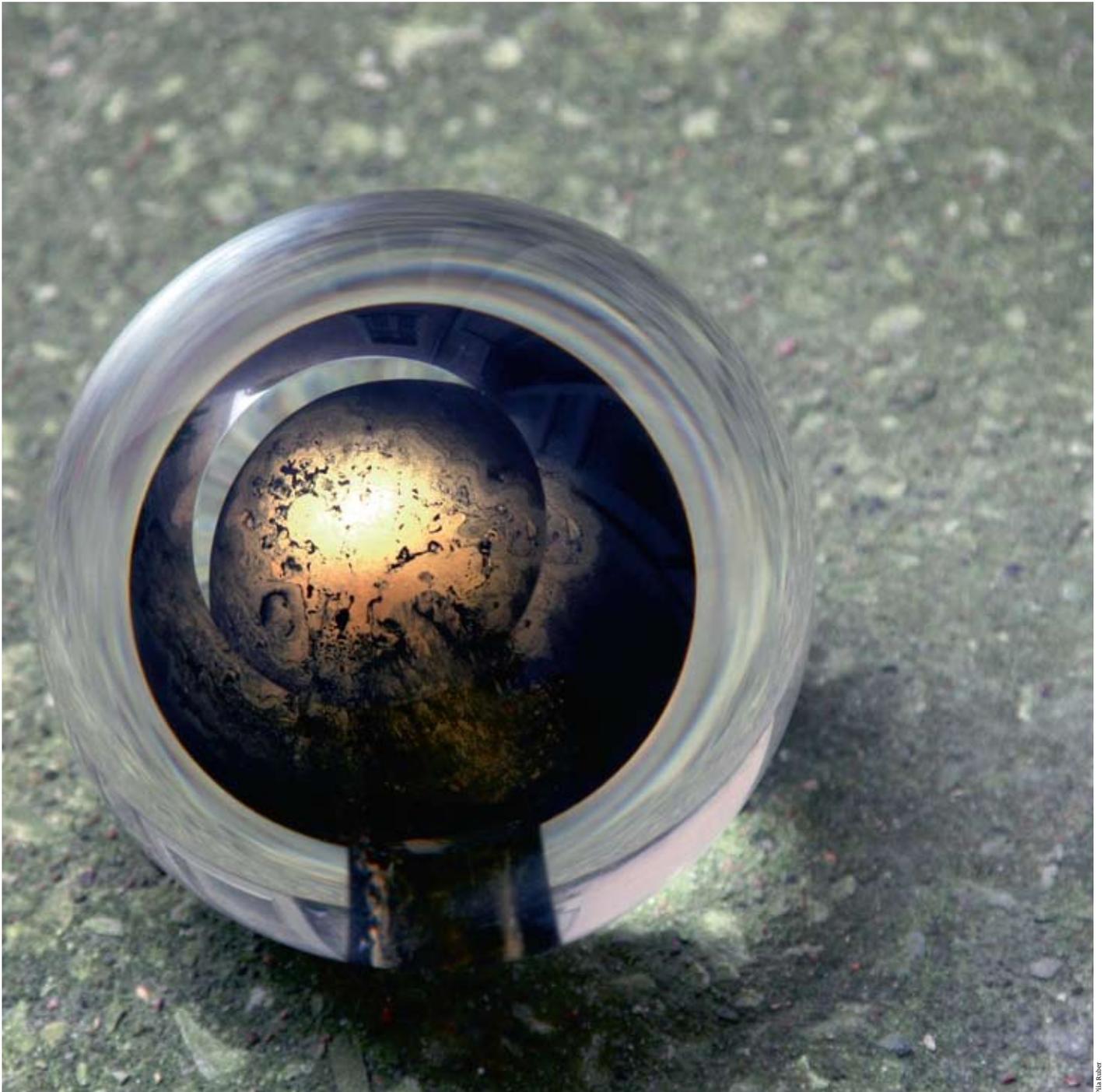
Among the authors he has staged are Shakespeare, Bernard-Marie Koltes, Akira Kurosawa, Martin McDonagh and Alfred Jarry. In several of his productions, he has used texts by Yukio Mishima and Sarah Kane. He has also written some parts of the texts of his own productions (*Oil*, and *Hot Estonian Guys* (see p. 42)). In addition to drama productions, he has staged musicals (*Blood Brothers* and *Evita*) and a rock-opera (*Ruja*). His productions have participated in several festivals in Berlin (*HAU2*), Vienna (*Wiener Festwochen*), Cologne (*Politik im Freien Theater*), Moscow (*Novaja Drama*), Tampere (*Tampereen Teatterikesä*), Torun (*Kontakt*), St Petersburg (*Baltiiski Dom*), Bern (*Auawirleben*), Oldenburg (*PAZZ 08*) etc.

↑ **Ene-Liis Semper** (b. 1969)

She is one of the artistic directors of Theatre NO99. She graduated as a scenographer and has created set and costume designs for more than a hundred productions (including operas) in different Estonian theatres. She has directed, along with Tiit Ojasoo, several productions in Theatre NO99, as well as in other theatres. Semper is also an internationally known video and performance artist. She has participated in the Venice Biennial twice and has won numerous awards for her creations.



