

Theatre NO99's *Savisaar*: An Estonian Political Musical for the Twenty-First Century

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Estonia, a tiny country in Northern Europe, has a population of 1.3 million and an almost equal number of annual visits to the theatre.¹ According to a 2016 survey, 87% of the population considers theatre as one of the most important expressions of Estonian culture and 57% goes to the theatre at least once a year (Kivirähk 4).² In comparison, a 2013 *Special Eurobarometer* concludes that the average theatre attendance in the European Union is 28% (“Cultural Access and Participation” 7).³ There are approximately fifty theatre companies in Estonia, ten of which are funded by the state or municipal governments, and around two hundred new productions premiere annually (see *Statistika*). In this fertile environment, the performing arts scene in Estonia has recently opened itself up to new influences and witnessed considerable international exchange. Debates that are relevant in Europe – about civil society, capitalism, sustainable energy and ethical politics, among other matters – have also entered Estonian stages. This chapter aims at exploring both the aesthetics and the political impact of one of the companies at the forefront of these developments: Theatre NO99. After providing an overview of their work, I will focus on their recent production *Savisaar* (2015), a political musical about the eponymous former leader of the opposition and ex-mayor of Tallinn, Estonia’s capital.

The importance and popularity of theatre within Estonian society has changed in recent history. As Jaak Rähesoo puts it, after the end of the Soviet occupation in 1991 “[t]heatre as a public art [...] had to re-think its role: for years a channel for expressing, however allusively, opposition to Soviet rule, it now had to obtain a new function. This became even more urgent once independence had been won and a period of economic transition from a centralized system to market forces set in” (*Estonian Theater* 81). During that transition, many theatres closed in other Eastern European countries due to economic difficulties, but this did not happen in Estonia,

¹ Statistics from the Estonian Theatre Agency show that theatre attendance has been over one million per year since 2007 (see *Statistika*). This is particularly noteworthy considering that the population in Estonia has been decreasing: while in 2012 the total was 1,318,000, in 2017 it is 1,315,635 (see “Population”).

² The survey “Teatri positsioon ja roll ühiskonnas” (The Position and Role of Theatre in Society) was set up in 2016 by the Estonian Association of Performing Arts Institutions, together with the Estonian Theatre Union. (All translations from Estonian are by the author of this chapter unless otherwise indicated).

³ According to this same study, Estonia’s figure is 45% (“Cultural Access and Participation” T3).

where the number of subsidised theatres stayed intact (see Saro 96). However, from the second half of the 1980s, with the weakening of Soviet power that culminated in the Singing Revolution,⁴ ‘performances’ happening on the streets (e.g. choir events and demonstrations) became much more significant than whatever the traditional theatre houses could offer. Venues reacted to their loss of audience with an almost fully commercial repertory,⁵ playing predominantly Anglo-American comedies.

Eva-Liisa Linder notes that “the long-time impact of totalitarianism on social and cultural life has engendered a certain social passivity in the Estonian people” (85). After regaining independence, it took fifteen to twenty years for civil society to develop, for citizens to form groups or associations and fight for their rights with democratic means. Political theatre has, therefore, grown rather slowly too. As Rähesoo points out,

the end of the dragging Soviet stagnation and the emergence of a radically new situation have given fresh impetus to dynamic impulses, especially among the youth. As in the beginning of the 20th century, they are most pronounced in visual arts and poetry. The theatre, as usual, lags behind. At first, in the 1990s, a large proportion of the theatre community’s energy was absorbed by a purely stabilizing effort, namely keeping the system of repertory companies functioning amid the economic chaos and sudden fall in attendance figures. (“Building in the Daytime” 91)

After having to adapt to the rules of the new market economy during the 1990s, the theatre needed to redefine itself in a changed society. By the second half of the 2000s it had again become a significant agent to promote dialogue on societal processes, or at least to mirror them (see Pesti *Poliitiline teater Eestis ja Saksamaal* 64). The first theatre to take on this challenge was the Von Krahel, founded in 1992. Despite it also being the first privately funded theatre in the country, its work has been bold in attacking the passivity of Estonian society, as well as addressing the power of corporations – for example, in *Connecting People* (2001), about

⁴ The Singing Revolution, a term coined by Estonian artist and activist Heinz Valk, refers to the pro-independence singing events that took place between 1987 and 1991, against the backdrop of a 150-year old tradition of Song Festivals in Estonia. Featuring mostly patriotic songs, these events became a catalyst for political change. The biggest saw 100,000 people singing together at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds (see Tammela).

