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ESTONIAN STATE PUPPET THEATRE

– The First Decades



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My thesis is on the genesis of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

It handles the following subjects: the conditions in the theatre in its first decades; the rooms where actors worked; actors' thoughts on their work; the plays that were staged; artistic means used to reach the audience and the audience's reaction to it. The thesis also describes the role of a director in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

The thesis gives an overview of the life and work of Ferdinand Veike, who played a major role in the history of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. His studies in Leningrad and his thoughts on his work are discussed.

The thesis also contains the views of Estonian State Puppet Theatre's current employees on the theatre and its role in Estonian society.

KEYWORDS:

Ferdinand Veike, Rein Agur, Estonian State Puppet Theatre, Puppet theatre in Estonia

Mirko Rajas

VIRON KANSALLINEN NUKKETEATTERI – ensimmäisinä vuosikymmeninä

Minun tehtäväni on selvittää Viron Kansallisen Nukketeatterin syntymisen tarina.

Selvitin olosuhteita Viron Kansallisessa Nukketeatterissa ensimmäisinä vuosikymmeninä: minkälaiset olivat tilat, joissa näyttelijät työskentelivät ja kyselin niin näyttelijöiden tunteista kuin myös ajatuksista työn ja taiteellisten valintojen osalta. Selvitin, minkälaisia esityksiä oli tarjolla, mitä taiteellisia keinoja käytettiin ja yleisön reaktioita niihin. Työni selvittää myös ohjaajan aseman ja tilanteen Viron Kansallisessa Nukketeatterissa.

Käsittelen työssäni teatterin perustajan ja nukkenäyttelijä – ohjaajan Ferdinand Veiken elämää, hänen opintoja Leningradissa ja ajatuksia työstä 30 vuoden aikana.

Esittelen myös nykyisten työntekijöiden näkemyksiä Viron Kansallisesta Nukketeatterista ja sen roolista Viron yhteiskunnassa.

ASIASANAT:

Ferdinan Veike, Rein Agur, Viron Kansallinen Nukketeatteri, nukketeatteri Virossa

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (OR) SYMBOLS

ESPTA	Estonian State Puppet Theatre Archive
ESSR	Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940-1991), another shortened form in use: Estonian SSR. Was a republic of the Soviet Union, administrated by and belonged to the Government of the Soviet Union
ETMMA	Eesti Teatri- ja Muusikamuuseumi Arhiiv (Estonian Theatre and Music Museum Archive)

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of my thesis was not difficult to choose. As I joined the Estonian State Puppet Theatre in 2010, I realised that I knew very little about its founding and history, practically nothing. Many customs, traditions and stories remained a mystery to me – why they were what they were and not something else. I decided to look into its history, the first years after its founding, to get a better picture of the present state of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre and how the theatre has developed, and to learn the origin of its conventions, customs and patterns of behaviour.

The goal of this thesis is to give an overview of the founding of the puppet theatre and its history, and to introduce briefly the thoughts of its current employees on its history and present state. The main emphasis lies on the first decades of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

I collected material for this thesis in the archive of the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum. In addition to old articles and interviews with actors acquired in the archive, I also carried out interviews with people currently working in the puppet theatre.

In the first part of the thesis, I will give a short overview of how puppetry as an art form first reached Estonia. Next, I will introduce the genesis of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre and its situation in the first years and the following decades. I will look at the first productions – which plays were staged, who directed them and who were the artists. I will also discuss the situation of actors in the first years, their artistic tendencies and their skills as puppeteers. Additionally, I will provide a longer description of the life of Ferdinand Veike, the father of puppet theatre in Estonia. I believe that if there had not been for Ferdinand Veike, the Estonian State Puppet Theatre might not exist in its present form at all.

I will conclude the thesis with an analysis of interviews conducted with people currently working in the theatre. In the interviews, I asked them what they

thought of puppetry as an art form in general, what their first contacts with the Estonian State Puppet Theatre were, why we need puppetry and what role it has to play in Estonian society.

2 FIRST CONTACT WITH PUPPET THEATRE IN ESTONIA

There is no tradition of puppetry in Estonian folk art. Hence, the specific qualities of puppet theatre have not been naturally inherited from previous generations.

First puppet shows in Estonia were performed in the 17th century.

The German puppeteer Jacob Winglandt who had his own marionette theatre gave performances in Tallinn in 1630. This was also the first time an itinerant theatre company visited Estonia.

There is record of about four more puppet shows: an anonymous troupe in 1860s that gave a performance of shipwreck and a fire-spitting mountain; in summer 1911, the Russian puppeteer Petrov put on a show in Tallinn with his singing puppets; in autumn 1932, English students performed in Tallinn with marionettes, enacting satirical sketches about the life of students. (Liigand *s.a* (a), 42)

The contact that people in Estonia had with puppet theatre through theatre companies from abroad was therefore random and infrequent. Several generations went by without knowing anything about the existence of puppet arts. There is some grumble in the press about the absence of this peculiar genre, but nothing changes.

Performances at fairs gave birth to the first semi-professional marionette theatre in Estonia. It was led by the circus artist August Liblik; other two members were Sam Siirak and Elli Savi. The first performance was given on November 2nd, 1933.

The first puppet theatre in Estonia was active from 1933 to 1937.

Compared to the best European puppet theatres of the time, the knowledge that Estonians had of puppetry and its specific qualities was scanty. (Liigand *s.a* (a), 44)

The main impetus for the development of Estonian puppet theatre was given by the Czech puppeteer Josef Skupa and his world-class visiting performances. In Tallinn, the performances took place in Theatre "Estonia"; at 5 p.m. for children and at 8.30 p.m. for adults. The puppets used in both performances were the same, but the text was different. (Liigand *s.a* (a), 45)

Josef Skupa's visit and the success of his performances gave Estonian puppeteers the idea to offer Estonian audience a chance to see plays for children and adolescents in the form of puppet shows. The idea was put into effect by Leo Kalmet, who invited voluntary actors to form a theatre troupe. After four months of rehearsals they gave a public performance on December 20th, 1936. This was followed by the creation of a puppet troupe and several public performances. (Liigand *s.a* (a), 51)

The puppet troupe founded in 1936 later gives an impetus for the growth of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

In a short period of time, actors have learned the technical handling of puppets relatively well. It is likely that by perfecting their skills, they can soon take puppetry to a required level. The audience's lively and supportive reaction to puppet shows and the results they have obtained so far encourage actors to carry on developing the field of puppetry. Puppet theatre requires a special repertory written for puppet shows, one that sadly we do not have in Estonia, but that we have to start creating. (Mettus 1936)

Leo Kalmet's falling in love with puppet theatre, the affection of Estonian audience and the success of the first puppet show created by Estonians themselves form a basis for the development of puppet theatre in Estonia,

finally leading to the founding of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre by Ferdinand Veike on January 1st, 1952.

