

PERFORMANCE AND SOLIDARITY

Table of Contents

From the Editors

A Situation Room for Theatre

p. 2

HEIDI BACKSTRÖM & MARIA SÄKÖ

A Warm-Up

The Brecht Game

p. 4

KLAUS MAUNUKSELA

Analytical Review

Step by Step Towards Utopia

p. 10

PILVI PORKOLA

Extract

Eriopis

p. 18

E.L. KARHU

Reportage

A Network of Sacred Places

p. 20

MARIA SÄKÖ

Short Story

Barentsburg

p. 36

MIKHAIL DURNENKOV

Interview

The Dramaturgy of Ecological Reconstruction

or

Would We Have Coped Better with Covid if Only We'd Played More?

p. 40

MARIA SÄKÖ

with KATARIINA NUMMINEN

Essay

The Transformative Power of the Naked Body on Stage

p. 46

HEIDI BACKSTRÖM

A Situation Room for Theatre

HEIDI BACKSTRÖM & MARIA SÄKÖ
Guest Editors-in-Chief, *Performance and Solidarity*

In 2017, a new online service launched in Finland. Titled *Tilannehuone*, or Situation Room, it lists every reported accident in Finland. Freely available to the public, anyone can use it to check what incidents are ongoing at any given time, how severe they are and what response has been mounted by the emergency services. The website also offers alerts, issuing warnings to road users on reckless drivers and other hazards.

It was the Situation Room website that gave us the idea for the publication you are reading now. Though written from a distinctively Finnish vantage point, we hope that it will inspire free and open debate on the theatrical arts that is truly international in its scope and firmly committed to solidarity.

Let's face it: today's world is full of "situations"; disasters both great and small. People congregate towards them, to put out fires, to bring the wounded to hospital, to do their part. All of that informs the theatre we are making and experiencing right now.

A situation room is not a Pandora's box from which the horrors of the world will pour forth in an unstoppable torrent. Rather, it is an attempt at making sense of the disasters facing us and at bringing people together in pursuit of solutions and the best ways to respond.

Kicking off *Performance and Solidarity* is a warm-up in the form of the *Brecht Game*. Created by dramaturge, writer and researcher **Klaus Maunuksela**, this gamified essay shows contemporary theatre makers with precarious careers fighting for a better life. We invite you turn to *Brecht 2.0* for a work-out that will challenge your heart and your mind.

When the world burns, solutions need to be found quickly. This applies in theatre just as elsewhere. And yet what we also need is sustained effort for the

future, for the years and decades to come. In her essay, performance artist **Pilvi Porkola** from the University of Turku's "Political Imagination and Alternative Futures" project turns her attention to the concept of a political imagination and the role it might play in the context of performing arts projects. She explores a series of works that have engendered change through play, through the medium of corporeality and by seeing reality differently and by creating new spaces.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine have shown us just how important it is to stand up in defence of our shared European values. Finland has long enjoyed a solid reputation as a country determined to do just that and committed to upholding the rule of law, but a clutch of recent performances have offered a more nuanced take: Moldovan theatre artist **Nicoleta Esinencu's** *Symphony of Progress* that toured in Germany and Romania last year explored the inhumane treatment faced by immigrant workers in Finland, concluding with an emphatic "Fuck you, Finland!". Also in 2022, **Pauliina Feodoroff**, a Skolt Sámi artist, showed her *Matriarchy*, a timely reminder that the rights of Finland's native peoples continue not to be met, at the Venice Biennale, while earlier this spring **Kaino Wennerstrand's** *Fixit Finland* ran in Poland, highlighting the democratic deficit that results from the EU's unquestioning commitment to neoliberalism. Cross-border artworks like this always matter but they are particularly important at a time when democracy is in peril. What we need is honesty, not self-indulgent platitudes.

If we abandon our commitment to solidarity, equality, transparency and free speech, we will lose even if we win. This publication looks at how European cultural institutions are working together to promote solidarity in Berlin, Paris, Hamburg, Sofia and across the Baltic and Nordic countries. A distinctively Finnish yet thoroughly international insight into the topic is provided by **Marita Muukkonen**, founder of the Artists at Risk network.

The next voice you will hear belongs to **Mikhail Durnenkov**, playwright and Putin-critic, who fled his native Russia for Finland and has since been supported by Artists at Risk. In his short story he considers the similarities between the Soviet era and the present day and how totalitarianism spells peril for human beings and the natural world alike. Environmental issues are also the focus of our interview with **Katariina Numminen**, which explores the distinctive tools at a dramaturge's disposal and how they might be used to support politicians and others in delivering change. Numminen was the resident dramaturge on the *Situation Room of the Future* project tasked with creating a tool to support policy and decision-making on ecological reconstruction. An amalgamation of art and science, its objective is to deliver not quick political wins but more democratic ways of doing things. It is an antidote to the seductive allure of fake news.

But though we are preoccupied by and immersed in these enormous global themes, we should not forget about the audiences, the people who come to see and experience theatre. In her highly personal account, **Heidi Backström** asks whether it's possible to find positive arguments in favour of nudity on stage. Ultimately, her essay becomes a deliberation on trust in theatre.

We may be living in an age of crisis, but theatre is by no means defenceless in the face of it. Instead of evoking images of hope or despair, our wish is that this publication will prompt our readers to seek real, practical, tangible solutions and to live them into being.

The Situation Room website is an excellent example of the kind of innovation we take great pride in here in Finland. Other things we are proud of are our track record on freedom of speech and our commitment to transparency in politics. We hope that this publication will serve as a "situation room" for the reality theatre faces in 2023.

The Brecht Game

KLAUS MAUNUKSELA

HOW TO PLAY: start in Square **1**. Answer the multiple-choice questions presented to you and make your way to the square indicated. Continue in this manner until you have visited every square and finished the game.

1

Bert Brecht, an exile in the 2020s

“Don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones.” **Bertolt Brecht’s** name is often used synonymously with political theatre; drama that is not afraid to take a stand and to shine a light on social ills. Theatre and politics are always a product of their time and, by the same token, always evolving. The past few years have been a challenging time for theatremakers, with Covid-19 lockdowns having a far-reaching impact on their work. At the same time, the need to address, through dramatic means, the burning questions that define our era, has grown ever greater. Russia’s war in Ukraine, the impact of Covid-19, rising inflation and the energy crisis invoke, like a ghostly spectre, the world in which Brecht (1898–1956), a witness to both the rise of fascism and World War 2, created his plays, including his *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti*, written in collaboration with the author **Hella Wuolijoki** during his period of exile in Finland. Like Brecht, many contemporary artists are now being subjected to political persecution or forced to leave their homes. What can Brecht, an exile and a dissident, teach us about theatre and the creative process during the 2020s, as we face growing instability and ever-faster change?

Would you like to
a) move on to an artwork
or
b) enjoy some theory?

a) **5** Arctic Medea

b) **2** Brecht on acid

2

Brecht on acid

“The purpose of Brecht’s experimental art is to engender class consciousness, in other words, to change the way we see the world. In that regard, it is akin to psychedelia, or Burroughs’s hallucination without drugs or sober inebriation. Although Bertolt Brecht’s achievements in pioneering political theatre are well recognised, the political dimension of his thinking on theatre is frequently deemed preachy and po-faced. In his *Vallankumouksen asennot. Brecht, Benjamin ja kysymys estetiikan politisoimisesta* (Positions on revolution: Brecht, Benjamin and the politicisation of aesthetics) (Tutkijaliitto 2022), Finnish philosopher, writer and translator **Eetu Viren** explores another side to Brecht. In Viren’s interpretation, tired old tropes are given an exhilarating new reading. Far from an earnest propagandist, Brecht is revealed as an experimental avant-gardist, whose creative pursuits run parallel to those of radical experimenters like beat poet **William Burroughs** or punk novelist **Kathy Acker**. As with beat poetry and 1960s performance art, it is the re-tuning of our senses and of our consciousness to a new frequency that matters in Brecht’s theatre. As Viren points out, a performance does not merely take place in an individual spectator’s consciousness, it is always collectively received. This is why the political dimension of Brecht’s thinking on theatre must be considered through the prism of collective liberation. Revolutionary theatre is about enjoyment and the corralling of collective strength and about the power of humour, no matter how dark, to liberate.

Would you like to
a) relax
or
b) find a more comfortable position?

a) **3** On relaxation

b) **4** On sitting more comfortably

3

On relaxation

Rest, chilling and relaxing, we are told, are all crucial to our post-work recovery. This oft-repeated mantra turns leisure, including art and entertainment, into just another resource for the 21st century worker to use. That also perhaps explains how we have grown used to the notion that, for art to be critical, it has to be serious, or perhaps even dull too. This could not be further from the theatrical ideal envisaged by Brecht, Eetu Viren argues. In his writings, Brecht sets out a model for an epic theatre capable of activating the spectator in a way that allows them to retain a sense of critical self-consciousness and to begin challenging established social power relations. In theatre, this happens on a physical, embodied level. Developing an enhanced sense of class consciousness is not unlike training a muscle – or relaxation, as Viren argues. Theatre can be viewed as a space where the spectator’s body grows lighter and more relaxed, allowing the audience to distance themselves from the conventional way of seeing and experiencing what is in front of them. This particular kind of theatre proposes an entirely new kind of revolution: the struggle for a better world starts with settling into a more comfortable position, as the eponymous main character, reminiscent of Karl Marx, says in Brecht’s *Me-ti* (1965).

Would you like to

- a) learn how to sit
- or
- b) stop and ponder your existence?

a) **4** On sitting more comfortably

b) **9** Fragility

4

On sitting comfortably

“Are you sitting comfortably?”

“I don’t know. I’m not here to learn how to sit.”

“I know, you want to watch the show. But for that you must be sitting comfortably, because, right now, we’re sat down, and we want to watch the show sitting down.”

“If you’re always looking to find the most comfortable position and to pick and choose the best of what you have, in short, if you’re always pursuing pleasure, then how can you ever understand anything of what you see?”

“If you’re not pursuing pleasure, and if you don’t pick and choose the best bits and if you don’t seek comfort, then why go and watch a show in the first place?”

A variation on Bertolt Brecht’s Me-ti (1965). This scene ideally lends itself for use as an internal dialogue whenever you’re sat down waiting for a show to begin, trying to get comfortable and wondering why you’ve come.

Would you like to be

- a) more active
- or
- b) more passive?

a) **7** On becoming more active

b) **10** Weak resistance

5

An Arctic Medea

“We want to tell the inspirational story of the death of your mother and the murder of your twin – twin! – brothers. About their death, and your journey in the wake of this intriguing catastrophe. Would you contribute with words – and pictures?” (Karhu 2021, 8).

E.L. Karhu is one of the Finnish contemporary playwrights in whose work the influence of Brecht is particularly palpably present. In Karhu’s plays, social critique is not limited to her thematic preoccupations – immigration, food banks and mental health – alone. The political permeates her language and her narrative structures, too, as they are frequently framed as commentaries on canonised works. Her *Princess Hamlet* (2017) is a feminist re-writing of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. *Eriopis* (2021) takes its cue from the Ancient Greek Medea myth, elevating to central protagonist Medea’s forgotten daughter Eriopis. The play takes the mythical story of revenge and murder and places it in an equally mythical setting, in the North of the North, a location that bears a close resemblance to Finnish Lapland. The play shows us the murderess’s daughter’s living on a distant husky farm, caught up in a media frenzy. Although an Arctic wilderness serves as the backdrop for the tragedy, *Eriopis* is by no means a charming fairy tale about a Boreal idyll nor an act of appropriation masquerading behind a splash of local colour. The play’s depiction of the north rejects the imagery, promoted by travel brochures and airline adverts, of Lapland as a natural, exotic and untouched escape on the edge of the civilised world. In the spirit of *Eriopis*, we would do well to approach all art-talk, this piece included, with the same degree of critical scrutiny. To what extent does the international marketing of artworks, and the artists behind them, rely on the manufacturing of equivalent ethnic and mythical imagery?

Would you like to

- a) read more about E.L. Karhu’s *Eriopis* or
- b) compare it to another play that also offers a reinterpretation of a classic work of theatre?

a) **6** On dismantling illusions

b) **8** Woyzeck Game

6

On dismantling illusions

E.L. Karhu’s *Eriopis* (2020) received its world premiere at the Schauspiel Leipzig in Germany. The fact that the play, originally written in Finnish but subsequently translated into German by **Stefan Moster**, had its first outing on the German stage not only speaks volumes about the end of theatre as a purely national project but also proves that demand exists for drama capable of ventilating the dramatic form across cultural and linguistic boundaries. E.L. Karhu’s plays effortlessly join the postdramatic theatre tradition, which has been heavily influenced by Brecht’s oeuvre through the works of writers and thinkers like **Heiner Müller** (1929–1995). From time to time, the rich and restless corporeality of Karhu’s language actually calls to mind the Austrian playwright **Elfriede Jelinek**. In *Eriopis*, the main character is referred to in the third person throughout, and the text, not unlike a prose poem, comes into being as a multi-voiced monologue. In the Helsinki premiere at Q-teatteri in 2022, directed by **Akse Pettersson**, the narrative solution brought four identical Eriopises, resplendent in shiny wigs and fake furs, to the stage: instead of one, there were multiples, instead of an individual, there was a collective. In **Anna-Sophie Mahler**’s direction at the Schauspiel Leipzig, a video projector multiplied Eriopis’s inner world across three walls. The actors swapped roles mid-performance, and the language was complemented by a musical score, performed on a baby grand, that occasionally rose to a cacophonous noise. The distinct theatrical techniques employed in these two productions speak to the fragmentation of the self that characterises our currently mediatised reality. Here, too, Brecht’s influence is making itself felt: it is the shattering of illusions, a fundamental element of contemporary theatre, that was key to his thinking. In Karhu’s play the techniques that generate the distancing effect do not dilute its immense emotional charge, which always simmers away just beneath the surface. The opposite, in fact, is true; when the act of viewing means engaging in direct contact and active battle with the performance, the distancing stands to give rise to entirely new emotional states.

Would you like to

- a) add some psychedelia to your life or
- b) pause in this moment?

a) **2** Brecht on acid

b) **9** Fragility

7

On activating the spectator

“The passive attitude of the spectator, which essentially corresponded to the passivity of the great majority of people in life, made way for an active one.” In Brecht’s epic theatre, the spectator is an active participant, who, instead of relating to the world through empathy (*Einfühlung*) and resignation, seeks to actively engage with the reality that surrounds them. Looking at the contemporary reality around us, his idea is not difficult to embrace: after all, the good citizen of today is, above all, an active one, across all sorts of areas of life: up to date on world events (or at least their Twitter feed), busy networking and keeping fit, for their own benefit but especially their employer’s, and with a clean bill of sexual health too. When it comes to the theatre, they are an active participant too, as reflected in the fierce competition being waged for their time. One possible approach is to involve the spectator even more closely with the performance. In Finland, ensembles like Raekallio Corp and Recover Laboratory have created immersive shows that invite the audience to shape the experience through the choices they make and involve them to such an extent that the spectators start to resemble a live action role player. This begs the question whether the spectator really is as passive as Brecht claims – and whether they ever have been. What’s the point of “activating” the audience when active engagement is now the norm across all areas of life?

