

MERILIN JÜRJO

A psychological reception model
of theatre performance



DISSERTATIONES DE STUDIIS DRAMATICIS UNIVERSITATIS TARTUENSIS

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Press

Department of Literature and Theatre Studies, Institute of Cultural Research,
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INTRODUCTION

Every spectator constitutes a psychological subject. The aim of this thesis is to examine the psychological dimensions of theatre reception and to analyse the influence a performance has on attitude formation. Although numerous theorists have emphasised the psychological nature of reception, and audience research from diverse perspectives has gained prominence in recent years, a systematic framework for understanding reception processes and their psychological mechanisms remains still underdeveloped. Furthermore, the role of spectators' mindsets in structuring the reception process remains insufficiently explored, particularly in relation to how they may guide attention, interpretation, and emotional engagement during a performance. Therefore, this thesis addresses the lack of an integrated psychological framework for understanding theatre reception and its influence on spectators' attitude formation and seeks to bridge this gap in the existing scholarship.

Thus, I propose three research questions:

1. How can psychological processes explain the reception of theatre performances?
2. How do individual aspects of spectators, such as age, cognitive biases, and prior life experiences, affect the reception of theatre performance?
3. In what ways can theatre performances contribute to the processes of attitude formation among spectators?

This thesis draws on several reception theories that have significantly shaped the field and continue to exert influence. It engages with key concepts proposed by Susan Bennett (inner and outer frame), Erika Fischer-Lichte (co-presence and embodiment), Norman Holland (spectator identity theme), Hans Robert Jauss (identification), Henri Schoenmakers (empathy and identification), Willmar Sauter (model of theatrical communication), Bruce McConachie (mirror neurons) etc., alongside psychological processes such as selective attention, autobiographical memory, priming, affect, and group processes. The use of multiple theoretical perspectives is intentional, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of the field and to map its most influential approaches. While these theories share certain compatible elements, they remain fragmented at a broader conceptual level. Moreover, they tend to reference cognitive and psychological processes without systematically integrating them into a unified explanatory framework.

Taken together, this study has two primary aims, which also constitute the original contributions of this thesis. First, it conceptualises and integrates these theoretical perspectives into a unified psychological model of theatre reception that demonstrates the interconnections between different aspects of reception and the psychological processes that mediate them. The purpose of constructing this model is not to simplify reception, but rather to illustrate and highlight the multiplicity of processes involved and the ways in which they are interconnected, thereby offering a more informative analytical framework. Simplified versions of

this model have been presented in Articles II and III, where they function as more accessible tools for reception analysis.

Second, this study examines the influence of theatre on spectators' attitude formation. Although there has long been considerable speculation regarding whether and how theatre affects its audiences, this question has gained increased scholarly attention in recent years. The present research investigates whether attitudinal development occurs and, if so, seeks to explain the mechanisms underlying such change. Conversely, in cases where attitudes remain stable, the study also explores the factors contributing to this stability. These outcomes are analysed in relation to the proposed psychological reception model to clarify how and why such effects emerge.

In addition, this study examines the areas and applications related to human psychology, well-being, and mental health in which integrating theatre proves important and beneficial – including its therapeutic potential, contributions to human flourishing, and facilitation of psychological self-reflection and meaning-making – thereby establishing the rationale for developing such a model and investigating this intersection. Several studies support this line of inquiry (e.g., Bayer *et al* 2025, Hass-Cohen *et al* 2026; Vaisvaser 2025; Yotis *et al* 2025), particularly from the perspectives of embodiment, memory functions, narrative processes, empathy and broadening perspective. These topics are discussed in Articles I and II. Article I analyses the plays “Emesis” (2021) by Heneliis Notton and “4.48 Psychosis” (2000) by Sarah Kane from the perspective of authenticity, exploring whether the base material can present real-life psychological disorders in a trustworthy manner. As this study draws on performances from documentary and political theatre – many of which engage with trauma (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault) or significant life challenges (e.g., political circumstances, societal expectations) – it is essential to consider whether and how the source material offers an accurate, responsible and recognizable representation. Although a director's artistic choices may vary and thus reshape the audience's perception of a text, spoken theatre relies heavily on language. Consequently, the textual foundation plays a decisive role in framing meaning and guiding reception of a performance. This is supported by studies suggesting that the words the dramatist places in the mouths of the characters are more important in shaping the audience's sense of engagement with them as individuals than the particular ways in which actors choose to portray them (Teasdale *et al* 2021: 5–6).

Plays “Emesis” and “4.48 Psychosis” portray trauma, depression, and life difficulties, which are features shared by all the performances analysed in this study. Although trauma and depression have been examined more deeply and from a clinical perspective in the context of this study (in Article I), they remain relevant on every level, as drama by its very nature is filled with conflicts, difficult circumstances, and characters who often go through significant challenges that can be traumatic and extreme, thus making studying trauma acceptable. It is also important to note that, due to the limitations of the dissertation, it is impossible to address all disorders or psychological aspects; therefore, some narrowing of the topics was necessary.

This study employs four complementary methodological approaches: comparative analysis and theoretical synthesis, text and performance analysis, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires. First, key theories in theatre studies and psychology are explored through a combination of comparative analysis and theoretical synthesis. Second, text and performance analyses are conducted to explore the proposed psychological reception model and to refine it into a form suitable for empirical testing with spectators. Third, in-depth interviews investigate both the relevance of the model and the potential for attitudinal development. Fourth, questionnaires are used to assess spectators' attitudes before and after the performance. The performances examined in this thesis include "Blackbird" ("Must-rästas") at Nuutrum Theatre¹, "When You Come, Bring Me Flowers" ("Kui sa tuled, too mul lilli") at Ugala Theatre², "God's Zoo" ("Issanda loomaaed") at Endla Theatre³, "Mephisto" ("Mefisto") at Estonian Drama Theatre⁴, and "Societally Harmful Element or SHE" ("Ühiskondlikult kahjulik element ehk ÜKE") at Vaba Lava⁵. It is important to note that all of the selected performances engage with themes of trauma (or trauma in connection with depression), as in "Blackbird", "When You Come, Bring Me Flowers", and "SHE", or with broader difficulties of life, identity, and adaptation, as in "God's Zoo" and "Mephisto". This is closely connected to the analysis of the plays and to questions of how reliably psychological distress and disorders are portrayed, as the study focuses specifically on psychological theatre and psychologically constructed characters. Theoretical investigation (comparative analysis, theoretical synthesis, text and performance analyses) was conducted between 2020 and 2023, while empirical data collection (interviews and questionnaires) took place between 2024 and 2025.

The dissertation consists of three articles and an introductory chapter, which itself is divided into five parts. The first article (Article I) examines the authenticity of trauma and depression in selected plays, investigating whether these portrayals accurately reflect the real-life manifestations of these conditions, what characterizes the psychological processes of reception, and whether art can serve as a potential tool in psychotherapy or otherwise influence readers and spectators' psychological well-being. This provides a foundation for the importance of integrating theatre studies and psychology, as well as for exploring the possibilities that arise from a deeper understanding of their interaction. The second article (Article II) introduces a simplified version of the psychological reception model, linking it to the ideas presented in the first article and exploring how the described reception process can influence well-being. The third article (Article III) presents empirical data collected from in-depth interviews and evaluates its

¹ Directed by Johan Elm, written by David Harrower (2005), premiered 14.04.2022.

² Directed by Liis Aedmaa and Laura Kalle; premiered 24.05.2021.

³ Directed by Laura Jaanhold, premiered 2.04.2022.

⁴ Adapted and directed by Kertu Moppel, premiered 12.02.2021.

⁵ Directed by Helen Rekkor, idea by Siret Tuula, premiered 14.11.2024.

relevance in relation to the model, demonstrating how the model is supported and validated by the empirical findings.

The first part of the introductory chapter provides an overview of the current state of the research fields of reception theory and (cognitive) psychology. The second presents the genesis underlying the development of the psychological reception model. The third part presents the psychological reception model itself, outlining its components and illustrating them through performance analyses of “God’s Zoo”. The fourth part offers a detailed account of the audience research methods employed at the thesis. The fifth and final part discusses the application of the model by presenting the results of in-depth interviews through a single case study of the performance “Societally Harmful Element”, and it also reports the findings from questionnaires along with reflections on them.

Although this study provides a broad overview of relevant theories, it does not claim to encompass all theoretical perspectives or psychological processes that could potentially improve the model. The focus is primarily on the psychological aspects of theatre reception and on information-processing mechanisms. The study addresses cognitive processes rather than physical, physiological, or psychobiological processes, although mirror neurons are considered in the context of reception. It does not investigate the dramaturgy or aesthetic qualities of performances in detail; however, these elements are considered to the extent necessary to understand the performances and the information they convey.

This thesis is guided by the belief that theatre possesses a capacity to influence human experience in ways that are often described as transformative or even “magical.” Rather than accepting this influence as inexplicable, the study seeks to understand the processes through which it emerges. By investigating the psychological dynamics of theatre reception, the author aims to make this perceived “magic” more comprehensible and to clarify how theatrical experience may influence spectators beyond the theatre.

1. CURRENT SITUATION OF THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

In theatre studies, the audience became a central object of inquiry in the 1980s, (Saro 2004: 7–8) with research drawing extensively on the theatre semiotics as well as literary studies. In recent years, the topic has regained prominence, particularly through interdisciplinary approaches that integrate insights from psychology, cognitive science, affect studies, and sociology to better understand audience engagement and theatrical experience. This renewed interest is reflected in a growing body of scholarship, including dedicated publication series on audience research published by Routledge (Audience Research 2026).

From the perspective of psychology, there have been significant developments in cognitive psychology in recent decades. Also, several studies have explored the intersection of art and psychological processes; however, the majority of psychological research on art has focused on therapeutic contexts, examining whether and how various artistic practices (e.g. music, dance, etc.) contribute to mental and physical well-being, e.g. reduce anxiety (Pérez-Eizaguirre *et al* 2021). At the same time, psychological studies specifically addressing theatre remain comparatively limited.

The following chapter outlines the current state of reception and audience research, its interaction with psychology, and relevant developments within psychology, with particular emphasis on cognitive psychology. While immersive and participatory theatre fall outside the scope of this study, contemporary audience research increasingly foregrounds audience engagement and co-creation, conceptualising spectators as active contributors to meaning-making processes. Although not analysed here, these developments provide an important context for situating the present approach to theatrical reception.

1.1. Theatre Studies Approaches

In theatre studies, several influential approaches to performance and spectatorship have been developed. For example, Susan Bennett's book "Theatre Audiences" (1990) was a pioneering study in the field, but the reception of performances also occupies a central place in Erika Fischer-Lichte's influential book "The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics" (2008), which conceptualises performance as a dynamic process. Communication-oriented models have also been proposed by Willmar Sauter (e.g. "Eventness: A Concept of the Theatrical Event" 2006: 51–58), whose model of theatrical communication frames performance as an interactive process between performers and spectators. These examples illustrate only some of the key theoretical contributions that have shaped audience studies and continue to influence contemporary research, although they represent a selection within a much broader field of approaches.

In recent years, contemporary research in theatre studies has expanded its scope and become increasingly interdisciplinary, moving from predominantly theoretical approaches toward empirical methods and integrating insights from

psychology (e.g. Wlazeł 2025), sociology (e.g. Sepsí, Szabó 2022; van Maanen *et al* 2015), neuroscience (e.g. McConachie 2008), and other human-centred disciplines into audience research. It has been found that the audience's experience is multidimensional and consists of several different components (Chan *et al* 2019: 6–18). This interdisciplinary approach has opened new avenues for understanding audiences and gaining deeper insight into the processes of reception. At the same time, it has introduced new challenges, including conceptual ambiguities, methodological complexities, and the need to reconcile different disciplinary perspectives.

One topic that has attracted focus in almost every recently published book is methodology (e.g. Edelman *et al* 2025; Snyder-Young, Omasta 2022; Wlazeł 2025). These works highlight the wide range of approaches that audience research has adopted from other disciplines. Studies now employ technologies such as virtual reality (Wlazeł 2025: 44–60) and EEG (Chabin *et al* 2021), alongside more traditional methods like surveys (Rathje *et al* 2021). Emma McDowell (2022: 274–275) highlights that the involvement of multiple disciplines introduces a wide array of methodological approaches, which should not be seen as a problem but rather as an indication that conceptualisations of performing arts audience experience are shaped by specific disciplinary contexts.

Despite these developments, the fundamental difficulty of studying audiences remains. As Kirsty Sedgman (2019: 479) notes, it is essential to examine “audiences’ individual articulations as part of a much broader cultural conversation, proffered within the constraining formulae of their specific context and then pieced together by the researcher as part of an overarching interpretive process”, thus underscoring the importance and significance of audience research. This highlights two key points: first, it is crucial to develop new approaches that integrate multiple disciplines in order to expand knowledge about audiences; second, audience studies are facing significant challenges in determining future directions, as the field stands at a crossroads of interdisciplinarity and therefore must negotiate a new conceptual and methodological balance.

Many studies focus on the integration of audience research with physiology and neuroscience, aiming to understand the physiological and neurological aspects of reception processes. For instance, increased skin conductance has been linked to heightened pleasure and arousal during live performances (Gabriel *et al* 2025: 388) and cardiac synchrony among audience members has been observed to correspond with greater alignment in their emotional responses to a performance (Ardizzi *et al* 2020: 2–6). Those findings suggest that physical co-presence amplifies both emotional and physiological engagement, highlights the unique impact of performer-audience interaction and increase coherent explicit emotional experience.

Many studies still focus on so-called traditional topics but use mixed-methods or some other way to collect new data. This way we have some better understanding about empathy (Rathje *et al* 2021), emotional engagement (Ardizzi *et al* 2020; Oatley 2002), perspective-taking (Troxler *et al* 2023), self-awareness (Blaine 2024) and intergroup relations (Batson, Ahmad 2009), which were all

raised or significantly boosted after attending a theatre performance. It has been found that artistic practices can enhance understanding of and foster connections (Muzikevičiūtė, Wilders 2025), as well as strengthen emotional engagement with the audience (Oakes *et al* 2024). Additionally, individuals respond to fictional characters as strongly as to real people (Oatley 2002: 63–64), and characters' motivations have been shown to significantly influence identification and liking in real time (Tchernev 2022: 749–755).

Theatre can contribute to the transformation of attitudes and the reduction of stigma by deepening knowledge, fostering understanding, and supporting broader educational processes (Lightfoot *et al* 2015). Empirical studies have demonstrated that theatrical experiences can function as powerful interventions, particularly in contexts where abstract information is insufficient to challenge entrenched beliefs (e.g. Michalak *et al* 2014; Pufahl *et al* 2021). These findings highlight theatre's capacity to shape both cognitive and emotional processes, promoting empathy, reflection, and changes in social attitudes.