3 THE FOUNDING OF THE ESTONIAN STATE PUPPET THEATRE

There was no children's theatre in Estonia. Drama theatres could not meet the demand for children's plays. At the time, puppet theatre was seen only as theatre for children. On November 24th, 1951, the South Estonian theatre was dissolved. On its basis, a new theatre called the Estonian State Puppet Theatre was formed on January 1st, 1952, by the ESSR Government of Arts directive number 499. Puppet theatre was part of the Soviet cultural system, this was probably the main reason for founding the theatre at a time when drama theatres were joined and closed one after another.

The brand new theatre started work with the following staff: managing director Aleksei Juhkum, head drama director Ferdinand Veike, designer/decorator Raivo Laidre, accordionist/pianist Vladimir Tarkpea, head of production Vello Kaljumaa, actors Helmut Vaag, Raivo Kuremaa, Ants Kivirähk, Aii Leetva, Lo Tui - Selirau, Maimu Orgussaar - Martin, Made Varango-Ots and Olaf Paesüld. The technical staff included a wardrobe supervisor, an electrician, two stage assemblers and a carpenter. Some professions essential to puppet theatre, such as puppet sculptor and puppet technician, were lacking.



Picture 1. Puppet Theatre Staff in 1952 (ESPTA *Estonian State Puppet Theatre Archive*)

The puppet theatre was given a chance to hire new actors. However, finding actors who were interested in puppetry proved to be quite difficult, especially as most of the drama theatres in Estonia were short of actors. Nevertheless, with the help of the Government of Arts, they managed to expand the acting troupe of the puppet theatre by transfers from other theatres and placements from drama schools.

In the first three years, the theatre had no rooms of its own. They travelled from one place to another and held rehearsals in wardrobes of other theatres. (Värk 2004, 53 - 55)

In 1952, Ferdinand Veike managed to find rooms in the Youth Dance Hall in number 1, Lai Street, which was used as residence for troops. Items of scenery had to be carried over soldiers sleeping on the floor and the stairs. There was a shooting range above the ceiling of the hall, so that quiet claps could be heard during performances. The need to find necessary rooms for the puppet theatre was typically underestimated. People tended to think that producing puppet plays needed no more room than the edge of a table. At first, puppet stages could be assembled only for four or five hours, as the army parachutists were working in the same hall. In the evening, the audience had to show their passports to see a play. (Veike & Rass 2009, 158 - 161)

3.1 The actor in the first years of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre

In the beginning, there were two kinds of actors in the puppet theatre. Many drama actors had become puppeteers because of the circumstances; in their hearts they were still longing for the big stage. These were the actors who needed immediate contact with the audience. They were good with words, emotional, sensitive, and had good contact with their partner, but it was often difficult for them to subject a puppet to their will.

The other type of actors had good command of the technical side of puppetry, but the verbal side or their inner emotions were sometimes wanting. An especially acute problem for the puppeteers was their inability to work with their voice. More than in other theatres, there were actors in the puppet theatre who had had no drama education and were lacking sufficient preparation in vocal techniques. Therefore, there certainly should have been voice coaching classes. (Värk 2004, 58)

Actress Helle Raa – Eskola:

The verbal expression of the actor, which I, being a drama actor, find much easier to handle, is only one component in communicating the puppet's character. Contact with your puppet, with your partner's puppet, with your partner, the puppeteer; giving the puppet natural movement and gestures that organically grow out of the puppet's character and its behaviour in a particular situation – all that requires multi-faceted attention. At first, having to handle the puppet just distracts me when I try to get into the role. It happens that the puppet's hand or head does not move the way it should, and you are immediately out of the role. Or your hand gets tired from holding the puppet for too long and the queen who should be gracefully calm and majestic suddenly starts to jump funnily, her head totters like that of an old woman, and the character of the puppet changes. Or if you focus too much on your own puppet, you immediately lose touch with other puppets and the puppet starts acting alone, forgetting its partners. (Ruus 19.10.1955)

Although there were some good performances of puppetry in almost every production, a great performance by the whole ensemble was rare in the puppet theatre at the time. The puppeteer who was hidden from the audience behind a screen had to make an emotional impact on the viewer by means of voice and puppetry technique. The theatre had some prominent actors who stood out and put others in the shade. (Värk 2004, 94)

Leo Kalmet:

When watching the performances, one notices that the standard of conveying motion is not yet uniform. While there are some quite good performances of motion, there is also technical shoddiness. The latter is either due to accidental mistakes or inadequacy. It seems that the puppet does not always bend to the will of its master, the puppeteer who moves it. There is also a lot of randomness in moving puppets. Even if a puppet performs rather well, it can still suddenly fall out of rhythm or just become mechanical. It also occurs that puppets do not always move on visible surface. At times, more than half of their body disappears underground, and sometimes, though less often, the puppeteer's hand becomes visible, immediately breaking the illusion. Greater emphasis should be put on achieving characteristic expressiveness, because the puppet lacks facial expressions and almost everything must be communicated through the movement of the body. Naturally, this requires a careful training of the puppeteers also outside performances. (Kalmet *s.a*)

By the beginning of 1960s, the question of successors had arisen sharply. For that reason, in autumn 1962, the puppet department of the Estonian Theatrical Society study studio was opened in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre by the leader Ferdinand Veike (See more from the chapter 4.4.1, page 23). (Värk 2004, 99)