⁵ “By the year 1992 the annual number of spectators had fallen to around 700,000 – a catastrophic loss of nearly a million in only five years” (Rähesoo *Estonian Theater* 82).

the Finnish company Nokia – and the hypocrisy of capitalism. In its preference for postdramatic forms and politically relevant issues, this company certainly paved the way for the emergence of the ground-breaking Theatre NO99.

Theatre NO99: Entertainment and Information

Founded in 2005 in Tallinn and financed by the Ministry of Culture, Theatre NO99 was created by director Tiit Ojasoo (b. 1977) and renowned video artist and scenographer Ene-Liis Semper (b. 1969). In just over ten years, their joint venture has become the calling card of Estonian theatre, presenting work at some of the most important venues and festivals in Europe. While especially popular in German-speaking countries (performing, for instance, at Konzerthaus Berlin in 2017), NO99 has also featured in the main programme of the Avignon Festival (2015), at the Royal Flemish Theatre, KVS, in Brussels (2016) and at the Biennale Teatro in Venice (2017). In 2015, the company won the Grand Prix at the Prague Quadrennial and, in 2017, the Europe Theatre Prize for New Theatrical Realities.

Theatre NO99's approach is unconventional on several counts, from the fact that actors are regarded as co-creators to the very name of their collective endeavour:

Theatre NO99 is a serial work of contemporary art. At the beginning of it was an idea that considering the inherently finite nature of time and its finality, time should instead be measured backwards. This served as the impetus for Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper's idea for a theatre where only 99 stage productions will open and which thus moves along sequential numbers to zero, towards oblivion. [...] Every stage production at Theatre NO99 is prepared with the feeling that it is the final production. (*NO99*)

The company is also particularly skilled in attracting publicity. Their political theatre projects tend to capture much attention in both printed and social media, and occasionally they move from the newspapers' culture section to the front page.

As Semper and NO99's dramaturg Eero Epner state in their joint piece "Ära söö kiles saia ehk kas poliitilist kunsti on võimalik mõista?" (Don't Eat Wrapped Bread or Is It Possible to Understand Political Art?), right from the start their objective has been to bring the theatre closer to society using popular means. Early internationally successful productions in this vein are

Nafta! (Oil!, 2006) and *Garjatšije estonskije parni* (Hot Estonian Guys, 2007).⁶ *Nafta!* discusses peak oil through cabaret aesthetics and is considered Brechtian in its combination of a didactic impulse (highlighting the message that the Earth is running out of energy) and entertainment (e.g. actors performing ABBA songs), as well as the evident use of V-effects (see Eppelt 86-7; Pesti *Poliitiline teater Eestis ja Saksamaal* 105-6). Another distinctive characteristic of NO99 consists in borrowing elements from audiovisual media: apart from the extensive incorporation of pop music, *Nafta!* features a parody of a television show.

Garjatšije estonskije parni, in turn, deals with the fear that ethnic Estonians will soon become extinct, a real concern that has been raised by scientists. The performance revolves around a group of men who form a club with the aim of reproduction, fathering as many children as possible. The tone of the piece is satirical, mixing documentary and revue styles. Its form can be characterised as postdramatic, as it comprises an assortment of monologues, songs, dances and *études*. The production raised intense discussion about demographic issues, both in the Estonian media (see Maiste) and in Europe. The show toured extensively between 2007 and 2009, giving guest performances in Holland, Finland, Russia and Poland, as well as in German-speaking countries. In the German-language media there was widespread coverage, labelling the piece as political theatre (see, for example, Haider-Pregler).