Moreover, theatre offers a means to model, rehearse, and potentially transform social situations by exploring alternative ways of responding to them. For example, theatre helps develop ways to express thoughts and opinions (Grandi 2022), increase knowledge and skills, as well as improved communication skills, self-confidence, and group-work abilities (Koponen *et al* 2012; Winham *et al* 2014). These findings indicate that employing theatre as an experimental pedagogical approach significantly enhances both communicative competence and positive attitudes. By encouraging active cognitive engagement and emotional involvement, theatre can thus serve as a powerful tool for development of both individual and collective social understanding.

Overall, it appears that audience studies in live theatre are increasingly interdisciplinary. Major focuses include how theatre elicits empathy and perspective-taking, and how it can drive prosocial change. Researchers have found measurable positive effects – enhanced empathy, social perspective, even charitable giving – from single performances (especially when paired with preparatory activities or post-performance discussion). They also emphasize the unique power of liveness: live presence amplifies emotional and neural engagement compared to screen-based formats. Moreover, recent audience and reception research treats live theatre as both a psychological and a cultural phenomenon. It employs tools from psychology and cognitive science to quantify emotional and cognitive effects, while also using qualitative methods to understand cultural context and meaning-making. The emerging consensus is that theatre can significantly shape minds and communities, but its impact depends on artistic, social, and pedagogical factors, as well as on cognitive and emotional mechanisms whose understanding is essential.

1.2. Psychology Approaches

Although some core principles in cognitive psychology remain stable, a deeper understanding of human cognition is still necessary. Current research trends suggest that the brain is not merely an information-processing organ but functions fundamentally as a prediction machine, constantly generating expectations about incoming sensory input and updating them based on experience (Clark 2013: 181–190). Many studies contribute to a more precise understanding of brain regions, thereby expanding and refining existing paradigms in cognitive neuroscience. By mapping specific neural networks and their functions, such research not only validates previous models but also provides new insights into how cognitive and emotional processes are implemented in the brain (Kohn *et al* 2013; Medaglia *et al* 2015; Sulpizio *et al* 2025).

Many studies focus on attention, exploring how it directs perception, filters information, and interacts with memory and other cognitive processes. According to recent studies, the selection of perceived information within attentional processes depends on several interacting factors, including goal-directed intentions, external stimulation, and previously learned associations (Theeuwes 2019). Also, a review emphasizes that attention functions as a neural mechanism for prioritizing relevant information under conditions of limited cognitive resources (Buschman, Kastner 2015: 127).

One central theme in current research concerns the close relationship between attention and memory. Findings suggest that these are not separate systems but strongly integrated processes (Cowan *et al* 2024; Wahlheim *et al* 2025; Anderson *et al* 2026). Memory can guide attention toward more relevant stimuli through both voluntary executive processes and involuntary orienting mechanisms (Cowan *et al* 2024: 199–205), as well as through the influence of past experiences (Chun, Turk-Browne 2007: 177–182). In addition, both behavioral and neuroscientific evidence point to several limitations of working memory, including the capacity of the focus of attention, the persistence of activation of information outside that focus, and interference between simultaneously active items (Cowan *et al* 2024: 199–205).

Another widely studied topic is autobiographical memory, the study of which has also increasingly taken a more interaction-focused direction, reflecting a broader cognitive perspective. Research has shown that it is closely connected to self-schemas and identity (Matsumoto 2025). Autobiographical memory is considered a crucial developmental capacity: narrating our personal past helps connect us to ourselves, our families, our communities, and our cultures (Fivush *et al* 2011: 327–332). Autobiographical memory is also increasingly examined in the context of social interaction and cultural frameworks, emphasizing that such memories are not isolated episodes but are embedded within broader cultural worldviews and interpersonal contexts (Fivush, Grysman 2023: 3–6). Moreover, it has been found that emotion and autobiographical memory interact in reciprocal ways, and that memory retrieval is dynamic – visual perspective and emotional

framing are constructed and these dynamic properties shape how a person feels, behaves, and interacts with others (Faul *et al* 2024: 257–262).

Neuroscience has become increasingly prominent across multiple fields as a means of providing empirical evidence: for instance, attitude change has been revisited (e.g. Lee *et al* 2025). Many disciplines are also investigating the influence of digital media – for example, in studies of attitude change and applications of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) – demonstrating that these theories remain both current and relevant (Hou 2025). Artificial intelligence and digital media have become prominent topics of investigation, as researchers seek to understand and interpret their impact on cognition, social behaviour, and cultural practices in today’s world (Fournier *et al* 2026).

Understanding empathy is also an area where neuroscience has played a key role. Research on the biological mechanisms of empathy increasingly relies on neuroimaging and EEG methods (De Tommaso 2023). Findings indicate that empathy can produce neural synchrony between individuals, suggesting that such alignment may have historically facilitated the formation of social groups, strengthened affiliation and trust, and improved coordinated responses to threats, thereby enhancing survival and collective functioning (Schwartz *et al* 2025: 2). Empathy has also been increasingly examined in relation to group processes, highlighting phenomena such as the intergroup empathy bias, where people tend to feel stronger empathy toward members of their own group (Fourie 2017: 47–48). Similarly, research on Theory of Mind (ToM) indicates that group dynamics play a role in social cognition: both cognitive and affective states are processed more quickly and efficiently in members of one’s ingroup as opposed to outgroup (Zhu *et al* 2023: 12–13).

One notable trend is the increasing use of naturalistic stimuli as opposed to strictly controlled laboratory settings (e.g. Tikka *et al* 2023). This approach involves studying cognition in real-world environments, which allows for more ecologically valid insights. This trend is evident in many of the studies mentioned above at the intersection of psychology and theatre research, where the impact of performances is examined in contexts in which the boundaries between psychological research and audience studies are often difficult to distinguish.

Moreover, when theatre and psychology intersect, they can create meaningful therapeutic impact. Research in related artistic fields has shown that, for example, music can reduce anxiety (Pérez-Eizaguirre *et al* 2021: 337–338), elicit profound emotional and cognitive responses as well as retrain impaired brain circuits (Zaatar *et al* 2023: 3–6). Similarly, dance has been found to influence various mental health-related conditions through processes of embodied cognition (Millman *et al* 2021: 25). These findings suggest that artistic experiences can influence psychological well-being not only emotionally, but also cognitively and physically.

The therapeutic potential of theatre has also been discussed in relation to practical initiatives such as Arts on Prescription (2025) and bibliotherapy, which uses books – and potentially dramatic texts and plays – to support mental health and emotional reflection (Martinec 2025: 78). In this context, theatre can be considered not only as an aesthetic or cultural experience, but also as a possible

resource within broader well-being. For this reason, examining the psychological processes of reception becomes relevant beyond audience studies alone: understanding how spectators interpret, internalise, and respond to representations of psychological distress may help clarify under what conditions theatre can contribute to reflection, attitude change, and emotional support. This provides a broader context for including therapeutic perspectives within the present study.

Bringing these perspectives together, it becomes evident that studying theatre performances from a psychological perspective reflects many of the current directions in cognitive psychology. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of attention and its close relationship with memory, which in turn is connected to previous experiences and stored memories. Psychological research also links Theory of Mind (ToM), empathy, and group processes, highlighting that both empathy and ToM tend to operate more strongly toward members of one's ingroup. Furthermore, studies show that empathy can create forms of synchrony between individuals, which in turn contributes to the formation and strengthening of social groups. Research on autobiographical memory also demonstrates its importance in understanding and addressing various psychological difficulties and disorders.

Against this background, and by adding theatre into the equation as a unique environment that can be observed from a distance while simultaneously allowing for mental and emotional participation, the development of a psychological reception model becomes essential, offering a framework that brings these elements together into a coherent whole.

1.3. Formulation of the Research Problem, Aims and Questions

As demonstrated above, the human mind and psychological processes are central to understanding theatre reception. It can be argued that engaging with a theatre performance is nearly impossible without considering psychology, as reception, interpretation, and even basic comprehension rely on multiple cognitive and emotional mechanisms. While the field offers a wide range of reception theories that attempt to incorporate insights from psychology, and psychology trying to provide broader understandings of how cognition operates and often employing more naturalistic environments to study human reactions, these approaches largely remain separate. Even though both disciplines show potential for mutual enrichment, there is currently a lack of integrative frameworks that would systematically combine core reception theories with underlying psychological processes.

Thus, to fully understand the experience and impact of theatre – and to meaningfully address the spectator – it is necessary to examine the psychological mechanisms that shape reception, as all theatrical experience is mediated through perception, emotion, memory, and evaluation within the human mind. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by proposing a psychological reception model that integrates key theories from theatre studies, reception theories and psychology in order to describe the cognitive, emotional, and memory-related processes

that take place in the spectator's mind during theatrical reception. By bringing these perspectives together, the model offers a new empirically grounded, cognitive-process-based framework for understanding theatre reception, moving beyond isolated theoretical approaches towards a more comprehensive account of how spectators engage with performance.

Building on the psychological reception model, this study also investigates the impact of theatre performances on spectators' attitude formation, examining both explicit and implicit attitudes. By integrating psychological processes with traditional reception theories, it explores how theatrical experiences influence cognitive and evaluative mechanisms, shaping thinking patterns and potentially modifying pre-existing attitudes. This approach allows us to understand not only what spectators perceive, but also how their engagement with a performance can lead to shifts in mindset and perspective.

Moreover, this study aims to explore the potential of theatre performance in engaging with representations of psychological distress and related experiences. The rationale is to open a theoretical pathway for understanding how theatre may function not only as entertainment, but also as a medium for psychological impact. To achieve this, it is first necessary to examine whether the information presented in performance is representative, as information presentation and its processing constitutes one of its key elements. Second, it is important to consider how individuals encountering such material might engage with and interpret these representations, thereby establishing a clear rationale for investigating the cognitive and affective processes involved in reception. Without an understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying reception, it is impossible to explain what exactly changes, how the change occurs, or why it might take place. By mapping these processes, the study creates a conceptual bridge between theatrical experience and its potential therapeutic implications, situating artistic representations of psychological distress within a broader context of meaning-making, reflection, and possible attitudinal or emotional change. In this way, the study does not merely propose a model but situates it within a broader research into its potential benefits.

Like much contemporary research in this area, the present study seeks to address a central and persistent challenge: how to conceptualize and systematically analyse the processes through which audiences engage with, interpret, and are potentially affected by theatrical performances, and which psychological mechanisms should be incorporated into this conceptualization to provide a more robust explanation of reception effects. Based on the studies discussed above, it can be argued that both the topic and the aim of this thesis are timely and well-situated within the broader field of audience and reception research.

To extend this discussion, the following chapter introduces the genesis of the psychological reception model. It outlines the theoretical foundations, interdisciplinary influences, and key conceptual steps that have informed its development. It is followed by a presentation of the model itself, synthesising these elements into a structured framework for analysing psychological processes in theatre reception.

2. GENESIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RECEPTION MODEL

To bring reception studies and psychological research into dialogue, I have mapped key theories from both disciplines that are relevant to this study. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical foundations that inform my research and discusses how these perspectives are integrated. First, I address important considerations in creating the model to ensure the process is transparent. Second, I review key reception theories that have influenced the development of my model, as many of their ideas constitute core concepts in theatre studies. Third, I introduce the psychological processes and theories that are crucial for understanding reception and, consequently, for the construction of the model.

2.1. Development of Psychological Reception Model

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the theoretical positioning of this study. Many of the frameworks employed here originate from earlier traditions in theatre studies rather than from recent scholarship. This is a deliberate methodological choice. While contemporary research has increasingly adopted empirical approaches, these studies often focus on specific components of reception, such as empathy, emotional engagement, or perspective-taking, or emphasize interdisciplinary connections with psychology and neuroscience. Although such work provides valuable precision and empirical support, it typically addresses isolated aspects of a more complex process.

By contrast, earlier theatre studies frameworks tend to conceptualize reception in a more holistic and integrative manner, treating it as a multi-layered phenomenon that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions simultaneously. Importantly, recent empirical findings generally do not contradict these earlier models; rather, they refine, specify, and lend support to particular elements within them. For this reason, earlier theories offer a more coherent conceptual foundation for building an integrative model of reception, while contemporary studies can be used to substantiate and nuance its individual components. This approach allows for a synthesis of cumulative knowledge, in which detailed empirical insights are embedded within a broader, theoretically grounded system.

The psychological reception model was developed through a systematic process of comparative analysis and theoretical synthesis drawing on existing theories and empirical research. Relevant scholarly literature was systematically collected and critically reviewed in order to identify core concepts, analytical categories, and recurring patterns across disciplines. Particular attention was paid to conceptual overlaps and points of tension between psychological theories of perception, cognition, and attitude formation, and theatre studies approaches to performance, spectatorship, and reception. These concepts and relationships were subsequently integrated into a theory-driven conceptual framework.

The model was developed through an iterative and reflexive process, undergoing multiple revisions as new theoretical insights and analytical observations

emerged. Each iteration involved the re-evaluation and adjustment of the model's components and their interrelations in light of the evolving conceptual framework. The resulting model constitutes an interdisciplinary synthesis that brings together psychological processes and theatre studies theories to account for audience reception in the context of theatrical performance.

The selection and integration of concepts into the model were guided by clearly defined criteria. First, the concepts were selected for their relevance in analysing audience reception in theatre. Second, priority was given to concepts that have been empirically examined or operationalised in prior research, particularly within studies of perception, cognition, emotion, attention, and attitude formation. Third, concepts were assessed in terms of their interdisciplinary compatibility, that is, their capacity to meaningfully bridge psychological processes and approaches to performance and spectatorship in theatre studies. Finally, analytical distinctiveness was taken into account in order to avoid conceptual redundancy and to ensure that each component contributed a clearly defined explanatory function within the model. Although the model does not aim to cover all possible factors influencing reception, the chosen criteria ensure a theoretically coherent and analytically transparent framework suitable for empirical study.

2.2. Key Reception Theories

To build the model, several key reception theories were selected: the outer and inner frame, the aesthetics of performance, the horizon of expectations, the theatre communication model, the theme of identity, as well as identification and empathy. Each of these is introduced and examined in greater detail.