Toompea Hill



The annual theatre award Theodor's Eye by Ivo Lill

SELF-CELEBRATION

On 27 March each year, the Estonian theatre world gathers in a splendidly lit theatre in order to celebrate the International Theatre Day. Over twenty prizes are awarded and the ceremony is shown by Estonian Public Broadcasting. The best of the previous year's drama, dance and music theatre are duly celebrated; there are also several special awards, such as the [Ants Lauter](#) prize for an actor or director who has worked in theatre for up to ten years, the [Georg Ots](#) prize for a person with outstanding vocal skills, combined with acting in an opera or operetta, and the [Salme Reek](#) prize for a production for children.



Estonian National Opera

Georg Ots

← Georg Ots was the best-known Estonian opera singer (1920-1975), both in Estonia and in the rest of the Soviet Union. His fame even travelled beyond the Iron Curtain to Finland, although our northern neighbours primarily knew him as the performer of the charming song *Saaremaa Waltz* (see p. 20). The biggest Estonian island, Saaremaa, with its junipers and spa hotels, still enjoys immense popularity with Finns, and the *Saaremaa Waltz* is still often heard at the dance nights of sanatoria, naturally sung by Georg Ots. In 2005 the Tallinn City Concert Hall premiered *Urmas Vadi's* (see p. 48) musical *Georg*, based on the recollections of the singer's closest relatives and friends; the lead role was performed by one of Estonia's Hamlets, Marko Matvere (see p. 24).



Toomas Volmer / ETA, Scanpix

← The boat *Georg Ots* was built in 1980 and carried passengers between Tallinn and Helsinki for twenty years. In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan had a meeting on *Georg Ots*. In 2002 the boat was sold to a Russian company and it travelled between Kaliningrad and St Petersburg until 2011.



TKM

Salme Reek

To the husky and simultaneously soft voice of Salme Reek, several generations of Estonians have fallen asleep: at 9 every evening when the children were tucked away in bed, the radio waves carried a bedtime story read by Salme Reek. Reek also participated in several TV productions for children, and due to her small stature Reek often played children on stage. Salme Reek's work for children is now remembered by an award bearing her name, which is given annually to the best children's theatre. Today's children, who can no longer enjoy Reek's bedtime stories, as new readers have taken over, are nevertheless able to learn about the magic world of theatre in the [Puppet Museum](#) – without doubt one of the most original of its kind in the whole world. The museum, in the cellar of the Estonian Puppet and Youth Theatre, offers an overview of the history of puppets by means of numerous multi-touch screens and playful solutions; even the tickets in the museum are clever, guiding visitors according to their age and language skills.



Estonian Puppet and Youth Theatre

Puppet Museum



Estonia Theatre (1913)



Estonia Theatre (1945)



Drama Theatre (1978)



Youth Theatre (1986)



Youth Theatre (1966)

Ants Lauter¹

Hamlet is certainly one of the internationally most accepted confirmations of professionalism of a national theatre. Estonian theatre, too, regards the role of *Hamlet* as crucial and most actors who have played him find their place in the history of theatre. The slightly over one-hundred-year-old Estonian theatre has proudly presented fifteen *Hamlets* so far. The first opened the new theatre and concert house Estonia in 1913. Two actors, Ants Lauter and Kaarel Karm², played the Prince of Denmark twice. In addition to classical productions, there have been many interpretations, such as the one-man show *The Hamlets* (2006) with Juhan Ulfsak³, or the ballet at the Estonian National Opera by Oksana Tralla⁴ (2008).



Theatre Vanemuine (1997)



Tallinn City Theatre (1999)



Von Krahl Theatre (2006)

Estonian theatre appreciates its history and predecessors and teaches its viewers the same respect, from primary school onwards. According to statistics, over five thousand schoolchildren are active in school theatres and over six thousand adults are connected with amateur theatres. The great cultural figures are not forgotten after their departure: any Estonian who wishes to commemorate a writer, artist or theatre-maker only needs to go to the Forest Cemetery (see p. 40), where most of them lie in eternal rest.



Estonian Drama Theatre

↑ theatre appreciates its history

Traditions are also preserved by various relics. One of the most coveted among them is the silver ring that used to belong to the prominent actress Liina Reiman⁵, and Anna Tamm's⁶ earrings, which the wearer can only pass on to the most deserving person. At the moment, both relics temporarily belong to actresses at the Estonian Drama Theatre. The Drama Theatre is certainly the place where almost all great figures of Estonian theatre have worked at some point or another, and the theatre is still one of the most coveted places for actors. Besides the silver ring and earrings looked after by the Drama Theatre actresses, other theatres have their relics too, which are also passed on from one person to another. Although an outsider might be bewildered by the bequeathing of relics and by the numerous awards, these nevertheless play a significant role in carrying on Estonia's theatre traditions and upholding theatre's social position. The positive impact of an award received on International Theatre Day is quite obvious on the ticket sales of the laureate's home theatre, as is clearly proved by statistics.

← connected with an amateur theatre

Although studying theatre is not yet compulsory in Estonian schools, many of them have drama circles, which are very nearly as popular as choir singing. No wonder then that the number of young people wishing to study drama is quite high, and numerous prominent actors of today once started in school theatres. Those who do not want to become professional actors can still participate in theatre: every university has a student theatre and there are literally hundreds of amateur theatres across the country, where thousands of Estonians come together after the workday in order to direct and act. Each year, school and amateur theatre festivals are organised, where the preliminary rounds filter out the less deserving and where juries consist of acclaimed professional actors, directors and theatre critics.



Estonian Amateur Theatres' Union

Group photo of the Tallinn Pioneers' and Youth Palace Theatre actors (1986).