Another notable work that employs postdramatic and even performance art aesthetics is *Kuidas seletada pilte surnud jänesele* (How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, 2009). The core theme here is cultural politics. The performance, focusing on the position of the contemporary artist, caused scandal by mocking the then Culture Minister.⁷ At the end of the show, an actor playing the role of an artist ‘urinates’ on an actress playing the minister. The piece is humorous, but also touches upon serious questions about artistic freedom in a democratic society. Significantly, this production also demonstrated that a publicly-funded institution like the theatre can criticise the state that finances it.

The most remarkable political performance by NO99 to date has been *Ühtne Eesti* (Unified Estonia, 2010), a theatrical simulation of the birth of a new political party (the name of which echoes Putin’s party, United Russia). Since Estonia, at the time, needed a new political

⁶ The title translations have been taken from the English version of the company’s website (see NO99). In some cases, the original title is in English.

⁷ The name of the minister was Laine Jänes. The word “jänes” means “hare” in English.

force to resolve societal problems that the government was neglecting – such as growing income inequality, cases of corruption and lack of transparency in the funding of politics – the fictional party gained instant popularity in the media. Although Theatre NO99 initially declared that the whole exercise was a performance, they played along with the press when sensing that a substantial portion of the public hoped that it would become a real political project. *Ühtne Eesti* was a wake-up call for politically passive Estonians and probably the most debated cultural event in the country. It started with a press conference at the Radisson Hotel in Tallinn declaring that the new party's general assembly would be held within forty-four days. It was also announced then that Unified Estonia would reflect the traits of all the larger parties in its behaviour, rhetoric, programme, campaign and so on. For instance, populist rhetoric was driven to an extreme with slogans promising money to mothers, free land to those who would move to the countryside and for banks to cancel people's real estate loans. At some point, somebody scribbled over the party posters with graffiti; it later transpired that the company itself was behind this. The purpose was to draw even more attention to the campaign.

During the seven weeks leading up to the general assembly, 103 articles about *Ühtne Eesti* were printed, counting only those in the main newspapers. The campaign was exemplary: huge populist posters on the streets and free publicity on the internet, including social media. According to the official figures, the assembly was attended by 6,540 people ("Yearbook of Estonian Theatre Statistics 2010" 62).⁸ The hall where it took place, the biggest in Estonia, had held the Eurovision Song Contest in 2002. The topics discussed were politically contentious: the economic crisis and demographic and environmental issues, among others. The event concluded with the election of a new leader, who turned out to be director Ojasoo. His speech was quoted and discussed for a long time afterwards; his final message was: "You are free!" (the last words of the event).⁹ The piece raised questions about power, democracy, freedom, the will of the people, the role of the media, truth and lies (see Pesti *Poliitiline teater ja selle strateegiad* 113-15).

NO99 has continued to produce work that engages with politics both nationally and internationally. In 2011 they staged *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* (the title alluding to Bertolt Brecht's 1930 libretto *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*), a production that recreated

⁸ The webpage of NO99 exaggerates the number to "more than 7500" (see "NO75 Unified Estonia Assembly").

⁹ "Te olete vabad!"

important landmarks in the country's history over the last one hundred years. The story, comprising loosely connected scenes, was conveyed via a live stream to an audience of 2,000 people sitting in a concert hall nearby. Once again NO99 managed to provoke debate, this time about the interpretation of history. In the same year, the theatre collaborated with British playwright Simon Stephens and German director Sebastian Nübling in *Three Kingdoms*, a trilingual thriller about prostitution and human trafficking that also explored prejudices between Eastern and Western Europe. Nübling, from Munich's Kammerspiele, returned to direct *Ilona. Rosetta. Sue* in 2013. Further international success was achieved by *Mu naine vihastas* (My Wife Got Angry, 2014), the first Estonian production to be chosen for the main programme of the Avignon Festival. Atypically for NO99, this humorous and uplifting show deals with personal rather than political themes: after the main character's wife deletes all travel family photos from his computer, he decides to restage them with the help of a bunch of people he meets in a hotel room.