2.2.1. Frames of Reception

Susan Bennett in her book "Theatre Audiences" (2013: 17) introduces two inter-related frames of reception: the **outer frame** and the **inner frame**. The outer frame concerns theatre as a cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event, the selection of material for production, and the audience's definitions and expectations of a performance. It encompasses the broader social, institutional and ideological contexts within which theatre is produced and received. The inner frame contains the performance event itself, with particular emphasis on the spectator's experience of a fictional stage world. This frame includes production strategies, ideological overcoding, and the material conditions of performance. Meaning emerges at the intersection of these two frames, where cultural expectations meet the concrete experience of the performance. The relationship between the outer and inner frames is always interactive: cultural assumptions shape performances, while performances simultaneously have the potential to revise, challenge or reinforce those cultural assumptions. In this way, Bennett conceptualises reception as a dynamic process in which spectators actively negotiate meaning within a culturally situated theatrical encounter. (ibid.)

Although Susan Bennett's theory is rooted in earlier scholarship, it still plays an important role in reception studies, particularly in helping to understand the formation of meaning, as well as in enhancing understanding and creating connections, as have shown later studies (e.g. Gallagher, Wessels 2013).

Drawing on Bennett's concept of the two frames, two interrelated dimensions of reception emerge. First, the **cultural frame** situates the spectator within a broader socio-cultural context, encompassing shared values, conventions, and historically shaped interpretative repertoires. Second, the **theatrical communication frame** addresses the specificities of theatre as an art form. While both dimensions are indispensable for understanding reception, they do not sufficiently account for the internal dynamics of psychological processing. To address this limitation, the inner frame may be further specified by integrating the particularities of theatrical communication – drawing on Erika Fischer-Lichte's account of performance and co-presence – with the spectator's mental structures conceptualised through the notion of the horizon of expectations. Such distinction, which Bennett herself also suggests (Bennet 2013: 230), enables a more nuanced articulation of the interplay between theatrical form and psychological reception. These concepts will be further expanded.

2.2.2. Aesthetics of the Performance

Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008: 75) conceptualises performance not as a fixed artwork or a stable object of interpretation, but as a dynamic and emergent process that unfolds in time. In contrast to text-centred or representational approaches, she emphasises performance as an event that comes into being through the concrete interaction between performers and spectators. Meaning is therefore not pre-given or solely embedded in the artistic structure of the performance but is continuously produced and transformed during the live encounter (ibid.: 141). Central to Erika Fischer-Lichte's processual understanding of performance is the concept of the **autopoietic feedback loop** (ibid.: 50), which has also gained importance in later studies emphasising the significance of experiencing a sense of relationship with performers and other audience members (e.g. Zehra *et al* 2023). The autopoietic feedback loop describes the reciprocal and self-generating interaction between performers and spectators (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 137). Performers' actions provoke reactions from the audience, such as shifts in attention, emotional responses, or bodily reactions, which in turn influence the performers' subsequent actions (Ardizzi *et al* 2020: 6). This circular process generates a dynamic and partly unpredictable performance situation that cannot be fully controlled by either side. The feedback loop thus identifies transformation as a fundamental category of an aesthetics of the performative.

The autopoietic feedback loop also foregrounds the role of **co-presence** (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32) and **embodiment**⁶ (ibid.: 89), highlighting that spectators respond not only cognitively but also sensorially and affectively to the performance. Later studies have found that emotions are a strong motivation for audiences to attend live performances, and that spectators often seek shared emotional experiences in which feelings circulate within the audience and create a sense of feeling together (Jacobson, Schaufler-Biback 2025: 305–308). Additionally, a sense of presence has been found to be positively correlated among different people within the theatrical event, reinforcing the idea that theatre and the experience of being there are fundamentally relational (Sofia *et al* 2024: 7). Theatre thus operates as a space of intensified perceptual and emotional engagement, motivating people to be together rather than functioning merely as a medium of detached interpretation.

Fischer-Lichte (2008: 190–195) further argues that performance has a fundamentally transformative potential, which she conceptualises through the notion of **transformative aesthetics**. Rather than aiming primarily at representation or meaning transmission, performance may bring about temporary transformations in perception, bodily awareness, emotional states, or self-experience by the energy circulating between actors and spectators which generates also the autopoietic feedback (ibid.: 199–200). Transformative aesthetics has recently been studied extensively, with findings highlighting the potential of art and aesthetic experiences as elicitors of transformation, regardless of the type of artwork or the context in which it is encountered. Research has shown that certain psychological components are necessary for transformation to occur, such as facilitating conditions or pre-existing expectations, cognitive discrepancy, perspective shifts, and psychological insight, as well as several after-effects on the recipient (Pizzolante *et al* 2024: 12–13). The influence of aesthetic experience has been studied and organised around processes such as initial disruption and subsequent metacognitive reflection, self-transformation, perceptual and conceptual change, as well as the connection between art viewing and the viewer’s personality (Pelowski, Akiba 2011: 89–95), and emotional engagement (Toome 2015: 32). Thus, theatre is not merely a matter of “reception”, but involves both bodily and psychological reactions: spectators respond physically to the presence of other bodies in the audience, while also engaging in inner cognitive and emotional processes as they interpret and process the performance.

These transformations are closely linked to the **liminal quality** of performance situations, in which everyday norms, interpretive frameworks, and social roles may be temporarily suspended or destabilised (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 175–179). Such liminal states can open spectators to alternative perspectives and experiences (ibid.), yet Fischer-Lichte deliberately refrains from claiming that these transformations necessarily lead to lasting cognitive or attitudinal change.

⁶ The specific features of embodiment are also addressed in Article I, where distinctive aspects of theatre are discussed alongside the play as a text, emphasizing how characters can become more fully realized when embodied and performed by actors.

Contemporary studies argue that liminality challenges boundaries and invites us to explore the spaces in between. It reminds us that our understanding of reality is itself and must remain malleable, negotiable, and fundamentally shaped by the stories and rules we invent (Zander 2025: 643–644). Moreover, it influences our social identity, behavioural learning, and emotional attachment (Wu *et al* 2020: 9–11), as well as our mental well-being (Zhai *et al* 2024: 11–12), thus already bringing Norman Holland’s identity theme into the dialogue, in which identity is understood as an integral part of the artistic experience. As performance can reveal aspects of our true self (Wu *et al* 2020: 6), it can also actively shape and transform identity through that experience, which is likewise relevant to the findings of Pelowski and Akiba (2011).

In this context, liminality offers the opportunity to destabilise everyday strategies and established ways of thinking, creating space for new thoughts and reactions. This process is amplified by embodiment and co-presence, and can develop into new experiences and memories as the spectator leaves the liminal space of the theatre. Thus, all these elements together create the specific frame of a theatre performance, making the experience unique and characterised by particular traits. It is not possible to consider the reception of a theatre performance without taking into account the influence of theatrical communication. This dimension of theatrical communication inherently interacts with the spectator’s personal database and level of cognitive processing, as will be discussed later in this section.

2.2.3. Horizon of Expectations

The **horizon of expectations** refers to the ways in which individuals understand and decode works that are based on cultural codes (Jauss, Benzinger 1970: 34). According to Jauss, the horizon of expectations consists of three components: familiarity with genre conventions, knowledge of the styles and themes of previously encountered works, and an understanding of the distinction between poetic and everyday language, that is, between fiction and reality (ibid.: 14). Jauss’s concept of the horizon of expectations builds on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of the hermeneutic circle, according to which an individual seeking to understand a text constructs a preliminary outline or projection. After acquiring initial information from the text, the reader anticipates the work as a whole, which results in approaching the text with specific expectations. This preliminary projection is repeatedly revised as new information emerges, and through this ongoing process of adjustment, understanding is gradually achieved (Gadamer 1997: 187).

To this process of projection and continuous revision, Jauss adds the dimension of expectation, which can be understood as predictions based on the spectator’s prior life experiences and encounters with art. Every artwork is read or viewed against the background of previous experience, which provides the context for its reception (Jauss, Benzinger 1970: 12–13). The horizon of expectations can therefore be understood as a synthesis of available and accessible information

the artwork continuously tests and transforms. As a result, discrepancies may arise between new information and existing expectations, potentially leading to learning experiences as well as changes in previously held knowledge. Such processes may, in turn, influence more stable cognitive structures, such as beliefs and attitudes, which are addressed later in this study. Once new information has been analysed and structured, the artwork – or aspects of it – becomes part of the spectator's prior experience, serving as a basis for the generation of future expectations. From this perspective, artworks can be viewed as one of the most immediate means of testing and modifying beliefs through the introduction of new, and at times contradictory, information.

Thus, we can say that the spectator in the present engages in the reception process through movement along a past-future axis, which includes the associative processes as well as memory processes (Kerneža 2024: 356). When considering the horizon of expectations, it is essential to acknowledge that because people's knowledge, experiences, environments, as well as definitions of art and moral norms change over time, the reception and interpretation of artworks also change historically. Consequently, earlier works are perceived differently through contemporary knowledge and may be interpreted in new ways (Baldick 2021: 116). Furthermore, receivers are influenced by the stereotypes and socially accepted value judgements prevailing at a given moment. This means that an individual's expectations cannot be examined in isolation but must be understood as part of a broader context shaped by factors such as culture, family, religion, and other social frameworks.

At this point, it becomes useful to further distinguish between two horizons of expectations to enable a more precise articulation of the mental and anticipatory structures that spectators bring to the performance situation. The first, a **wide horizon**, is culturally grounded and activated prior to the beginning of the performance. It encompasses historically shaped conventions, genre knowledge, personal experiences, and socially shared interpretative frameworks. This wide horizon enables a multiplicity of potential expectations and lays the groundwork for how the performance is initially approached and framed by the spectator. The second, a **narrow horizon**, emerges from within the performance itself. It is generated in response to the unfolding theatrical event and becomes operative in an ongoing feedback loop between stage and spectator. This narrower horizon is continuously adjusted as new information is presented, expectations are confirmed or disrupted, and meaning is negotiated in real time. Distinguishing between these two levels allows for a more differentiated understanding of how culturally embedded anticipations and cognitive processes activated by specific performance interact in shaping reception. It is important to note that the narrow horizon operates within the **frame of theatrical communication** (unlike the wide horizon), being influenced by liminality and co-presence and thus remaining open to disruption, which can ultimately lead to transformation.

2.2.4. Model of Theatrical Communication

Susan Bennett, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Hans Robert Jauss each foreground the specifically theatrical nature of communication, emphasising that theatre must be understood as an event-based, embodied, and co-present process that unfolds within a particular cultural and aesthetic context. This emphasis on theatre as a distinct communicative situation is likewise central to Willmar Sauter's model. His model of theatrical communication focuses on the dynamic exchange between performers and spectators. According to Sauter, theatre is not simply a product to be received; it is a communicative process in which meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of performance elements, audience interpretation, and contextual factors (Sauter 2006: 51–58). He distinguishes three levels in the reception process of a performance: the sensory, the artistic, and the symbolic. At the sensory level, the performer must first capture the spectator's attention, enabling them to perceive the performance through sight, hearing, smell, and other senses. Impulses emanating from the performers and the performance space generate affects, expectations, and moments of recognition in the spectator. At the artistic level, the audience engages with what occurs on stage not as natural communication, but as an artwork governed by its own specific codes and rules, which may derive from genre, theatrical form, or stylistic conventions. At the symbolic level, the spectator may identify with a character embodied by a performer, interpreting both individual roles and the performance as a whole. Although each successive level builds upon the preceding one, all three are interwoven and operate simultaneously, creating a multi-layered reception experience. (ibid.)

By considering theatre as a communicative system, Willmar Sauter allows us to bridge social, psychological, and aesthetic perspectives, situating reception as an active, co-creative process in which spectators continually negotiate the meaning and impact of what they observe. Sauter's model also provides a basis for identifying several interconnected factors through which spectators process and understand a performance. Therefore, Sauter's sensory level can be linked to the process of noticing information, where capturing the spectator's attention is essential, although this level also involves certain limitations that will be discussed further. The artistic level, referring to the specific codes of artworks, extends this initial perception into the frame of theatrical communication. Finally, the symbolic level can be understood as the most interpretative stage of this process, where meaning-making takes place, thus connecting to the cognitive processing.

Recent studies on Sauter's ideas highlight the importance of the spectator's experience through the intertwining co-presence, aesthetics, and the psychology of understanding and interpretation (e.g. Nielsen 2019). As Sauter points out in his essay, “[t]o put two cameras in front of a stage – as many theatres did during the pandemic – mostly failed to achieve an aesthetic effect,” which underlines the specificity of live theatrical presence (Sauter 2022: 26). His statement that “presence remains as future memories of the past” (ibid.: 18) further emphasizes the

role of memory, illustrating how theatrical experiences become integrated into the spectator's memory and subsequently shape future horizons of expectations. Together, these elements shape theatre reception as an embodied event, forming one essential dimension of the spectator's experience alongside its cognitive aspects of reception.

2.2.5. Identity Theme

Frames determine how and in which circumstances we receive the performance, horizons of expectations show how our mind is engaged with it. But they do not consider the specific aspects of the spectator or what makes every spectator different. Norman Holland (1975: 816–818) shifts reception theory a little bit more explicitly towards a psychological level and brings in the **identity theme**. In engaging with a work of art, the reader or spectator uses the text to confirm, vary or symbolically rehearse their own identity theme. Holland argues that readers' desires, beliefs and emotional needs strongly influence how they interpret texts, stressing that reading is neither solely an activity of the text nor of the reader, but a dynamic transaction between the two. From this perspective, interpretation often reveals more about the reader than about the text itself (*ibid.*). Consequently, differences in interpretation are not random but are systematically connected to the individual's psychological structure. Thus, Holland's approach challenges the notion of a fixed or objective textual meaning and underscores the extent to which artistic experience is shaped within the psychological and identity-based framework of the individual reader or spectator (Yurdakul 2024: 87).

From this perspective, Norman Holland highlights the centrality of the spectator's individual mental world in shaping the reception process. Contemporary studies suggest the potential for live theatre to contribute positively to identity formation (Richardson 2022: 152–156), help spectators develop a broader understanding of themselves (Ørjasæter *et al* 2017: 8), and provide a practical path for identity reconstruction in a pluralistic society (Jia 2025: 103). Moreover, studies suggest that the emotional, intellectual, social, and transcendental aspects of attending live theatre may help explain how preferences for live theatre are formed (Throsby *et al* 2024: 308). In this way, theatre brings together identity, previous experiences, and future expectations and preferences, meaning that spectators enter the theatrical situation with their own beliefs, prior experiences, and mental structures, engaging in a process of identity work. These personal dimensions influence not only the formation of expectations – particularly within the narrow horizon of expectation – but also the ways in which meaning is constructed during the performance. They shape interpretative choices, patterns of identification, and the distribution of empathy across characters and situations.