Active engagement aside, would you like to be passive adjacent to
a) a gaping void
 or
b) vicarious activism?

a) 9 Fragility

b) 10 Weak resistance

8

Woyzeck Game

“a) No, my name’s not Marie. I’m a Career Coach assigned to you by the Job Centre.” (Anttila & Maunuksela 2022, 149)

Woyzeck Game, a variation on a video game script, takes Woyzeck, the protagonist in **Georg Büchner’s** (1813–1837) classic play, and subjects the hapless soldier to his local Job Centre’s “activation policies”. During the performance, selected members of the audience are invited to direct the actor using a remote control method. The installationary work ran for a period of two weeks in a public place in the centre of Helsinki. A key reference point for this work is dancer **Reijo Kela’s** iconic *Cityman* (1989) which explores the consumption-oriented way of life during the 1980s economic boom. In *Woyzeck Game*, the public realm was used to lend visibility to the moralistic control exerted over people who find themselves unemployed. The daily performances saw the actors confined to a glass terrarium and executing a series of everyday tasks from meditation to filling out job applications. I wrote *Woyzeck Game* in collaboration with **Lauri Antti Mattila**. During the creative process, we considered how classic plays can be brought into the present day not just in terms of their content but also their form. Our chosen approach reflects Brecht’s notion of the classics as raw material for new works. In a Brechtian material value sense, Büchner’s unfinished working-class play offers a fertile ground for experimentation. With all of us now, in our own way, involved in generating economic output, what do we mean when we use words like “work”, “labour” and “the working class”? What constitutes a good life in a situation where there are not enough full-time jobs available for everyone?

The time has come for you to take a more active role in this exercise. Would you like to do so as
a) a spectator
 or
b) as an activist?

a) 7 On becoming more active

b) 10 Weak resistance

9

Fragility

A key tenet of current labour market policy, “activation” means that jobseekers are encouraged and obligated to apply for work. Under the so-called Nordic labour market service model that has been adopted in Finland, benefit recipients are required to submit four job applications per month or face a cut to their benefit payments. The model exists in softer and harder iterations, but the focus is always on achieving a drop in the jobless numbers. At the same time, the job market is fragmented and sufficient full-time employment is simply not on offer for all who want it. The tendency to use work as a measure of our worth as human beings has also come under criticism for its implications on sustainability. In an era of climate breakdown, it is imperative that the environmental impacts of work and employment are fully accounted for. And in this context, it is the wider purpose and meaning of the work that we perform as well as its environmental implications that matter. In a scenario when jobseekers are expected to accept almost any job offered to them, passivity becomes a form of refusal and resistance. This also provides an opportunity for rethinking political theatre. Under what sort of circumstances might minimalism and an absence of activity constitute the core ecology of an artwork? In *Disappearing - a passion* (2022), **Kid Kokko** et al.’s “textual concert”, a text is projected through speakers and onto the stage wall, non-binary gender finds expression in wind

and emptiness becomes the ever-elusive object of every speech act. “Something disappears entirely. Or maybe not entirely, but it seems so. It feels as if something had disappeared for good. That kind of a feeling.” (Kokko 2022, English translation by H. Ouramo). While the streaming giants focus on creating ever more addictive fictional worlds and visual experiences to tempt us, perhaps what theatre can do is turn its attention to that which is already here and demanding new ways of being seen. Focusing on what really matters constitutes an act of ecological rebuilding, too. What if, instead of pursuing an active approach à la Brecht, we respond to the ecological crisis facing us with greater passivity instead – less work, more time?

Which would you choose

a) less work

or

b) more time?

a) **8** Woyzeck Game

b) **4** On finding a comfortable position

10

Weak resistance

The concept of “quiet quitting”, the gradual reduction of the time and effort you put into your work, has slowly begun to take hold in the workplace. The Chinese equivalent, 躺平 (tǎngpíng), embraced by those fed up with their workplace culture, literally means “to lie down”. These practices challenge prevailing ideals of productivity and efficiency, constituting new and unique forms of refusal. They do not necessarily present as open critiques of our present-day workplace culture, manifesting instead through withdrawal and an absence of initiative taking to an extent that would be sufficient to meet the clinical criteria for depression. On the face of it, the didactic and sermonising approach that characterises Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* has little in common with these weak signals of resistance. And yet they share the same fundamental aim of seeing reality not as something fixed and fated but as something that can be shaped and changed. The sit-ins staged by Extinction Rebellion that see activists blocking streets in protest at the lack of action on climate change is a tangible manifestation of this approach. The world now is a very different place to how it was during the last wave of mass movements. It seems that at the heart of the climate protests is the notion that the only thing we have influence over is our own bodies, and it therefore makes sense to sit down and refuse to budge. Our bodies are the stages on which our resistance is acted out. The ever-growing links between art and activism are not a happenstance. “Artivism” turns performance into protest. In Finland, the multidisciplinary Ilmastokirkko collective are reimagining the future using tools

that lend themselves to artistic purposes as well as for bringing about social change. In their *Corpus Crisis* (2021), the audience were invited to become part of a ritual that saw them transported forward in time to the year 2051. They were shown a future in which social movements like the mysterious *Muuttolinnut* (Migratory Birds) have become the primary drivers of change. Suddenly, imperceptibly, the spectator finds that they have become part of a vast continuum of social movements that reaches both backwards and forwards in time.

Would you like to
a) feel better
or
b) get active for activism?

a) 3 On relaxation

b) 7 On activation

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Step by Step Towards Utopia

Finnish Artists Exploring the Political Imagination

PILVI PORKOLA

I can imagine a million different ways the world will end, but I can't imagine a single way it can be saved. But I need to learn to imagine that world, how it can be saved, even if I can't. That's what art's for, you know, it's for doing all the things I can't.

Sonya Lindfors, choreographer

Mainstream narratives tend to lean towards the dystopian: what defines our era, it seems, is our propensity for fearmongering. What we hear far less about are the means and opportunities for doing things differently. Artists are always thinking about social issues and attuned to the possibility of change. Though they would be forgiven for pursuing a different course altogether given the state of the world, artists nevertheless continue to envision that which has not yet come into being and which might even be considered an impossibility and are making space for it.

The term “political imagination” is used to describe action in pursuit of social change. Much of today’s political discourse is based on the logic of no alternatives. It speaks volumes about the rhetoric around power but also reveals a collective political imagination on the wane. The reason there are no alternatives is that people cannot imagine them.

In utopian studies, a utopia does not equal a blueprint, it is a method or process that aims at social change. Utopian thinking is viewed as a skill that you can, and should, practice.¹ Utopias are not about the delivery of a predetermined social configuration, they are a mirror that you can hold up to convention and thus constitute a critique of prevailing social orders.² As performance studies scholar

Jose Esteban Muñoz puts it: “Utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, and presence is not enough”.³

For the artists, the concept of “utopia” represents a useful tool: it is an invitation to imagining new alternatives, an artistic and political instrument capable of opening up new and different futures. In art, utopian practices are constituted through gatherings, through discussion and negotiations and through play. For artists, political change is not something that happens instantly, or that proceeds in a linear fashion towards a predetermined goal. It is about observation in the moment and listening, with a keen ear, for new possibilities. Social and political change should emerge from multiple sources: from private, embodied experience as well as shifts in the structures that underpin art and the wider world.

In this article, I will explore the concept of political imagination⁴ through four different live art projects, in which change is constituted through a new way of seeing society and reality, through an embodied approach to creating, through play and through the creation of new spaces. All the interviews were carried out as part of the Political Imagination and Alternative Futures research project at the University of Turku.⁵

3 Muñoz 2009, 100.

4 “Political imagination” is a term used to denote a collective and communal skill that can be learned and improved. It allows us to imagine alternative social and political orders and to build, through negotiation, new alternative futures. See e.g. Porkola & al. 2022 <https://journal.fi/sosiaalipedagogiikka/article/view/116952/75657> 8 January 2022.

5 We interviewed 20 artists currently practising in Finland as part of Political imagination and alternative futures, an Academy of Finland-funded research project set to run from 2020 until 2024. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how the artists employ the political imagination in their work. The research group led by Suvi Salmenniemi comprised Inna Perheentupa, Pilvi Porkola, Salome Tuomaala-Özdemir and Hanna Ylöstalo. www.polima.fi

Corpus Crisis – a corporeal community

The Climate Church is a collective founded by performing artist **Laura Marleena Halonen** and dramaturge **Ronja Louhivuori**. The twosome set it up to explore, through artistic and activist practice, the relationship between the ecological crisis and the sacred. It ultimately emerged from the founders' observation that the public debate about the climate crisis was happening "in words and on screens" with little in the way of an embodied or collective, experience-based dimension. The religiously uncommitted Climate Church emerged from a sense that the climate crisis had to be tackled not just through facts and figures but also through affective and corporeal means. The collective's stated purpose is to create performances that foster a sense of community through a series of simple and familiar rituals.

In *Corpus Crisis* (2021) the audience were invited to take part in a series of physical exercises that will already have been well known to them. The event comprised a sermon, an adapted version of the Apostle's Creed and communal singing. The concept, borrowed from Christian liturgy, worked well, drawing an emotional response from the audience. In fact, that artists found themselves taken aback by the audience's willingness to take part. Ronja Louhivuori said of the experience:

I was surprised and deeply moved by just how utterly willing people were to sing together. It's almost like it's something that's just beyond the intellect. These occasions have been powerful experiences for me and that surprises me because I've actually always been a bit sceptical about this kind of thing.



Corpus Crisis (2021),
photo Aleks Talve.



For the second part of the production, Halonen and Louhivuori invited other artists to imagine what the popular movements of the future might look like.⁶ The brief was to think about what our era might look like as a moment in history, when viewed through the eyes of someone in 2051. The Climate Church posits that activist movements will continue to retain their relevance, and that they will be engaged with questions specific to their own time, i.e. our near future. Imagining future activist movements is an exercise that reveals something fundamental about activism as not just a reaction to the burning issues of our own time but as something that moves through time representing the possibility of change. Shifting the perspective to thirty years hence allows us to engage with issues that are acutely relevant right now but also leaves us free to envision things we might not even have thought of yet.

The artists behind the Climate Church define their own practice as a “framework, a sketch and a backbone” that can be updated and complemented as needed and applied to a variety of different contexts. Their aim is to reach diverse audiences, including beyond the confines of the art world, and thus share and continue the discussion with other people and in other places. The collective is not just about art, it is also intended as a laboratory and a networking opportunity.

The collective explores the distinctions between art and activism, concluding that art is about creating space for the possible, not about finding solutions to problems. Art provides a space not only for thinking differently but also for different embodied approaches. Change is not confined to our minds, it also occurs in practice, “in the flesh”. As Halonen puts it: “For me it’s this brilliant laboratory, where we can really take our time to investigate the politics and practices of the flesh”.

Art is about possibility and playfulness, people coming together to try things. For Louhivuori, artistic and activist spaces are places of imagination:

The way I see it is that art opens up this space, it gives you permission to think about things that there isn’t necessarily room for in politics, or in activism or even in everyday life. It’s like you can ask questions but you’re not expected to immediately supply the answers, or you can put forward hypothetical answers without worrying about asking a question first. And it’s about the process really, like, you don’t need to find solutions to all the things that are in front of you, whatever they might be, it’s about having the permission or the space to think and imagine. And to create these new realities.

Forest Performance – the radical potentiality of playing

Milla Martikainen and Katri

Puranen's *Metsäesitys* (Forest Performance) (2015–) was prompted by the pair's interest in the long-standing public debates about Finland's forestry policy. The debate, they both felt, was highly polarised and unable to escape the dichotomy of conservation-versus-felling. Similarly, the debate being conducted within the forestry industry itself seemed steadfastly focused on fact and cognition with no discernible effort to undo the polarisation or broaden the conversation on to a more personal or humane plane let alone attempting anything involving the political imagination.

As part of the project, Milla Martikainen and Katri Puranen have created two fictional flying squirrel characters for themselves, known as Papanä (Nugget) and Norkko (Catkin). The point is not to create fully-fledged characters or a polished performance but to facilitate interaction with audiences.

Nugget and Catkin have run workshops, organised Twitter dinners, attended forestry conferences and interviewed politicians. Their role is to engage the political imagination and bring new ideas into the debate on Finnish forestry policy. Beyond this immediate preoccupation, they are also asking what role artists and artistic thinking might have to play in knowledge generation and political decision making.

On the opportunities for art and artists to get involved in political decision making, Puranen has the following to say:

...art would have so much to give if it were to be incorporated into our decision-making and knowledge generation processes, and doing that as art. It's about engaging with the unknown and with chaos and with strange languages and bringing together things that would otherwise never come into contact with one another. Just feeling your way into it with this sense of openness.

The flying squirrels are not there to talk about flying squirrels but to make it possible for people to express different, even contradictory, viewpoints. They specialise in unusual takes and unexpected segues, creating a world that is built on dialogue while pursuing their own unpredictable and often playful logic and inviting their conversational partners to react differently.

According to Puranen and Martikainen, political imagination in art means that social and political issues are not dependent on everyday norms and material limitations. Instead, art offers the opportunity to look at things from new, surprising perspectives.

What we did was we said, right, this is art, and that means we can imagine anything, we're not limited by the constraints of the material world. Because when you enter that imaginative mindset then that is when you suddenly really see those constraints, you see them while you're testing them and challenging them. Or you find yourself looking at things from a new angle. You've got these building blocks, these pieces that just won't fit together, but then you turn them around in your hands and look at them from different perspectives and suddenly they fall into place.

Put another way: imagination and experimentation engender agency; it is the notion that change is possible that moves people to take action.

Forest Performance (2015–),
Flying squirrels Papanä (Nugget)
& Norkko (Catkin), photo Ari Korkala.





Forest Performance (2015-),
Flying squirrels Papanä (Nugget)
& Norkko (Catkin), photo Ari Korkala.

We Should All Be Dreaming – a space for dreaming and the impossible

The neo-liberal logic that is woven into the fabric of our society also extends to the arts sector; artists are expected to work productively and efficiently to ever tighter schedules, constantly generating new concepts and ideas. The choreographer **Sonya Lindfors** and writer **Maryan Abdulkarim's** *We Should All Be Dreaming* (2018–) is a dinner and a gathering in one, an event and a social platform, that creates a space for the collective imagination to thrive. Participants are invited to explore what the future might look like from an intersectional feminist and decolonial perspective.

According to Lindfors, the challenges artists face are directly linked to the structures within which art is made. Artists are increasingly having to consider the conditions and constraints under which they work, the kind of spaces and places where art is possible. Arts institutions have their own processes and expectations, while the funders follow their own. Artists may well aspire to do things differently, to imagine things differently, but that is of little benefit if the structures that govern their efforts impose their own conventional logic on the ideas and visions that they create. While activism is always reactive to the world around it, within art, there should be time and space for imagining things differently, for seeing a different world.

We need spaces, facilities, resources, time for dreaming, we need to make sure that we're not just reacting. Activism is always a reaction to the system and the structures we're surrounded by. But if we want to imagine different futures then that takes time and energy, it's difficult. It's not just some side hustle.

What Lindfors wants to see is artists engaging their skills in the service of unlocking the imagination and of making dreaming possible. Time pressure and the pressure to achieve are driving people to exhaustion, and we all know that exhaustion makes dreaming impossible. But through art it is possible to make space, mental or otherwise, for dreaming.

At the moment, the structures that govern art are forcing us to act in a certain way. Artists move from project to project with this sort of short-termist mindset, slaves to the system, instead of being a bit more like, hang on, what's actually possible here, what can I use these structures for. I think it's really worth asking how we might do more than just react, we should take a moment to think about what it is we actually want to do.

Abdulkarim and Lindfors cite the words of **Sun Ra** as the inspiration for *We Should All Be Dreaming*: “the possible has been tried and failed, now it is time to try the impossible.” This, for them, is what art is all about. “When I’m up on stage, I can fly. I’m not really flying, but I can imagine that I am.”



Utopia Consultation – reality under permanent construction

The Reality Research Center's *Utopia Consultation* project kicked off in 2013 when the collective first began turning their thoughts to notions of reality, utopia and everyday life. Although it initially emerged as a collective effort by a large ensemble, Utopia Consultation ultimately took the shape of a one-on-one human encounter-cum-utopian life coaching exercise.