A special position in the repertory of NO99 is held by *Kodumaa karjed* (Screams of Fatherland, 2015), a documentary solo-performance with which Jaak Prints won the Annual Theatre Award for best actor (the piece was also nominated for best play).¹⁰ The piece uses documents from Estonian media in the past twenty-five years, assembled in a compelling montage. The documents include printed advertisements, commercial announcements, wanted ads, speeches of presidents and other politicians, campaign promises, song lyrics, sport reportages, internet commentaries, television and radio broadcasts, court documents, a necrology and a poem. Although it is a performance about the Estonian community, it also resonates at an individual level, as every member of the audience would have their own memories of the period. Through a combination of reflection and emotion, the play both scrutinises and reassures Estonian society. At the other end of the spectrum, *Kõnts* (Filth, 2015) – one of NO99's recent international touring productions – featured nine actors standing, jumping, running and wallowing in thick mud for about two hours. In its depiction of relationships full of tension, emptiness, frustration and rage, the show can be interpreted as a portrayal of the downfall of humankind.

¹⁰ The Annual Theatre Awards are organised by the Estonian Theatre Union. There are 27 categories covering the whole field of the Estonian performing arts. The event is broadcast live by Estonian Television and takes place on International Theatre Day, 27 March. The awards are financed by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia.

As the descriptions above make clear, the goals of Theatre NO99's political performances are, on the one hand, to spread information and, on the other, to ask challenging questions. Their work interrogates our everyday life and the society to which we belong. Their productions so far have covered themes such as the environment, Estonia's history, national identity and demographic problems, the position of art in contemporary society, cultural politics and the ethics of the political party system, among many others. They often take a didactic standpoint, presenting the audience with what they consider to be the truth about the current state of affairs. Their formal approaches, however, are diverse, blending elements from cabaret, revue, reality shows, video and performance art, to name but a few. Although their practice could be described, generally, as postdramatic (as will be discussed below), they usually devise their shows from documentary material such as the news, interviews and pre-recorded footage, offering an eclectic mix of representational and non-representational styles.

Savisaar, the Politician, and *Savisaar*, the Theatrical Event

NO99's *Savisaar* combines the aesthetics of ancient Greek tragedy and musical theatre, within a story about political power. The title refers to Edgar Savisaar (b. 1950), who until 2016 was the leader of the biggest political party in Estonia, the centre-left Centre Party. Savisaar is considered as a living dinosaur in Estonian politics. He gained prominence during the process of restoration of independence from the end of the 1980s and became the first Prime Minister of the re-established Republic in 1991. As years passed, he and his party became known for their populist approach, attracting support from elderly and lower income voters, as well as the Russian-speaking minority (see Poliitika Guru).¹¹ Savisaar has been elected mayor of Tallinn several times, serving from 2001 to 2004, and 2007 to 2015. As leader of the opposition, however, his reputation was that of a dictatorial figure, which made it unlikely for other political forces to collaborate with the Centre Party in the state parliament or at government level.

Savisaar continued NO99's critical focus on power relations and the functioning of the democratic system. The plot charts the fall of a once important politician, yet the real Savisaar is not the main concern. The piece is about gaining and keeping power, about the struggle to give it up, about what power does to a human being. In a similar process to the one preceding *Ühtne*

¹¹ One third of Estonia's population is Russian-speaking. The Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities live in separate media and cultural worlds, which makes interactions between them rather scarce.

Eesti, everything that happened before the actual premiere of *Savisaar* was as important as the production itself, strongly influencing its reception. As mentioned above, the ability of NO99 to manipulate the media and public opinion is outstanding. All this suggests that *Savisaar* can be analysed most productively through the framework of the ‘theatrical event’. Willmar Sauter draws attention to the “eventness” of theatre as its “unique quality” (13), that which separates it from everyday life. At the same time, however,

a theatrical production can be part of public life to a very high degree. The theatrical event is not only constituted by the interaction between the performer and the spectator during the period of the performance. The theatrical event must be understood as a process as much as it is a specific occurrence. [...] The ‘length’ of an event is eventually determined by the purpose of the investigation and therefore depending on the decisions of the observer, i.e. the researcher. (7)

In the case of *Savisaar*, the interaction Sauter describes between the theatrical event and its societal context began with a witty and effective marketing process. The production was perfectly timed: its premiere was scheduled for two weeks before the general parliamentary elections in Estonia, with the last performance taking place on election day. *Savisaar* was the leader of the biggest and most popular political party, so the interaction with the election campaign was deliberately written into the project from the start.