2.2.6. Identification

According to Henri Schoenmakers, **identification** is a process in which a spectator places themselves in the situation of a character, adopts the character's perspective, cognitive disposition, sensitivity, and interests, and experiences the emotions they believe the character to be experiencing (Schoenmakers 1988: 142). Numerous theories of identification have been proposed, sharing certain common features while differing in their classifications and underlying assumptions. A selection of them is presented in Table 1. For example, Hans Robert Jauss *et al* (1974: 298) distinguishes five types of identification, while Schoenmakers (1988: 150–156) extends Jauss's framework by incorporating insights from cognitive psychology and emphasising the spectator's cognitive processes in identification with characters. Building on and critically engaging with Jauss's ideas, Schoenmakers proposes seven types of identification (*ibid.*). Jonathan Cohen (2001: 256) outlines four central dimensions of identification and introduces the related concepts of parasocial interaction and distancing.

Table 1. Different types of identification of Jauss, Schoenmakers and Cohen.

Hans Robert Jauss	Henri Schoenmakers	Jonathan Cohen
associative	similarity	empathy or sharing the feelings of the character
admiring	wish	cognitive aspect or sharing the perspective of the character
sympathetic	participation	motivational or internalizing/ sharing the goals of the character
cathartic	instrumental	absorption or the degree to which self-awareness is lost during exposure to the text
ironic	theatrical projection	
	identification with the author	
	identification with an imaginary object	

In the context of the present study, specific types of identification are not treated as discrete categories; rather, identification is understood as a general process that may occur in different forms. This understanding is linked to the **group processes** discussed in the following section and engages in dialogue with Article I, where the presentation of characters is brought into focus.

Within cognitive theatre theory, identification has also been examined through the lenses of **embodied experience** and **narrative perspective-taking**. Bruce McConachie (2008: 66–68), drawing on theories of embodied cognition and mirror neurons, argues that the spectator’s relationship to what unfolds on stage is not merely intellectual but also somatic, such that audiences experience characters’ emotions and tensions on a physical level, responding to bodily expression, rhythm, and stage movement. According to McConachie (2008: 35–40), spectators draw on their prior experiences, perceptual patterns, and emotional responses related to human movement, spatial perception, and social interaction when watching a performance. Thus, mirror-neuron-induced responses are integrated with broader cognitive information processing. For instance, emotionally charged scenes may activate spectators’ autobiographical memories, which are often associated with strong affective components (Buchanan 2007: 774; Holland, Kensing 2010: 97–102). As a result, what is seen on stage becomes not only more intelligible but also more personal, helping to explain why theatre can generate such strong empathic bonds even when the characters themselves are morally ambivalent. This means that the information presented (and noticed) on stage does not function as a passive stimulus but instead activates stored memories and cognitive processes that enable spectators to interpret what they see and respond to it emotionally but also participate bodily.

The functioning of mirror neurons supports this process by creating a sense of physical involvement: when a spectator observes a particular movement or emotional expression on stage, their own neural networks are activated in ways similar to those involved in performing the action themselves. In this case, the brain recreates somatosensory and emotional states when observing others, enabling people to understand actions and emotions through simulated shared bodily states, a process known as embodied simulation. (Gallese 2009: 527) In this way, individuals use their own bodily experiences to interpret both their own and others’ intentions and feelings. This supports the idea that bodily and action awareness shape emotional understanding and guide empathy (Raimo *et al* 2023: 969–971). Through this mechanism, kinaesthetic empathy emerges – the ability to feel and understand the experiences of others through movement (Vaisvaser 2025: 8).

2.2.7. Empathy

An important trigger for identification is **empathy**, which can be situated within both reception theories and psychological theories. Henri Schoenmakers (1988: 142) defines it as a process in which the spectator is able to understand the character’s emotions and situation without adopting those emotions as their own. More specifically, the spectator may experience emotions that differ from those of the character, yet these emotions arise from the spectator’s own experiential framework. This stands in clear contrast to Schoenmakers’s concept of identification, in which the spectator places themselves in the situation of the character while simultaneously adopting the character’s interests, worldviews, perceptions,

and emotions. Accordingly, whereas empathy allows the spectator to maintain distance and to recognise that the experienced emotions belong to the character rather than to the self, identification entails the adoption of the character's cognitive and affective world, thereby reshaping the spectator's experiential perception⁷ (ibid.)

Identification, empathy, and group processes converge in the concept of **strategic empathy**, which refers to the deliberate ways in which authors seek to engage the emotions of a particular readership through empathic means (Keen 2006: 224). Although it is used as an authorial tool, it can position empathy as an agent that mediates identification and directs with whom and under what circumstances we empathise. Keen identifies three main forms of strategic empathy: (a) bounded strategic empathy, which operates within relatively homogeneous groups and is based on shared experiences, fostering identification and emotional alignment among similar readers; (b) ambassadorial strategic empathy, which is directed toward selected audiences outside a given group, with the aim of encouraging greater empathy for marginalised or unfamiliar "others"; and (c) broadcast strategic empathy, which addresses a broad audience and emphasises shared human qualities, such as vulnerability, fear, or hope, in order to generate empathy across group boundaries (ibid.). In this sense, empathy is not merely a passive means of understanding or connecting with characters but can function as a mechanism that links different social groups and enables identification on a broader level, extending beyond isolated aspects of the characters, thereby influencing reception. Such processes may open space for new understandings; as empathy becomes more directed, new experiences may emerge and be incorporated into the spectator's personal experiential framework.

Empathy thus enables spectators to engage emotionally with fictional characters. Through empathy, a connection is formed between the spectator and the artwork, generating a sense of emotional engagement: we are not indifferent to the other when we are able to understand them and connect with them on an emotional level. In this context, empathy opens up the possibility of relating to characters and making sense of their inner worlds. It can be understood as a bridge connecting the spectator with the character's internal state and lived experience, making it, to some extent, part of the spectator's own world and thereby activating the process of identification.⁸ This process may involve a range of emotional responses, meaning that the empathic bond is shaped accordingly. Such dynamics may also help explain why these experiences are sometimes described in terms of catharsis: the empathic "bridge", often mediated by mechanisms such as mirror neurons, allows spectators to temporarily access emotional states that are not ordinarily encountered in everyday life.

⁷ At the same time, it is important to note that understanding and identification do not occur exclusively in relation to characters but may also involve actors or the authorial position.

⁸ Also discussed in the Article I.

The role of empathy in shaping emotional engagement has been examined in more detail, with research suggesting that empathy involves a cognitive investment. More specifically, empathy costs, meaning adopting an empathic stance requires mental resources (Cameron *et al* 2019: 963), and when a spectator chooses to invest these resources in a work, they become more willing to participate in the narrative, to analyse it, and to draw new conclusions. Increased analysis and greater expenditure of cognitive resources, in turn, lead to more effective information processing. This relationship can therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing: the more one analyses, the more influential the experienced information becomes, strengthening both engagement and empathy; at the same time, the greater the empathy, the more cognitive resources one is willing to invest. However, when empathic engagement becomes too “expensive”, disengagement may occur more easily, reducing the sense of connection.

To conclude, the reception theories discussed above demonstrate that psychological processes are implicitly embedded in many influential models of theatre reception. Although scholars such as Jauss, Holland, Bennett, Fischer-Lichte and Sauter approach reception from different theoretical perspectives, their frameworks consistently assume the involvement of perception, cognition, emotion and interpretation in the encounter between spectator and performance. In this sense, theatre reception cannot be understood without reference to cognitive and affective processes that enable spectators to perceive, interpret and emotionally engage with what they experience.

At the same time, these theories often treat psychological mechanisms as underlying or self-evident rather than as objects of systematic empirical investigation. Concepts such as expectations, identification, empathy, emotional engagement and meaning-making are central to reception theory, yet they are rarely examined in detail using psychological research methods. This theoretical gap points towards the relevance of psychological approaches, which offer tools for analysing how spectators process theatrical experiences at the level of perception, emotion, cognition and attitude formation. For example, while Fischer-Lichte’s theory provides a powerful account of the conditions under which theatre may evoke intense and potentially transformative experiences, it does not explain the psychological mechanisms through which these experiences are processed or stabilised over time. Her focus remains on the performative event and its immediate effects rather than on the subsequent cognitive, emotional, or motivational processes within the spectator. This leaves open the question of when and for whom a transformative theatrical experience may translate into more enduring changes in attitudes or beliefs, thereby creating a productive point of connection for psychological models of attitude formation and change.

Consequently, the following section turns to psychological studies in order to complement reception theory with empirically grounded insights. By drawing on psychological research, it becomes possible to examine more precisely how theatre affects spectators, how meanings are constructed in real time, and under what conditions theatrical experiences may contribute to processes such as empathy, perspective-taking and attitude formation.

2.3. Key Psychological Processes and Theories

Understanding the impact of theatre on spectators requires examining the psychological mechanisms that underpin attention, perception, emotion, and cognition. These processes help explain how audiences engage with narratives, identify with characters, experience empathy, and potentially adjust their attitudes or behaviours. In addition, this section introduces concepts such as priming, attention and memory processes, the information processing models of Crick and Dodge (1994) and Lemerise and Arsenio (2000), as well as Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory.

2.3.1. Information Processing

In order to meaningfully apply the reception theories outlined above, it is necessary to acknowledge that no reception can occur without **information processing**. The activation of cultural frames, theatrical conventions, horizons of expectation, or identification mechanisms presupposes that the spectator perceives, attends to, and cognitively processes the stimuli presented in performance. Therefore, an account of psychological information processing is not an external addition to reception theory but a foundational precondition for understanding how reception takes place at all.

To study information processing, social information processing model by Crick and Dodge (1994) was used. Although originally developed to explain how children and adolescents process social cues – such as interpreting others' intentions and generating behavioural responses – the model outlines psychological mechanisms that are broadly applicable to social information processing across age groups. The model is conceptualised as a six-step cyclical process, in which each stage is influenced by a **memory bank or “database”** consisting of past experiences, social rules, and cognitive schemas: (1) encoding of cues: attending to internal and external social cues; (2) interpretation of cues: interpretive processes and attributing meaning; (3) clarification of goals: determining desired outcomes and regulating arousal; (4) response access or construction: accessing stored, learned, or constructing new responses; (5) response decision: evaluating and choosing the best response; and (6) behavioural enactment: performing the chosen behaviour (ibid.: 76–77).

Crick and Dodge's model is further developed in the emotional extension proposed by Lemerise and Arsenio (2000: 107), who argue that emotions are not merely background factors but integral to each stage of social information processing. Emotional states influence which cues are attended to, how intentions are interpreted, which goals are prioritised, and which responses are considered acceptable or desirable (ibid.: 109). In the context of theatre, this underscores the importance of affective engagement: emotional arousal elicited by performance does not merely accompany cognitive processing but actively shapes meaning-making, empathy, and moral evaluation. As a result, emotionally charged theatrical experiences may intensify processing depth, bias interpretation in specific

directions, and strengthen the memorability and impact of the performed material. Studies have also extended the original model by examining the interplay between implicit and explicit processes in shaping social perception and behaviour. They argue that perception integrates sensory input with prior knowledge in order to reduce uncertainty and make sense of the world; however, these prior expectations can also bias interpretation, particularly in social contexts (Ziv, Hadad 2021: 4).

The social information processing model helps to conceptualise how spectators cognitively and emotionally engage with staged social situations, framing spectatorship not merely as interpretation but as social cognition in action. Although spectators are not required to enact behavioural responses themselves, they nevertheless engage in parallel processing: attending to social cues presented on stage (such as tone of voice, gesture, or spatial relationships), interpreting characters' intentions, anticipating goals and outcomes, and evaluating possible responses within the fictional framework. While spectators cannot act within the situation, they may still internally select what they perceive as the most appropriate response and compare it with the action taken by the character. This comparative process is moderated by horizon of expectations, identification, transportation and mirror neurons, and may generate cognitive dissonance when the character's choices diverge markedly from the spectator's own preferred response. These processes are continuously shaped by the spectator's personal memory bank or database, consisting of prior experiences, social norms, emotional associations, and cultural schemas. Theatre thus functions as a simulated social environment in which spectators can observe, rehearse, and evaluate social behaviour without direct personal risk.

While social information processing models primarily account for the individual's immediate social world, Urie Bronfenbrenner's **ecological systems theory** (1977) extends the analysis to encompass multiple layers of environmental influence, ranging from proximal interpersonal contexts to broader socio-cultural structures. The theory emphasises that development emerges through interactions between the individual and their changing environments.

Similar to the model proposed by Crick and Dodge, Bronfenbrenner's framework was also originally developed to examine child development. However, it can be productively extended to adults, as individuals across the lifespan remain embedded within the interacting systems that shape experiences, knowledge, values, and decision-making processes. Bronfenbrenner (1977: 514–515) identifies five interrelated systems: (1) microsystem: the most immediate environment, including family, peers, educational institutions, and neighbourhoods, where direct, face-to-face interactions occur; (2) mesosystem: the interconnections between different microsystems, such as relationships between family members and educational or professional contexts; (3) exosystem: social structures that do not involve the individual directly but nevertheless exert influence, such as workplaces, local governance, or media environments; (4) macrosystem: the overarching cultural, economic, political, and ideological frameworks, including societal norms, laws, and dominant value systems; and (5) chronosystem: the

influence of time, encompassing life transitions, historical events, and socio-cultural changes across the lifespan.

Bronfenbrenner's theory adds further layers to the psychological reception model. It can be connected to the cultural space frame, as culture forms part of the macrosystem, as well as to the wide horizon of expectations that arises from the socio-cultural environment. Both are further shaped by processes of digitalisation, as social relationships are increasingly mediated through social media platforms, while knowledge about the world, cultures, and ideologies is continuously accessed and constructed via digital devices (e.g. Navarro, Tudge 2023). At the same time, the microsystem can be linked to the spectator's personal database and the narrow horizon of expectations, as these are closest to the individual's personal world. Moreover, research shows that social and emotional skills are closely linked to identity formation, which is shaped by multiple layers of the environment (Main *et al* 2025: 16), thereby connecting identity theme, affect, emotions, social processing, and environmental influences. In this sense, Bronfenbrenner's theory mirrors the process of theatre reception. This parallel is apt, as Bronfenbrenner describes how individuals are shaped by different layers of their surrounding environment, while theatre can be understood as a temporarily bounded world influenced by its own temporal and spatial conditions. Spectators spend a defined period of time within this environment, without an easy possibility of withdrawal, which also reinforces the role of the theatrical communication frame.