For **Pekko Koskinen**, a member of the group, utopia is about living in the moment, and about movement towards the unknown:

...traditionally utopias have been about the end product. So we came up with this idea of the brick-by-brick utopia as a contrast to that, where you might not know where you're headed but you do have this sense of what the next step might be. So whatever situation you're faced with, you can go "I could take this step, but I could also take this other step", so it's another approach to finding a way forward.

Talvikki Eerola and Maria

Santavuori picked up the utopia consultation idea and developed it further to create a performative, dialogue-based new service that can be adapted to a whole host of different situations. Their *Utopia Consultations* take the form of one-on-one encounters where the role of the artist-cum-consultant is to facilitate a two-way discussion about the participant's own personal utopia. The discussion between facilitator and participant is based around a series of mental and orientation exercises. The physical setting is used, through the medium of discussion, to discover opportunities for thinking and doing things

differently. A door, a window or even a crack in the plaster can represent a "gateway" to a whole different world or mindset. When you rename something familiar, you will see it differently. Eerola and Santavuori have delivered their consultation exercises in a variety of settings in Finland, including care homes and day centres, art museums and urban festivals.

Over the years, the Reality Research Centre have also developed other similar exercises which they have termed "observing and orientation practices".⁷ These exercises are based on the idea that reality is a constantly evolving construction, and it is up to us to determine the perspectives from which we view it. The exercises are intended as a toolkit that invites participants to observe the reality around them and shapes their experience of it. "You'll never know where the tools take you," they say.

In the context of the performance, "utopia" is both a personal invitation and a creative tool. The discussion has a pre-determined structure that the consultant follows while listening to the participant's ideas and remaining responsive to their mood. It is the participant that generates the content for the dialogue. The structure is designed to facilitate a range of different encounters, although ultimately the objective is to engage both participants in play and to invite them to imagine together. Or as Talvikki Eerola puts it:

⁷ See e.g. Eerola & Santavuori 2018 <https://todellisuus.fi/wp-content/uploads/utopiakonsultin-kasikirja.pdf> 17 December 2022



Utopia Consultation (2013-), photo Iiro Rautiainen.

We hope that it'll take on this life of its own, that people will play around with these different scenarios and realities and then set about turning them into a reality. That it won't be this like passing thing but something that actually makes a mark. As you said, change starts with the individual. It's about individual people doing things differently, seeing things differently, being differently.

The purpose of the Utopia Consultation is not simply to bring about social change. It is primarily focused on the individual participants and their personal capacity for change and, most particularly, pointing out the steps that connect their personally held dreams with the possibility of change.

Towards the future through art and the political imagination

The political imagination manifests itself within the arts as the understanding and the insight that reality can be changed. It is possible to adopt new viewpoints, to rename things, to have different bodily experiences and, ultimately, to change the structures that make our world go round. Art is the act of creating space for possibility, for imagination, for experimentation. Art is corporeal thinking and embodied experience. Art exists to reveal to us the radical potential that can be unleashed through play. Through fictions, we can dismantle conventional thought processes and formulaic behaviours. The making and experiencing of art both contain the possibility of a radical alternative.

For artists, art is the process by which they generate knowledge about society and in which rational thought and embodied, sensory, affective perception are inextricably interwoven. Because of their capacity for grappling with and tolerating contradictions and unknowns, artists are able to think freely and to find connections in unpredictable and unforeseeable places. Through the act of making art, artists also have the ability to traverse different languages and different knowledge repertoires, in other words to engage in political imagining. There is certainly scope for this unique skill to be more widely utilised in our current political debates and decision-making processes.

What if we were to take art seriously, to view it, not just as “art”, but as an essential, change-making part of our society? In my own personal utopia, the state would fund the Climate Church along with our other churches, artists would be employed at Metsähallitus, the Finnish forestry commission, the annual Day of Dreaming would be a public holiday and “utopian practices” taught by artists would be part of the national curriculum for schools.

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Eriopis

Medea's Survivor Daughter Tells All (2020)

E.L.KARHU

Translated by EMILY JEREMIAH & FLEUR JEREMIAH

THE SOUTH OF THE NORTH II

32

Eriopis on a walk in the city, in the South of the North. Twenty dogs on leashes. Mother's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

Eriopis on a walk outside, in the city. Mother's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

Eriopis and Father on a walk outside, in the South of the North. Mother's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

33

Eriopis on a walk in the city, in the South of the North. Father's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

Eriopis on a walk outside, in the city. Father's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

Eriopis on a walk outside, in the South of the North. Father's picture on all display screens, all walls, on murals.

34

Eriopis on a walk with twenty dogs, the leashes entangled.

35

Jason gives another interview. An image without a sound, talks, talks, talks.

36

Eriopis on a walk on a very tidy, trimmed, asphalted stretch by the sea with twenty dogs, the leashes entangled. Yacht masts clatter in the wind.

When you go into a shop, you see Mother's image on a yellow background. When you walk past a kiosk, you see Mother's image on a yellow background. When you walk across a park, you see Mother's image on a yellow background. The dogs are also visible on the yellow background, they look stupid, sneaky and disproportionate, their divinely beautiful, coarsely blended fur matt and indistinct. Not dog-show champions but work champions, says Mother's voice, not for show but work, they are the ones we rear in these latitudes and that's what she does, for sure. In the yellow picture Mother's hair spreads behind her head in a massive black cloud, why on earth isn't Mother wearing a bobble hat, Eriopis, why doesn't she have a bobble hat on her head, that's what you don't understand. The panting of the sled dogs echoes in your ears through the picture.

Every other passer-by turns their head towards you when you walk with your father, the man who bears your name, Eriopis, occasionally someone is startled when your father says something to you, the bell in Father's voice rings a bell that the person can't fathom, he's heard it somewhere but can't immediately say where and eyes turn towards you, at first towards your father and then you and then back to your father, they lick your flesh, Eriopis, and seem to leave you with sticky traces.

Now you're walking again past the kiosk, the yellow picture outside the kiosk awaits you and Father stops and pulls the yellow picture away from under the plastic, there are always two yellow pictures in the plastic pocket hung in front of the kiosk, they are back to back so that people approaching the kiosk from both sides can see the picture the right way round, as it should be. Father doesn't fold up the yellow picture, he takes a large flat folder from his briefcase and puts the yellow picture in it. Now that Father has removed one of the pictures, people coming from the other direction only see something dumb, a picture inside out, an inside-out Mother on a yellow inside-out background with yellow inside-out dogs. The vendor at the kiosk won't be pleased with that, Eriopis, he really won't.

*Eriopis - Medea's Survivor
Daughter Tells All (Eriopis - Medeian
selviytyjätytär kertoo kaiken, 2020),
was commissioned by Schauspiel
Leipzig and had its world premiere
in Leipzig on March 6, 2020 in
German. The play was later produced
by Q-teatteri in Helsinki, Finland
in March 2022. Eriopis is a radical
rewriting of the Medea-myth.
In Karhu's version Medea and Jason,
Eriopis and her twin brothers live on
a husky farm far up North until the
unthinkable happens, and Eriopis
is brought down south to live in
the city with her father.*

A Network of Sacred Places

MARIA SÄKÖ

Could our cultural institutions serve as sacred places providing succour to people in their moment of need? And could these sacred places come together to form a vast network covering the entire world?

If your world were to fall apart today, where would you go? If your theatres, your museums, your university were ransacked? If a militia or a criminal gang suddenly seized power in your local area? If all your friends and colleagues were killed?

For many people around the world, this is the reality they are facing right now. It was only 78 years ago that Western Europe was released from the horrors of war. Will we be forced to confront them again? What can our cultural institutions do to ensure these atrocities never happen again?

There is currently no method for consistently and reliably measuring the social and political impact of the work carried out by our cultural institutions. I nevertheless made contact with ten organisations around Europe to ask them for their views on reacting to societal change and how they, beyond the shows and other content they feature on their programme output, choose to assert their social and political agency. Each of the institutions I spoke to has their own distinctive approach to social and political engagement, and they all operate within their own legislative and regulatory contexts.

When it comes to analysing the ability of European cultural institutions to engage socially and politically, the question we should be asking is this: how can our cultural institutions go about creating alliances with other institutions and organisations in order to make an active contribution to society?

The concept of allyship has long been of interest both to the cultural institutions themselves and other sector stakeholders. In the past year alone, there have been repeated calls,

in writing and in person, in support of closer alliances. Negative competition will undermine cohesion between the institutions and limit their reach. The words of the philosopher **Martha Nussbaum**, who places cooperation at the heart of democracy, are particularly resonant here:

“A monarchy is like the early situation of an infant. The all-powerful caretaker and the fearful infant, and the infant wants to be taken care of, and the monarch wants the infant to be rather docile. That is what monarchy thrives on. They want a populace who are afraid, and they try, usually, to inspire fear in people.

But democracy is different. It requires cooperation, it requires reciprocity, and it requires trust in things that are not totally certain. You have to be willing to reach out to your fellow citizens, no matter what you actually think of them, and form common projects.

Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the need for hope for faith. So, faith, meaning you're not certain whether or not these people are actually going to be able to work with you, but you got to kind of trust that that could be so. And therefore, you need a certain kind of love, said King. And then right away he says, well, that doesn't mean you have to like the people. But that means you have to have a kind of goodwill toward them. And you have to want to work with them.

So, democracy needs all those things, and when people are frightened, they become very narcissistic, and they shrink. They shrink back into themselves, and they think only of themselves, and that makes them absolutely pawns for a leader who wants to control them.”¹

There are four key points I would like to make about allyship, which emerged during the interviews and other research I carried out in 2022 in preparation for this article:

Point 1

The capacity of cultural institutions to practise self-criticism, to accept criticism and to engage in dialogue with criticism.

Our oldest and most venerable cultural institutions are often seen as staid and stagnant. These organisations would do well to reflect openly on their own past and, in particular, how their identities have come to be formed and why. “If you want to forge links with other institutions, you need to be able to be open about your own past,” said **Gitte Zschoch**, Secretary General of the Düsseldorf-based Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA) at the Institutions and Resistance seminar organised by Artists at Risk (AR) on 11 February 2022.

An excellent example of an institution engaging critically with its own past is the Kampnagel theatre in Hamburg. Germany’s Turkish community has been neglected by the country’s cultural sector since the 1970s, and although progress has been made in recent years, much still remains to be done. Kampnagel’s director **Amelie Deuflhard** says that engaging the Turkish community is not just about involving them in German cultural life, it is also critical for the ongoing viability of the institutions themselves which may otherwise perish. Already, German cultural institutions are feeling the loss of entire generations. “The entire *raison d’être* of these institutions is that they were created for the people, but we now have schools where the majority of children come from Turkish backgrounds and whose parents have never felt like their local cultural offering is for them. What that has led to is this sense of outsidership in relation to the cultural institutions and that might well span three generations by now. There are huge numbers of Germans who could be in the audience, who could be a part of the cultural fabric of our country, but they’ve been terribly neglected.”



Amelie Deuflhard,
photo Julia Steinigeweg.

According to Deuflhard, German institutions tend to get their ideas back to front. When they become aware that their local Turkish community, for example, is underserved by their offering, they seek to course correct by thinking up things to offer to them. “But that’s not how it works. You need to listen. What I’ve done in the past is I’ve gone and actually spoken to members of the Turkish community to find out, say, who the most popular singer in Turkey is at that moment and then booked them to perform at the Kampnagel. That’s encouraged people to visit us, and we’ve then been able to build relationships with them that way. So it’s not about us knowing what the audience want, it’s about us listening to them with a very keen ear.”

An excellent way to assess an institution's social impact is through their capacity for taking on board criticism levelled at them from external sources. **Hrag Vartanian**, editor-in-chief of Hyperallergic online magazine, has spoken about how critics should get serious about critiquing institutions and suggested they direct that critique first and foremost at the institutions they think highly of and who they consider to be open to change. "We need to change our framing and bear in mind that these institutions do all sorts of things, and they should be allowed to get it wrong occasionally." People should not lose faith with the cultural institutions that surround them, he argues, but instead turn their criticism into dialogue, which would give the institutions a chance to engage and take it seriously.

Point 2

Cultural institutions have the ability to promote public debate in a manner that is conducive to fostering democracy and preventing polarisation.

According to **Elisabet Goula Sardà** who also spoke at the Institutions and Resistance seminar, cultural institutions will play a key role in agenda setting and fostering public debate in the future. The challenge for them will be to prevent polarisation and to ensure that all voices are given the chance to be heard. She argued that cultural institutions occupy positions of sufficient authority to be able to uphold freedom of speech when it is under threat. This potential should not be allowed to go unutilised, she added.

Goran Injac, artistic director of the Mladinsko Theatre in Slovenia, has this to say about his theatre: "The Mladinsko is a publicly funded theatre in Ljubljana. We have a tradition for experimentation and political activism that dates back to the Yugoslav era. We've always sought to remain true to our symbolic heritage and to strengthen it. We're not just here to entertain. What really matters to us is that we can take part in public debate and make space for it in the public realm."

Vaba Lava is an Estonian theatre centre that opened in 2010. The centre's twin aims are to provide opportunities for local independent theatre companies and to promote new and experimental live art. It has two stages, one in Tallinn and another in the Russian-speaking city of Narva. The decision to settle in Narva is in itself a political act as the region remains underdeveloped. Prior to the arrival of Vaba Lava, little investment had gone into Narva's cultural offering. The arts are an excellent way

to support the integration of the non-Estonian speaking community, but little money has been made available for this kind of activity, and Vaba Lava's finances are currently under pressure. Vaba Lava is the force behind the city's Vabaduse theatre festival which specialises in showcasing theatremakers who have faced censorship or even persecution in their own countries. The festival will return for another outing in summer 2023, with a focus on theatre from Ukraine and Central Asian countries. Over the past year, Vaba Lava's programme has featured many Ukrainian productions.

European theatres build alliances through networks and collaborative projects, including festivals and competitions that promote freedom of expression. But as you will see, size is not everything: many smaller theatres punch well above their weight when it comes to extending the hand of allyship.

Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, Poland runs an international festival and playwriting competition for new drama. The focus is on discovering new writing with innovative potential. It also seeks to showcase Eastern Europe's heritage and unique strengths and to highlight what is going on in that part of the world culturally. For Teatr Polski, the east is synonymous with the blending of cultures and traditions. Eastern European theatres tend to focus on the human condition and on social and political issues. Teatr Polski's competition has drawn entries from writers based in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The Lithuanian Sirenos Festival is run by an organisation so small that it does not have the sort of support functions normally associated with festivals. The director, **Kristina Savickienė**, had this to say about their programme: "What we look for at Sirenos is plays that address political themes explicitly and directly. We organise discussion events and promote new publications. We also make the most of social media and do everything we can to help our featured artists with networking opportunities. The word "sirens" has a dual meaning of both rescuer and murderer. It refers to the noise that alerts us to danger but also to the mythological creature with the power to seduce us into transgressing our own boundaries. True to our name, our festival is also defined by this dual



Kristina Savickienė,
photo Dmitrijus Matvejevas.

Point 3

The ability to transcend difference and work together.

The Trans Europe Halles and the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) are excellent examples of how collaboration can lead to new practices being shared between institutions. **Vesselin Dimov**, director of the Toplocentrala Regional Centre for Contemporary Art in Sofia, Bulgaria, is active in both networks and well connected within the wider European theatre scene:

“When communism fell in Bulgaria, nothing really changed about how the country was run. The corruption continued, with people still relying on their social networks to get things done. It’s only in the past few years that we’ve started to see change and Toplocentrala is one manifestation of that.”

In some countries, it turns out, cultural institutions start working on strengthening grass roots democracy at an early stage, even before they are fully set up and running. This is how Toplocentrala, established in its

aspect: we are here to warn our community about the dangers it faces but we also want to lure them into indulging in some culture. We’re living in a world that keeps lurching from scandal to scandal. Instead of making noise about every single one, we want our festival to be a recurring event that offers our audiences a short break from their everyday routines, that succeeds in touching every single visitor on a personal level and never stops sowing the seeds of change. Above all, our festival is an event. It is both a celebration of the present moment and a more long-term process, always connected to both the past and future and not just confined to the present moment.”