JAM-STORING NATION

The best meal for an Estonian is allegedly another Estonian. This claim is made by Estonians themselves, who seem to have absorbed self-irony with their mother's milk. We also like to laugh at our neighbours in theatre, but are not so keen to recognise ourselves on stage. The playwright [Andrus Kivirähk](#) has probably best captured the essence of Estonians. His *Estonian Funeral* has been firmly in the repertoire of the Estonian Drama Theatre for ten years, thus being the longest-running production in Estonian theatre at the moment. Estonians, as portrayed by Kivirähk, work like mad, yearn to settle in the country and have a fondness for a drink or two. Every time they go shopping, they buy a sack of sugar and ten boxes of matches, because you never know when a new war might break out or people will again be deported to Siberia.



Estonian Theatre Agency

↑ [Andrus Kivirähk](#) (b. 1970)

He has been called the best distorting mirror of Estonians. He is equally acclaimed as a prose writer and playwright and not only because both his novels so far, *The Old Barn* and *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, quickly made it to theatre stages, but also because he has written dozens of plays as well. The characters in his plays are often the great figures of Estonian theatre, for example the father of the Estonian theatre school Voldemar Panso (in the play *Voldemar*) (see p. 12) and the latter's fierce opponent Kaarel Ird¹ (see p. 17), and great actors of the past, the Hamlets of the Estonian theatre, Ants Lauter and Kaarel Karm (see p. 35) in *Theatre Paradise*. Kivirähk's longest cooperation partner has been the Estonian Drama Theatre, where over 10 of his plays have been staged, including *Vassiljev* and *Bubõr Made It Here*, about the birth of the Drama Theatre (see p. 8). However, the history of theatre is by no means the only topic that fascinates Kivirähk, and thus the other part of his work are stories about Estonians, lavishly spiced with self-irony and the absurd, as well as being revealing about our peculiarities, such as working too hard, constant discontent and envy of our neighbours.



Tom Mahrsoo

Estonian Funeral (2002) by Estonian Drama Theatre

Or, as the son of the family in *Estonian Funeral* jokes: “Let’s say you wake up in the morning – and people are being deported all around! It comes in handy to have your room full of flour and green peas! No need to run to the shops before being packed off to Siberia; you cram your rucksack to the bursting point and straight into a cattle wagon! Rest your head on a sack of sugar, at least something to lick, and the journey can begin!”

When Estonia was about to join the European Union in 2004, the jam-storing nation was terrified lest the price of sugar hit the roof, and they emptied all the shops of the white poison.



The Short Life of Adolf Rühka (2005) by Estonian Drama Theatre

Taru Malmros



The Old Barny (2001) by Estonian Drama Theatre



Karin and Pearu (2012) by VAT Theatre

Slim Vahur

The European Commission naturally refused to believe that most sugar was bought up by private consumers, and imposed an over 45-million-euro sugar fine on the Estonian state. Had the European officials bothered to check the cellar of an average Estonian family, where shelves were cracking under the weight of jars of jam and bottles of juice, made dozens of years ago, or had they watched the above-mentioned *Estonian Funeral*, the fine might not have been imposed.



The Light Blue Wagon (2003) by Ugala Theatre



Theatre Paradise (2006) by Theatre Vanemuine



The Forest Cemetery is the last resting place for many Estonian poets, painters, novelists, actors, etc., but also for politicians and scientists. Each creative union (see p. 36), Theatre Union among them, has reserved some territory in the Forest Cemetery for their distinguished members. The first person to be buried there was the writer Eduard Vilde (see p. 28); among others, Lydia Koidula (see p. 20), A. H. Tammsaare (see p. 6), Georg Ots (see p. 34); the Estonian presidents Konstantin Päts (see p. 46–47) and Lennart Meri are resting there too.

SMALL, BUT RESILIENT



SMALL, BUT RESILIENT



“The land must be filled with children and grandchildren...”, as the band called Justament¹ used to sing at the beginning of the national awakening era in the second half of the 1980s. However, there is still reason to worry: according to the 2011 Census, the population of Estonia is just below 1.3 million, 68.7 per cent of whom define themselves as Estonians. It is estimated that in thirty years there will be only 600 000 Estonians. We need more children in order to survive as a nation. In 2007 the NO99 Theatre produced *Hot Estonian Guys*, in which a group of Estonian men decide to solve the problem.

↑ *Hot Estonian Guys*

“We will abandon everything else and start producing more Estonians. We will slog away, morning, noon and night. God created the human race in six days, but we will create Estonians seven days a week, twelve months a year.” (See p. 42.)

The production caused lively disputes in Estonian media and became an international hit as well, being performed at over 10 European theatre festivals. In most of the bigger countries, the main concern of the play naturally remained hopelessly unclear. Just like in a scene where the same Estonian men join a PR company in order to work out a marketing plan for tracking down sponsors for their undertaking, only to find themselves facing monolingual Russians across the table, who fail to understand their business plan.

A similar lack of understanding in the world has also been caused by Estonia's strict language and immigration policy, to the extent that Estonians are sometimes accused of nationalism. The intruder, the stranger, has been a painful topic in many plays that have become **classics of Estonian drama**.