2.3.2. Attention

Without attention, information cannot be consciously registered; consequently, it cannot be purposefully processed. Given the multimodal and information-rich nature of performance, spectators are constantly exposed to competing visual, auditory, and spatial cues. Contemporary studies emphasise the connection between attention and motor-related signals (Xia *et al* 2024: 555), as well as the role of salient distractors in capturing attention (Lin *et al* 2024: 939), thereby highlighting the importance of embodiment and aesthetic factors – such as lighting and sound – in theatre performance, presenting it as an embodied, relational, dynamic system. In the context of the present study, particular attention is given to theories of **selective** and **affective attention**.

Selective attention is crucially important because humans can only process a limited amount of information at any given time and must (often not consciously) determine which elements are most important (Dayan *et al* 2000: 1221; Treisman 1964: 12). Therefore, attention operates as a necessary precondition for reception: which elements to sort out from the available stimuli, and only those elements that are attended to can be encoded, interpreted, integrated with prior knowledge, and potentially remembered. In this sense, attention is not merely one component among others but a foundational gateway that makes psychological processing – and thus reception – possible.

Attention is also guided by emotion: emotional stimuli capture and maintain attention more effectively than neutral or novel stimuli (Fenske, Raymond 2006: 312; Phelps *et al* 2006: 297–298). Moreover, narrative processing involves the interplay of attention, working memory, and emotion (Gordon *et al* 2018: 107–108), which leads to affective attention – the tendency to automatically focus more on emotionally meaningful stimuli than neutral ones. **Affective attention** develops through experience and shapes how we perceive the world and respond emotionally. Such attentional biases also play a key role in emotion regulation, influencing both the initial focus of attention and subsequent information processing (Todd *et al* 2012: 367). Consequently, individual differences become salient, determining how we perceive situations – what is emotionally significant emerges over time and influences whether we notice negative aspects and how we respond to them (*ibid.*: 369–370). Therefore, each spectator brings to the theatre their own personal emotions and associated meanings, creating a unique basis for noticing and interpreting different aspects of the performance. These, in turn, influence empathy and identification.

2.3.3. Memory

Almost every reception theory presupposes the operation of memory. Bennett's (2013: 17) two frames rely on culturally and experientially accumulated knowledge structures; Jauss and Benzinger's (1970: 12–13) horizon of expectations depends on previously formed interpretative repertoires; and Holland's (1975: 816–818) notion of identity theme foregrounds the enduring psychological patterns through which individuals organise experience.

All of these perspectives implicitly assume that spectators draw upon stored representations – a personal database – in which beliefs, attitudes, emotional associations, and prior experiences are retained (Lemerise, Arsenio 2000: 112). This database does not merely provide background information; it actively shapes perception, expectation, interpretation, and identification during the performance. Memory, therefore, functions as a structural foundation of reception, enabling continuity between past experiences and present engagement and making meaning-making in theatre both possible and individually differentiated. Recent studies emphasise memory reconstruction as a process that enables updating memories or engrams – a physical or biochemical “memory trace” of neurons in the brain – with new information (Lei *et al* 2025: 471), suggesting that memory is not a static “archive” but a dynamic, continuously renewing system. In this way, theatre does not merely represent experience but can also reactivate and reshape memories.

Spectators' own meanings and individual differences are closely linked to memory functions. Consequently, it is necessary to consider **autobiographical memory theory**. According to this theory, individuals store personally significant experiences in a narrative form (Singer *et al* 2012: 570), which increases the likelihood that these memories will be activated in emotionally or thematically similar contexts (Talmi *et al* 2019: 469–470). These memories are not merely

recollections of the past but are deeply intertwined with the self (Conway 1992: 169), thus connecting to Holland's (1975: 816–818) theory of texts as mirroring the identity of the reader or spectator. In this sense, when a spectator watches a performance, identity-related memories may become activated, which in turn influence interpretation and, consequently, reception. The concept of **involuntary autobiographical memory** further extends this framework, proposing that memories can spontaneously emerge in response to suitable cues, even in the absence of conscious intent (Schlagman, Kvavilashvili 2008: 920).

Since emotions play a crucial role in shaping this process, it is important to consider the perspective of **affect theory**, which highlights the influence of emotions on memory (Oatley, Johnson-Laird 2014: 138), as well as on shaping meaning and transformative experiences (Schino *et al* 2025: 17). Our experiences, stored in memory as a personal database, are often marked by strong affective valence. This, in turn, directs affect-driven attention, causing us to automatically focus on emotionally meaningful cues. Consequently, emotional resonance with a performance can guide attention, deepen engagement, support the retrieval of previous experiences, and shape interpretations – particularly those linked to similar affective states – even before conscious cognitive processing occurs. There is also a close relationship between emotion and memory systems, as emotions facilitate access to evaluative mental representations (Tenenbaum *et al* 2009: 162–163). Memories and mental images associated with a given emotional state, in particular, are more readily retrieved when that same emotional state is experienced again, thereby shaping how current experiences are interpreted and evaluated. This, in turn, shapes the narrow horizon of expectations and influences which elements of the performance spectators notice and attend to.

An important memory-related phenomenon is **priming**. Priming is a form of implicit memory, which is concerned with perceptual identification of words and objects (Tulving, Schacter 1990: 301) and also produces involuntary memories (Mace 2005: 882). When we have encountered something before, it becomes easier to recognise or process it later. In this way, priming stores information in memory about the perceptual and structural features of objects (Tulving, Schacter 1990: 303). It can therefore be understood as a preparatory process: through prior exposure, perception and subsequent behaviour can be subtly guided without the individual's conscious awareness. Recent studies have shown that priming influences emotional cognition, including emotional responses and evaluations, decision-making, and social judgment (Si 2024: 152–154), and is also linked to experiential information, sensory-motor systems, and is thus embodied (Fernandino, Conant 2024: 10–14). In theatre, priming can operate through a wide range of performative elements, including language, visual imagery, sound, spatial arrangements, bodily expression, and recurring narrative motifs. Repeated exposure to particular symbols, emotional tones, or patterns of interaction may activate associated concepts and affective valences in the spectator's implicit memory, thereby shaping perception and interpretation before conscious reflection takes place. Such priming effects can guide attention towards specific aspects of the performance and predispose spectators to interpret subsequent events in a

particular way. Thus, priming is a pre-activation of meaning. From the perspective of attitude formation, priming works as a subtle way for theatre to prepare spectators' minds and emotions for later reflection or deeper thinking. By activating familiar ideas or emotional associations, a performance can make it easier to accept new perspectives and reconsider old ones. In this way, theatre can influence attitudes gradually, not by direct persuasion, but through small, often unconscious shifts in how spectators perceive and evaluate what they see.

2.3.4. (Inter)personal processes

Both the empathy strategies described above by Keen and all identification types closely resemble everyday **group processes**, particularly those associated with in-group and out-group dynamics. An in-group refers to a social group which an individual identifies with – such as family, nationality or political party – whereas an out-group denotes a group with which the individual does not identify (Tajfel *et al* 1971: 150). It has been found that individuals actively engage in different forms of self-categorisation (Leonardelli, Toh 2015: 72–73). Closely related to this is social identity theory, which conceptualises the self as fundamentally shaped by an individual's membership in social groups (Turner, Oakes 1986: 240). From this perspective, group affiliation plays a significant role in shaping self-perception as well as the ways in which individuals are inclined to perceive and interpret the social world. Consequently, intergroup processes are strongly influenced by phenomena such as in-group bias, whereby individuals systematically favour members of their own group over those belonging to out-groups (Fu *et al* 2012: 1). Group membership also aligns how emotions are experienced, leading individuals to feel emotions collectively as part of a shared “we-mode” (Von Scheve, Ismer 2013: 410).

By bringing these theoretical perspectives into dialogue, it becomes possible to discern clear mechanisms related to in-group and out-group engagement within the reception process. Cultural frames, horizons of expectation, and identity-based interpretative patterns all contribute to how spectators position themselves in relation to the characters, narratives, and value systems presented on stage. Spectators are more likely to experience identification, empathy, and cognitive alignment with figures or situations that resonate with their personal database and perceived in-group affiliations. Conversely, representations associated with out-group categories may evoke distance, critical reflection, resistance, or even rejection. More precisely, the spectator encounters a group – or multiple groups – from a position of relative distance and is required to negotiate their own relationship to these groups, deciding whether they belong to them or not. This process may result in identification, conflict, or a combination of both, particularly in works that present several competing groups or perspectives. Whereas in everyday social life intergroup encounters often involve an implicit defence of one's own in-group, the distinctive quality of art lies in its capacity to present out-groups within a safe and controlled environment using aesthetic distance. Through such

mediated encounters, spectators are invited to engage with unfamiliar or marginalised perspectives without immediate social risk. In the case of an in-group or a strategy targeting the in-group, finding points of connection is relatively straightforward, as the spectator is already predisposed to value and trust members of their own group. In contrast, for strategies aimed at an out-group or directed outside the spectator's own group, it becomes crucial to establish a bridging element through which the spectator can identify and begin to understand the out-group. Thus, it incorporates empathy or strategic empathy, which is not merely emotional involvement, but the potential expansion of the spectator's worldview and a reconfiguration of attitudes towards out-groups, rendering them more comprehensible and, in some cases, more sympathetic.

Furthermore, research highlights the role of group processes such as collective attention and shared focus. It has been argued that humans use behavioural synchrony to promote neural synchrony and, in turn, social bonding (Wheatley *et al* 2012: 601), and that brain-to-brain synchrony may serve as a neural marker of engagement and dynamic social interaction, likely driven by shared attention mechanisms (Dikker *et al* 2017: 1375). This suggests that theatre-going is inherently a group process that fosters synchronisation, bonding, and shared attention, forming a collective mechanism. In this way, theatre generates group processes on multiple levels, becoming an important part of social relationships and highlighting the role of co-presence and embodiment. Theatre, therefore, is not experienced individually but is co-constructed through these group processes.

An important psychological factor in understanding the world and other people is the **theory of mind (ToM)**, which is particularly relevant in the context of theatre reception. ToM refers to an individual's ability to infer and comprehend the mental states of oneself and others, including beliefs, desires, intentions, and emotions (Decety, Svetlova 2012: 2). While it is often associated with empathy, the two concepts support each other, but are distinct: empathy involves understanding and sharing others' emotional states, whereas ToM encompasses a broader cognitive range, enabling the explanation, prediction, and interpretation of behaviour through the attribution of mental states (*ibid.*: 13). ToM is crucial for navigating complex social interactions and responding appropriately to observed information and it is argued that the greater the mismatch between affective cues and situational information, the more strongly the ToM system is engaged, requiring increased consideration of others' motives, thoughts, and emotional and cognitive states (Biró *et al* 2025: 349–350). This capacity is supported by **mirror neuron systems**, which allow us to react to others' movements, emotional expressions as well as by higher-order cognitive abilities such as abstraction and inferring others' intentions (Schulte-Rüther *et al* 2007: 1355; Schmidt *et al* 2021: 1).

In the theatrical context, ToM plays a key role in identification: to identify with a character, a spectator must understand their psychological reality at an abstract level. Mirror neurons, by simulating observed actions and emotions, form part of the system that underpins ToM, making it an essential element of the reception process. Furthermore, ToM also intersects with group processes in

reception. When audiences observe characters representing in-group or out-group affiliations, ToM allows spectators to infer intentions, emotions, and social norms associated with these groups. This understanding can facilitate empathy, moral evaluation, or critical reflection, and helps explain why individuals align with certain characters or perspectives while distancing themselves from others. In this way, ToM serves as a bridge between individual psychological processing and social dynamics, as it enables the dynamic construction of others through attention, affect, and embodied simulation, while also supporting group engagement in theatre.

2.3.5. Attitude Formation

An **attitude** can be understood as a relatively stable structure of beliefs, feelings, and behavioural tendencies directed towards socially significant objects, groups, events, or symbols. It may be conceptualised as a positive or negative evaluation of a person, object, or issue. (Hogg, Vaughan 2018: 154) Attitudes develop in part to conserve cognitive energy; as a result, we do not need to “learn” about a particular object anew at every encounter, but rather already possess an implicit understanding of how to respond to it (ibid.: 156). Decisions are thus made on the basis of attitudes, allowing us to express opinions about aspects we like or dislike, and to select appropriate behavioural responses.

From a traditional perspective, attitudes are formed through personal experiences or through their relation to pre-existing attitudes (Allport 1935: 798–844). A repeatedly encountered stimulus evokes certain feelings or reactions, and with subsequent exposures, a predisposition develops that enables the individual to respond to similar situations. This process gives rise to positive expectations in anticipation of favourable events, increasing the likelihood of repeating behaviours, or conversely, avoiding potentially harmful events based on negative evaluations. (Ibid.) Today, attitudes are often examined through a dual-process model, in which they can be either explicit – that is, accessible and consciously reportable – or implicit, meaning that they operate with limited awareness and are activated with little or no conscious effort (Serenko, Turel 2019: 657–658). Consequently, our attitudes may sometimes be internally inconsistent.

This brings us to **attitude change**. Because attitudes function as cognitive tools for navigating a complex and stimulus-rich world, they tend to be relatively stable and resistant to change. Nevertheless, attitude change is at times necessary, as the social environment is constantly evolving and individuals must adapt accordingly. This often comes with **cognitive dissonance** – the psychological discomfort individuals experience when confronted with inconsistent or conflicting information (Festinger 1957: 3–4). There are two central hypotheses considering it: (1) the presence of psychologically uncomfortable dissonance motivates the individual to attempt to reduce this dissonance and to restore cognitive consistency; (2) when dissonance is present, in addition to the motivation to reduce it, individuals actively seek to avoid behaviours and information that may increase dissonance (ibid.).

According to Festinger (1957: 3–4), the emergence of new information or events inevitably produces at least a temporary state of dissonance in relation to existing knowledge, opinions, or cognition-related behaviour. More specifically, when newly encountered information does not fit an individual's existing system of beliefs or knowledge, the individual is faced with a decision: either to change their behaviour and, consequently, adjust their beliefs and attitudes so that the new information becomes consistent with them, or to seek information that invalidates or diminishes the impact of the new input, thereby allowing the existing cognitive schema to remain intact (*ibid.*: 6). The latter option often involves modifying the environment or the interpretation of the situation so that it aligns with pre-existing cognitions. This indicates a general tendency to maintain cognitive consistency. People are motivated to reduce conflicts or imbalances between their beliefs, feelings, and actions, as these create psychological tension; accordingly, they tend to prefer attitudes and relationships that are consistent or balanced, as these are experienced as more comfortable (Hogg, Vaughan 2018: 156–157). When such consistency is threatened, individuals are motivated to change one or more contradictory beliefs so that the belief system as a whole is in harmony. Balance is generally restored in whatever way requires the least effort (*ibid.*).