Kristina Savickienė says international theatremakers are collaborating more than ever before. “Theatres are joining forces to find more sustainable ways of working. Larger theatres have the resources to work in a more long-term way, while others are forced to work on a project-by-project basis, which makes it much harder to work sustainably for example. We definitely need new ways of doing things and new networks that will allow theatremakers to support each other and work with like-minded practitioners, but that will take time.”

current guise in 2014, describes itself on its website: “Toplocentrala is an associated member of Trans Europe Halles because they enjoy networking, learning, running a sustainable centre, collaborating and development in a European context.” Unusually for Bulgaria, the publicly funded construction project to build the Toplocentrala venue was transparently run. The process that ultimately led to the creation of the centre, which is based at a former heating plant, was a long one and ran for nearly a decade. During that time, Vesselin Dimov visited more than 30 of the most exciting arts establishments around the world. He believes that when it comes to building solidarity and promoting democracy, it’s important to go out and actually meet people. He could have familiarised himself with these organisations and spoken to their staff online, but he felt a series of actual face-to-face meetings was an essential part of the process. Cultural organisations in different countries can have widely divergent working practices which represents a notable barrier to cross-border collaboration, he points out, and direct meetings are an opportunity to transcend those differences. To the same end, he proposes a time bank system that theatremakers could sign up to and use to share their skills and expertise with colleagues in other countries.

It was during the pandemic that Toplocentrala really took off. There was suddenly faith in what the team were trying to achieve, and they succeeded in attracting enthusiastic supporters within the city council. The team’s persistent lobbying and their efforts to highlight the importance of the local independent theatre sector and of new dramatic forms was beginning to bear fruit.

From the beginning, the team were committed to ensuring that Toplocentrala was promoted as a cultural centre for all. Every aspect of the operations, from the architectural design competition and public consultation meetings to the communications and the transparently run finances, was designed to foster engagement and ownership among the general public. Owned by the City of Sofia,



Vesselin Dimov,
photo Dimov's private archive.

Toplocentrala is a model for how all public projects should be run in a truly democratic system. Contemporary theatre needs its own dedicated space, Dimov argues, because it allows inclusive and transparent support to be provided to meet the needs of this specific genre. Without a dedicated space, contemporary theatremakers would be confined to and marginalised by the institutional theatres that continue to be hampered by corruption.

Toplocentrala’s efforts to bring different artforms together under the same roof reflects wider boundary-breaking trends within the art world. Its inaugural programme featured performing arts superstars alongside local popular favourites. Until now, collaboration between the Balkan countries has been limited, and Toplocentrala have sought to change that. The venue also hosts international arts residencies, which has allowed the centre to expand its cross-border reach.

When it comes to media attention, international coverage of Bulgaria tends to be dominated by corruption and election scandals. However, while the country's old and stuck-in-the-past cultural institutions may continue to sag under the weight of their history, Toplocentrala's transparent approach is certainly newsworthy. They have modelled their operations on cultural organisations in other countries, particularly Germany. Hamburg's Kampnagel has been a particularly important influence.

Hrag Vartanian of Hypoallergic has also issued a call for cultural institutions to operate as if they were sacred places, open to all and ready to provide assistance to people at their time of need. An excellent example of this idea in action is the Kampnagel in Hamburg who have found ingenious ways to welcome immigrant communities to their venue. Kampnagel have also run art projects for asylum seekers that would otherwise not have been able to enter Germany. They have made helping people into an artform. There is a well-established tradition for this in Germany, dating back to **Joseph Beuys**. Being human – and by definition lending assistance to other humans – is *Kunst an sich*, art in itself.

As Deuflhard made expressly clear in an interview she gave as early as 2014, the project was not about turning the Kampnagel into an asylum hostel. Its purpose was to provide privacy and dignity, in the context of a public facility, for people with a complex history of seeking asylum. This would “engender a new social dialogue within the public realm”, she said, and offer an opportunity “for an equal exchange of ideas” between artists.

Kampnagel's commitment to operating democratically is also reflected in the venue's decision not to run a main programme complemented by a fringe programme;

all productions have equal status here. They receive the same publicity and are given the same resourcing in terms of promotional and other events. Kampnagel also chose to extend an invitation to theatre ensembles particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic to perform there.

Cultural institutions will inevitably take very different approaches to allyship. But difference is always an opportunity, provided that you are aiming for the same goal. The same sentiment was expressed by Elisabet Goula Sardà in her speech at the Institutions and Resistance seminar:

“A useful thing to note is that cultural institutions can come together and make up for each other's shortcomings. One of the strengths of my institution, for example, is that, thanks to the stability of our financial position, we have the capacity to embark on large scale projects. That also means, however, that we are a little bit less nimble on our feet than others. So we could offer our support to institutions that are perhaps struggling to secure the funding they require. And there you have a situation where we could help each other out.”

New, supranational funding mechanisms would be one way to drive cooperation within the cultural sector. It is important to talk about funding because, although cultural institutions in receipt of public funds are often seen as slow to change, their privately-funded counterparts are often much more conservative in their approach.

Cultural institutions in the United State, for example, which rely on philanthropy and other private sources of funding, are particularly resistant to change. Almost invariably they will struggle to initiate change from within. With private money calling the shots, it is difficult to abolish elitist practices as those may well be what the donors actually want to see.

The lack of financial support can erode the viability of cultural institutions even when they are highly regarded and internationally well known. You don't have to look hard to find an example. Goran Injac, artistic director

at the Mladinsko had this to say: “The rise of the far right has had a significant impact on what we do here at the Mladinsko because our country’s nationalist cultural policy demands nationalist and inward-looking output from us, and there is no room for anything else. We are determined to address issues that are relevant to minority groups in our country as well as immigration, climate change, human rights, nationalism and even our fiscal policy but despite the fact that these are important themes in their own right and the fact that our work has received international recognition, we have found ourselves at the receiving end of attacks motivated by nationalist ideology. We’ve been told that we should go back to traditional text-based theatre, and that we should be ‘more Slovenian.’”

Point 4

The fourth observation is that, although it is right to have high expectations for our cultural institutions, it is also important to acknowledge that they do not operate in a vacuum. Their work needs to be complemented by journalists, artists, politicians and ordinary citizens who have an interest in what they are doing and are keen to help them develop.

One person who has made a significant and distinctive contribution to developing our cultural institutions is **Marita Muukkonen**, co-founder, alongside **Ivor Stodolsky**, of Artists at Risk (AR). AR is a Finnish organisation that has appealed for all cultural institutions to develop skills that will allow them to offer more solidarity internationally. Established a decade ago, AR ran 26 artistic residencies in 19 different countries before Russia’s war against Ukraine. Since the invasion, it has gained more than 500 new partner organisations.

Marita Muukkonen acknowledges that lots of good work is already being done by cultural institutions across Europe, but she also sees room for improvement. In recent years, European theatres have granted more placements than ever before, via the AR programme, to artists seeking safe haven residencies. She says that an integral part of cross-border solidarity is for everyone involved to recognise just how accomplished the artists

seeking these residencies are. In other words, solidarity also means engaging in a qualitative evaluation of art and the criteria that underpin that quality. “Persecuted artists are often the ones with the most powerful and distinctive voices,” Muukkonen says.

Last year, more than 2,100 Ukrainian artists applied for a residency through Artists at Risk, and of these 350 have so far been allocated placements. A further 600 applications were submitted by Russian and Belarusian artists, leading to 90 placements. A total of 1,400 Afghan nationals applied to the organisation too but fewer than 50 placements have been granted so far. It is currently not possible to find placements for Afghan nationals in Finland as Finland does not offer visas on humanitarian grounds, and there are no alternative means to secure entry. A humanitarian visa would allow applicants to secure a residence permit without the need for an interview with border officials. Germany and France, by contrast, both offer humanitarian visas. The two countries currently host the largest number of AR artists, having created special placements for Afghans and Russian dissidents.

When allocating placements, AR will always take the individual artists’ wishes as well as their language skills and family circumstances into account. Regardless of the country they are placed in, every effort will be made to support them in creating networks that will allow them to work throughout Europe and continue to pursue their artistic practice.

A particular problem at the moment is the unequal treatment artists face when seeking refuge in Europe. Afghan and Kurdish artists for example are at high risk of persecution, torture and imprisonment but face many hurdles when they attempt to enter Europe. In Turkey, merely speaking one of the Kurdish languages on stage can be enough to attract persecution.

In the German context, drawing a clear distinction between Kurdish and Turkish artists is important. Germany has set up a special programme for supporting Afghan artists but only Afghan artists still resident in Afghanistan are eligible to apply. This is problematic because people facing the worst persecution have already been forced to flee to neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran, where they remain at risk. The programme is not set up to take this reality into account.

At the moment, AR is not attempting to bring any Afghan theatremakers into Finland as they would not be eligible for entry due to the Finnish visa system. Ukrainian artists, who are eligible to enter the country without a visa, have been met with an unprecedented wave of goodwill here, however. For the first time since AR was set up, new supporters have contacted the organisation to offer their assistance even before the artists themselves have had a chance to request it. Muukkonen is at pains to highlight the importance of not allowing the war in Ukraine to take the attention away from other crises taking place around the world, and she calls on cultural institutions to stay focused on supporting at-risk artists from other countries too. She adds that the suggestion put forward by some Ukrainians that Russian dissidents should be denied assistance and forced to stay in their home country is an inhumane one. “We don’t hold Chinese or Iranian dissidents responsible for the situation in their respective countries. Every professional artist facing persecution, imprisonment or torture has the same human

rights. I mean it’s not like we withheld visas from American artists when **Donald Trump** was president. This is an extremely dangerous road to go down, and it is simply not the way to foster solidarity through cultural institutions or to uphold human rights and the freedom of speech.”

What Muukkonen wishes for more than anything is tangible action, not symbolic gestures, from European cultural institutions and the staff working in them. An easy thing to do, she points out, is for an in-house artist to sign up as a peer mentor, which will facilitate the AR resident artists’ access to the host country’s cultural sector and social networks.

“If every European institution chose to support one asylum seeking artist for a period of three months, that would be a huge and powerful thing. We need to remember the transformative power of the grassroots, that’s what we need to tap into.”

As an example of best practice, Muukkonen highlights an approach that sees artists being employed as teachers, generating opportunities for two-way learning and development. A student production currently running at Berlin’s Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch has been directed by Russian dissident artists, including AR alum **Pavel Semchenko**, founder of St Petersburg’s famous AKHE theatre. AKHE is currently under investigation by the Russian security service FSB.

Russian and Ukrainian artists are currently based in a number of locations around Finland, including Hailuoto Island in Northern Finland as well as Tohmajärvi, a sparsely populated municipality close to the



Marita Muukkonen and Ivor Stodolsky, the co-founders of the Artists at Risk network. Photo Featured Image / Roser Gamonal.

Russian border. They are less concerned about where they are staying and more interested in being able to continue practising their craft, Muukkonen says.

“What we need to bear in mind is that the artists we work with are extremely high calibre professionals. They will definitely be able to find employment in mainland Europe at some point, and Finnish institutions would do well to attract this world class talent now while the opportunity is there.”

The performing arts encompass several disciplines, like set, costume, sound and lighting design, where language skills are less important. Muukkonen says people are often so worried about a language barrier getting in the way of their work that they overlook this fact.

All the artists that apply to the AR need help and support. What varies is the precise nature of their needs. Ukrainian artists, for example, are different from other safe have residency participants in that they are fleeing war, not facing persecution because of their artistic activity. The Ukrainians are also entitled to visa-free travel.

Muukkonen is delighted by the many examples of collaborative best practice that have emerged in the larger institutional theatres in Europe. She is particularly keen to mention Schauspielhaus Zürich which raised EUR 70,000 for AR. The actors would gather in front of the theatre after every performance carrying placards with information about the work being done by AR. The funding was sufficient to provide residency opportunities for five artists. Unfortunately, Schauspielhaus Zürich failed to garner wider local support in their area, and the contracts of creative directors **Nicolas Stemann** and **Benjamin von Blomberg** were terminated, local politicians having taken the view that their approach was too radical.

The Latvian Homo Novus Festival and its director **Bek Berger** have been actively involved in AR's work, organising an artistic residency placement for **Timur Ibramoimov** from Ukraine. The festival has also arranged a collaboration with the Dirty Deal Teatro. Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre and the Czech National Theatre have both worked with an

AR artist, while in Paris the Centre National de Dance organised an artistic residency for three female dancers from Afghanistan. In Finland, Espoo City Theatre, Klockriketeatern, the National Theatre, YLE Radioteatteri, Teatteri Avoimet Ovet, Spindrift Theatre, Alpo Aaltokoski Company, Theatre Info Finland, Dance Info Finland and the Writers' Guild of Finland have also supported and provided networking opportunities for AR's artists.

Another institution that has taken an active role in this area is the Divadelný ústav theatre institute in Bratislava, Slovakia, that has provided placements for Ukrainian theatre professionals and playwrights in collaboration with the Slovak National Theatre, while the Czech National Theatre in Prague hired a Belarusian playwright. In Düsseldorf, work has been ongoing on the Asphalt theatre festival, and AR has put forward several theatre professionals for it. The Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) in Catalonia has produced *My Mother and the Total Invasion* in collaboration with their AR-supported residency artists, actor **Aleksey Yudnikov** and director and playwright **Sasha Denisova**. Last year, the CCCB staged Belarusian playwright **Andrei Kureichik's** *Voices of New Belarus* translated into Catalan as part of their annual Orwell Festival. Their collaboration with AR will continue throughout 2023.

In the coming years, it is expected that artists who explore climate change and the ecological crisis as part of their work will increasingly require protection, and the number of people displaced by natural disasters will rise exponentially. Environmental artists will form a distinct group with a very specific set of needs. Right now, journalists and, increasingly, others standing up for the environment are being murdered in Latin America. AR has recently set up a new programme, titled Ecologists at Risk, in response to this growing area of need.

Cultural institutions are already tackling environmental issues through their work, but what is currently missing from the stage are the very people actually facing persecution because of their work on climate and conservation issues. Hearing the voices of these artists and involving them directly in productions about climate change would fundamentally shape the way climate change theatre is being done. As things stand, their absence distorts our understanding of what art is capable of during this era of climate breakdown.

The Global North's fascination with conventional and straightforward disaster narratives speaks volumes about our lack of understanding about how, for many people, the future is already here. **Janne Löppönen** makes

this same point in his essay *We Need Better Dystopias*: “In his Novara Media article *Extinction Isn’t the Worst That Can Happen*, Dr **Kai Heron** writes that what our current framing of the climate crisis overlooks is that for many, the end of the world has already happened. When you consider the fact that, 500 years ago, European settlers killed, whether through violence, disease or forced labour, more than 90% of Native Americans, the world in which their descendants now live would be a hellish prospect for their forebears. Heron reminds us that climate chaos will intensify the inequalities that already exist in our societies. Heat waves are already killing people in India, while in Brazil, the poorest can no longer afford electricity as reduced rainfall has led to higher energy prices. In Afghanistan, farmers facing crop failures due to record droughts have been forced to join the Taliban to secure access to food. Instead of a final collapse, what we should fear is a world of unfathomable suffering, where climate refugees are shut out from the last protected enclaves and prisoners are press-ganged into putting out the fires that rage around us. You only need to look towards the Mediterranean, Palestine, California or Australia to see that the seeds of eco-apartheid have already been sown. A framing that limits us to a twin choice of either extinction or salvation obscures the fact that many people are already suffering from the worst effects of climate breakdown and that those effects are the result of ‘ordinary’ capitalism, racism and colonialism. #nothingtoseehere.”