Months before the premiere, a giant poster of the production suddenly appeared on a big building overlooking the Tallinn city government headquarters. *Savisaar*, then mayor of Tallinn, could see the poster from his office window. The publicity immediately attracted the attention of the media and many important politicians were questioned: What did they think of NO99 making a show about the opposition leader? What did they think about the title? Everybody speculated about the production, knowing nothing about it. The only information that the theatre provided, apart from the show’s title, was its genre: *Savisaar* would be a musical (according to NO99, at that point they had not yet decided on the use of elements of Greek tragedy, nor did they have a script). The production was planned for the biggest concert hall in Tallinn’s city centre, with almost 2,000 seats (for a city of 400,000 inhabitants). Tickets were sold out in a few days, months in advance of the opening.

The company then caused controversy with another poster. A few weeks before the premiere, the city was flooded with black-and-white playbills (the typography and colour scheme typical of NO99) showing the slogan: “Elect Savisaar. This advertisement is paid by the state”.¹² The playbills were calling for the public to buy tickets for the remaining extra performances of *Savisaar*, while the funding claim accurately reflected the subsidised status of the theatre. Unsurprisingly, however, the signs were seen as part of the parliamentary campaign. As the law prohibits campaigning in public spaces from one month before the election date (to avoid excessive expenditure), the police ordered NO99 to take down the posters. Of course, vigorous discussion in the media was again guaranteed.

Another pre-premiere event consisted in a political blog posted on the theatre website that also appeared in *Postimees*, Estonia’s biggest daily newspaper. The blog discussed all four political parties represented in the Estonian parliament at the time. One blog entry commented on the visionary speech of the then Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas on 10 January 2015. Rõivas, from the liberal Reform Party, was the youngest prime minister in Europe at the time. NO99 asked where had all the brave old politicians gone who had made reforms in the 1990s and why young politicians today did not have the courage to push forward real change. The question of ethics was also key to the blog, anticipating the production’s emphasis on the ethical implications of clinging on to power.

A final preamble to the production was “First Reading: Savisaar’s Great Speech”.¹³ This ‘action’ was scheduled to coincide with the real Savisaar’s political address at the concert hall of the Estonian National Opera. NO99 housed its own ‘speech’ in the adjacent Estonian Drama Theatre. Both venues have a comparable capacity – 500 to 600 people – and are about a hundred years old. Therefore, they function as important cultural landmarks in a society where theatre has historically played (and still plays) a crucial role. Both speeches attracted full audiences, even though the spectators were markedly different: in one venue there were those genuinely interested in hearing the politician; next door were those taking part in the artistic event conducted by Theatre NO99. During this ‘first reading’, spectators had a first glimpse of the character Savisaar, played by the powerful female actor Marika Vaarik. The play’s songs were also rehearsed at the venue. In the production, a choir of around fifty young people, called Vox

¹² “Vali Savisaar. Reklaam on kinni makstud riigi poolt”.

¹³ “Esimene lugemine: Savisaare kõne rahvale”.

Populi,¹⁴ played an essential part (that of the Centre Party, loyal to Savisaar), emulating the Greek chorus.

Musical, Tragedy or Epic Theatre?

The play depicts Savisaar as King Edgar, a once powerful monarch who is becoming increasingly isolated. Elements of Greek tragedy – for example, dialogue written in poetic prose and lyrics in verse – are combined with a modern plot: in this parallel universe, kings are elected, and the action occurs on Edgar’s election day. As the play progresses, King Edgar is abandoned by his friends and enemies. Firstly, the foreign ambassadors withdraw their support. The ambassadors wear fur coats, making them appear Russian (the real Savisaar has flirted with Estonia’s neighbour for political support and his party has an agreement with United Russia). It then transpires that Crown Princess Kadri wants to take over (the real politician Kadri Simson ran against Savisaar in the 2015 party leadership election and was only narrowly beaten). Yet King Edgar refuses to resign and turns to his old friends. These characters also represent real politicians whom the audience would have been able to recognise. They are former allies of Savisaar who left the Centre Party due to his dictatorial style of leadership. The leader ultimately betrays his supporters, (literally) stabbing them to death when they are no longer useful. At the end of the play, a Messenger from the East announces King Edgar’s election victory by a small margin, but the character of Furia, who functions as an oracle, had earlier predicted the protagonist’s demise. According to Christian Römer, instead of the expected “ironic parody”, *Savisaar* offers some empathy for the protagonist: “the king is victorious and alone: he knows only too well that voluntary resignation will mean his death, or worse, total insignificance” (173).