Attitude change can also be examined through dual-process theories, the most widely used of which is the **elaboration likelihood model (ELM)** (Petty, Cacioppo 1986). According to the ELM, persuasion can happen and attitudes can be changed through two distinct routes. The first, the central route, is activated in situations where the recipient has both the motivation and the cognitive resources to process the message. In such cases, attention is directed towards the content of the message itself, which is carefully analysed and evaluated. The second route, the peripheral route, is employed when motivation and cognitive resources are low. Here, the recipient focuses not on the substance of the message but on its peripheral cues, such as message length, the perceived authority or attractiveness of the source, or other surface characteristics. One of the key distinctions between the two routes lies in the level of awareness involved: central-route processing is conscious and involves the integration of new information with existing knowledge structures, whereas the peripheral route relies primarily on automatic processes. (*Ibid.*: 126) These include priming, whereby behaviour is influenced by previously encountered information outside conscious awareness (Tulving, Schacter 1990: 301), and **heuristics** – implicit rules or mental shortcuts that enable decision-making with minimal cognitive effort (Simon 1990: 9).

Research within the ELM framework has shown that although peripheral-route processing is faster and more frequently employed, attitude and belief change is more durable when it occurs via the central, conscious route (Petty, Cacioppo 1986: 125). This is likely due to the depth of processing involved: the central route requires greater cognitive effort, and the new attitude is more extensively rehearsed, thereby strengthening the interconnections among its components and making it more accessible (*ibid.*: 175–176). It can also be argued that

subsequent modification would again require a substantial expenditure of cognitive resources, thereby making the new attitude more stable. Contemporary studies suggest that processing can be hybrid, involving both routes simultaneously, with the central route primarily engaged in processing content and interests, and the peripheral route more responsive to visuals and emotional cues (Zainudin *et al* 2025: 179233).

Cognitive dissonance is closely related to the horizon of expectations, as both highlight that information presented to the spectator is inevitably new, prompting continuous adjustment of expectations and restructuring of prior interpretations. The presence of dissonance can influence identification with characters, and in some cases even dissolve it: when a character's views conflict with those of the spectator, the type of identification that emerges may change. Strategic empathy and group processes similarly need to account for dissonance, as information about out-groups often produces cognitive conflict. From the perspective of the ELM, spectators may engage with a performance through the central route, actively reflecting on themes, dialogue, and moral dilemmas, which allows them to process and resolve dissonance more deeply. Alternatively, they may rely on the peripheral route, where emotional reactions, actors' charisma, or striking visual elements guide their experience, creating more immediate but potentially less enduring responses. Contemporary studies extend these established theories by highlighting the influence of others' opinions (Oktar, Lombrozo 2025: 89–90), the persuasiveness of positive emotions (Rodríguez-Hernández *et al* 2024: 26), and the phenomenon of lateral attitude change (Linne *et al* 2024: 20691–20692). This suggests that attitudes can shift indirectly, meaning that influence originating from more “distant” or related sources may, at times, be more effective than explicit persuasion (*ibid.*).

Having outlined the multiple connections between theatre reception and psychological processes and theories, we can now bring these perspectives together to present the psychological reception model, which integrates the theoretical and psychological components discussed above into a coherent analytical framework.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL RECEPTION MODEL OF THEATRE PERFORMANCE

Based on the genesis of relevant literature, theories and processes discussed above, and the analysis of selected performances, a psychological reception model of theatre performance was developed. The model integrates different psychological approaches and (theatre) reception theories and comprises of three levels: the presentation of information, the noticing of information, and cognitive processing. These processes are mediated by attention, memory, priming, and affect, and are further shaped by individuals' cognitive structures and framed by specific characteristics of theatrical performance, and the broader cultural context. The model also incorporates two distinct pathways connecting the reception process to the cognitive structure system, illustrating potential mechanisms of development. Psychological reception model is presented on the Figure 1.⁹

The finalized model was initially subjected to a theory-driven validation through its application to four theatrical productions: "Blackbird" ("Muusträstas") by David Harrower at Nuutrum Theatre, "When You Come, Bring Me Flowers" ("Kui sa tuled, too mul lilli") at Ugala Theatre, "Mephisto" ("Mefisto") at the Estonian Drama Theatre and "God's Zoo" ("Issanda loomaaed") at the Endla Theatre. These productions were deliberately selected to reflect substantive and stylistic differences while all addressing current socially significant themes, thereby enabling a test of the model's applicability across heterogeneous performance contexts. "Blackbird" and "When You Come, Bring Me Flowers" are introduced and analysed in Article II.

During the analysis, specific elements of each performance were systematically mapped onto the processes outlined in the model using performance analyses, and the potential activation of these processes during audience engagement was critically examined. This theory-based application allowed for a structured evaluation of the model's analytical strengths, the identification of conceptual or operational limitations, and the implementation of iterative refinements to enhance its coherence and explanatory power.

The following section first introduces the aspects of theatre reception that make the study of performance particularly complex, yet essential to consider; then presents the model itself, and poses the results of the performance analysis of "God's Zoo", focusing on a single performance to maintain clarity and coherence. "God's Zoo"¹⁰ is a documentary theatre production that explores the lives of religious people in Estonia, a country where approximately 87% of the population identify as non-religious (Issanda loomaaed 2025). The performance

⁹ Simplified versions of the model are presented in Articles II and III; here, a specific model is shown that illustrates all relevant connections and processes, thus providing a more detailed overview.

¹⁰ Endla Theatre, director Laura Jaanhold, dramaturg Anne-Ly Sova, set designer Illimar Vihmar, music designer Taavi-Peeter Liiv, lighting designer Kristen-Kalev Lina (TÜVKA); premiered 2.04.2022.

seeks to examine who these individuals are, how they have come to their faith, what kinds of lives they lead, and how they perceive their place within society as well as societal attitudes towards them.

The production is based on interviews conducted with 17 Christian participants, including Lutherans, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baptists. The interviews were carried out between 2021 and 2022. The performance is structured around three types of scenes: reflective discussions in which the actors comment on and analyse the performance and the scenes being enacted; scenes derived directly from the interviews, primarily presented as monologues; and scenes that dramatise narratives recounted by the interviewees.

3.1. Influencing Aspects of Performance Reception

The reception process depends on three main components: (a) the performance itself (including characters and aesthetics); (b) the audience, or spectator; (c) the environment in which the spectator and the performance encounter one another. Each of these components introduces a range of variables that cannot be overlooked.

With regard to the performance, its thematic focus and mode of presentation are central, as are language use and performers. The reception of a performance is shaped by its core message and the means and techniques used to convey it, including directorial decisions and scenographic elements such as sound, set design, and lighting. These elements are closely linked to the choice of form, whether the performance takes the shape of spoken drama, a musical production, clowning, performance art, or other formats. Language and language use determine who is able to understand a performance linguistically (for example, an Estonian-language production can be understood by those who speak Estonian, unless subtitles or simultaneous translation are provided) and whom the performance primarily addresses. A production that employs youth slang, for instance, is more likely to appeal to younger audiences than to older theatre-goers. Also, the performers themselves and their level of professionalism shape the manner in which the performance's message is communicated, as well as the spectator's capacity for immersion and overall enjoyment (Toome 2015: 32).

In addition, the aesthetics of a performance shape and mediate how and in what ways spectators receive or engage with it. Drawing on Umberto Eco's distinction between open and closed texts – where the former allows for a wide range of possible responses and interpretations, and the latter guides readers toward a more specific and predetermined response (Eco 1979: 8–10) – theatre productions may similarly differ in their interpretive openness. More ambiguous productions tend to enable a broader spectrum of audience responses, whereas others restrict interpretation to a single, relatively unambiguous meaning, thereby limiting disagreement or divergent readings. These differences in interpretive openness also influence the range of emotional responses that a performance may evoke. A production that invites multiple interpretations can generate diverse affective

reactions, as spectators negotiate meanings in relation to their own experiences and expectations. Consequently, a performance may exert a strong impact not only through pleasure or enjoyment but also through more challenging emotional responses. Emotional and cognitive engagement in theatre can therefore arise from a wide range of affective experiences, highlighting the active role of spectators in interpreting and responding to a performance.

In relation to the audience or spectator, relevant factors include gender, age, level of education, as well as prior experience, interests, and socio-economic status (Saro 2004: 49–52). For instance, socio-economic status influences the frequency of theatre attendance; interests shape performance choices (for example, individuals interested in dance and music may prefer musical or dance theatre); and prior experience may determine preferences for certain theatres, directors, or performers. Educational background can influence analytical skills and the ability to create connections between the fictional reality of the stage and everyday life, while age affects historical knowledge and experiences related to past periods.

The environment plays a significant role in shaping performance reception by influencing both the accessibility of a performance and the conditions under which it is experienced. Accessibility may be affected for example by location, which can facilitate or restrict audience participation and shape who is able to attend a performance and under what circumstances. Beyond accessibility, the environment of the performance contributes to the reception process by structuring the spectator's experience. Spatial arrangements, audience positioning, and the sequencing of events may result in different spectators encountering the performance in distinct ways. Furthermore, the material and sensory qualities of the environment provide contextual cues that support immersion and contribute to the perceived realism of the performance. Together, these factors demonstrate that reception is not determined solely by the performance itself, but emerges from the interaction between the spectator, the performance, and the environment.

Although these aspects are not directly incorporated into the reception model itself, they inevitably operate in the background, shaping the conditions under which reception takes place. They influence who is able to access a performance, who is likely to understand or relate to it, and how factors such as geographical location and institutional context delimit participation. Aesthetic choices further mediate reception by structuring how performances are opened up to audiences. Different aesthetic strategies invite different modes of attention, interpretation, and emotional engagement. For this reason, even if such contextual and aesthetic dimensions are not formal components of the model, it is important to acknowledge them as underlying factors that condition the psychological processes of reception.

3.2. Framing Elements

Framing elements – culture and the communication of theatre – are key factors shaping the reception process. Unlike other elements, cultural impact and the distinctive features of theatre remain constantly in the background during the

performance, providing an ongoing contextual framework at every level of the process. Therefore, it is essential to consider these two frames as surrounding the reception process itself.

3.2.1. Cultural Space Frame

Cultural space functions as a frame that surrounds and shapes individuals. We are born into it and socialised within it; therefore, spectators do not enter the theatre as blank slates but as individuals already influenced by their environment and its culture, history, economy, and politics. This corresponds to Susan Bennet's (2013: 17) concept of the outer frame and to Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977: 515) macrosystem layer, both of which suggest that cultural context cannot simply be "switched off." Rather, it operates in the background, often outside conscious awareness, while continuously shaping perception and interpretation.

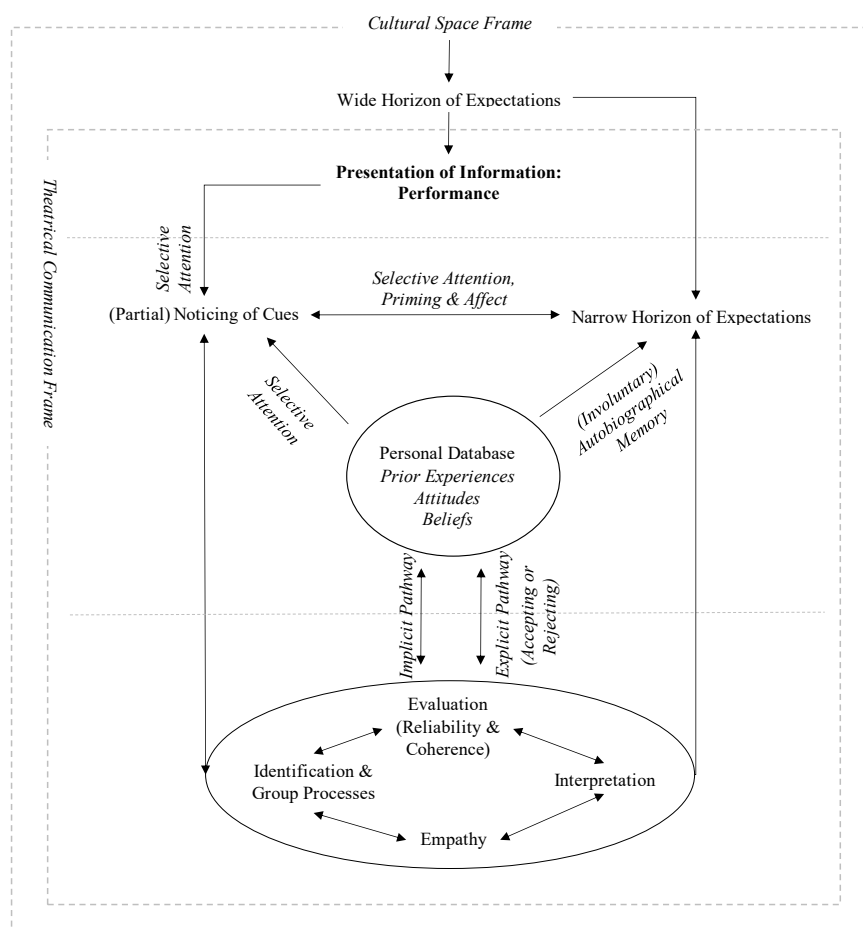


Figure 1. The Psychological Reception Model of Theatre Performance. Short-dashed lines indicate transitions between levels; long-dashed lines indicate frames.

“God’s Zoo” is strongly and directly connected to the cultural context. It addresses questions of religion in contemporary society. Religion has played an important role in shaping culture, influencing the values and understandings that circulate within it. “God’s Zoo” is situated in a cultural environment where, on the one hand, the value system has largely developed under the influence of the Christian tradition, yet on the other hand Estonia is among the most secularized countries in the world (Most Atheist Countries 2026). Thus, the religious dimension creates an important cultural background for the reception of the performance.

3.2.2. Theatrical Communication Frame

The second important frame in this model is related to the specificity of theatre as an art form and consists of time, closed room, autopoietic feedback loop, co-presence, embodiment and aesthetics, corresponding to the ideas of Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) and to the artistic level in Willmar Sauter’s model of theatrical communication (2006: 53–54). Theatre unfolds within a defined temporal structure: it begins and ends within a continuous time frame (excluding intermission), creating a bounded yet extended period of exposure and an uninterrupted experiential arc. Although the duration may vary, this temporal containment establishes a liminal space in which spectators are immersed for a sustained period, long enough to encounter diverse characters, conflicts, value positions, and potentially dissonant perspectives intertwined with transformative aesthetics.

In addition to its temporal boundedness, theatre operates within a shared physical environment characterised by co-presence (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 89). The performance cannot be paused or rewound, and disengagement is socially and practically more demanding than in mediated forms such as film or literature. As a result, spectators are continuously exposed to the performance, unless they deliberately disengage on a cognitive level. Importantly, even resistance, discomfort, or disagreement constitute forms of engagement, as they signal an active cognitive and emotional response to the staged material.