Marita Muukkonen rightly calls for the reality facing the people affected by these global developments to be amplified by our cultural institutions much more than they currently are, to allow us to discover, through art, better solutions to the problems we face. When you view the world from the Global North’s perspective, the notion of artists facing persecution because of their art might seem an abstract prospect. “It’s important for us to come together because often we will only understand another person’s circumstances when we come face-to-face with them.”

References

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- Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear*, Simon and Schuster 2016.



Putin's Russia (2006),
photo Elli Helenius.

From major stage works to experimental and children's theatre, a diverse range of Finnish theatre productions have taken critical aim at **Vladimir Putin** and his regime, and the topic has been prominently explored by Finnish opera, too. Fresh readings of numerous Russian classics and contemporary works have also delivered between-the-lines criticisms of Putin. The productions featured in this round up have been particularly outspoken in their criticism of the Russian president.

Productions by Finnish theatres or guest performances in Finland that have been critical of Putin:

2006

Putin's Russia (KokoTeatteri 2006)

By Anna Politkovskaya, directed by Johanna Hammarberg and Anna Veijalainen

A deep dive into present-day Russia that enraged and astonished its viewers in equal measure, the play featured stories not covered by newspapers and current affairs programmes.

2009

Kuka kukin on ('Who Is Who', Finnish National Theatre 2009)

By Kari Hotakainen and Juha Lehtola, directed by Juha Lehtola

Putin and other prominent figures appeared on stage in this exploration of the narcissism and delusions of grandeur that characterise our time.

2011

Two in Your House (Teatr.doc at the Baltic Circle festival in Helsinki 2011)
By Jelena Greminová, directed by Talgat Batalov

This documentary theatre production described the plight of the Belarusian opposition in a country where prison guards routinely break the spirit of their detainees while trapped in the system themselves.

2012

Antibodies (Baltic House Theatre at the Stage Festival in Helsinki 2012)

This documentary theatre performance by the Baltic House Theatre about the murder of anti-fascist musician Timur Kacharava in Saint Petersburg in 2005 ran at Helsinki's Stage Festival.



SLAVA! Kunnia (2015),
photo Stefan Bremer.

2015

Maidan: Voices from the Uprising
(World Theatre Day event by Finnish National Theatre and Theatre Info Finland TINFO 2015)
By Natalya Vorozhbit and Andrei Mai

Vorozhbit's play explores the thoughts and experiences of young people who took part in the 2013–2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, where 300 people lost their lives.

The Bolotnaya Square Case
(Staged reading by Teatr.doc at Klockriketeatern in Helsinki 2015)
Directed by Yelena Gremina

This production told the story of a demonstration organised by the Russian opposition at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in May 2012 on the eve of Putin's presidential inauguration that was violently suppressed by the authorities. Some of the protesters were either imprisoned or forced to undergo involuntary psychiatric treatment.

SLAVA! Kunnia. ('SLAVA! Honour.'
Finnish National Theatre 2015)
By Pirkko Saisio, directed
by Laura Jäntti

This irreverent musical performance about Russian history and current affairs was written before the Maidan Revolution in 2014. Nevertheless, people came to interpret it through the prism of the protests in Kyiv.

Suuri ja mahtava ('Great and Powerful',
Musiikkiteatteri Kapsäkki 2015)
By Markus Leikola, directed by Paavo Kerosuo

This musical satire about the history of the Soviet Union and Russia closed with a grandiose duet between Stalin and Putin.

2013

Kiertävä kysymysneuvosto eli kaikki mitä olet aina halunnut tietää
(‘The Touring Council of Questions or Everything You’ve Always Wanted to Know’, TOTEM theatre 2013)
Written and directed by Essi Rossi

This production referenced Russia and the Arab Spring, addressing several taboo subjects at once. Putin, Jesus and Einstein all made brief projected appearances on stage.

2014

The Life and Death of Comrade K
(Helsinki City Theatre 2014)
By Edvard Radzinsky, directed by Roman Viktyuk

The Life and Death of Comrade K featured multiple Stalin statues on stage and one of Finnish-born Soviet communist Otto Wille Kuusinen that bore a striking resemblance to Putin (the set designer insists this was unintentional).



Rajavirhe/Russophobia (2017),
photo Lasse Poser.



Sumu (2016),
photo Timo Teräväinen.

2016

Sumu ('Fog', Finnish National Theatre 2016)
Written and directed by Juha Jokela

Fog investigates the foggy relationship between Finland and Russia in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea with a particular focus on the ethical dimensions of trade between the two countries. Though Putin is not directly parodied in the performance, a critic for the Finnish national broadcasting company noted that "even saying Putin's name on stage is like saying Voldemort instead of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named".

2017

Rajavirhe/Russofobia ('Border error/Russophobia', Teatteri Telakka 2017)
By Maksim Kurochkin, directed by Faer Varvara

A play based on interviews carried out in Finland, Ukraine and Russia regarding the Winter War of 1939, the tensions between the three countries and the then-status quo in Ukraine.

Burning Doors (Belarus Free Theatre at the Tampere Theatre Festival 2017)
Directed by Nicolai Khalezin and Natalia Kaliada

Burning Doors by political refugees Khalezin and Kalida told the story of Maria Alyokhona (Pussy Riot). The Belarus Free Theatre operates underground as it is banned by the Belarusian government on political grounds.

Det ordnar sig, sapiens! ('It will be alright, sapiens!', Lilla Teatern 2017)
By Marina Meinander and Kirsi Porkka, directed by Marina Meinander

This play about the state of humanity satirized Finnish politicians along with big international names like Trump and Putin.



A Very Expensive Poison (2023),
photo Tommi Mattila.



Det ordnar sig, sapiens! (2017),
photo Henrik Schütt.

2021

Insulted. Belarus(sia) (Staged reading by Klockriketeatern 2021)
By Andrei Kureichik, directed by Dan Henriksson

Insulted. Belarus(sia) is about the first month of the Belarusian revolution on the eve of the country's democratization after years of dictatorship and attempts to understand how the Belarusian revolution differs from those in Prague, Russia, and Ukraine.

Voices of the New Belarus
(Voice installation by the Finnish National Theatre, YLE Draama and Artists at Risk 2021)
By Andrei Kureichik, directed by Soila Valkama

This play is a collection of verbatim testimonies from Belarusians who took to the streets in Minsk to protest president Lukashenko's re-election for a sixth term and the jailing of pro-democracy activist Sergei Tikhanovsky in 2021.

2023

A Very Expensive Poison
(Lahti City Theatre 2023)
By Lucy Prebble, directed by Anne Rautiainen

A play about the murder of former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko, with Putin, his former boss, as an unreliable narrator.

This text is based on theatre reviews, data from the Ilona Finnish theatre database and programme information provided by the featured theatres and festivals.

UK

Glass Half Full Productions

www.glasshalffullproductions.co.uk

Germany

Kampnagel

www.kampnagel.de/en

Landestheater Tübingen

www.landestheater-tuebingen.de

Schloss Freudenburg Wiesbaden

www.schlossfreudenburg.de

Schott Acting Studio

www.schott-acting-studio.de/en

Tanztheater Pforzheim

www.theater-pforzheim.de

TGR The Green Room

www.thegreenroomforartists.de/about

Netherlands

NEPCO performance art collective

www.nepco.nl

France

Centre National de la Danse

www.cnd.fr

Switzerland

Schauspielhaus Zürich

www.schauspielhaus.ch/en

Spain

Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona CCCB

www.cccb.org/en

Sweden
Rikstolvan
www.rikstolvan.se
Ukrainska Teatern

Estonia
Vaba Lava
www.vabalava.ee/en

Latvia
New Theatre Institute of Latvia
www.theatre.lv/eng

Czech Republic
National Theatre
www.narodni-divadlo.cz

Slovakia
Theatre Institute
www.theatre.sk

Slovenia
Mladinsko
www.mladinsko.com/en

Bulgaria
Toplocentrala
www.toplocentrala.bg/en

Barentsburg

MIKHAIL DURNENKOV

Autumn 2022. It's the seventh month of war when I recall Barentsburg...

The rusty shingle crunches loudly under our rubber boots. The egg-yellow jacket of New York's DJ Spooky flashes up ahead in the white mist. Because of his yellow jacket and because of his need to jog every day, the other members of the expedition have resorted to calling Spooky 'The Running Banana'. Our guide, Russian ornithologist Sergei who has a rifle about his person, is running behind Spooky swearing under his breath, trying not to lose sight of him. Sergei is responsible for accompanying, and maintaining the safety of, the members of our expedition. Here, in the Arctic, 'safety' is not a matter of empty rhetoric. Most of the polar bears we will encounter have never seen a human before and will feel no fear towards us - which lends an undeniable degree of risk to our expedition.

Incidentally, the Arctic offers other dangers for the unprepared adventurer. For example, while gazing at the unbelievable landscapes, you can easily fall into a crack in the ice, powdered over by recent snowfalls. One day, I sat for a long time next to just such a crack, listening to the melting water gurgling about thirty metres beneath me, like silver, ringing bells. If you fall, you'll go tumbling... tumbling... tumbling...

We regularly visit glaciers - bright blue from the oxygen compressed under a gigantic pressure. The snow, which fell over the last thousand years, is compressed under its own weight into ice - a metre thick, meaning that ice *ten metres* below the surface of this glacier contains information about snow which fell ten thousand years ago. That thought thrills me, eliciting something akin to hallucinatory visions. Snow was falling the day that primitive men dragged a sledge along - its runners made from

mammoth's tusks. Primitive child dropped its toy in the snow, a fur-rattle stuffed with pebbles, and started crying - so they all turned around to pick it up. Then they set off again - and the snow kept falling and then turned to ice, which I'm now watching as it sparkles in my glass of whisky in the electric light of the wardrooms. There are no glaciers on the island where we hear the crunch of brittle moss under Spooky's running feet as well as Sergey's restrained swearing through the mist. We are surrounded by mist, but September on Svalbard is warm. Our whole expedition, myself along with twenty scientists and other artists, emerge at a shallow stream, in which pieces of chiselled ice are bobbing around. The water flowing down from the hills constantly sharpens these pieces of ice and then tumbles into the sea. As if a thousand deposed mountain kings threw off their icy crowns. But really it's just an ordinary stream. There are endless streams like this one, around here.

We gather around David, the expedition leader, to clarify what we're doing here. David has been organising expeditions like ours every year for the past ten years. The idea behind these expeditions is simple and wonderful. Lots of artists know about global warming, and yes, there are even numerous artistic projects appearing on this topic, but not many of them (not many of us) perceive this problem on a personal level. David had the idea of bringing together artists with the scientists who are researching the problems of a changing climate, and sending them off together on a joint expedition, so that artists could be persuaded through personal experience that global warming and other signs of ecological catastrophe are not abstract, but rather they are the most real and present danger imaginable.

David draws our attention to a stream. Spooky and Sergey have returned to the fold and are also listening to the river. "We are standing on a glacier which has lain here for hundreds of thousands of years. It is one of the largest on Svalbard. Millions of tonnes of frozen fresh water. Everything you see has happened to it in the last fifty years." We look again at the stream. The peak of the moss-covered hills from which it flows, is lost in the mist. All of a sudden, a stuttering noise can be heard emanating from the mist, like a thousand leather drums. Descending from one ledge to another, above us, stomps a herd of wild reindeer. They almost reach us – they're only about twenty metres away – when the herd divides into two and, smoothly flowing around us to our right and left, they continue their descent. It's another five minutes before the sound of drumming subsides. The only sound is the murmur of the river, which used to be a year-round glacier not very long ago.

The following day our schooner arrives in Barentsburg.

Actually, before telling you about Barentsburg, first I must say something about Helsinki. I arrived in Finland after the war had started and I hadn't reminisced about my time on this expedition, which had taken place in the now-distant year of 2011, until a chat-message appeared on my mobile from an unknown number.

"I heard that you're in Finland. I need help. My daughter and her husband are passing through Helsinki, they need a place to stay for one night."

I cautiously ask who has written the message.

"Anatoly."

Which Anatoly?

"Anatoly from Barentsburg."

And that's when I started reminiscing about Barentsburg.

According to the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920, all signatory-countries have the right to mine natural minerals in the archipelago, as long as they recognise it to be the sovereign territory of Norway. One of the few countries to make use of this right was the USSR, which bought a piece of coastline from Norway in the Grønfjorden bay in the 1930s. The first miners' homes, mines and coal storage appeared earlier, as early as 1912, and when Barentsburg became Russian, the Norwegians left the fjord, and the first Soviet state company Arctic-Coal (*Artikugol'*) shipped over its workers.

Barentsburg is one of two Russian settlements in the archipelago and the second largest locality after Longyearbyen, the administrative capital of Svalbard. The other Russian mining village, with an African name Pyramid, has now been abandoned. In fact, Barentsburg is not going through the best of times either and the reason for its continued existence is unclear. Its tunnels are closed, coal is mined only to fulfil local needs – warming the homes of polar explorers. But one thing at a time.

Our schooner reaches Barentsburg towards evening. A day before, some members of our expedition – who, the month prior to our journey, had been longing for contact with civilisation – clapped me on the back, announcing that this evening there would be a real "Russian vodka bar". By which they meant that I would have to teach them how to correctly use that beverage. We had only five Russians among the twenty-five members of our international expedition – myself; Sergei – our guide; Darya – the curator of a contemporary art gallery; Lyonya – the artist with his writer-wife – Marina, who would later write about a wonderful book about our expedition: *Goodbye, Arctic*. It wasn't clear exactly why I'm designated as the "Russian vodka bar" expert, but I feel responsible anyway and worry about it.

To start with, the mooring lights of Barentsburg shine in the darkness, and then we moor our boat to the dock, blackened by coal dust, and get out onto the shore. As the expert on the "Russian vodka bar", and as an individual who speaks Russian, I walk ahead. A poorly lit wooden staircase rises in front of us. The coal dust is so ingrained into the wood that it sparkles in the light of the lamps. It's raining. Or rather, there's a drizzle which settles onto our faces, like a watery dust fired from a spray-gun. Out of the darkness, a huge figure emerges, as if hacked out of coal. I feel a rising dread and, as the others are shoving me in the back, I ask where the bar is around here. The figure silently studies me. His face is not visible. Then his coal-stained hand rises and points into the darkness. We walk in that direction, as indicated, and about ten steps later I look back. The figure still stands as it was standing before, arm raised, like a Lenin statue ushering *the people* towards a bright future.

After another hundred metres, there's a wooden bungalow with a large cardboard *matryoshka* on the porch. It is the very same, sought-after "Russian vodka bar", and our merry band stumbles noisily inside. But I hesitate. The dim light behind the small building catches my attention. I walk around to the other side, I take several steps and I fall... into my childhood.

Even now, it is hard for me to say why a perfectly ordinary children's playground made such a strong impression on me. For a whole month, we hadn't had any internet, nor had we seen any signs of civilisation except for the short jetty used by the scientists in Ny-Ålesund. But even that had faded from my mind, lost beneath the heap of impressions of glaciers, islands, mountain peaks and snowy expanses. Encounters with whales, walruses, bears and seals, never-ending polar sunrises and sunsets had seemingly wiped away some sort of protective layer, exposing a deep layer of memory.

In any case, at that moment, I'm in a playground and, coming as a surprise even to myself, I fall into my childhood. Far north, my parents were simple workers hacking a path through the *taiga* for a railway. Droplets of water are falling through the

lamplight onto the wooden decking. Created with wooden roundels, the little car has fallen back awkwardly onto its cracked wheels. Next to it is a little old donkey, carved entirely from a log. The rubbish bin looks like a penguin with an open mouth (Why should penguins swallow rubbish? Why are there even penguins in the Arctic?)

In the distant 1980s, there was the very same naïve architecture in the *taiga* village of my childhood. The playground looks abandoned and solitary, as if the last child who played here was – me. Thirty years ago. Except then mum called me for dinner and I went inside, never to return and I lived a great life and grew up and suddenly – I'm back. And now I'm standing here shaken by how suddenly the circle has been completed.