3.2 The director in the first years of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre

The greatest part of directing was done by Ferdinand Veike. For example, from 1956 to 1963, 29 plays out of 38 in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre were directed by him. Ferdinand Veike held fast to the traditional style that was characteristic to him. At least six new plays had to be staged each year. Ferdinand Veike can be described as a director with vivid imagination and interesting ideas, in the framework of classical booth theatre. His colleagues remember that he was not always able to implement his interesting and great imagination in the production's general idea. (Tomson 1988)

Veike loved staging fairy tales and he was good at it. He seemed to follow two paths that sometimes tended to go off course. One path was this overactive imagination that he could not always control, and the other – he did not think much of relativity. He tried to attain it, but did not get the right balance. There was sometimes too much noise in his productions as well as things that should

not be emphasised. On the other hand, he was good with many other things.
(*Kõnelused...*, 27.11.1987)

Oskar Liigand:

Ferdinand Veike laid more emphasis on the technical side, on how the puppet moved. When he made remarks to actors on the movement of a puppet, he explained his demands with the fact that as a bystander, he saw how the puppet moved, whereas the puppeteer did not. Once I demanded that they put a mirror on stage, so that I could see the puppet moving too. But the mirror was a distraction; everything was the other way around in the mirror. Veike was a very good actor himself, a better actor than a director. And very good at moving the puppet; nobody was on a par with him. Every puppet came to life in his hands. It is a pity that such a good puppeteer spent so much time directing. As a director, however, he was irreplaceable, because there was nobody else to do it.
(*Kõnelused...*, 26.11.1987)

Novel ideas and creative quests were brought to the theatre by the young director Rein Agur who could not be satisfied with working within the limits of booth theatre. For example he was anxious to find out if Hamlet's soliloquy could be delivered on puppet stage. Wise men had said it was not possible – a puppet could not do that. Agur, however, believed it could. All he needed was to find the right means and a device to capture the audience. (Liigand *s.a* (b), 31)

Of course Rein Agur looked for ways to use his creative personal touch in directing. The theatre had to move on, develop and reform – but how? He was not sure about this himself at the time. Rein Agur:

We needed to get rid of naturalism and the illustrative nature of the text. To bring imagery and theatricality on stage. We needed to create the conditions for actors to play at their maximum. Until then, actors were just animators who said their lines and moved their puppets. The actor as an artist with all his faculties had to be brought on stage in the puppet theatre. This was very important. At the beginning of the sixties, I thought that puppet mechanics, its shape and form – giving it maximum movement, perfecting it to the utmost – is one way to put as much life into what is happening on stage as possible. There is some truth in it. But no matter how far you drive it, you still end up by the wall. Distorting the voice was unacceptable for me from the start. The moment an actor picked up a puppet, his voice turned ugly. The prevailing understanding in the theatre was that distorting your voice meant giving the puppet its character. This slowly started to change. There was also the question of repertory with more content. We had to get rid of the didactic nature of plays and moralising closing songs.
(*Kõnelused...*, 07.12.1988)

Ferdinand Veike and Rein Agur held completely different views in their creative work, which is by nothing to frown upon in a true professional theatre. On the

contrary, it brings variety into the theatre and enriches its artistic face. Ferdinand Veike laid more emphasis on outward glory, using many effective tricks and at the same time demanding virtuoso handling of puppets. For Rein Agur, masterful command of the puppet was less important than opening up the hidden meaning of the play. As he put it – the puppet theatre not only had to amaze children and make them laugh, but also to broaden their horizons of feeling and thought, so that they could better understand the modern world around them. Both directors chose the repertory of the theatre according to their own beliefs. (Liigand s.a (b), 34 - 35)

3.3 The first productions of Estonian State Puppet Theatre

The first production in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre premiered on March 23rd, 1952. It was Sergei Mikhalkov's *The Boastful Bunny*, directed by Raivo Kuremaa and Ferdinand Veike. The music was written by Vladimir Tarkpea. The play was staged in collaboration with Leningrad puppet specialists. Raivo Kuremaa, Made Varango-Ots, Olaf Paesüld, Ants Kivirähk, Lo Tui and Ingrid Kasesalu were few of the actors who took part. (ESPTA 1952)

Actress Ingrid Kasesalu speaks of the performance:

I got the part of the third bunny. I did not have many lines, but I thought it was so much fun, my first role! It was a very simple play with hand puppets. It was a puppet show in a booth. We only performed shows in a booth at the time. It was a simple fun story with songs in it. The scenery was modest. Playing with puppets was not that difficult; Ferdinand Veike taught us. One of the ideas of the production was that everyone had to work together. (Vapper 1990)

The important productions that were staged in the first years of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre:

- The Orphan's Hand-Mill (Vaeslapse käsikivi)

The only form of puppet theatre in Estonia in 1950s was one staged in a booth. *The Orphan's Hand-Mill* was therefore an exceptional production in the theatre of those days. In order to unite the traditions of two different schools, Ferdinand Veike staged Juhan Kangilaski's *The Orphan's Hand-Mill* in 1953. The beginning and the end were performed

only by actors; scenes of dreams in the middle were acted out with puppets. (Värk 2004, 59)

The critic Aino Tigane spoke highly of the production as a whole, but he also found many shortcomings. The scenes with puppets were weak when compared to those on big stage. The voices of puppet characters lacked expression, which made it difficult for the audience to understand which character was speaking. Aino Tigane thought that the characters were meticulously performing small tasks, but it was not enough to raise dramatic tension; singing and dancing alone could not do that. (Tigane 10.04.1953)

Crafty Hans and Old Devil (Kaval-Ants ja Vanapagan)

Crafty Hans and Old Devil was staged in 1955 for both children and adults. This was rather exceptional at the time; children were still considered to be the real audience of the puppet theatre. As the play was mainly built on the text, it was not enough of a puppet play by contemporary standards. However, director Ferdinand Veike thought this production realised the maximum that they were capable of at the time. (Värk 2004, 67)

The critic Romulus Tiitus writes about the staging of Juhan Kangilaski's Crafty Hans and Old Devil with the following words:

The production of this play can be considered a success. The puppets are magnificent. When they come on stage, you feel like they are your long-time acquaintances. When it comes to the actors, it is difficult to praise anyone in particular; everyone does a good job. (Tiitus 23.04.1955)

Owing to its vivid folksy characters, Crafty Hans and Old Devil was one of the most successful productions of the time. Old Estonian proverbs and the fact that performances took place in Kadrioru Park, in open air, added to its popularity. The success of this play excited people's interest in puppet arts and the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.