Co-presence, autopoietic feedback loop and embodiment (ibid.: 32–89) further intensify this engagement. The simultaneous physical presence of performers and spectators contributes to the generation of shared affective energy, positioning the spectator as an integral part of the performative event. Embodiment enhances the sense of reality, as live bodies enact the narrative, potentially activating mirror neuron systems and embodied cognitive processes. These mechanisms contribute to the construction of a “real-life” illusion and increase the credibility and experiential immediacy of the performance. All these elements are intertwined with the aesthetics and stylistic choices of the performance.

“God’s Zoo” runs 2 hours and 45 minutes with an intermission. It establishes a trusting environment set against “The Garden of Earthly Delights” by Hieronymus Bosch, where it becomes possible to share sincere personal stories about religion. Audience responses – moments of laughter as well as signs of discomfort – form part of a continuous feedback loop, functioning either on the individual level (as spectators gauge whether their reactions align with those of others) or in relation to the actors, contributing to the circulation of performative energy.

3.3. Different Levels of the Reception Model

The psychological reception model is divided into three function-based levels: the presentation of information, the noticing of information, and cognitive processing, each of which comprises several processes. The first level concerns objective information as presented, prior to modification by cognitive processes. The second level involves the noticing of information and the factors that influence it, such as attention, a narrow horizon of expectations, and an individual's personal database of prior experiences. The third level consists of cognitive processing, that is, the interpretation of information and the construction of meaning based on what is perceived.

3.3.1. Presentation of Information

Wide Horizon of Expectations

The wide, or potential, horizon of expectations – further development of horizon of expectations (Jauss, Benzinger 1970) – refers to the totality of cultural knowledge, assumptions, and interpretative frameworks that may shape how an individual perceives and interprets a work of art. More specifically, it encompasses all possible expectations a spectator may bring when attending a theatre performance. This wide horizon is strongly influenced by the surrounding cultural space, but also by individual characteristics, including (a) the spectator's social environment, prior knowledge, and educational background; (b) information received before the performance (e.g., programme, advertising, reviews); and (c) the spectator's personality and personal value system.

“God’s Zoo” allows connections to be made both with God and with the Estonian folk saying “God’s zoo is colourful”, which is usually an (ironic) reference to human differences and oddities. Thus, the title itself creates a relatively diverse horizon of expectations even before the content of the performance begins to shape audience interpretation. In this case, the role of culture in shaping this horizon of expectations is also evident: the phrase “God’s zoo is colourful” must carry cultural significance in order to evoke potential expectations in the audience.

Similar to cultural space, the wide horizon of expectations can be linked to Susan Bennet’s (2013: 17) outer frame and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1977: 515) ecological systems theory, particularly the macrosystem, as well as to its later neo-ecological reformulation, which accounts for the increasingly technology-mediated nature of contemporary environments (Navarro, Tudge 2023). In this sense, the wide horizon of expectations transcends both temporal and national boundaries. It may encompass knowledge and memories from earlier historical periods, internalised norms and experiences, as well as stereotypes and taken-for-granted beliefs that are implicitly treated as truths and mobilised when justifying one’s views. Many stereotypes become embedded in cultural memory and are no longer critically examined, either because the information originates from a source perceived as trustworthy or because it has been widely socially validated. In such

cases, we may speak of heuristics (Simon 1990: 9) or of the social proof effect, whereby (repeated) social confirmation produces an illusion of truth (Mehrad 2023: 6). At the same time, stereotypes are by definition simplified and distorted representations of reality, serving to conserve cognitive resources (Zhang *et al* 2023: 1). Consequently, the wide horizon of expectations extends across temporal dimensions and is closely intertwined with memory processes: it integrates past experiences and knowledge that remain active in the present, while also reflecting the inherently reconstructive and fallible nature of memory itself.

Nowadays, the wide horizon of expectations increasingly transcends national boundaries, as the internet has made information and public discourse globally accessible. Such access enables diverse cultural ideas and norms to circulate and intermingle, blurring previously stable boundaries while simultaneously shaping and expanding audience expectations. Together, these elements form a mental and emotional framework for experiencing a performance even before it begins. Even if spectators do not consciously reflect on these influences, they remain embedded in a cultural environment saturated with such themes, which inevitably shapes how different issues are perceived and interpreted.

Presentation of Information: Performance

A performance functions as a source of (new) information as well as a medium that offers new perspectives on familiar themes or recalls long-established truths. Information may be understood as data or knowledge about facts, acquired through inquiry, experience, or practice. Theatre conveys information through multiple expressive channels, ranging from text¹¹ and facial expression to movement, lighting, scenography, and music.

In the theatrical context, this implies a relative autonomy of the staged material: what appears on stage operates as data within a given aesthetic and narrative framework. The spectator may thus occupy an exploratory position, while the staged action constitutes the material to be examined. Because theatre communicates through diverse verbal and non-verbal means, all expressive elements – spoken language, gesture, rhythm, spatial composition, sound, and visual design – function as carriers of information.

“God’s Zoo” presents different aspects of Christianity while also highlighting common jokes among Christians (for example, a wordplay joke about asking Baptists during a christening whether their babTITS are naked).

It is important to note that the informational units presented on stage are, at the level of presentation, identical for all spectators. Before being filtered through cognitive processes such as attention, interpretation, and memory, the staged stimuli remain structurally the same.

¹¹ The text as a carrier of information – along with its trustworthiness and influence – is examined in Article I.

3.3.2. Noticing of Information

(Partial) Noticing of Cues

Theatre often presents information in large quantities. At the same time, human information processing has cognitive limits, which means that some information inevitably goes unnoticed (Buschman *et al* 2011: 11252). Not all presented information can be processed simultaneously. Consequently, spectators must (often unconsciously) prioritize which elements are relevant or important and which can be ignored. This process relies on selective attention (Dayan *et al* 2000: 1221), but is also guided by emotions and affective states, which can direct attention toward specific stimuli (Fenske, Raymond 2006: 312; Phelps *et al* 2006: 297–298; Todd *et al* 2012: 367). Importantly, this selection process is unique to each spectator, reflecting individual differences in perception, prior knowledge, and personal relevance. This is in accordance with Willmar Sauter’s model of theatrical communication, particularly its sensory level (Sauter 2006: 51–52), where the spectator’s attention must first be captured and physically perceived.

In “God’s Zoo”, Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Garden of Earthly Delights” functions as an important visual reference within the stage environment. However, although the painting is present in the background of the performance, it is not possible for spectators to observe it in detail during the performance itself. The spatial distance from the stage and the dynamics of the ongoing action draw the audience’s attention primarily toward the actors and the unfolding events. As a result, the painting operates more as a symbolic and atmospheric element than as an object of close visual examination, and many of its details may remain unnoticed by the spectators.

Narrow Horizon of Expectations

The narrow horizon of expectation reflects the spectator’s actual knowledge or what is accessible in their memory. It aligns with Jauss and Benzinger’s (1970) horizon of expectations theory, Susan Bennet’s (2013: 17) inner frame and as well as Bronfenbrenner’s (1977: 514–515) micro- and mesosystem, encompassing processes that depend on and originate from the individual. The narrow horizon does not include all of a spectator’s memories or knowledge, but only those that are activated during the performance, thus, it is directly linked to the spectator’s active thoughts while watching. It may also involve the emergence of previously unconscious or latent ideas and associations, with the theatre serving as the activating agent. The narrow horizon is strongly shaped by personal attitudes, beliefs, and prior life experiences. These individual memories and emotionally charged associations provide the basis for determining which expectations are likely to arise and help establish initial expectations that can subsequently be tested and adjusted during the performance.

In “God’s Zoo”, the question “Who are the Christians living in Estonia?” sets the direction for the audience’s expectations, which are shaped by knowledge, experience, and prejudice alike. At the same time, the production engages very boldly

with the expectations it generates. For example, in Jakob's (played by Nils Mattias Steinberg) monologue, he immediately points out the associations people commonly link with Christianity: cathedrals, priests, paedophilia, crusades, and church services. Jakob also illustrates the speaking style of Lutheran clergy – monotonous, delivered at a single pitch, with arms spread wide as if to bless everyone present. This approach both directs the audience's thinking and gives spectators an opportunity to recognize their own expectations.

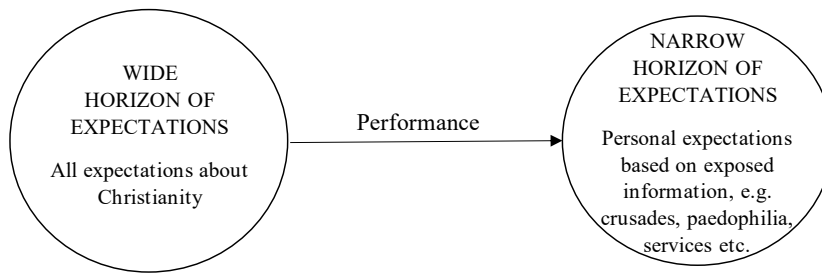


Figure 2. Connection between two types of horizons of expectations: “God’s Zoo”

The narrow horizon of expectation is connected to the wide horizon, yet the two remain analytically distinct. Spectator’s personal experiences shape expectations about how a given situation might unfold, while societal norms and collective understandings may provide a different – at times even opposing – framework. Cultural, political, and other systemic structures exert a strong influence on the individual and their choices, whereas the individual simultaneously constructs a personal world that typically has limited influence on the broader cultural system. In other words, the wide horizon of expectations operates beyond the level of individual experience, whereas the narrow horizon – rooted in personal memory and experience – is inherently individual and subjective.

The activation of the narrow horizon of expectations is closely linked to autobiographical memory, as spectators may engage with the performance from a personal or emotionally charged perspective. In such cases, their horizon narrows around specific emotional or experiential reference points. Within this framework, spectators are more likely to notice signs, motifs, and narrative elements that resonate with their own life experiences, concerns, or personal questions. Because emotions play a central role in shaping this process and influencing the memory, affect theory is considered. Moreover, studies on brain regions have shown that personal and public events in memory activate different areas of the brain, suggesting that they are inherently distinct in nature (Sulpizio *et al* 2025: 11–12). In relation to horizons of expectation, personal experiences can be associated with a narrow horizon of expectations, whereas public events correspond to a wider horizon of expectations.

Personal Database (Prior Experiences, Attitudes, Beliefs)

Each spectator possesses a personal database composed of prior life experiences and the attitudes and beliefs formed from them. It bears conceptual similarity to Norman Holland's (1975: 816–818) notion of the identity theme and also resonates with the information-processing model proposed by Crick and Dodge (1994). This database is shaped by factors such as age, education, life experience, and cognitive capacity. It enables individuals to function in everyday life by storing acquired knowledge and inferences, as well as decision-making strategies that support efficient processing, including heuristics and stereotypes. During a performance, spectators likewise draw on this database, applying the same interpretative and evaluative mechanisms to the events unfolding on stage.

In the performance, the actors discuss encounters with Jehovah's Witnesses, noting that "we have to talk about them as well," while their visible discomfort suggests an underlying tension. This theme is further developed in a sketch scene in which the characters hide from a Jehovah's Witness, who eventually discovers them awkwardly in a closet. Such situations are easily relatable to the spectators' own experiences, which can be retrieved from their personal database and compared with what is presented in the performance.

The database functions both as a repository that provides behavioural guidance and as a system that is continuously updated. It operates through ongoing feedback processes, allowing new information to be incorporated or existing knowledge to be revised when the new input better fits the structure or appears more useful. Consequently, information presented in a performance may either align with or challenge the spectator's existing knowledge and the expectations derived from it, thereby directly affecting its compatibility with the spectator's attitude system. This perspective aligns with models of attitude change and learning that address the conditions under which new information is accepted and integrated.

Attitudes and beliefs, whether implicit or explicit, shape both which elements are noticed through attentional processes and how spectators interpret the performance, as well as what they accept as credible. Implicit attitudes are more closely linked to emotional components (Smith, Nosek 2011: 308), whereas explicit attitudes are more readily retrievable as they are conscious (Tao 2024: 315). This highlights the accessibility of attitudes within the personal database – that is, how quickly and easily a given attitude can be activated. Accessibility is related to familiarity: repeated exposure increases familiarity, which in turn strengthens and facilitates the retrieval of associated attitudes (Zajonc 1968: 23).

Theatre influences accessibility in two ways: it can activate pre-existing attitudes while simultaneously contributing to the formation of new ones through the presentation of information. This process shapes the expectations that emerge within the narrow horizon and guides what spectators register through attention. Consequently, these processes operate within a continuous feedback loop throughout the performance. Spectators repeatedly invest cognitive resources to

evaluate the compatibility between incoming information and their existing attitudes. The theatrical encounter thus constitutes an intensive experiential context in which thematically related information is presented within a limited time frame, creating conditions that may facilitate attitude change.

Attitudes may become visible when a spectator hears statements on stage which they do not agree with. For example, in “God’s Zoo”, Jakob states that we are all religious and that atheists simply do not realise it. This prompts the question of what goes through the spectator’s mind at that moment – do they agree with or does it produce dissonance and they want to argue with it.

Whether attitudes remain stable or shift, each new piece of information poses a renewed interpretative challenge. With every cycle of processing, the narrow horizon of expectations is recalibrated and reconstructed. In this way, spectators draw upon their personal database to make sense of the performance, while each new experience – including the act of watching theatre – simultaneously contributes to updating that database.

3.3.3. Cognitive Processing

Identification and Group Processes

Through identification, the spectator can place themselves in the position of a character (e.g. Cohen 2001; Jauss *et al* 1974; Schoenmakers 1988), enabling engagement with the narrative from multiple viewpoints. Identification depends on certain conditions related either to the spectator or to the character. Accordingly, the process is linked both to the spectator’s self-concept – how they perceive themselves – and to group-related processes, including the types of individuals with whom they tend to align or identify. Belonging to a group is a psychological need that enhances a sense of safety and, in turn, reinforces our values, attitudes, and self-concept.

Identification and group formation are influenced by self-image and by the group with which a spectator perceives themselves to belong. This requires the spectator to position themselves in relation to the characters: Am I religious or not? What are my personal experiences with religion (drawn from my experiential database)? What are my moral or political standpoints? “God’s Zoo” offers multiple avenues for identification, as the stories are told from diverse viewpoints and life paths, enabling spectators to relate even if they are not religious themselves. Points of identification may emerge through everyday habits, negative experiences with (other) religious people, individuals who have found inner peace (through religion), or those struggling with difficult emotions, exclusion, or bullying for various reasons. For example, Jakob was an atheist who embraced religion in adulthood. He describes how he once adhered strongly to evolutionary theory and sought to challenge religion, feeling frustrated that highly educated people believed what he perceived as unscientific ideas. Because this position resembles that of many spectators in Estonia, identification is facilitated through shared attitudes that are readily understandable.