The burst of laughter from the windows of the Russian Vodka Bar behind me pulls me out of my stupor. I turn around and walk inside, continuing to feel a strange connection to this place.

The next day, the sun illuminates the landscape and my feelings of recognising this place gradually dissipate. The red moss on the mountains, surrounding Grønfjorden, are ablaze in the light. The shafts of boarded-up coal tunnels are gaping on the slopes, as if the mountains have been drilled by a dark nothingness, and there are coal heaps sprawling at the foot of the mountains, like the coal is dripping towards the loading docks.

Barentsburg consists of dozens of faceless, three-story brick buildings. In recent years, some of them were lined with poisonously bright plastic, which has done nothing to improve their beauty. Somewhat below them are a few rows of wooden miners' homes – in cornflower blue. Nobody lives in them; they stand derelict with smashed windows. The buildings are connected by boarded-over heating pipes. In a small square, there is an obligatory granite Lenin and a concrete slab – a monument, depicted in the spirit of socialist realism: miners against a background of space rockets and a poem.

*“Shakhterskii trud v lyudskom pokoe
V delakh natruzhenykh raket
Gornyak, natruzhennoi rukoyu
Ty darish vsem teplo i svet”.*

*“The miners labour in service of public peace,
Labouring for the overworked missiles,
Oh, miner with overworked hands!
You give everybody warmth and light.”*

Everything in Barentsburg comes in ones, like a cosmic village of the future: one playground, one chapel, one stadium, one school, one administrative building, one shop. There's nothing superfluous. One canteen, one museum.

In the museum, I look at the embossed parquet flooring, on which there lies a huge whale vertebra – the exhibition, presumably. We came across these vertebrae frequently on the archipelago's islands – thrown there by the sea.

The museum also has the obligatory stuffed polar bear, walrus tusks and a portrait of the famous ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. A brief text under her photograph explains that the ballerina's father was the head of administration in Barentsburg and this is where she spent her childhood.

The museum workers tell me that, since any currency besides Norwegian kronas is prohibited in Svalbard, residents of the town receive their salaries on special cards which are circulated only on the territory of Barentsburg. They buy food with these cards and spend them in the canteens. They can spend the rest of their earnings only when they return to the mainland.

The main thing which the museum workers try to convey in their tales is *the mission* – for which several generations of miners toiled. “We always understood that a lot depended on our labour and on us,” a woman tells me nervously – one of the museum staff. “Whether the mainland had light and warmth, or not – that was down to us. That's why we were prepared to endure so much.”

There's yet another poetic inscription from Soviet times on the smoky wall of the only canteen in Barentsburg:

*“Znachit gde ty ni stranstvoval
Na poroge lyboi vesny
Budesh' bredit' polyarnymi trassami
Budesh' videt' snezhnyi sny.”*

*“Wherever you have wandered
On the threshold of any spring,
You will think endlessly about polar tracks,
You will dream only snowy dreams”*

It's either prophetic, or a curse.

2011. I returned from the expedition and tried to reach Anatoly. Our conversation was as follows:

-Hello, this is Mikhail, I'm a playwright and I was recently on an Arctic expedition in Svalbard. Antonina Nikolaeva, who works at the museum, gave me your number. She said that you used to work in Barentsburg's administration in the 1980s.

There's a long silence down the phone line and then a dry voice reluctantly emerges.

-What's it to you?

-I've been commissioned to write a radio play. I want to write about Barentsburg.

-Who commissioned it?

-The BBC World Service.

-BBC... That's the Americans, isn't it?

-The English.

-What's it to them?

-It's for me. I thought – I'm Russian, so I can write about Barentsburg. Especially because it reminds me of my childhood. I'm from the Amur region, my parents were building the Baikal-Amur railway line...

-What's it to the English?

-They're interested in ecological theme and it's an issue

which matters to me too. Why don't we meet in person and I can tell you about it – and answer all of your questions in detail.

I wait for forty minutes by the Pushkin statue in the centre of Moscow and when I call Anatoly again, he says:

-I came to take a look at you, but I didn't like what I saw.

-Sorry, I don't understand, you actually came here? Why didn't you come and speak to me?

-That's what I'm telling you, I didn't like what I saw. It's also the Americans...

-The English.

-Don't call me again.

Short beeps on the phone line.

And that's where this could have ended if the waiting at the Pushkin statue hadn't been repeated in Helsinki in the autumn of 2022. I wait for forty minutes at the station by Kamppi for Anatoly's daughter and her husband to appear, now that they're fleeing Russia's mobilisation. But as it happened, nobody turns up. I call them – I call Anatoly but nobody picks up. He probably didn't like what he saw, again – I decide, philosophically, and I travel back home.

That night, my phone starts ringing.

An unfamiliar number. I run into the kitchen, to avoid waking anybody else up. It's Anatoly's voice on the line, he doesn't waste any time on greetings.

-I talked them out of it.

-Who?

-I talked my daughter out of it – and her husband. His workplace promised him that the army won't call him up. He didn't believe them and wanted to leave Russia with his family. But I talked him out of it.

-Why?

-Well, why shouldn't they believe it?

Standing in the dark kitchen, I shrug, even though Anatoly will never see my gesture.

-Did you write that thing for the Americans?

-For the English. I did.

-Did they like hearing about our Barentsburg?

-To be honest, I'm not sure. The English always praise everything, but it's never clear if they like it or not.

-Barentsburg is the best town on earth.

-I see...

The conversation falters. I want to politely say goodbye but then Anatoly blurts out:

-I worked there from '85 to '88. The last years weren't good. What with the food supplies and all that. The chaos in our country had already kicked off.

-I see.

-But the lads kept working. Up there in the north, you're either working or resting. It's better to work. We loaded up coal every day. We loaded up every ship to the brim. We worked in three shifts. Then we took it off to sea and off it went – overboard.

-Overboard?

-Yes. Into the sea.

-Why?

-What should we have done with it?

Who needed the coal? If you can carry it that far, it can become gold. More expensive than oil. That's why we dumped it.

-Wouldn't it have been simpler to close the mines?

-We received the order to work.

To maintain our presence in the archipelago at all costs.

-Whose presence?

-Our presence.

-And the miners?

-What about the miners?

-Did they know?

-No need.

I couldn't stand this anymore.

-So you persuaded your daughter's husband to stay in Russia. Because you believe what the authorities tell you? Do you actually believe them?

-What's that got to do with it?

-Seriously? They're lying to you just like you lied to the miners! And yet you believe them! You carry on believing them! Even though they've always lied! Nothing has changed!

A pause. Anatoly again.

-I never liked you, even then.

-Listen, it doesn't matter if you like me or not. Tell your daughter and her husband your story about the coal! Tell them and let them come to their own conclusions...

-Don't call me again. Do you understand? Never call me again!

The buzzing of an empty phone line.

Exactly as it happened in 2011. And maybe exactly as it had happened in 1988. And maybe exactly as it had happened before then too. Nothing has changed. The only thing that has changed is me – sitting in this kitchen with my heart pounding in my chest and a telephone with a buzzing phone line – feeling my helplessness in the face of catastrophe. Beyond the windows is Helsinki. It's autumn 2022. The war has been raging for seven months.

The Dramaturgy of Ecological Reconstruction

or

Would We Have Coped Better with Covid if Only We'd Played More?

MARIA SÄKÖ
with KATARIINA NUMMINEN

When a team of researchers wanted to find ways to support local authority decision makers grappling with the socio-environmental crises facing us, they invited the dramaturge **Katariina Numminen** to join them. Numminen immediately delved into her professional toolkit, pulling out concepts like *play, complexity, practice, exercise, rough-and-readiness* and *deliberative democracy*. In this essay, she discusses her work as part of the *Situation Room of the Future* project, where her tools were used as a theoretical underpinning for the exercise but also facilitated practical decision making.

For politicians, crisis often means opportunity, a chance to garner attention and bolster their popularity. Every crisis contains an inherent drama, to which audiences are drawn and which provides a positive and convenient spotlight for a politician to bask in.

We have now entered an era of chronic social and environmental crises, however. What this new reality means is that the kind of crisis management quick fixes traditionally beloved of politicians will simply no longer cut the mustard. While our politically elected representatives would rather focus on day-to-day matters than confront the future, officers in many local authorities are busy drawing up plans covering a period of four to five years. These plans are often far too cumbersome to meet our present day, ever-changing needs.

The problem with local authority decision making is that the voice of experts, who could play a key role in the long-term ecological reconstruction effort, are currently not being heard.

How can we go about making the kind of fast-paced decisions that are needed while at the same time attending to the really big, long-term picture? How do we make sure that our democratic decision-making is informed by evidence-based data even when the chronic crises engulfing us leave us under pressure to act fast and act now? How can we communicate a clear vision for the future without becoming overly committed to plans that are unwieldy and fail to reflect the latest knowledge and evidence?

In response to this dilemma, the Finland-based WISE project and BIOS Research Unit have joined forces to create a new exercise that is designed to support local authority decision making. BIOS is a leading multi-disciplinary team of researchers that seeks to identify new ways to incorporate environmental data into political decision-making, while WISE forms part of the Academy of Finland's Strategic Research Council programme titled *Adaptation and resilience for sustainable growth*. The consortium comprises six sub-projects with funding totalling EUR 5.4 million over the project's six-year run (2018-2023).

Situation Room of the Future

The *Situation Room of the Future* exercise allows elected members and senior council staff to practise critical decision-making on issues that will determine the direction of travel for their local authority for decades to come. During the online workshop, participants are invited to engage in the ecological reconstruction of their local area. Delivered in the form of a game, the workshop is available free of charge to all local authority decision-makers in Finland. It is designed with maximum accessibility in mind, and no specialist IT skills are required to run it.

The workshop, which takes around three hours from start to finish, can be booked by any local authority employee. They will receive the game play instructions by email and are invited to assume the role of game leader. The game requires around 4–12 participants from the local authority, ideally from a range of professional backgrounds. Participants are guided by a narrator, whose calm and pleasant voice remains a constant presence throughout the gameplay. The exercises consist of a series of tasks, which the participants discuss as a group and formulate responses to. When the game is finished, the leader submits the responses on behalf of the team. These can be downloaded afterwards and distributed to the participants. The responses will also be anonymised and retained by the WISE project for possible future analysis.

Katariina Numminen, playwright, dramaturge and professor of dramaturgy at Helsinki's Theatre Academy from 2014 until 2019, spent a year working on the *Situation Room of the Future*, collaborating closely with **Paavo Järvensivu**, BIOS's resident environmental scientist. This essay draws on a BIOS podcast episode in which Järvensivu and WISE programme leader Professor **Janne Hukkinen** discuss the role of dramaturgy in creating the *Situation Room*.

What tools does the dramaturge have at their disposal that can be used to support ecological reconstruction?

Playing, not gaming

In her earlier works and through her research, Katariina Numminen has sought to articulate a dramaturgy capable of evading the dramatic–post-dramatic binary. “I’ve drawn

on **Roger Caillois's** categories of play as well as theories articulated by Donald Winnicott to explore the kind of fresh perspectives that open up to us when dramaturgy is understood as a form of play. This concept of dramaturgy-as-playing highlights dramaturgy as a processual practice and reveals the all-encompassing, omnivorous nature of the dramaturge's role. The concepts of gaming and playing also allow for exploration beyond the confines of the performing arts towards broader cultural phenomena, and that is something I have thought about a lot while developing the *Situation Room of the Future* exercise. The key thing to be aware of is that this is not a game as such, it is specifically intended to constitute a form of play.”

The BIOS group initially contacted professional game designers when embarking on the project. The negotiations did not bring the desired results however, as the gamers wanted a clear brief to work towards, whereas BIOS wanted to hire someone who would approach the exercise as an entirely open ended and novel entity in collaboration with the rest of the group.

“Games have a predetermined structure and a set of rules that you follow, whereas play takes its cue from whatever parameters exist at any given time. With a game you're expected to fit yourself into the mould provided whereas play feeds off the moment and draws on whatever resources are available at that particular town hall meeting room, under that particular local authority's socioeconomic circumstances. The fixed structure of a game means that you're inevitably confined by its fictions, whereas playing is always open-ended and defined by its own imperfection. And through that you can then begin to see where the opportunities lie for tangible real-life action and change.”

Highly structured by definition, a game cannot provide players with the same sense of openness and possibility as playing as the choices they are invited to make during gameplay occur in an artificial setting that cannot be transposed into reality.

“When the topic you're dealing with is ‘the future’, you've got any number of dramaturgically fascinating questions to address. What's particularly interesting is the way the temporal orientation is turned towards the future and towards the exercise itself. Dramaturgy is classically defined as the representation of a story or a series of events that have already taken place, but here the focus is on opening up those structures and looking forward.”

The *Situation Room of the Future* will always depart to some extent from the familiar, everyday financial and political realities facing the participating local authority. The purpose of this is to draw the participants' focus away from day-to-day matters like budgets and political cycles towards what really matters; the changes the local authority

will face in the coming decades. This is where the experts and the politicians can work together, engage in dialogue and quickly come up with decisions that take account of the distant future.

Numminen is emphatic about the crucial role play has in building the future: “The really important thing is that this exercise is not about utopias or representations of utopias, it’s about the future being present in the here and now.”

Complexity

While creating the *Situation Room of the Future*, Katariina Numminen drew inspiration from **Marianne van Kerkhoven’s** ideas on dramaturgy. “Marianne van Kerkhoven, the mother of contemporary dramaturgy, describes it as the process of learning to tolerate complexity. And I think that’s precisely what we’re doing here.”

A seminal figure for dramaturgy, Kerkhoven worked with many notable Central European choreographers and directors like **Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers** and **Jan Ritseman** over three decades from the 1980s onwards. She was attached to the Kaai Theatre in Brussels and wrote extensively for performing arts journals. Numminen has studied the Kerkhovian dramaturgy:

“Kerkhovian dramaturgy foregrounds process and processuality. While Brecht espoused careful preparation and planning involving a set of pre-determined ideas and concepts that would then be adapted and clarified in rehearsal, Kerkhoven starts from a place of openness with an emphasis on the dramaturgy, the thinking and the meaning being created on stage.

Dramaturgical interventions are directed at the text, though not always and not exclusively, and also involve the body, the space and the events taking place on stage. Dramaturgy cannot be separated from corporeality, it happens within the body, and dramaturgical meaning is not necessarily confined to verbal discourse. In her written work Kerkhoven highlights the importance of vulnerability and corporeality and the ability to tolerate diversity, complexity and not-knowing.”

All of these elements are very much present in the *Situation Room of the Future*. A commitment to multi-disciplinarity engenders complexity, and by accommodating that complexity, it is possible to unlock the path towards more democratic and more sustainable decision-making.

When art and science are brought together, the questions that invariably get asked are how and why. Paavo Järvensivu at BIOS has the following to say: “The thoughtful use of gestures, whether small or large, is difficult to achieve through academic endeavour alone.

The sort of things that an artist has in their gift – a multiplicity of perspectives, a practical and theoretical understanding of gestures, and of the reactions those gestures are likely to attract and everything they stand to serve as a catalyst to – are essential to the *Situation Room of the Future*.”

An academic might possess useful knowledge but lack the skill to understand how that knowledge can be integrated into democratic decision-making. The *Situation Room of the Future* delivers on both counts. “What we’re trying to do is to encourage the participants to stick to the research questions we’ve chosen, but there’s no set format for their responses. We know the sort of scientific terrain we want to explore, but we want to combine that with a series of considered gestures. The exercises are designed to constitute a series of experiments. When we were creating this tool, we thought carefully about the aesthetic methods that would be most suitable here. What’s fascinating is that the dramaturgical dimension we’ve added has this boundary blurring effect. The target audience here is not just local politicians and policymakers, anyone can give it a go,” Järvensivu explains.