Crafty Hans and Old Devil in the puppet theatre received much attention from both the audience and theatres; it was later taken as example when staged in other theatres. (Värk 2004, 67)

- Playing with the Devil (Mäng Kuradiga) by Jan Drda

Although people in the puppet theatre were convinced that they could offer something to an adult audience as well, it was not quite clear what this should have been. Should it have been allegorical or was it possible to stage a realistic play for adults in puppet theatre? There were many sceptics. It was increasingly believed that adults should be approached on a wholly different level and in a different way than children. (*Kõnelused...*, 27.11.1987)

The ministry of culture of the time did not approve of performances for adults in the puppet theatre. Being the only children's theatre in Estonia, it had to stage plays only for children, considering the audience's great demand for children's plays. (Värk 2004, 85)

Despite the heated debates, Ferdinand Veike managed to stage *Playing with the Devil*, the first puppet play for adults in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, which premiered on March 11th, 1961.

The first puppet show for adults was mostly approved of by critics.

The first attempt – staging the satirical *Playing with the Devil* – showed clearly that playing for adults had perspective. The production had some shortcomings, such as the overwhelming predominance of the negative side or the fact that important moments were not emphasised enough. Nevertheless, this first attempt is to be considered a success. (Kalmet 1961)

Playing with the Devil was a welcome change for puppeteers. They could now test their skills on an adult audience and in interesting roles that the play had to offer. They were not short of audience, but unfortunately pressure from above forced them to give up performing the play. The

next puppet show for adults was not to be staged for another twelve years. (Värk 2004, 85)

3.4 Summary of the first year

In the first year, the puppet theatre repertory was dominated by Russian drama. Out of seven plays staged, the only original Estonian play was Helmut Vaag's *Greed Goes before a Fall (Ahnus Ajab Upakile)*.

Critics accused the theatre management of not having made necessary contact with Estonian writers of children's stories. But the problem was that nobody, neither the theatre people nor writers, knew what the difference between an ordinary play and a puppet play should be. It was becoming clear that a puppet play has to be lively, full of action and with as little text as possible. Listening to static puppet characters chatting away on stage was simply too boring for the young audience. Everything on stage had to be clear and understandable to children. The importance of the creative thinking and deep emotions of the child audience had not been taken into account.

Most of the productions in the first season were naturalistic both in their directing and design.

In the first year, the Estonian State Puppet Theatre mostly performed on tours. The theatre travelled a lot. One tour could last a week or even up to three weeks. The first year of the puppet theatre saw 246 performances and 41423 guests. (Värk 2004, 56 - 57)



Picture 2. Touring 1950 - 60s (ESPTA)

3.5 Summary of the first decades of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre

Original puppet plays constituted a big part of the puppet theatre repertory in its first years. The list of the theatre's own playwrights included Juhan Kangilaski, Eno Raud, Uno Leies, Oskar Liigand, Reet Reiljan and Ellen Niit. Having so many authors was certainly a good thing; unfortunately, however, original repertory lacked variability. The plays were usually fun stories where there was lively activity, but the content was secondary and superficial. Many of the plays in repertory also tended to fall into the category of routine pedagogical theatre. Before the puppet theatre renewed its content, it tried to change its visual side. (Värk 2004, 128)

The design of a puppet stage had to be laconic and offer better opportunities for playing. A new type of screen where puppets could move on different levels extended the stage area considerably and enabled the actors to appear before the audience as well as hide behind the screen. The appearance of stylised puppets spoke of the aspiration to open up their nature and function. Oskar Liigand:

“It is wrong to think that puppet theatre is the art of the big stage in miniature. In theatre, as in art in general, the object depicted is a human being. On big stage, this happens through a person, but on puppet stage – through a lifeless puppet. Puppets therefore have a great power of generalisation, they express themselves

through allegory. Generalised symbolic figures are capable of carrying great and philosophical ideas.” (Purje 1971)

A puppet show is almost always a synthetic one, combining words and actions, puppets and their environment, music and audio background. It is a pleasure to see that the theatre has paid much attention to music. Most plays are accompanied by original music and many outstanding composers have been invited to give counsel. The situation is not all that good with audio equipment and amplifiers. Music that has been composed with talent and vividly instrumentalised for a small group unfortunately loses much of its effect when the viewer cannot hear it with sufficient expressiveness and vividness. Sadly, this theatre has been more disregarded by critics than any other. And yet, it also gives performances and creates rather serious art. The theatre now has to take bolder steps in diversifying its repertory and finding new means of expression. The audience is alert and open-minded, but the theatre should still keep its imagination flying high. (Kivilo 1970)

Looking back on the time now, a few decades later, it seems that the Estonian State Puppet Theatre made the greatest leap in its development in 1970s, although plays that offered original and novel ideas were staged in the following decades as well. But it was probably also a time when the fiercest criticism was levelled at the puppet theatre for not being childlike, for its irony, and for destroying the illusion of the puppet world.

4 FERDINAND VEIKE AND THE PUPPET THEATRE

When it comes to the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, one cannot disregard Ferdinand Veike, the man who laid the foundation for the introduction and development of puppet arts in Estonia. If there had not been for Ferdinand Veike, there might be no such form of theatre as puppet theatre in Estonia. Estonian State Puppet Theatre (at present Estonian State Puppet and Youth Theatre) is the image of Ferdinand Veike (Picture 3) and therefore discussing him is essential for giving a precise and relevant overview of the only professional puppet theatre in Estonia.