The concert hall stage where the play premiered was left bare, with the machinery of the venue in sight, confirming NO99’s aforementioned association with epic theatre. Occasionally a huge screen was lowered behind the actors, covering the full length of the space. In a humorous touch, there were young female assistants on stage helping to hold an umbrella above King Edgar’s head (Savisaar had often been photographed with young girls). The show was billed as “an antique tragedy about the contemporary world with a touch of rock musical” (“NO46 Savisaar”) and, fittingly, the music was composed by young rock and indie star Vaiko Eplik

¹⁴ Youth mixed choir Vox Populi was founded in 2006 and has 60 active members (see *Vox Populi*).

(with Jakob Juhkam). The songs – including solo and chorus numbers – also operated as a Brechtian device, commenting on the action and characters ironically, as in the case of the duet of Savisaar and Laar. Mart Laar was the leader of the party Fatherland and is another important politician who, during the re-independence movement, set himself against Savisaar. The humorous lyrics, sung by both characters simultaneously, say: “you can’t deny / it’s crystal clear / that the republic got its independence / only thanks to me” (Epner et al. 28).¹⁵ Vilja Savisaar (the leader’s ex-wife, also a politician) becomes a singing character as well. Her song laments, “who would pay for the years / that I slaved for the man / who is empty inside / only a shell is left / not a man / what would you pay for his name? / you never get back / the wasted years / the times gone by” (45).¹⁶

As a strong dramatic story about a fallen hero, with symbolic characters and a chorus, the play does resemble a Greek tragedy, yet it can be assumed that catharsis is not the aim. Rather, as in Brecht’s non-Aristotelian model, the story is meant to be performed with some ‘distance’ and a satirical edge, encouraging critical reflection on matters of power. Another significant V-effect was the cross-casting of the protagonist. Surprisingly, however, it was only the quality of Vaarik’s performance as Savisaar that was commented upon by reviewers, not the actor’s gender. This might be because, despite obvious references to a living public figure, King Edgar was presented by NO99 almost as an abstraction. It can be argued that Vaarik, who won the Annual Theatre Award for best actress with this performance, personified the essence of power more than a character in the conventional sense. The show was also praised for its compelling visual elements, such as the gigantic video screen where a simultaneous black-and-white projection of the characters could be seen. As Römer indicates, this may be interpreted as a symbol of the continuous exposure of public life: “Being a politician today means being under the gaze of an aggressive glare that penetrates deep beneath the makeup mercilessly assessing the value of the candidate. If the political product is no longer fresh, a fellow party member lurks around the corner with the dagger in disguise” (172).

The epic elements in *Savisaar* suggest an interesting tension between the Brechtian and postdramatic paradigms in the work of NO99 in general (see also Linder 87). The postdramatic,

¹⁵ “ei sinagi saa salata / ka siilil selge see / et vabariik sai alata / vaid tänu minule”.

¹⁶ “kuid kes maksaks aastate eest/ mil orjasid meest/ kes tühi on seest/ vaid kest/ mitte mees/ mis maksate ta nime eest?/ raisatud aastaid/ kadunud aegu/ tagasi sa ei saa”.

as understood by Hans-Thies Lehmann, means the de-hierarchisation of performative elements on stage, where the spoken/written text no longer dominates. This kind of theatre combines heterogeneous styles (see Lehmann 26) and focuses on the materiality of the performance. The approach then results in a “multi-perspectival” form of perception (16). In *Savisaar*, the postdramatic aesthetics can be recognised in the non-hierarchical use of different components. The spoken text, the songs, the music, the live projection and even the costumes are equally important.