Dramaturgy is a tool for understanding the role human gestures play in the context of democratic decision-making processes. Dramaturges understand what different gestures mean and how they can be analysed. Katariina Numminen’s previous works have explored gestures and repetition and she has returned to these themes when constructing the *Situation Room of the Future*.

When the meaning of these gestures is properly understood, they allow the participants to better understand not just themselves but the how’s and why’s of the decision-making process too. The exercises are also an opportunity for the research team to investigate what the different gestures mean in the context of decision making and what they are capable of bringing into motion. Gestures reveal the kind of embodied knowledge that can only be generated in a practical setting.

What Katariina Numminen also found exciting about the process was that the model can be adjusted in response to user experiences. “We have set this thing up in such a way that, by tweaking the script, we can tailor it to different target groups, including international audiences. What we’ve got is a prototype, and the settings and the content can be changed at will.

Now that the *Situation Room of the Future* is live and in use, my thoughts have turned to the variations that we went through while making it, and what I’ve noticed is that when we first started out, we had all these alternative paths we could have taken but chose not to pursue. Perhaps at some point we could

Katariina Numminen,
photo Noomi Ljungdell.



rewrite the script to allow for these multiple options within each exercise. I also wonder if we adjusted it a little bit whether it might lend itself to larger groups and to more diverse settings too.

The format and the exercises have several different temporal settings built into them. They're about giving the participants a mental workout. What I mean by that is that we want there to be this fizz of energy to the proceedings, but we don't necessarily want to achieve that by introducing some major disaster scenario. The energy we're looking for has to come through this broader understanding of, like, we've got these issues to sort out and we need to get cracking on them right now even though there's also this more acute thing going on."

The problem with imaginary disaster scenarios is that the truth is invariably far stranger than fiction. This was the case with the *Situation Room of the Future* too. "There's no way we could have foreseen the pandemic or Russia's invasion of Ukraine." Numminen says she's heard that, in their feedback, people who have taken part in disaster simulation exercises often say that they would have preferred more extreme set pieces and action film-style scenarios. That is not what the *Situation Room of the Future* offers, quite the opposite in fact. Instead of supplying adrenaline-inducing content, it invites participants to step back and take a critical look at conventional disaster narratives.

Practice and exercise

"The *Situation Room of the Future* is for everybody. What it's ultimately trying to do is help place the local authority's long-term goals at the heart of its own strategy setting. Another key feature is that it brings politicians and officers together in a completely new setting." Ensuring that specialist local authority staff, particularly those with environmental expertise, are given equal footing with other specialists is also a priority.

The exercise is perhaps most accurately described as a participatory workshop. "What we provide is a structure and a set of tasks. But what people choose to talk about, that's entirely up to the participants themselves. We're hoping that it will generate hugely diverse results."

Paavo Järvensivu points out that the *Situation Room of the Future* differs from other similar exercises in that there is no ready-made dashboard provided. The participants supply all their own materials and resources. "It might turn out that there are people working within the organisation whose voice has never been heard before in these types of conversations. The *Situation Room of the Future* is about making sure that they get a chance to speak."

In *Kaikki järjestyy aina* (It'll be fine), Katariina Numminen writes: "Seeing dramaturgy as a process and as a form of play may help to illustrate its nature as an event, the here-and-now aspect of it. My view is that dramaturgy is not primarily about narrating events that have already occurred, about representation if you will. It's also not a rehearsal for something that will happen in the future. Dramaturgy is about what is happening right now. When we play, we're of course free to make reference to the past or anticipate the future but, ultimately, play takes place in the now. People play for play's sake. "Process", "process-oriented" and "process-driven" are terms that emerged into use through the New Dramaturgy of the 1990s. The focus on process is not a contemporary dramaturgical phenomenon, however.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, synonymous with the birth of the Western dramaturgical tradition, already highlights the importance of composition and plot: tragedy arouses terror and pity to effect cathartic purification of those feelings. Tragedy is a process, where a certain effect is achieved through the act of performance. It's about doing something as a means to an end, an event. The purpose of composition is to create an effect in the spectator. Dramaturgy takes place in time, it is interaction between materials,"

"Polycrisis" is another important concept for Numminen. It describes both the dramaturgical mindset and the ability to manage multiple temporalities simultaneously, both highly relevant to the *Situation Room of the Future*.

Rough around the edges

Katariina Numminen points out that although a lot of work has gone into creating the game and its complex structure, it was a priority for the working group to ensure that a no-frills model was made available to participants. This meant also making sure that it did not come with a hipster look or a high-end aesthetic that might alienate users. Paavo Järvensivu says it has a rough and ready quality that makes it very casual and accessible. “What we’ve ended up with is pretty close to LARPing, but not that close, as you always play it as yourself. We’ve wanted to make the experience as no-frills as possible, which means that there’s no expectation that you’ll rehearse for it in advance or put on some kind of fancy dress costume.”

Numminen writes: “Dramaturgy is a processual entity, permanently in the midst of becoming. First and foremost, dramaturgy is an exercise in temporal composition: stage performances are art taking place in time. In his lecture performance *Doing Time*, **Tim Etchells** of the Forced Entertainment theatre company argues that what all dramaturgical practice has in common is its preoccupation with time. ‘[We are] always dealing in [time],’ he says. When it comes to the performing arts, dramaturgy is above all about managing the project, show or event’s temporal elements and articulating its sense of time. Secondly, dramaturgy always emerges through a process. Marianne van Kerkhoven, a pioneer of dance and process dramaturgy, has always highlighted the process-based character of dramaturgy. In the working process she describes, materials are gathered from a range of sources, and it is during the rehearsal process that the artist observes how these materials behave and evolve: ‘This means that it is only towards the end of the creative process that a concept, a structure, or a more or less definite form slowly starts to appear since these aspects are neither known nor put forward from the beginning.’ Thirdly, the temporal process is also an important one for the spectator or recipient. Their experience of the artwork is also a process, a temporal event.”

In addition to grand visions for the future, Katariina Numminen also believes in the importance of, simply, breathing. “It’s about people coming together and creating a sense of cohesion as they talk across the departmental divides.”

The *Situation Room of the Future* is not meant to have teeth, and it should not be painful. The participants are meant to be able to breathe their way through the process.

“The participants are allowed to fail, because this is just an exercise, you’re meant to get things wrong. The reason play is so effective is that it serves no purpose, and it maintains and generates flexibility through its inherent uselessness. There is a chance that it might lead

to something useful, but we don’t yet know what that might be. We leave the loose ends untied. In that sense, it is the act of playing itself that matters, not the content. People gain a sense of agency through play, and that is precisely what we’re trying to achieve with these exercises.”

The *Situation Room of the Future* is about creating agency, not experiences.

“A really important thing about the *Situation Room of the Future* is that it’s an attempt to fight against this silo mentality in our decision making, where experts work in isolation and never get a chance to talk to each other. But it’s also about the rhythm of the decision-making process, which researchers have now started to turn their attention to, and the impact that has on which issues actually make it on to the agenda, and this issue of rhythm is just so relevant to dramaturgy.”

Deliberative democracy

The team use the word “openness” to describe the local authority tool they have created. “It’s almost like improvisation, there are all these degrees of freedom built in,” Janne Hukkinen from WISE says.

Deliberative democracy will be essential for future decision-making. It is about fostering dialogue between experts from a range of different disciplines and that dialogue being supported and encouraged. “What the *Situation Room of the Future* does is open up all these new possibilities. And as it’s a publicly available resource, it can be used to make participation in decision-making more accessible to the public,” Hukkinen says.

The aim of the *Situation Room of the Future* is to transition political decision-making away from a technocratic mindset where policy-making is seen as an arm’s-length, self-perpetuating process.

Hukkinen says that the *Situation Room of the Future* is about fostering deliberative processes not only in terms of democratic structures but also on the level of content. “We’re trying to offer a way out of this technocratic European approach to governance which would prefer not to involve politicians in the process or address questions about what life is actually all about. It’s about management as a purely technical exercise, where you introduce a whole range of market incentives and financial subsidies and other interventions that then exclude democratic deliberation and scrutiny and leave a handful

specialists in charge of decision-making. In this scenario, it is the regulatory frameworks that generate our material and social reality. The *Situation Room of the Future* is an attempt to bypass that technocratic approach to governance and management and to invite people to address their present social and material realities and to then engage in speculative thinking around that.”

The act of looking is very much part of the exercise too, Katariina Numminen points out. It's about the participants stepping away from their screens and seeing something different.

“To the concept of dramaturgy as a process-based phenomenon you can add the concept of dramaturgy as a ubiquitous presence: there is no virgin material for us to mould at will through dramaturgical means, because there is no separating dramaturgy and material. We can take the process-ontological view that every element, every object, every thing, all matter in fact, is a temporal process in its own right (it just happens that the lifespan of a rock is very different from the lifespan of a flower), and it follows that any given constituent element of a play or other performance already has an inherent temporal quality to it and therefore, by definition, a dramaturgical quality too.”

Deliberative democratic practices are closely linked to the notion of play I introduced at the start of this essay. Numminen has written this about play: “On playing and games as dramaturgical phenomena: in recent decades, play as an activity has emerged as a popular topic for discussion within the cultural sector and across wider society. The effect of the so-called ludic turn can be seen from the 1960s onwards in the form of increased leisure time and the rise of the toy industry. This is also the point in time when we see adults starting to play too. According to **Valerie Frissen** et al. and others, this represents a wide-ranging social phenomenon and seismic shift that brings about a complete reordering of how we think about work and play. The 21st century ludic turn, it should be noted, was preceded by an earlier one: play was first described as an activity with an inherent value of its own during the Romantic period, notably in the works of **Friedrich Schiller**.

For Schiller, play represents freedom and a chance for man to be “wholly Man”. Romanticism also sees a connection between the child at play, the artist and freedom: for the artist, art is a form of self-expression, a form of free play unbound by any constraint. Play is always the opposite of coercion, and a distinguishing human characteristic. We are only truly human when we are at play, the Romantic argument goes. Many of our present day theories on play, however, stress that play is ubiquitous and a characteristic feature of all animal species, not just our own.

The act of playing first became an object of academic study in the 1850s. This development was driven by a new interest in childhood as a distinct and particular stage of life and the emergence of evolutionary theories. It is difficult to pin down a single exact definition for play. Researchers have approached the topic from a variety of different perspectives and arrived at different conclusions. Seminal definitions have been formulated by **Johann Huizinga** (in the 1930s) and Roger Caillois.”

What if we had been able to make use of play during the COVID-19 pandemic? In an interview he gave to BIOS in autumn 2021, Janne Hukkinen, WISE lead and professor of environmental sciences at the University of Helsinki, puts forward his interpretation that frames the entire pandemic as a time of play. “I'd argue that the whole pandemic was about playing. There were these constant twists and turns, and ups and downs, and someone would always mess up. The only problem was that the people playing were a bit uptight and kept having fallings out. There were all these competing models and ideas and solutions, and then a politician would say something, and then another politician would say something else and on and on it went.”

Hukkinen argues that the situation could have played out in a more obviously playful way: “There absolutely could have been more of ‘So, you've got that model and we've got this other model, let's try them and see what happens'. And it ought to have been possible to take more of an interest in what ordinary people had to say. When you reframe a problem, you will see it completely differently.”

The purpose of WISE is to facilitate better decision-making on the most challenging forms of socio-environmental disruption facing humankind. WISE wants to foster resilience and drive adaptive capacity in response to climate-induced migration, the energy crisis and other forms of political instability.

WISE is currently in the process of developing and testing a new national-level integrative policy mechanism, the Policy Operations Room (POR), which invites participants to respond to a series of simulated crisis scenarios. Their responses are then recorded by the WISE team and used for research purposes. Currently a test bed project, POR has the potential to be developed into a permanent tool for rapidly integrating comprehensive scientific advice into the most complex policy challenges.

The Transformative Power of the Naked Body on Stage

HEIDI BACKSTRÖM

For two nights in a row, I watch, mesmerised, as naked and oiled human bodies, with horse tails sticking out of their bottoms, cavort on stage. On the first night, I witness the bodies attacking a block of wood with axes, saws, knives and chisels, as the bright eyed and bushy tailed denizens of the night that have gathered for the performance dance around them. Sweat and oil glisten in the lights, every now and again an anus loses its grip on a tail, and the air is heavy with a sense of danger but also of connection. On the following night, the same bodies are back to serve up an offering of fresh fruit and flowers for the gathered festival audience, creating a gorgeous, generous *tableau vivant*. After an intense and energetic festival club, the naked horse bottoms invite the crowd to join a flower-strewn, candle-lit procession that makes its way towards, and ultimately disappears into, the sea. *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* is complete - or destroyed by intent and design.

I go to the theatre all the time, and I think and write about it for work and for pleasure. The stand-out cultural experience for me in 2022 was this “theatre-cum-club-night, club-night-cum-theatre” production performed at the Hangö Teaterträff theatre festival in early

June by the up-and-coming 4 Floors of Whores theatre collective. I was slightly surprised to find myself thinking that, as I don't, as a rule, much care for naked bodies on stage, and would always prefer to be the one who decides which naked boobs and willies I'm exposed to at any given time. I'm also of the view that the majority of on-stage nudity serves no real purpose; when confronted with the sight of an actor in a state of undress my gut reaction invariably is to cringe.

What the 4 Floors of Whores delivered in Hanko, however, was an excellent demonstration of the power and potential inherent in on-stage nudity. The experience was very much a physical and embodied one and, to a rather magical degree, a healing one too. It offered precisely the kind of belonging and togetherness, on a fundamental, cellular level, that people come to the theatre to experience. For me, it also spoke to the issue of representation within theatre, encompassing not just diversity and variety, but also the question of gaze; *how* we as the spectators look at those we see on stage. During *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* I felt a sense of safety and trust that I rarely associate with the presence of naked bodies on stage. The collective comprises **Emilia Jansson**, **Astrid Stenberg** and **Herman Nyby**, along with sound designer **Riku-Pekka Kellokoski**. The production in Hanko was directed by **Lara Magdalena Tacke** from Germany.

But then. After the performance, I became privy to a discussion between a group of older Finnish theatre-makers who deemed its content “childishly provocative” and “done to death”. After all, they had already seen it all back in the 1980s. It almost seemed as if these sixty-somethings were a bit angry. Their exchange stayed with me. How was it possible that we had had such opposite experiences of the same production? Can nudity in the theatre be deemed to have been “done to death” purely by virtue of it having been used for effect on a previous occasion? Is nudity difficult precisely because it so often ends up being boring and predictable? And if not boring and predictable, is it always by definition provocative? Should this production have come with a content warning? Or have these sixty-somethings become so conservative over time that they now struggle to see the art for the nudity? Is this merely a manifestation of the generational gulf? Or is theatre facing an internal threat from the purity police?

Boobies on stage! <titter, titter>

In (Finnish) spoken drama, on-stage nudity is usually employed either for comedic effect or to denote victimhood. Along with farting noises and dumb blonde jokes, a flash of a naked boob and a glimpse of a bare bottom are classic comedic devices. And, as far as I’ve understood it, when a victim of sexual violence appears on stage either fully naked or with parts of their private anatomy exposed, the purpose of their nudity is to drive home a point about shame and guilt.

By contrast, when the characters we see on stage go swimming, make love or perhaps treat themselves to a sauna, it is assumed that the spectator’s imagination and the magic of theatre will carry the moment, suspend the disbelief. You can put actors in a steam room wearing their dinner jackets, and the audience can be relied upon to implicitly and effortlessly understand that what they are witnessing is an exercise in dramatic licence and creative freedom. So given that, thanks to the power of imagination, there is no limit to what we can be invited to see on stage, whether that’s inanimate objects being brought to life or adult actors appearing before us as children, unicorns or chanterelles even, you would think that getting the audience to imagine nudity was one of the easier things to achieve. The way I see it, as far as the spectator is concerned, make believe is the cornerstone of the entire experience. What theatre does is invite us to imagine, to engage in play.