Picture 3. Ferdinand Veike's bas-relief picture on the Estonian State Puppet Theatre (by Jaana Juur 2008)

4.1 The beginning of Ferdinand Veike's journey

Ferdinand Veike was born in November 1924 in the village of Saueaugu, Küti parish. His parents were farmers. He received his first drama education from 1943 to 1946 in the special class of the Drama Studio of the State Drama Theatre, receiving also the honorary title of People's Artist of the Estonian SSR. (Veike & Rass 2009, 782 – 783)

The State Youth Theatre of the Estonian SSR was founded in 1944. At the time, Ferdinand Veike was still a second year student of the Drama Studio, but he was able to join the puppet troupe of the brand new Youth Theatre. The atmosphere in the Youth Theatre's puppet troupe was tense and the situation of the rooms difficult. Performances were given in several places; their technical side was unsatisfactory. The puppet troupe had to heat the rooms with seven stoves in order to keep the audience from getting cold and leaving to see performances somewhere else.

In the beginning, Ferdinand Veike's task was to string the puppets and choreograph puppet shows. Until the beginning of 1948, the only type of puppets used was marionettes.

Ferdinand Veike's first role as a puppeteer was in Lo Tui's production *Haldjas Kastetilk* (*Dewdrop Fairy*), where he played the Oak Tree.

In March 1948, the activities of the State Youth Theatre of the Estonian SSR were terminated by government directive and the theatre was joined with the Drama Theatre in Tallinn. Ferdinand Veike was employed to work as the artistic director of puppet shows. He started to direct puppet performances and also act in them himself. (See more from appendices: Ferdinand Veike's CV, page 39)

4.2 First production

Ferdinand Veike's first independent production came out in 1948. It was a play called *Reinuvader Rebane* (*Cunning Fox*) written by Helmut Vaag. (Veike & Rass 2009, 66, 115)

Helmut Vaag writes about the play:

The extent of Ferdinand Veike's imagination makes you dizzy. His puppet show takes up the whole wide stage. Until now, the stage of a puppet show has been four metres in width; Ferdinand Veike, however, makes use of as much as ten metres and perhaps would have used more, had the size of the room allowed it. He staged the play in a way that had the performance going on in three different points at once, so that the audience did not know where to look. (Vaag s.a)

The contemporary Estonian daily "Õhtuleht" reviewed the production as follows:

"Using animals as puppets on a puppet stage is technically quite difficult to carry out. It requires a thorough knowledge of their way of life and physiology. The puppeteers of the New Theatre have done quite a good job with it; the play will be a pleasant and informative experience for children. (Õhtuleht 19.11.1948)

4.3 Studies in Leningrad State Institute of Theatre

In 1949, Ferdinand Veike was rewarded for good results in his work with a trip to Leningrad, where he was introduced to the work of the Leningrad Puppet Theatre. Mikhail Koroljov, the head drama director of the Leningrad Puppet Theatre, gave Veike a study program of the puppet faculty of the Alexander Ostrovsky Leningrad Theatre Institute. Ferdinand Veike later used it for the study studio of the puppet theatre.

In 1950, Ferdinand Veike was sent (dispatched) to the higher faculty of drama directing in the Alexander Ostrovsky Leningrad State Theatre Institute by order of Brovatsov, the head of the Government of Arts, the forerunner of the Ministry of Culture. (Veike & Rass 2009, 66 – 148)

In Leningrad, Ferdinand Veike attended lectures and seminars on drama directing. These were followed by lectures and meetings with theatre designers for preparing productions and creating designs of decorations, props and costumes and for setting stage lighting. They learned to analyse productions. The value of the text and the importance of its literary merit were emphasised. They experimented with decoration and costume design as well as directing to obtain witty results. The joint effect of sculpting and makeup gave birth to grotesque puppet characters. The practical work of directing studies in the Leningrad theatre institute involved working on new productions in the Maxim Gorky theatre, such as Alexander Ostrovsky's *Snow White*.

In rehearsals they learned in detail how to communicate with their partner. This was later discussed in lectures and additional nuances were pointed out. Ferdinand Veike has the signatures of lecturers of eighteen courses on his graduation diploma. He had to sit an exam in twelve subjects: two political disciplines, history of Russian literature, history of Russian theatre, history of Soviet literature, history of Soviet theatre, history of Russian and Soviet art, history of Western art, theatre of antiquity, dramaturgy of the theatre of antiquity, history of costumes, and history of Western literature and theatre. He had to know how the characters of *commedia dell' Arte* were called, the names and plots of at least twelve plays by Shakespeare, history of Western, Russian and Soviet music, composers, operas as well as other musical productions and films.

Unfortunately, graduating the directing class in the Alexander Ostrovsky Leningrad Theatre Institute is no longer considered to grant higher education in Estonia. Perhaps with good reason, for the institute has changed its name and nowadays, puppet play directing is studied for two years after graduating from the puppeteering faculty. Today, puppeteers are trained in the Saint Petersburg

Academy of Theatre, Music and Cinema. Studies are non-stationary; distance learning lasts for five years and requires students to be present for a month four times a year. (Veike & Rass 2009, 148 - 154)

At present, Taavi Tõnisson, an Estonian puppeteer, is a student of this school since autumn, 2011.

4.4 Life after the graduation of Leningrad State Institute of Theatre

When Ferdinand Veike graduated directing studies in Leningrad and arrived in Tallinn, he was assigned by the Government of Arts the task of founding a puppet theatre in Tallinn. On the one hand, it was a flattering task, but on the other – a frightening one. The creation of a separate puppet theatre opened up the opportunity to further develop puppet arts.

On January 1st, 1952, Ferdinand Veike founded the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. (Värk 2004, 55)

4.4.1 Creation of the Study Studio of the Puppet Theatre

In autumn 1962, Ferdinand Veike led the creation of the puppet studio. He chose teachers to the studio from among experienced theatre experts. (Värk 2004, 174 - 176) The students chosen by Ferdinand Veike first had to come for an interview and then to tryouts. The competition was rather strong – out of fifty young hopefuls, only twelve were admitted to the studio.