Epner, who has created most of the company’s texts, including *Savisaar* – co-written with Tarmo Jüristo, Aare Pilv and Vaiko Eplik (lyrics) –, claims that producing work about politics is in NO99’s nature due to it being a state-funded theatre. As part of the public sector, he argues, NO99 is supported by society and therefore has an obligation to relate to it (see Epner). *Savisaar* sits very squarely within NO99’s political practice, from its highly choreographed pre-production process to its final performance on election day. Yet the didactic impulse present in previous shows by NO99 is not so evident here. As stated above, the character of *Savisaar* becomes less a representation of a controversial politician than a metaphor for power and a vehicle to examine the ethics of party politics, without any preconceived answers. In what follows, I will conclude the analysis of *Savisaar* applying my own taxonomy for a definition of contemporary political theatre (see Pesti *Poliitiline teater Eestis ja Saksamaal* 54-8).

Political Performance: From Theme to Function

A political theatre performance can be considered as such according to four criteria, corresponding to the four core aspects of any artistic phenomenon: thematic, ideological, aesthetic and functional. The most widespread definition of political art (including theatre) derives from the thematic criterion: a work that deals with political and/or social themes or topics. What is considered as a topic of a text (or, in this context, a theatre performance) depends first and foremost on the interpreter of that text (in this context, the spectator) and so it is open to what s/he wants to find. A theme or topic can then be understood as a conceptual construction that the interpreter arrives at by associating different parts of the text. When identifying a theme within a text, the interpreter also widens it to other texts (or performances), establishing links. As Brinker explains, “The theme is understood as potentially uniting different texts” (21). The thematic aspect in *Savisaar* is unequivocal and has already been labelled by the theatre makers.

By choosing the title *Savisaar*, NO99 makes a clear reference to the actual political landscape of Estonia, even if the ultimate objective is to question power relations in society in general.

In terms of the ideological viewpoint, the ideology of an art work is, of course, dependent on the society where that work is created as well as the position of its creator. As Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick assert, “the exact meaning of the term is often elusive and confused”, but “[i]ts most common use may be simply to refer to a more or less coherent set of beliefs” (170). Ideology is, in this general usage (as opposed to the specific, Marxist one), a comprehensive vision, a way of looking at the world. It can be argued that the aim of contemporary political theatre is often to oppose the consensus and conformism that is rife in western societies, provoking dissent. That was clearly one of the objectives of *Savisaar* as a theatrical event.

The aesthetic criterion is perhaps the most disputed, as political theatre can adopt different guises (and has done so throughout its history). I would suggest, in this regard, that contemporary politics is most effectively addressed in the theatre by a postdramatic aesthetics. Central to postdramatic theatre, as discussed above, is a non-hierarchical approach where the different sign-systems of a performance have the same importance, that is, the (written and oral) text does not dominate over the other (physical, visual) elements. Although *Savisaar* still conveys a story through dramatic means, the incorporation of various forms (Greek tragedy, musical theatre, video documentary) relates to the postdramatic paradigm. Moreover, the visual aspects of the performance – the enormous screen, the large chorus in red gowns and white wigs, the King’s golden toga – are as striking as the text cogently uttered by Vaarik as Savisaar. Crucially for political theatre, the non-hierarchical stance of the postdramatic extends to the relationship with the audience. The postdramatic spectator has more power, as the openness of the work forces him/her to make their own decisions. In the case of *Savisaar*, it is up to audience members to establish whether the show amounts to election propaganda, the mocking of a notorious public figure, a reflection both of and on society or something else altogether.