The best known is certainly August Kitzberg's *Werewolf*, written in 1911. In this play, a frightened girl named Tiina, whose mother has been executed as a witch, suddenly turns up one night at the Tammaru family home. Years later when the time arrives for the son of the household to get married, the parents want him to propose to his other stepsister Mari, although Margus's heart yearns for the duskier Tiina. The son must thus choose between his own feelings and the convictions of his parents and the village, and he, of course, chooses the latter.



are still being sought in Estonia

In his adaptation of *Antigone* (2010) the Iranian director Homayun Ghanizadeh raises the classical Greek tragedy to a state of symbol showing how any totalitarian system gets rid of those who act differently.



classics of Estonian drama

I Loved a German (2009), written by A. H. Tammsaare in 1935 and directed by Elmo Nüganen seventy four years later tackles the issue of being proud to be a member of a nation even after the majority (in this case the Baltic Germans) has become the minority overnight.



Werewolf

(1984) by Theatre Vanemuine

Although the Tammaru bloodline is continued, the choice forced by society brings misfortune to everyone concerned. *Werewolf* poses the question of how much an individual should sacrifice oneself for society at large and how much a nation can reject strangers in the name of survival. Answers to these questions **are still being sought in Estonia**, both in the creation of laws and in works of art.



are still being sought in Estonia

Dance performance *SõpRusEst* (2012) (i.e.: *sõp* - root word for friend + *rus* - russian + *est* - estonian = *sõprusest* - about friendship) by young choreographer Svetlana Grigorjeva is one of the few theatre pieces dealing with the question of being a Russian born in Estonia, or a member of a huge nation and at the same time a minority in a very small country.



Erkki-Sven Tüür's opera *Wallenberg* (2007) describes the life of a Swedish man who used his diplomatic status and saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis, thus proving that even one man can make history.



PSEUDOHISTORY

Reading contemporary Estonian plays, the audiences can [get a rather vivid picture](#) of our (cultural) history: President Konstantin Päts¹ (see p. 40) shut into a lunatic asylum in Kazan together with Tsar Nicholas (*Ballet Master*), an attempt to wall in a virgin during the construction of the Estonian Drama Theatre (*Vassiljev and Bubõr Made It Here ...*) and the poet Juhan Liiv² turning out to be the illegitimate son of Emperor Alexander II and the poet Lydia Koidula (see p. 20) (*Koidula's Blood*). This particular knowledge will not get you through a single exam, but for a more knowledgeable viewer these plays by Urmas Vadi (see p. 48), Andrus Kivirähk (see p. 38) and Loone Ots³ offer imaginative fact-based games.



[Vassiljev and Bubõr Made It Here](#) (2010) by Estonian Drama Theatre
[get a rather vivid picture](#)



[Koidula's Blood](#) (2008) by Theatre Vanemuine



texts by Madis Kõiv

The Endless Coffee Drinking (2008) by Estonian Drama Theatre

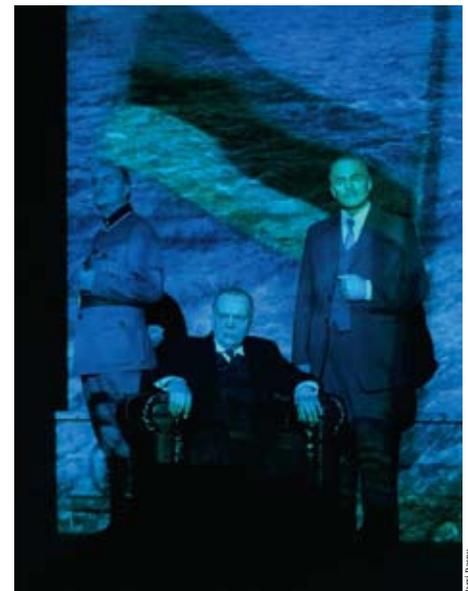
Leaving aside some **true historical plays** written in the 90th anniversary year of the Republic of Estonia, productions relying on Merle Karusoo's (see p. 52) memoirs or a few **texts by Madis Kõiv** (see p. 50) that finally made it to the stage, it might well seem that the Estonian drama of the new century avoids historical tales, preferring plays with absurd hypotheses, which are the more successful the more you can spot clever factual distortions. It might seem that we are not yet ready to tackle our recent history in any detail.

However, plays about World War II appeared on stage as early as the 1980s. The reasons for disruption must thus be sought elsewhere, for example in Estonia's changed values, where everything Estonian was temporarily overshadowed by European splendour. At least now, two generations later, drama is gradually dealing with the beginning and end of the first Republic of Estonia. At this rate, the events and people connected with the restoration of independence will reach the stage in around 2050.



get a rather vivid picture

Ballet Master (2009) by Endla Theatre



true historical plays

President 1939 (2008) by Estonian National Opera



Death of a Communist (2007) by Theatre NO99

Some plays about the occupation period already exist, for example Kivirähk's *The Imperial Chef*, where the protagonist, the writer Friedebert Tuglas⁴, finds himself ostracised by the Soviet power, or **Hendrik Toompere jr's** *Death of a Communist*, based on the KGB interrogation protocols and memoirs of the guerrillas known as Forest Brothers. In addition, the playwright **Urmas Vadi** has taken the pseudohistorical approach to a totally new level in recent years. His protagonists are contemporary living people who often play themselves on stage.



Rein Pakk is *Looking for a Wife* (2011) by Tartu New Theatre



Hendrik Toompere jr (b. 1965)

He graduated from the Drama School where he has later also taught. He has worked as an actor in the Tallinn City Theatre and in the Estonian Drama Theatre. Since 1998, he has been working there as a stage director. For him, the story is a starting-point or a frame. The consciousness of the world and the changing identity of a person are often the main themes in his productions. In addition to working in his home theatre, he has collaborated several times with the project-theatre R.A.A.A.M., which has set as its aim to stage new original Estonian dramaturgy.