The puppet theatre study studio started work on November 1st, 1962. Classes took place in the evenings twice a week. All students had to have a job, as they did not earn money in the studio. Neither were they guaranteed a job in the puppet theatre after graduating the studio. (Värk 2004, 99)

Ferdinand Veike taught the subject of mastery in acting. Other subjects taught in the studio included voice coaching, stage movement, handling marionettes, puppet crafting, and history of theatre. Students were also taught manners and ethics. (Värk 2004, 174 - 176)

The studio worked on the principle that a puppeteer is first and foremost an actor. The students were first given an idea of the elements of theatre arts in a broader context. At the same time, the singular character of puppet theatre as a synthetic and collective form of theatre was kept in mind. The curriculum comprised the following subjects: the bases of dramatic arts, speech technique, puppet anatomy, puppet manipulation, puppet making, puppet stage design, stage movement, role analysis, solfeggio, voice lessons, and history of theatre.

In the first year, the students mainly learned etudes and theoretical subjects. In the second year, they performed in their first production, *Cinderella*. From early on, studio members were used in puppet shows alongside experienced actors. (Värk 2004, 99)

On June 16th, 1966, ten young puppeteers graduated the studio (I puppet theatre studio group 1962 - 1966). Six of them started work in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. (Värk 2004, 174 - 176)

A singular play in puppet theatre repertory was Mihhail Tedeä's *Detective Paw* (*Salapolitseinik Käpp*). Rein Agur staged the play with the second-year students of the study studio (II puppet theatre studio group 1967 - 1971). It grew out of etudes that studio members performed in their classes.

This was a somewhat unusual performance. As the lights went out, white hands appeared above the screen – 18 hands in white gloves with fingers spread out. Next came various etudes of hand movement and rhythmic, where hands depicted blossoming flowers, construction workers and swans on waves. Then a real puppet appeared above the screen – a crying girl called Marika. In order to find her missing toys, the clever hands made a detective right in front of the audience, and started to act out a story that had to display all the skills that had been acquired in the first year – skills of puppet manipulation and mastery of acting. During the rehearsals, everyone was probably concerned with their own puppet, examining its movement and bending it to their will. Communication with their partner, however, was still quite random and shaky. (Normet 26.10.1969)

4.4.2 Ferdinand Veike gets replaced by Rein Agur

In spring 1978, Ferdinand Veike suffered an infarction right in the middle of a performance. For three months, he was in a poor state and even had to learn to walk again. On December 20th 1980, Ferdinand Veike stepped down from the post of head drama director in the theatre he had founded. He was replaced by director Rein Agur.

Ferdinand Veike started work as a freelance. He still has not lost touch with the puppet theatre – he sees all the new productions and gives advice if necessary. (Veike & Rass 2009, 191 - 192)

5 INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE CURRENTLY WORKING IN THE ESTONIAN STATE PUPPET THEATRE

In this last chapter, I will concentrate on the key figures in the present-day Estonian State Puppet Theatre: managing director Meelis Pai, artistic director Vahur Keller and leading actor Taavi Tõnisson. I carried out interviews with them in order to find out, what their first contacts with puppet theatre were like and to learn their views on the role of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre in present-day Estonia.

In addition to aforementioned persons, I also conversed with actress Tiina Tõnis, who has a long work experience in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. I asked her to share her thoughts on working in the theatre.

5.1 Interview with the managing director of Estonian State Puppet Theatre

Meelis Pai

What was your first contact with the Estonian State Puppet Theatre?

I first came into contact with puppet theatre when I was nine years old. I went to see a Ferdinand Veike's puppet show. It was very stormy and the screen of the stage fell down. I sat in the first row and helped him put the screen up again. Later I travelled the whole tour with him as his 'screen holder'.

What has changed for you in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre since you started working here?

I have got answers to many questions – I came to the building and saw how puppeteers work. I have been able to travel and see puppet shows across the world.

In my opinion only a special kind of person can be a puppeteer; it is a special gift. Not every actor can learn the skill.

Another thing that has changed is that actors have come out on big stage. Our theatre has started to offer entertainment, which is a very good step in terms of popularisation.

Why does Estonia need the Puppet Theatre?

Estonians love going to the theatre. We are lucky to have the Puppet Theatre and to differ from others by our skills.

It is good for a theatre to have its individual face, the same goes for the Puppet Theatre. We also serve the role of the only professional children's theatre in Estonia.

Why the Estonian State Puppet Theatre?

To be honest, it was mostly a coincidence. Had there been an opening somewhere else, I might have found myself there. But I was fortunate to come

here, because this is a place where you can experiment. We have also created the puppet museum, which is a very important project for me. It has benefitted the theatre a great deal.

If you could change something in the Puppet Theatre, what would it be?

The managing director has always got one thing in mind – how to finance good ideas. My dream is to have a new building finished in three years. I wish that there was work for everyone, so that our actors would not have to tear themselves apart; that the actors of the Puppet Theatre had a chance to work in television and participate in films.

Interviewed by Mirko Rajas April 2012



Picture 4. Estonian State Puppet Theatre managing director Meelis Pai (by Jaana Juur 2008)

5.2 Interview with the artistic director of Estonian State Puppet Theatre Vahur Keller

What was your first contact with the Estonian State Puppet Theatre?

I do not remember exactly. When I was a child, I never went to the puppet theatre. The first clear memories are related to my time at the university.

Studying in drama school, I staged my first play in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. It was my course work. Back then, me and my course mate looked at the building and found it to be a depressing black hole in the city centre – a black hole with great potential. We fantasised about coming to work here after school, polishing things up, setting them in motion.

What do you think, why does Estonia need the Puppet Theatre?

For diversification. To make Estonian theatre scene more exciting. Theatre in Estonia concentrates on the verbal side; the text is in high esteem. We have grown out of Russian and German theatre. But also because in Soviet times, words made it possible to convey hidden messages in subtext. But thinking of theatre in general, puppetry offers a great opportunity for diversification, as the primary means of expression is visual.

Why the Puppet Theatre?

What fascinates me about the genre is that actors have to suppress their ego, in a good way; they have to overcome their inner self. It is terrible to watch an actor showing off on stage, using fixed commonplace moves. But the genre of puppetry keeps the actor permanently active; mere charm is not enough. The actor is always forced to start from scratch. As the means of expression is outside of you, you are forced to act in the name of something higher than you.

In which direction can the Estonian State Puppet Theatre move in the future?