The question that follows is this: are there circumstances under which full frontal nudity is an essential, indispensable part of a show? It is worth asking, given that every actor is a real person, performing the role of another, fictive, person and using their own, unique, ordinary, complex body to do it.

In the balmy Hanko night, I could only come up with one such circumstance: when the nudity is a means to communicating an important message. By “means” I mean a carefully considered and deliberately chosen course of action that recognises the wider historical context in which it is made. A historical context that will always encompass gender inequality. After all, when a naked female or trans body appears on stage it is always automatically a political act. The sight of a naked cisgender male body, by contrast, is not.

“The presence of a naked human being on stage, or in any non-private space for that matter, is in and of itself a political act. It is political in the sense of art (what are the boundaries of art?), biology (what are human beings meant to look like?) and social policy (what are the limits of acceptable human behaviour?)”, director and performance artist **Janne Saarakkala** writes in his 2010 essay on **Sanna Kekäläinen’s** artistic practice, where nudity plays a significant role, both as an aesthetic element and as an object of creative enquiry.

I suspect what bothers me most, or makes me most uncomfortable about nudity, is that it is usually done to highlight gender as a binary variable. Unlike in dance, it is rare for naked bodies on the theatre stage to (successfully) constitute a representation of humanity in a universal sense or for them to appear in a neutral framing. Which brings us to the issue of representation. The notion of a penis as a symbol of maleness and breasts as a symbol of femaleness is both narrow and wrong but one that continues to underpin the way nudity is presented in theatre today.

Watching *The Church of Four Floors of Whores*, I felt like there was something about it that the artists had got just right. The nudity in it had an organic, natural quality, and yet it was performative and clearly defined. The bodies that appeared on stage were each vested with the same creative agency, not reduced to symbolic representations of gender, social class or any other category.

Nudity = provocation?

Is the presence of a naked body on stage always a provocative act? I, a forty-something spectator, frequently find the sight of a gratuitously exposed boob on stage highly provoking. A sixty-something artist of the stage will perhaps bristle at something else. But what? I raise this question with a group of theatre-makers of different ages. My troupe of armchair psychologists eventually come up with the following potential explanations for the 4 Floors of Whores' provocative potential: 1) a spectator's sense of having a prior claim on the radical content, i.e. a late-life crisis of some kind 2) a weakness inherent in the production itself, 3) feelings of shame/vicarious embarrassment, 4) a protective instinct towards the performers, 5) a conservative outlook, which even the wildest of us are perhaps bound to develop eventually, 6) the specific context(s) at Hangö Teaterträff and 7) a generational gulf (which may or may not link in with point 1).

If someone, somewhere, at some point, has put, say, yellow wigs on stage, does it automatically follow that, by matter of definition, yellow wigs have been "done to death" and the next person to use them is automatically guilty of copycatting? Nudity has been omnipresent throughout art history and is integral to humanity itself (though it is important to note that in Western cultures on-stage nudity has only been legal for less than a century). It's difficult to see how anyone could claim exclusive ownership of it, right? May the universe spare us from the kind of conservative mindset that shuts down our senses and prevents us from experiencing art!

Context is an interesting avenue to consider here. *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* ran at a theatre festival that celebrated its 20th anniversary last summer. A lot happens in two decades, and the festival in question has a strong sense of its own heritage and role as the sole platform for bringing together Finnish-Swedish theatre makers. The festival is undergoing a generational shift. 4 Floors of Whores represents 2020s theatre. Or does it? Theatre, I mean.

We know that *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* ran at a theatre festival, and the ensemble behind it describe themselves as a theatre collective. If they had chosen "performance art" instead of "theatre", would the reaction from the older generation theatre-makers have been different? In theatre,

the performer gives physical expression to a character. In performance art, the performer does not act or embody another person, they give expression to themselves, convey their own ideas. The role of the body within the work is different. Another significant difference between theatre and performance art is the issue of who determines and directs the events unfolding on the stage/during the performance.

Who defines the boundaries between theatre, performance art and live art (in Finland, live art is defined as a genre informed by or in between theatre and visual, video, sound and/or performance art)? I reckon it should be the artists themselves. Because the act of definition is also always about context and canon. What and who do the artists want to be compared against, and how, and what kind of historical context do they want to be associated with? Live art, in my view, would be the most obvious definition for the Four Floors of Whores, but the collective have made the conscious decision to link themselves to the theatrical tradition instead. In doing so, they are also subjecting themselves to a rather more conservatively-minded spectatorial gaze.

Almost everyone I speak to in connection with this piece can recall at least one theatre production where nudity has been done well. What all of these examples have in common is their duration. Time appears to have a neutralising effect that is capable of eliminating feelings of shame, arousal and provocation. When nudity is sustained over a longer period, it ceases to be a statement or a special effect and becomes just another aspect of the wider story. It adds something that would be impossible to achieve with clothes on.

Dismantling the myth of Finland's special relationship with nudity

It is a myth that Finns have a straightforward and uncomplicated relationship with nudity. Finnish theatre-makers have tended to buy into this myth too and have explored it in their work, variously perpetuating and deconstructing it. When it comes to naked bodies on the Finnish stage, Sanna Kekäläinen and **Leea Klemola** are two names that immediately spring to mind. They too have reached for their own versions of the 4 Floors of Whores's horse tails, saws and chisels when exploring and directing nudity on stage. The work of Sanna Kekäläinen, a choreographer who has incorporated nudity into her

practice since the 1990s, encompasses dance, performance art and theatre. I have a sense that it is this multiplicity of genres that “helps” her audiences to see the nudity they witness as an integral part of her works rather than as a provocation. Her commitment to returning to this topic year after year, and the familiarity that commitment engenders, are a significant factor too – her audiences know to expect nudity, which eliminates the element of surprise.

Leea Klemola is one of Finland’s best-known actors and theatre directors. Her plays, written and directed on her own and in collaboration with others, feature non-human characters, cross-dressing and cross-casting along with some gender bending and unabashed nudity. When it comes to Klemola’s oeuvre, I’m not quite sure whether absolutely all of the nudity in her works is strictly necessary, but it always works. This track record of success is probably due to her skill in presenting human beings as complex and fragile creatures. Her directorial approach reveals her fascination with the sensitivity and permanent incompleteness that characterise humankind, and the nudity in her works is always presented in a way that is candid and unposed. Every element is carefully thought through before it goes on stage which means her audiences are not put in a position of having to feel second-hand anxiety on behalf of the performers.

I don’t know whether the *4 Floors of Whores* have been influenced by Kekäläinen and Klemola, but Finnish theatre-goers will inevitably view their church through the context of the Finnish stage, which means that I for one see traces of the two theatre-makers’ work, as well as their thinking about the body and the way it is presented on stage. However, in view of the generational differences at play, it is more likely that it is European theatre-makers like **Euripides Laskaridis**, **Florentina Hölzinger** and **Vegard Vinje** that are leading the way for the *4 Floors of Whores*.

Directing the gaze, issuing an invitation

When at the theatre, which do you find harder: looking someone in the eye or looking at their private parts? For me, eye contact in general can be an extremely intimate act, while holding a performer’s gaze in the theatre is invariably a fairly discombobulating experience too. It tears at the barrier between the performer and the spectator much like the sight of a naked body does. Whose eyes am I looking into right now, and who is looking back at me. Is it the performer or the character?

Matilda Aaltonen and **Joel Teixeira Neves’s** *VOYEUR* (Reality Research Center, 2020) provided an astute dissection of what it means to be subjected to a gaze. As part of their production, a vast sheet of plexiglass was erected between the audience and the 10-strong cast. On one side, we, the spectators gathered, as ourselves; tired, ordinary, unaware, fully dressed, ready to look and to see. On the other, the performers, both clothed and not, proceeded to command our gaze by removing one item of clothing after another. There we sat, watching each other watching each other. The performers would reveal as much or as little of themselves as they chose, made eye contact with individual spectators and, in doing so, asserted a series of distinct boundaries of their own. Audience members, too, were allowed and able to avert their gaze or even move seats. That might sound pretty simple, but the performance delivered an experience of genuine depth and created a kind of magic. A magic that equalled trust, consent and an invitation.

When I think about contemporary theatre productions involving nudity where the nudity has been done well and in a moving, thought-provoking way, the word “invitation” keeps coming back to me. While in *VOYEUR* the invitation equals permission to see and be seen, in the *Church of Four Floors of Whores* the invitation is constituted on a more cellular level. It gives the audience the opportunity to amalgamate into a community of partygoers defined by a reciprocal sense of trust. The naked body at the centre of the action invites us all to trust in the fact that the others wish us no ill. It is part of what makes the naked body such a radical proposition in our present moment.

Content warning-inducing nudity

“Please be aware that tonight’s performance contains loud noises, flashing lights, smoke effects and nudity as well as references to violence.” This imaginary yet entirely realistic content warning could be found at the door of almost any contemporary theatre space in Finland. Content warnings in the theatre speak volumes about the present moment. I fully agree that audiences ought to be told in advance about any flashing lights, smoke and other special effects that might adversely impact on their health. But what about the actual content of the production they have come to see? How much of that should be divulged in advance to avoid triggering a trauma response among audience members? And why would nudity need to be included in any warning? I’d argue that it might well have the effect of engendering more nudity-related shame, not less. The issue of why a production features nudity and how that nudity might be communicated to would-be audiences in advance are of course an entirely separate matter.

As someone brought up as a woman, I’ve been taught that the sight of a penis I’ve not expressly asked to see is a threat and breasts bared without invitation are something shameful. The theatre I have watched over the years has served to reinforce, not reframe, this mindset. What I’m still waiting to see is a tender, vulnerable penis and a bland and anodyne vulva.

I share my thoughts about the necessity, or otherwise, of on-stage nudity with director and performer **Minna Lund**. “Why wouldn’t nudity be necessary,” she counters, perceptively. If theatre is an opportunity for us to explore issues and explore them beyond just the textual level, why not include the immense diversity of our bodies in that exploration? But she immediately qualifies her own question with another: “Who is it that wants to see nudity and why?” If the nudity is happening on the say-so of the director or the writer, there has to be a justification for it. Lustful fantasies and unbridled desires are as valid a purpose as any, provided that they are clearly articulated and every performer involved in the production

is empowered to assert their own boundaries. The two questions every director must ask themselves is: “why is this particular person or body naked?”, immediately followed by “and why not one of the others?”.

Seeing the tails in *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* as they swished about and tumbled out didn’t feel voyeuristic. The atmosphere was much more one of collective curiosity, a “let’s try this and see what happens”. The performance took place at an over-18s club night, and members of the audience were free to exit the space at any time without missing out on the rest of the evening’s programme. I personally cannot think what the organisers could possibly have issued a content warning about. And yet, at the other end of the spectrum, there are productions that address issues of sexuality, and of sexual violence, that would definitely benefit from a content warning. But even then, something along the lines of “this performance makes direct reference to an act of rape” would be a more honest warning. It is not nudity in itself, that in most cases proves scary or triggering for audiences, it’s just that when it’s placed on stage, it immediately becomes code for a whole host of other things too.

Nudity without a cause

“I wish I could be just flesh, flesh, flesh!” cries **Aino Virta**, the 90-year-old protagonist in *Naked*, a monologue written and performed by **Asta Rentola** as her final project for the Guildford School of Acting. As its name suggests, *Naked* is a play about nudity on stage. When the fictional actress Aino Virta is invited to play a naked dead body in a film, it prompts her to start thinking about her own body image. *Naked* approaches the topic from a number of interesting perspectives, feminism included.

Is female nudity always a feminist act? Or is the opposite the case?

I saw *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* as an act of emancipation and, by the same token, as an act of feminism too. And yet that very same emancipatory energy could just as easily be harnessed in the service of other causes, like body positivity. But is it really necessary for on-stage nudity to have to seek legitimacy through association with a political agenda?

The bodies we saw on stage in *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* were different, not only from one another, but also from the sort of bodies we are used to seeing on advertising billboards or performing a dance choreography. The bodies in *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* are strong, hard-working and very much committed to the moment. The perfect actors' bodies, I find myself thinking. "Typical actors' bodies" might be better. However, what I found so utterly emancipating about this production was not the unmistakable diversity of the (white) bodies I saw but the trust that was palpable between the performers. It is the absence of that kind of trust that I think often makes on-stage nudity so challenging for the spectator. If the audience cannot sense that trust, nudity will feel awkward and embarrassing, no matter how carefully considered it is, how justified its presence is and how brilliantly it is performed.

Finally - an encounter with the theatre-makers themselves

I had initially thought that I would manage to write this piece and to dissect the reasons we find the naked human body so provocative without speaking to the Four Floors of Whores themselves. I wanted their church to serve as a catalyst for my own thinking, but it ultimately ended up serving as the framework that allowed me to reflect on my own sense of spectatorhood and relationship with the naked on-stage body. In the end, my curiosity gets the better of me, and I end up in conversation with Emilia Jansson, Herman Nyby and Astrid Stenberg. Why the nudity?

"We find it meaningful to put forward new ways of doing theatre, and perhaps even to engender permanent change from within," the threesome says. A commitment to ongoing discovery is what drives them as a group and as individual artists. Their use of nudity, they explain, emerged as a subconscious choice and not as an attempt at provocation or as a means to an end in itself. The collective's first production, *BLANCHE* (Uniarts, 2019), a rewriting of **Tennessee Williams's** *A Streetcar Named Desire*, contained elements of so-called real action, including public urination and anal penetration. Their interest in real action is rooted in their craft as actors. How do you incorporate your bladder or your bowel into your acting, they ask. What discussion and negotiation are needed before you can insert an object into someone else's anus on stage? What does it feel like to act upside down? The collective are driven by their desire to experiment, to engage playfully with

the job of acting, and if that means pushing some boundaries along the way then so be it, but they never set out to provoke for the sake of it.

I now turn my attention back to the group of older theatre-makers who took umbrage at *The Church of Four Floors of Whores* and conclude that they must simply view the actor's body differently, as an active agent rather than as an object of study. As something to hide rather than to celebrate, perhaps.

The presence of nudity instantly activates the spectator's gaze, we become more conscious of our own act of looking. That might be particularly radical in the theatre setting where we are used to being passive recipients. Nudity offers a tender and subtle way to engage the spectator. And that, by definition, is political.

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Featured works

- 4 Floors of Whores: *The Church of Four Floors of Whores*, Hangö Teaterträff theatre festival 9–11 June 2022.
Matilda Aaltonen & Joel Teixeira Neves, *VOYEUR*, Teatteri Universum 13 February 2020.
Asta Rentola, *ALASTI/NAKED*, recording from Valtimonteatteri 2020, watched on 26 January 2023.

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MIKHAIL DURNENKOV is a Russian playwright, screenwriter and lecturer currently residing in Helsinki. In 1995 he was one of the founders of a school for new drama in Tolyatti, Russia, which started a movement that had a great impact on the development of new Russian plays. Since 2012 Durnenkov has been the artistic director of the Lubimovka Young Russian Playwrights festival, as well as played a key role in the oppositional Russian theatre group Teatr.doc. His plays have been produced around the world, and they often tackle humanitarian and political issues. For example, in his play *The War Hasn't Yet Started* (2015) Durnenkov describes the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Upon the invasion of Ukraine in 2021 pro-Kremlin groups began a targeted campaign against Durnenkov, and his anti-war statements were condemned by the Union of Theatre Workers who also revoked his membership, while the Department of Culture of the City of Moscow demanded the cancellation of all performances based on his works. Durnenkov has resided with his family in Helsinki since March 2022. His most recent play, *A Short Episode in the Universal History of the Mushroom Civilization*, premiered at the Espoo City Theatre in Finland in 2023.

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