Finally, considering the functional criterion, one must ask: What is the aim of political art/theatre? Can it provoke changes in society? Although a causal link is almost impossible to determine, a convincing argument can be made about NO99 in this respect. Beyond the lasting media impact of the Unified Estonia project (which is still mentioned in discussions about the relationship between civil society and political parties), an actual political act was triggered by it in May 2012. In a newspaper article called “Erakondade rahastamisest: Ausalt” (About the

Financing of Political Parties: Honestly), Reform Party member Silver Meikar confessed that he had transferred money from unidentified sources to the party's account and that this kind of scheme was known to the party's Secretary (at the time, the Minister of Finance, Kristen Michal, who eventually resigned). Meikar's confession, which he claimed was inspired by *Ühtne Eesti*, caused intense arguments on the functioning and funding of politics. In addition, for the first time after 1991 Estonians came onto the streets to protest demanding political transparency and a new civil society movement, Aitab Valelikust Poliitikast (Enough of Unfair Politics), was born. The scandal also prompted another 'action' by NO99, "First Reading: The Board Meeting of the Reform Party",¹⁷ a semi-documentary piece by Epner, Ojasoo and Semper. The reading was a one-time event inspired by media coverage on the secretive financing practices of political parties. While most of the dialogue was fictional, the events and characters depicted were real (for further analysis see Linder 92-4; Pesti *Poliitiline teater Eestis ja Saksamaal* 114-15).

In the case of *Savisaar*, it has been claimed that the timing of the show, right before the parliamentary elections, "contributed to the highest voter turnout since 1995" (Römer 174). However, given that the real Savisaar obtained the largest majority in the country,¹⁸ the question can also be asked whether the play inadvertently mobilised support for him. Although any influence would be impossible to measure without the necessary data, it is a question that was debated by audiences and in the media. At the same time, NO99's tragic tale became almost prophetic for the politician. A few weeks after the ballot, he was hospitalised with a bacterial infection and his foot was amputated. Later in the same year, Estonian police charged Savisaar with corruption and he was divested of office as Mayor of Tallinn. Although he had planned to run for President, he lost the nomination within his party to a young female candidate, who failed to win the presidential election in any case.

Moreover, when the next election for party leader came about in 2016, Savisaar played hide and seek with the media, refusing to say whether he would stand again to lead the party he had founded 25 years earlier. Two candidates were running: Jüri Ratas, a young, more liberal politician and long-time rival of Savisaar, and Yana Toom, a member of the European Parliament, loyal to Savisaar and favoured by the Russian-speaking electorate. One day prior to

¹⁷ "Esimene lugemine: reformierakonna juhatuse koosolek".

¹⁸ At the 2015 parliamentary elections, Savisaar received 25,057 votes, the biggest individual count. The second position was held by the then Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas, with 15,881 votes (see *Riigikogu Valimised 2015*). After his parliamentary victory, Savisaar decided to continue holding the post of Mayor of Tallinn.

the election, Savisaar finally announced that he was stepping down in favour of Toom. However, Ratas won, causing commotion in Estonian politics. The next day, as if fulfilling an oracle's prediction, the government of Estonia fell. The Reform Party, in power for the last seventeen years, lost the support of its coalition partners and the Centre Party was invited to form a new government under Prime Minister Ratas. The situation echoed the words of the play:

FRIEND: You are only moving downwards, old man. Your sword is blunt, rusty long ago. What has become of you, dear friend? Nothing special. You became what becomes of us all. Your downfall has been so quick that justice cannot catch up with you, and history will not remember you as a king but as a bad dream.¹⁹ (Epner et al. 31)

At the time of writing, Savisaar is to appear in court charged with corruption, yet he is also running for the local municipality elections in October 2017 – not as the candidate of the Centre Party but heading The List of Savisaar, his own election coalition. *Savisaar*, the musical, continues to be frequently discussed in the media. Meanwhile, Theatre NO99 is opening performance number 34. The title is *Revolutsioon* (Revolution).²⁰

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¹⁹ "SÕBER: Veel ainult allapoole liigud, vana mees. Mõök sul nüri, roostes ammu. Mis saanud sinust, sõber hea? Ei miskit erilist. Saanud see, mis saab meist kõigist. Nii kiire allakäik on sul, et õiglus sulle järele ei jõua enam, ja ajalukku ei lähe sa enam kuninga, vaid halva unenäona".

²⁰ At the time of this chapter's final editing (January 2020), it has been a year since Theatre NO99 ceased its operation. Meanwhile, the County Court has freed Savisaar from trial on corruption charges due to his bad health.

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