I think there should be more independent troupes that practice puppetry. At the moment, there is only one theatre practicing the genre. Other theatres could start using more elements of puppetry. Perhaps in the future there will be a puppet theatre or troupe in Estonia that practices traditional puppetry; that would be interesting.

In ten years' time, Estonia could be the location of the world puppetry centre, the puppetry mecca in Europe.

If you could change something in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, what would it be?

There are many devoted actors in our theatre; I would not change much. Neither would I like to have much money; that would lose the creative pleasure and sharpness. Money would bring along brain death – certain deficiency makes you think and act.

I would rather not change anything, but hold on to the merits we have in our theatre.

Interviewed by Mirko Rajas April 2012



Picture 5. Estonian State Puppet Theatre artistic director Vahur Keller (by Jaana Juur 2010)

5.3 Interview with Estonian State Puppet Theatre actor Taavi Tõnisson

What was your first contact with the Estonian State Puppet Theatre?

*It was a long time ago; I was just a child. Helle Laas visited our school with her performance *The Vepsian Fairy Tales*. I do not remember much of this emotion. But I do remember being surprised that the actress was alone on stage.*

Why does Estonia need the Estonian State Puppet Theatre?

I do not know if Estonia needs the genre at all. If it was completely lacking, it would not change much. The country would be poorer.

However, children's plays in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre introduce children to the world of theatre.

Puppet theatre is something that is much richer than the classic one. We are one of the possible cultural windows to the world. Puppetry is a language that is universal, just like the language of dance.

Theatre is theatre and puppet is an instrument of telling a story. The richer the culture of a country is, the richer are its people.

A memory related to the Puppet Theatre?

As I graduated drama school, we came to see performances here. One day when I had just seen a play here with my course mate, she said that she would like to work in this building. I answered that I certainly would not. But here I am, happy. I realised very soon that I had come home, that there was a place for me here.

Why the Puppet Theatre?

I came here by coincidence and did not realise at first where I really was. At first it was just a job for me; another option was not to work. Coming here, I did not know if I liked puppets. I have experienced both success and failure and I have sometimes felt that I would do much better without the puppet. But if I am doing well, I can feel the creative freedom that the puppet gives me.

If there was something you could change about the theatre, what would it be?

I believe that after a revolution in theatre, there should be stability. Theatre should look after the wellbeing of its actors; look after their development, so that they would not forget that the place they work in is a theatre.

Interviewed by Mirko Rajas in March 2012



Picture 6. Estonian State Puppet Theatre actor Taavi Tõnisson (by Jaana Juur 2010)

5.4 Conversation with Estonian State Puppet Theatre actress Tiina Tõnis

Tiina Tõnis has been an actress in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre since 1985. Because of her long work experience, she has a good overview of the time in the theatre that, though not immediately following the period I concentrated on in this thesis, was greatly influenced by it.

The conversation concerned different directors whom Tiina Tõnis has had a chance to work with; what the years she spent in the theatre have been like; what has changed and what has stayed the same. Tiina Tõnis also gave her opinion on the development of the theatre.

Tiina Tõnis:

'27 years in the theatre is almost half of my lifetime. In the context of Estonian theatre, 27 years is a short period of time; in the history of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, however, it is a considerable number. Much has happened from 1985 till now. Even the government regime has changed.'

In the course of 27 years, there have been good and interesting times, but unfortunately also quite a lot of the other kind. Managing directors have changed, actors have come and gone, there have been intrigues and chafing in the theatre. At first glance, the most visible side of change is the house itself. New rooms for the theatre were already looked for in Soviet times. The process has been continuous and, as Estonian economy developed, more and more successful.

Creative life in the theatre ebbs and flows. In retrospect, it seems that the year 1985 was the last act of good times in the puppet theatre. Rein Agur was the head drama director (1981 - 1992). Just like now, there were 15 – 20 actors working in the theatre. The level of the troupe was not uniform, but the personalities were very interesting. I would like to point out Hendrik Toompere (actor in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre 1963 - 2008), who can be described as a born actor, actor with a capital letter! At the time, his creative nature was in top shape; we had a lot to learn from him. He was a bold and slightly insolent actor. There is no one like him in Estonia today.

We had many professional actors-musicians, who could sing, play musical instruments and compose.

In autumn, 1985, Rein Agur started working on Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, which proved to be an exceptional event in the broader context of Estonian theatre. I think it was one of Rein Agur's best works of directing. It was imaginative, witty, sparkling, almost genial. I cannot think of a production from the following years that compares with it.

At the first years after I joined the puppet theatre, the repertory included productions of different genres and forms. There were classic plays performed with rod puppets in a booth; there was open play with the puppet and the actor together; there were puppets manipulated from the back and there were plays without puppets. We had plays for adults, too. In 15 years, until the year 2000, 14 plays were staged for adults; six of them were open air performances.

At the beginning of 1990s, there was a shift of power. This was a time when the theatre was clearly led by the mind, not business and money like in the 21st century. Shift of power also meant a change of head drama director. This post was taken up by Eero Spriiit. Eero Spriiit was a drama director (1992- 1997) who, especially in the beginning, paid much attention to the actor. In puppet shows, actors were on their own.

At all times, actors of our theatre who had a good idea or some initiative could also direct plays. Eero Spriiit soon tired of being the head drama director as well. The year was 1997. He invited Allan Kress to replace him (1997 - 1999). Kress was young and with little experience. Something strange followed. Never before or after has the individual character of a person played such a big role. After two years, the whole troupe was against his staying in office. Of course Allan Kress did invite visiting directors and managed to woo Evald Hermaküla into joining the puppet theatre (artistic director in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre 1999 - 2000). Hermaküla is a major name in Estonian theatre. I had the privilege of being in his troupe and create the play Case No. 0 (Kohtuasi number 0). We literally had to create it from scratch, because there was no source material. Working in theatre, I have never held someone in such awe as I did him; at first it even hindered my work a little. He was a director I trusted one hundred percent. Hermaküla later became the head drama director, but only for a short time. No one will ever know why he decided not to live.

The year 2000 is a time of great changes in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. New managing director Meelis Pai with his new team starts to lead the theatre. Andres Dvinjaninov becomes the artistic director (2000 - 2006). The coming of Meelis Pai brought along high sales figures, marathons of Christmas performances, and producing more or less commercial musicals. There is interesting and less interesting material.