Urmas Vadi (b. 1977)

The production *The Last Kiss of Peeter Volkonski*⁵ shows the actor and soloist of the legendary punk band *Propeller* telling his life story to a young actress. In the play *Rein Pakk*⁶ is *Looking for a Wife*, the actor and businessman Pakk does exactly what the title promises. The last part of Vadi's trilogy *The Testament of Rudolf Allabert*⁷ presents the playwright himself, who plays the student of the actor Rudolf Allabert, Urmas Vadi. Although whatever is shown on stage is partially based on facts, Vadi approaches reality with imagination, which makes the spectator constantly wonder where the border between reality and make-believe actually lies.



THE ONE WHO REMEMBERS

Estonians are quite fond of watching history on stage. Due to the modest spread of our small language and our stories we cannot really trust anyone else to tell our real stories, and thus our original drama often tackles past times and people and their tales. Looking back a bit, it becomes evident that the core of Soviet-era original drama dealt with remembering. As the official historians wrote a history that was not our own, the suggestive words hidden inside and behind artistic images constituted a narrated proof of our existence.

The protagonist in **Madis Kõiv's** (see p. 47) play *Return to Father*, written at the beginning of the independence period, could well be the quintessence of all earlier tales of remembering. A man visits his childhood home, where time performs somersaults, relives childhood memories, war and forced departure. Behind most mundane memories lies infinity, where the historical time of a nation, as well as individual time, seem to acquire the dimensions of mythological time, uniting a limited single experience with the eternal.



Madis Kõiv (b. 1929)

He studied physics at the University of Tartu and he holds honorary doctorates from the University of Tartu and the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. He started writing plays in the early 1960s but was discovered as a playwright by **Priit Pedajas** only in the 1990s. Kõiv's plays always work on the philosophical level. His texts are never easily graspable; they are perceived as a multidimensional theatre of reason full of conceptual riddles. Kõiv's approach has been described as the substantial integrity of different cognitive levels: personal and universal, sensuous and abstract, logical and irrational. Kõiv received the national culture award in 1994, 1998 and 2002, and the award for lifetime achievement in 2008.



Return to Father
(1993) by Estonian Drama Theatre



When We Tried to Sell Walnuts with Vassel of Moondsund,
No One Wanted to Buy
(1999) by Estonian Drama Theatre

Perceiving herself in the turbulence of historical events makes the mother of the protagonist say from the past: “None of us has a life that is truly ours. Everything that happens I’d like to be mine, my personal life, which has nothing to do with what year or what time we’re in. I’d like the time to be mine, my very own, a time that has nothing to do with anyone else, not 1939 or something else, which crashed down on me and where my life is not my own.”



Philosopher's Day (1994) by Estonian Drama Theatre



The Evening Show of Vagabonds (1997) by Estonian Drama Theatre



Priit Pedajas (b. 1954)

He is an actor, director and theatre pedagogue, one of Voldemar Panso's students. He has worked as an actor and director in Ugala Theatre, Endla Theatre and the Estonian Drama Theatre. Since 1999 he has been artistic director of the Estonian Drama Theatre. Pedajas is renowned as a master of atmosphere, who with his good sense of rhythm and a precise play of actors can create on stage captivating worlds, where reality has no power. His plays are unquestionably musical, even when music does not play a major part of them. Pedajas has also given concerts with songs written by himself. He was the first to discover the plays of Madis Kõiv and staged his *Return to Father*, *The Evening Show of Vagabonds*, *Philosopher's Day*, *When We Tried to Sell Walnuts with Vassel of Moonsund*, *No One Wanted to Buy*, *Finis nihili* and *Meeting*. Priit Pedajas prefers original Estonian drama. Nonetheless, he has repeatedly produced plays by Brian Friel.



Päivi Rübner

Merle Karusoo (b. 1944)

She is a student of Voldemar Panso. She has been a lecturer in the drama academies, has written books, plays, adaptations for the stage, and compiled documentary materials for plays. In the beginning of the 1980s she started collecting biographies of Estonians. Karusoo was among the first Estonian directors to start an independent theatre group at the end of the Soviet regime. Currently she works as stage director in Estonian Drama Theatre. The dramaturgy of her work is based on the idea that the problems of society can be articulated and analysed through theatre and its tools. Important part of this process is the ritual purification created by saying things out loud. **Karusoo prefers to work with documentary materials** collected by herself and the cast. Interviews, letters and diaries are the foundation for compositions that focus on personal stories that reflect the reality of many people. The topics and problems are universal and surpass borders of nationality. Karusoo's productions tell stories and touch upon themes that are often ignored both in theatre and in society. →↗↘



TENT FALHEDOM

Sigma Tau-C705 (2008) by Estonian Drama Theatre

The biographies' theatre of director **Merle Karusoo** (see p. 47) deals precisely with “truly our life”, creating texts that are based on life stories told or written by people themselves.



Peeter Laurits

The Snows of Sorrows (1997) by Estonian Drama Theatre

→↗↘ **Karusoo prefers to work with documentary materials**



Takko Tõnis

Missionaries (2005) by Rakvere Theatre

For example, Karusoo's first documentary production *I Am Thirteen*, which premiered in 1980, was based on the essays of 500 schoolchildren in Tallinn. The result of the joint effort was a partly caricatured, partly rather painful collage about life at school. This production was followed by tales of deportations to Siberian prison camps (including experiences from the point of view of those who carried out the deportations), sexuality, participating in contemporary military missions, facing a terminal illness and adapting to society.