I have been very passionate about theatre all my life. And suddenly, with sadness and surprise, I found myself to be tired, perhaps even disappointed. I started to feel that the theatre was racing in various directions; it lacked its individual face; material for the repertory was chosen randomly.

I have especially missed a director who has a clear vision. It may sound terribly pretentious, but I really want the director to be smarter than me. I want to value my time; what we are doing – I want it to matter.

In conclusion I would like to say that there is every indication that good times are coming back. A number of young people have started work in the theatre; I have great faith in them. It feels like the time when I started. And one thing is certain – the rest of Estonian theatre public has started to notice the doings of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre.'

17th March 2012



Picture 7. Estonian State Puppet Theatre actress Tiina Tõnis (by Marko Usler 2011)

5.5 Commentary to the conversation and interviews

It was interesting to converse with people currently working in the Puppet Theatre. My conversation with Tiina Tõnis gave a fascinating overview of an actress's path, which she still treads. In her opinion, the theatre had its heyday in the time when she started working there in 1985. The time was followed by ebb and flow, flow even more so. But she ends in a positive note by voicing her thought that with the coming of new puppeteers from the Turku Arts Academy,

there is a similar air in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre as there was when she started working there in 1985.

It is interesting that the three interviewees, the theatre's managing director, the artistic director and leading actor all had different views on changing something in the theatre. It is certainly due to their different roles and offices in the theatre – the managing director thinks of financing good ideas, whereas the artistic director sees a certain shortage of funds as a good thing that prevents degeneration; instead of changing something, he wishes to preserve the existing atmosphere. The leading actor hopes and believes that though innovation and revolutionary steps are necessary, it is also important to maintain stability.

Having dissenting opinions is a positive sign. If everyone had the same view on changing something, it would be a clear sign that there is something wrong in this theatre. But their hoping and dreaming of different things indicates a theatre that breathes in the same rhythm.

6 CONCLUSION

As I started to write this thesis, my goal was to find out how a state funded puppet theatre came to be in Estonia. In retrospect, I may say that the work has been very productive. It is as if I have completed a training course on our theatre. It seems to me that having learned the history, I as an actor of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre now grasp the essence of our theatre much better. I understand the origin of traditions that are upheld even today, which events they go back to. I know what the journey of the theatre to the present day has been like, what the price of things has been, what the people have been like, their thoughts and their contribution to the growth of the Puppet Theatre. I realise how history is entwined with the present day. Furthermore, I am very glad to see that Ferdinand Veike, the man who founded the Estonian State Puppet Theatre on January 1st 1952, is still with us despite his advanced age.

The process of collecting and studying material was very interesting and educative. The history of the theatre may not be long, but it did offer a lot to discover. I had a chance to rummage through old archives and read the reminiscences of actors and directors of the time as well as theatre critics' commentaries on plays that were in repertory in the first years. And in the end I got to carry out interviews with people currently working in the theatre in order to compare the development of the theatre until the present day with possible developments in the future.

In the course of the year and a half that I have been working in the Puppet Theatre, I have often met the opinion that puppet theatre can only mean performing in a booth. As I did my research, I came to understand the background of this deep-seated belief. The plays performed in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre in the first decades were of only one genre – booth theatre. Puppeteers were hidden behind the screen and mainly played with hand puppets. Even though director Rein Agur introduced new ideas, Estonian

theatre audience has still not let go of the image of puppet theatre being performed only in a booth.

I also found out that in the first years, the theatre experienced problems with actors. There were both drama actors as well as self-styled puppeteers who had not received proper drama education. Unequal level of puppeteers was an incentive to create the Puppet Studio in 1962, which provided education in both drama acting and puppetry. The studio is still active in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre. There is one difference – in earlier days it was probable that the graduates of the Puppet Studio were employed in the Estonian State Puppet Theatre, whereas today the study studio has been renamed the Youth Studio of the Puppet Theatre and the students are mostly gymnasium students whose staying to work in the theatre after graduating the studio is generally not an option. However, there are exceptions.

As for the character of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre today, conversations with the managing director, the artistic director and two actors show that all four of the persons I interviewed have a different vision of the theatre, of the institution they work in. I, for my part, believe that this plurality of opinions benefits the theatre, as it sweeps along the audience too.

Despite its age (this year is the 60th anniversary of the Puppet Theatre), the Estonian State Puppet Theatre is still a fresh and needed institution that offers something different from other theatres. Popular productions and sold-out performances give evidence of the important position that the Puppet Theatre holds among other theatres in Estonia.

I believe that if the Puppet Theatre preserves its original traditions and value systems and in time adds others to enrich the ones that already exist, then in 200 years, someone could write about the development of the Estonian State Puppet Theatre through centuries, because the material is exciting and special.

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Õhtuleht 19.11.1948

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Ferdinand Veike's CV

Education:

1946 special class of Drama Studio of the State Drama Theatre

1951 A. Ostrovsky Leningrad State Theatre Institute, directing

Work experience:

1944 – 1948 Estonian SSR State Puppet Theatre – dancer, actor, director

1948 – 1950 Theatre “Estonia” – dancer

1948 – 1952 Tallinn State Drama Theatre – actor, drama director

1952 – 1980 Estonian State Puppet Theatre – head drama director

1981 – 1985 Estonian SSR State Philharmonic Society – recitation artist,
puppet soloist

1985 – 1987 Variku community centre – managing director

1973 – 1978 Tallinn Pedagogical Institute – lecturer

1991 – 1995 Tallinn Pedagogical University – lecturer

(Veike & Rass 2009, 357)



Picture 8. Ferdinand Veike with the puppet Buratino (ESPTA)



Picture 9. Estonian State Puppet Theatre performing hall (ESPTA)



Picture 10. Estonian State Puppet Theatre Small Hall in 2012 (by Jaana Juur)



Picture 11. Estonian State Puppet Theatre logo in 1960 (by Raivo Laidre)



Picture 12. Estonian State Puppet Theatre logo in 2012 (by Enn Kivi)