I Am Thirteen

(1980) by Youth Theatre (see p. 4). 32 years later Karusoo acted as the mentor to the today's version of *I Am Thirteen* by the class of 2012 of the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy (see p. 16, 18).



END NOTES

THEATRE MATTERS

1 → Mikk Mikiver (1937–2006) – director, actor and theatre pedagogue. He worked in the Youth Theatre as the chief artistic director, in the Drama Theatre and lectured at the drama school. Mikiver was a much acclaimed director, as well as a theatre and film actor. His most noted achievements included directing the Estonian plays, and he was also involved in politics between 1989 and 1992.

2 → Jaan Kruusvall (1940–2012) – playwright. In 1971 he graduated from the Gorki Institute of Literature and worked for Tallinnfilm, the weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (*Hammer and Sickle*) and the literary magazine *Looming* (*Creation*). His best known plays are *The Colours of Clouds*, about the destiny of Estonian country people during World War II, and *The House of Silence*, which tackles the life of Estonian country people after the war. In 2011, his play *Sounds of the Plains* received the annual drama award of the Estonian Cultural Endowment.

AN URGE TO LEAVE

1 → Urmas Lennuk (b. 1971) – playwright, director and theatre manager. He graduated from the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2000 as a theatre director and since 2011 he has worked as the drama director of the Theatre *Vanemuine*. He first focused on writing plays but has now returned to directing as well. In addition to plays for the stage, Lennuk has written screenplays and is one of the most acclaimed Estonian authors of dramatizations, with a talent for balancing the atmosphere of classical texts with their interpretations. Four of his plays have won prizes in the New Drama Competition. He was also a finalist in the international playwrighting competition New Baltic Drama 2011.

2 → Vilsandi – an island off the western coast of Saaremaa, with an area of 8.75 km² (length 6.3 km and width max. 2.3 km). About 30 people live on the island, although most leave for the winter. The best known inhabitant is the playwright Jaan Tätte, who has written songs about Vilsandi and worked as a lighthouse keeper.

3 → Marko Matvere (b. 1968) – actor and director. In 1990 he graduated from the Drama School and worked between 1992 and 2004 in the Tallinn City Theatre. He now works freelance. He has received the Ants Lauter young actor award. Besides theatre work he is a member of the band *Associations of Little Accordions* and has performed at concerts with Jaan Tätte. Matvere and Tätte also undertook a two-year voyage around the world on a sailboat, which they completed in summer 2012. In 2002 Matvere was one of the hosts of the Eurovision Song Contest held in Tallinn.

4 → Jakob Karu (b. 1966) – playwright. Jakob Karu is the pseudonym of the culture critic and graphic designer Tõnu Kaalep (b. 1966). Two plays have been staged under his name: *The State of the Matter* (2004) and *At Grandmother's* (2007). Both texts received awards at the drama competition organised by the Estonian Theatre Agency.

THE FATHER FIGURE

1 → Gustav Suits (1883–1956) – poet, critic, educator and scholar, the most influential poet among the Young Estonians and one of the greatest Estonian authors of all times.

Born in Võnnu, a small borough south of Tartu, Gustav Suits completed his education at the universities of Tartu and Helsinki, with the influence of the culturally related and politically more advanced Finns having a lasting impact on his world view.

In 1901, two years after debuting with a critical essay and a poem *Vesiroosid* (*Water Lilies*, 1899), he founded a society *Kirjanduse Sõbrad* (*Friends of Literature*), which included A. H. Tammsaare and issued an influential journal *Kiired* (*Rays*). A key initiator for the activities of *Young Estonia*, Suits formulated the *cri de couer* of the movement: “More European culture! Let us be Estonians, but also become Europeans!”

After the declaration of Estonian independence in 1918, the former revolutionary committed himself to advancing Estonian-medium education, heading the Department of Literature at the University of Tartu from 1919 to 1944, and founding the Estonian Academic Literary Society in 1924. Fleeing the Soviet occupation in 1944, Suits spent the rest of his life in exile in Stockholm, where he wrote the bulk of his poetry and many research papers.

He is commemorated by the Gustav Suits Poetry Award, granted annually for a philosophically profound collection.

2 → Juhan Viiding (1948–1995) – poet, actor, stage director and singer, widely regarded as the greatest modern innovator in Estonian poetry. Son of a well-known poet Paul Viiding, Juhan Viiding studied at the Drama School, and worked, upon graduation in 1972, as an actor and stage director at the Estonian Drama Theatre. The sensitive and tragic jester in the world of Estonian literature, he took his own life in 1995.

Juhan Viiding debuted under the pseudonym Jüri Üdi with *Närvitriik* (*Nerve Print*, 1971; a joint collection with Johnny B. Isotamm, Joel Sang and Toomas Liiv) and continued to publish under the name of his consciously developed and portrayed alter ego until his 1978 collection *Mina olin Jüri Üdi* (*I Was George Marrow*). Presenting his works in the distinctively expressive manner, Viiding grew into a living legend, influencing every Estonian writer of his time and becoming an irresistible source of inspiration for upcoming youngsters.

A member of the popular *Amor Trio*, as well as an author of numerous lyrics, Juhan Viiding is also the best Estonian example of the poet who sang.

NON-EXISTENT THEATRE

1 → Karl Saks (b. 1984) is a freelance choreographer and dancer. He graduated from the Department of Dance Art at Viljandi Culture Academy in spring 2009. He currently teaches independent dance technique and improvisation classes there. Karl Saks's first independent work as a choreographer was *Chud* (2010), which was named the best dance performance of 2010. His next solo performance, *The Drone of Monk Nestor*, is a continuation of *Chud*. Karl Saks is also known by the name Cubus Luarvik, under which he composes electronic music and creates soundscapes for his dance performances, using self-taped bits of sound mixed by electronic software.

2 → United Dancers of ZUGA is a dance collective that was created 12 years ago by the then young and active dance creators Tiina Mölder, Kaja Kann and Jarmo Karing. Throughout its existence, different artists have participated in the various adventurous performances of ZUGA. ZUGA loves the work process and takes it onto the stage, encouraging the relationship between performers and spectators.

3 → Henri Hütt (b. 1985) is a techno-orientated performing artist and choreographer who values creative hybrid forms. He has directed three productions so far, in the most recent of which – *Sphere Islands (in order to dance)* – he appeared on stage with his father, a glass designer.

4 → Mart Kangro (b. 1974). He is one of the most internationally known Estonian choreographers. After graduating as a dancer and choreographer from the Tallinn University, he danced for a few years at the Estonian National Opera before committing himself solely to choreographic work, where he often takes to the stage himself. Kangro has directed eight dance productions. His choreographic language is very much about precision and clarity of movement, and he has collaborated extensively with the German choreographers Thomas Lehmen and Christina Ciupke.

5 → Madis Kolk (b. 1974) studied theatre at the University of Tartu and is currently doing his PhD there. In 1998 he started working as a theatre critic and since 2003 he has been the editor-in-chief of the biggest Estonian cultural journal, *Theatre. Music. Cinema*. Madis Kolk has been on the drama jury of the annual theatre award several times and received the annual theatre critic award in 2012. In 2010 Kolk curated the festival Drama.

6 → Anu Lamp (b. 1958) has been a resident actress at the Tallinn City Theatre since 1982. She is also an excellent translator and a long-time professor at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. In 2006–2010 she also worked as the City Theatre's literary manager. Anu Lamp's numerous awards include the Ants Lauter acting award in 1989, Estonian annual theatre award for best actress in 1990 and 1996 and best supporting actress in 2000, Aleksander Kurtna award for best translator in 1993 and 2002, Order of the White Star in 2001, the Estonian Theatre Agency's new drama award in 2006, and the Estonian national cultural award in 2012.

SELF-CELEBRATION

1 → Ants Lauter (1894–1973) – director, actor, theatre manager and pedagogue. He started in 1913 in Estonia Theatre as an actor and stage manager. He later worked as the head of drama in the same theatre and after World War II he was the general manager of the Estonia Theatre and Drama Theatre, and the artistic manager of the Theatre *Vanemuine*. He taught stage practice for many years. He has acted in over 20 films, including *The Milkman of Mäeküla* (1965) and *Men Do Not Cry* (1968).

2 → Kaarel Karm (1906–1979) – actor. He started his career in 1925 in the Estonia Theatre, first in operetta and ballet, and then as a drama actor and stage manager. From 1949 he worked in the Drama Theatre as an actor. In summer 2012 the Rakvere Theatre premiered Urmas Vadi's *Summer Days of the Nuthouse According to Vaino Vahing* on Karm's home farm in Lääne-Virumaa County.

3 → Juhan Ulfsak (b. 1973) – actor. He graduated from the Viljandi Culture Academy and attended courses at the Helsinki Theatre Academy. Since 1998 Ulfsak has worked as an actor in the Von Krahli Theatre. In 2012 he received the annual best male actor award for his role in Peeter Jalakas' production *Gilgamesh*. Ulfsak has also acted in several films, including Veiko Õunpuu's *The Empty Beach* (2006) and *Autumn Ball* (2007).

4 → Oksana Tralla (b. 1979) – ballet dancer and choreographer. In 1988 she graduated from the Tallinn Ballet School. She has received the annual dance production award three times: in 2002 for *The Last Hairy* (with Taavet Jansen), in 2008 for *Hamlet* and in 2012 for *The Little Prince*.

5 → Liina Reiman (1891–1961) – actress and theatre pedagogue. She was one of the first Estonian professional actresses and worked in the *Vanemuine*, Endla, Estonia and Drama Theatres. In 1944 she moved to Finland, where she worked as an actress, director and theatre pedagogue. She published her memoirs *The Footlights* and *The Spell of the Stage*. Her memorial ring is one of the bequeathed relics in Estonian theatre. The first keeper of the ring, the actress Aino Talvi, was selected by Reiman herself; since 1984 the relic has been in the possession of the Estonian Drama Theatre actress Ita Ever.

6 → Anna Tamm (1880–1964) – actress. She started her career in Viljandi, and then worked in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. In 1911 she returned to Estonia and worked in several theatres, for the longest period in the Tallinn Workers' Theatre and Drama Theatre. Her earrings are among the travelling relics in Estonian theatre. Tamm gave the pieces of jewellery to the actress Lisl Lindau, who decided that the earrings should become a travelling talisman and chose the actress Kaie Mihkelson from the Estonian Drama Theatre as their next temporary keeper.

JAM-STORING NATION

1 → Kaarel Ird (1909–1986) – theatre manager, director and actor. He was the legendary artistic director of the Theatre *Vanemuine*. He encouraged the young theatre directors Evald Hermaküla and Jaan Tooming, who staged productions in the 1970s which are now known as the Estonian theatre renewal. In 2010 the Tartu New Theatre premiered Ivar Põllu's *Ird, K* on the basis of various historical documents. The actor playing the lead, Nero Urke, as well as the playwright Ivar Põllu, received the annual Estonian theatre awards.

SMALL, BUT RESILIENT

1 → Justament – a band. It started in 1980 as a band of several final-year school children in Tartu on the initiative of Toomas Lunge and Jaan Elgula. One of the best known of the six-member band is Andres Dvinjaninov, the founder and manager of the Emajõgi Summer Theatre.

2 → August Kitzberg (1855–1927) – writer. As a playwright he initially wrote unpretentious farces for village amateur theatres but, after the first professional theatres emerged, he became one of the most highly acclaimed playwrights in Estonia. The opening performance of the professional Theatre *Vanemuine* in 1906 was Kitzberg's drama *In the Whirl of Winds*, followed by the tragedy *Werewolf* (1911) and the drama *The God of Money* (1915). Kitzberg also wrote stories and plays for children, as well as memoirs and fables.

PSEUDO HISTORY

1 → Konstantin Päts (1874–1956) – the first president of the Republic of Estonia. He graduated from the law department of the University of Tartu in 1898. Päts took an active part in the 1905 revolution, for which he was condemned to death by the tsarist government. He escaped to Switzerland in 1906, and from there to Finland. In 1909 he returned to Estonia and was sentenced to prison for a few years. Päts then edited the newspaper *The Tallinn Messenger* and helped establish Estonian national military units. He was imprisoned by the German occupation forces in 1918 and was sent to a prison camp in Poland. After being released in 1918, he led the Provisional Government and organised the defence against the invading Red Army. He held various political posts in subsequent years. In 1934, as State Elder, Päts declared a state of emergency and closed down all political parties. This started the “silent era”, a period of authoritarian rule in Estonia. In 1938 Konstantin Päts was elected President of the Republic of Estonia. In 1939 he decided to abandon all military resistance and signed an agreement allowing Soviet military bases in Estonia, hoping until the last moment that Germany would interfere and Estonia would be spared warfare. In 1940 the Soviet occupation powers deported Päts and his family to Russia, where he died in 1956. In 1990 Päts was reburied in the Tallinn Forest Cemetery.

2 → Juhan Liiv (1864–1913) – poet and prose writer, author of several still much loved patriotic poems, such as *Yesterday I Saw Estonia* and *He Flies Towards the Beehive*. Juhan Liiv had a restless soul and the first signs of mental illness emerged at the age of 20. During his final years he wandered around the country, staying with friends and relatives, but never for long. During his fits of illness, Liiv thought he was Tsar Alexander II, the son of Lydia Koidula and the heir to the Polish throne.

3 → Loone Ots (b. 1965) – playwright and cultural historian who read Estonian language and literature at the University of Tartu, and completed her MA in folk poetry and PhD in pedagogics. Ots has written plays, popular science and children’s books and has published two collections of poetry. She researches the cultural history of Estonia and the Baltic countries, and lectures in Baltic Studies at University of Tartu and Moscow University. Ots founded the Richard Wagner Society in Tartu, which she headed for a long time; in addition, she is involved in child and animal protection. Her plays generally tackle historical topics, although they often blend facts and fantasy.

4 → Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971), surname Mihkelson until 1923 – author, critic, literary scholar and translator, founder of Estonian short story, organiser of the Estonian intellectual life in the first half of the 20th century. A largely self-taught son of a carpenter from Ahja in Tartumaa, Friedebert Tuglas wrote the majority of his short stories, poems, literature studies and travel books during his period of exile (1906–1917), caused by his involvement in the Revolution of 1905. However, living mostly in Finland, the emigration did not hinder him from becoming the powerhouse of the *Young Estonia* movement. After his return home, Tuglas quickly established himself as the leading figure of the Estonian literary scene.

5 → Peeter Volkonski (b. 1954) – actor, translator and musician. He is a descendant of Prince Volkonski, who once owned the Keila-Joa manor, which has become a popular summer theatre venue. Volkonski studied acting, and has translated plays from Russian and English. He has sung in several bands, including the notorious *Propeller* (on 22 August 1980 the second part of their concert after the football match was banned, which unleashed a riot by young people at the stadium as well as in subsequent days in Tallinn).

6 → Rein Pakk (b. 1968) – actor. He first studied at the Drama School, but graduated as a film director from the film and video department of Tallinn University. Besides being a freelance actor, Pakk has been involved in establishing several venues for entertainment, and has written articles on culture, society and art, as well as essays and criticism. He has published caricatures in the monthly *Diplomacy* since 2005. Since 2011 he has worked as an actor in the Theatre *Vanemuine*.

7 → Rudolf Allabert (1939–2011) – actor, director and theatre pedagogue. He worked as an actor in the Rakvere Theatre and Youth Theatre, and between 1986 and 1992 he was the artistic director of the latter. From 1978 he lectured on theatre directing at the current Tallinn University.



Eesti Instituut

Estonian Institute
Suur-Karja 14
10140 Tallinn
Estonia

Phone +372 6314 355
e-mail: estinst@estinst.ee
www.estinst.ee

draamamaa.ee
Estonia – Land of Drama



EESTI
TEATRI
AGENTUUR

Estonian Theatre Agency
Väike-Karja 12,
10140 Tallinn
Estonia

Phone +372 6282 342
e-mail: info@teater.ee
www.teater.ee