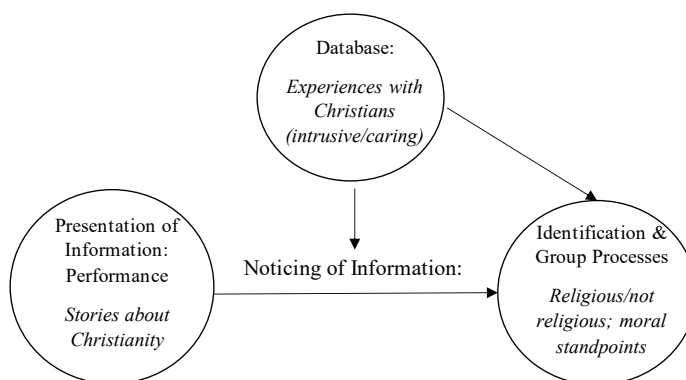


Figure 3. Connections between information, noticing, identification and database: “God’s Zoo”.

Although belonging to a group and identifying with characters can create a relatively strong mental alignment, the persistence of this state depends on subsequent experiences and on the congruence between presented and expected behaviour. In other words, the information presented must align with what we expect from our in-group and resonate with our own attitudes.

Notably, references to Jehovah’s Witnesses can generate discomfort among the actors and among the Christian characters they portray, creating a situation in which two otherwise distinct groups momentarily align in opposition to a third. This dynamic illustrates how group boundaries can shift: differences may recede while similarities become more salient, allowing new forms of proximity and shared positioning to emerge.

Empathy

Empathy enables spectators to emotionally engage with characters (Schoenmakers 1988: 142) and functions as a mediating mechanism that supports both identification and interpretation. More specifically, characters whom spectators feel empathically connected with are easier to identify with, as empathy may arise from shared experiential grounds (e.g. similar lived situations) as well as from shared emotional states. This engagement can involve affective resonance and embodied responses – potentially including mirroring processes – alongside cognitive appraisal, thereby making identification possible even with morally ambiguous or unlikeable characters. Empathy also facilitates the understanding and interpretation of characters’ decisions and actions, even when these are not aligned with the spectator’s own views or attitudes.

In “God’s Zoo,” empathy is easily elicited by stories in which individuals are treated unjustly because they are perceived as different. Situations marked by unfairness and harmful behaviour from others are readily understandable to spectators and thus strongly conducive to empathic response.

Interpretation

Interpretation in theatre involves the active construction of meaning from the on-stage events, integrating sensory, cognitive, and emotional cues into a coherent understanding. This process is closely intertwined with information processing model (Crick, Dodge 1994), empathy (Schoenmakers 1988: 142), ToM, and symbolic level of Sauter's communication model (Sauter 2006: 55–56), as emotional attunement to characters' experiences allows spectators to infer motives, intentions, and emotional states, thereby enriching their comprehension of the narrative. At the same time, interpretation is also connected to the evaluative processes: spectators not only understand but also assess the actions, decisions, and moral stances of the characters. Empathy mediates this evaluation by providing insight into why characters behave as they do, allowing for a more nuanced judgment that balances personal beliefs with the characters' perspectives. Through this dynamic interplay, spectators engage in a continuous cycle of interpreting, identifying, empathizing, and evaluating, that shapes their overall reception of the performance and may influence subsequent attitudes or reflections.

One striking sketch depicts a believer experiencing the atmosphere of peace and reverence in a church, which is abruptly disrupted by a worker's crude entrance and question about the location of the "shithouse." A strong contrast emerges between notions of sacredness, respect, and social attitudes, creating space to reflect on people's behaviour and the extent to which we respect other people's personal worlds.

Evaluation (Reliability and Coherence)

Evaluation refers to the spectator's judgment of the information, actions, or events presented on stage, and it can be understood through two key dimensions: reliability, which reflects the perceived trustworthiness or credibility of the depicted events or characters¹², and coherence, which reflects how logically and consistently the narrative or behaviour unfolds. It is derived from the social information-processing model (Crick, Dodge 1994). Evaluation is closely linked to interpretation, as the process of making sense of what is seen on stage depends on assessing both the plausibility and internal consistency of the performance. It is also intertwined with identification, because the more a spectator identifies with a character, the more their evaluations are shaped by the character's perspective, emotional state, and experiences. In other words, identification can bias or enrich evaluation: spectators may judge actions differently depending on whether they empathize with or approve morally a character (Teasdale *et al* 2021: 8–9), which in turn informs the meaning they construct through interpretation.

In "God's Zoo," credibility may instead be evaluated through the perceived plausibility of the situations and narratives presented – whether the events and reactions appear psychologically and socially convincing. For instance, a spectator

¹² This is discussed in Article I through the example of trauma and depression.

may question whether it is believable that parents would assume their non-religious child is drawing pentagrams together with a religious classmate. Such evaluations are not determined by objective truth but by perception and prior knowledge. What appears convincing depends on the spectator's existing beliefs, experiences, and expectations, which shape how the presented material is interpreted and assessed.

3.4. Mediating Processes

Mediating processes such as selective attention, priming, affect, autobiographical memory, and both explicit and implicit pathways guide and enable the functioning of other aspects of the model. They represent fundamental characteristics of the psyche that cannot be switched off. Without these mediating processes, reception would be uniform and mechanical; in reality, however, they explain why the same message can generate different meanings, reactions, and degrees of impact across individuals.

3.4.1. Selective Attention, Priming and Affect

The different components of the model are mediated by selective attention, priming, and affect. This selection is influenced by emotions, as well as by the spectator's prior attitudes, knowledge, and expectations. Pre-formed expectations direct attention towards dialogues and symbols that align with the narrow horizon of expectations, filtering out other information. Attention also prioritises information that maintains the balance within the spectator's cognitive system, or personal database.

Affect-driven attention means automatic prioritisation of emotionally meaningful stimuli over neutral ones and it influences both the focus of attention and information processing (Todd *et al* 2012: 365). This form of attention develops through experience and is directly linked to our personal database, shaping how we perceive the world and respond emotionally. Consequently, individual differences in this database affect how situations – including theatrical performances – are perceived. A spectator's personal experiences, emotions, and their associated meanings are often coloured by affect, which in turn directs attention towards emotionally salient cues. Emotional resonance with the performance can therefore guide attention, deepen engagement, facilitate the recall of prior experiences, and shape interpretation, particularly in relation to states of affective similarity.

Attention and information uptake are also influenced by priming, which facilitates the formation of specific associations, which in turn shape the spectator's horizon of expectations.

Religion has appeared in public discourse through various scandals and controversies, including investigations into sexual abuse within religious institutions, cases of spiritual abuse and misuse of authority, and political conflicts involving religious groups. Such events may function as a form of priming or contribute to

the certain associations, expectations, or attitudes, which in turn influence selective attention during the performance.

3.4.2. (Involuntary) Autobiographical Memory

Autobiographical memory refers to personally significant experiences stored in narrative form, deeply intertwined with the self and with how individuals perceive and construct their identity (Conway 1992: 169). The involuntary autobiographical memory perspective adds that memories can spontaneously surface when triggered without conscious intention (Schlagman, Kvavilashvili 2008: 920). Priming further facilitates this process (Mace 2005: 883), activating relevant memory networks and making stimulus-related thoughts or experiences more readily accessible. Autobiographical memory thus links the personal database with the narrow horizon of expectations, allowing individual experiences and memories to shape subsequent anticipations during the performance.

In “God’s Zoo,” the monologues are interspersed with sketches depicting everyday situations involving religious individuals. These scenes may activate autobiographical memories if spectators have encountered similar moments themselves – for example, making jokes about religion at a barbecue, falling into awkward silence upon learning that a colleague is a Christian, or attempting to avoid encounters with Jehovah’s Witnesses. Such memories become juxtaposed with what is presented on stage, shaping attention and guiding expectations throughout the performance.

3.4.3. Implicit Pathway

Between the database and the cognitive processing level (interpretation, empathy, evaluation, and identification), two pathways illustrate how information presented in a performance reaches the database, similarly to Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) ELM. One of these is an implicit pathway, referring to unconscious processing. A spectator may not consciously accept the presented information or may evaluate it as unreliable or biased; nevertheless, cognitive processing still occurs. As a result, some knowledge or experiential traces may be incorporated into the database without the spectator’s awareness. In this way, attitudes may also be subtly shaped or shifted, yet because these changes are implicit, they are not readily accessible to conscious reflection.

“God’s Zoo” presents extensive material about Christianity and Christian life in Estonia. At the beginning of the performance, different forms of Christianity are introduced alongside statistical information, emphasizing the diversity of Christian identities and worldviews. The production also incorporates historical perspectives, suggesting that viewpoints acquired through education continue to shape contemporary attitudes – for example, the idea that the Crusades were driven more by political and power interests than by religion. At the same time, this educational material is framed by simple, everyday situations that normalize religion and present Christians as not fundamentally different from other members

of society. They are shown in ordinary contexts – taking a smoking break, walking, or spending time with friends. A memorable line delivered by Kadri Rämmeld captures this idea: “Who are these religious people – perhaps we have even had coffee with them,” as if such proximity were unusual, although, ironically, this supposed “otherness” may have gone unnoticed before. Through these strategies, spectators may become more aware of the diversity and complexity of Christian worldviews, which can differ considerably from initial assumptions. Even if spectators do not explicitly change their attitudes, they acquire new information and encounter alternative perspectives. This material is implicitly incorporated into their experiential database, becoming accessible when similar topics arise in the future.

3.4.4. Explicit Pathway (Accepting or Rejecting)

The explicit pathway involves active processing in which the spectator consciously accepts or rejects information following cognitive evaluation. When the presented material is assessed as coherent and reliable, it may be incorporated into the database, sometimes accompanied by the recognition that the onstage presentation confirms pre-existing attitudes or prior experiences. Conversely, information may be judged unreliable or inconsistent and therefore disregarded in order to preserve the stability of the cognitive structure.

New information may also be processed explicitly. For example, spectators may recognize that inappropriate jokes, when repeated, lose their humour, while also discovering how religion can function as a source of support and comfort. They may gain insight into how Christians experience negative social attitudes, as well as how some believers themselves are critical of extremist positions. The performance also presents a range of viewpoints within Christianity – for instance, some Christians express acceptance of homosexuality, whereas others argue that Kersti Kaljulaid, as a divorced woman, should not have served as president. Such contrasts can prompt reflection and potentially shift attitudes, contributing to the perception of religion as a more complex and normalized aspect of social life.

Cognitive dissonance is one process that may arise within the explicit pathway when the database is not coherent with information undergoing cognitive processing. In such cases, the new information may be rejected, or the underlying cognitive structure may be modified in order to resolve the dissonance¹³ (Figure 4).

“God’s Zoo” engages extensively with cognitive dissonance, a concept that is explicitly introduced even during the performance. Throughout the performance, two principal areas of tension emerge: claims related to systems of belief (for example, “evolutionary theory is pseudoscience”) and questions related to morality and values (for example, “abortion is wrong and all children, regardless of health condition, should be born”). When spectators hold attitudes that differ from those presented, a conflict arises in which the claims expressed in the performance

¹³ Cognitive dissonance in relation to the story and its characters is examined in greater detail in Article I.

enter a kind of internal “debate” with the spectator’s own convictions. Many of the themes also highlight social norms – what is generally considered acceptable in society – as well as individuals’ personal viewpoints. The example of Jehovah’s Witnesses addresses the celebration – or deliberate non-celebration – of Christmas, such as not bringing a Christmas tree to kindergarten or not putting up decorations. In this case, a widely accepted social norm is juxtaposed with a minority position that challenges it.

Cognitive dissonance is also closely connected to another significant dimension of the performance – the portrayal of non-believers’ behaviour toward religious individuals. The production presents instances in which believers are chased with an axe, mocked, ignored, or dismissed rather than heard, reinforcing an explicitly voiced sentiment that believers are fortunate if they are not physically attacked in public. This raises a broader ethical question: is this an image of ourselves that we wish to accept, and does it align with our values? When spectators ask themselves similar questions and recognize that the depicted situations do not align with their own values concerning human dignity, cognitive dissonance is activated, calling for resolution in one form or another.

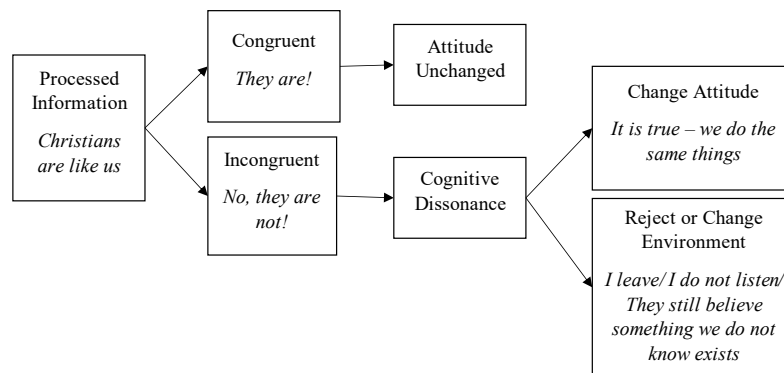


Figure 4. Cognitive Dissonance in the Explicit Pathway: “God’s Zoo”.

To conclude, the model conceptualises theatre reception as a multi-level process integrating theatre studies and psychological processes, involving both cognitive and affective components. Spectators enter the performance with cultural knowledge and pre-activated expectations, while the processing of the performance is shaped by information processing, prior experience, identity, attention, and affect. The live nature of theatre aligns these processes within a theatrical communication frame. Identification, empathy, interpretation and evaluation enable cognitive analyses and conclusions while moments of dissonance prompt the reinterpretation of prior beliefs. Theatre thus creates conditions for co-constructed meaning, opening space for reflection and the re-evaluation of prior attitudes.

4. AUDIENCE STUDY

The audience study, which constituted the empirical testing of the model and the mapping of attitude formation, consisted of two distinct sub-stages: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In addition, pilot studies were conducted both to test the methodological procedures and to identify the most suitable questions for the main data collection.

4.1. Questionnaires

The questionnaires were developed separately for each production, considering the specific content of the performance and the themes that emerged during its course. This process was informed by a detailed performance analysis, through which the main themes were identified and used as the basis for selecting the questionnaire items. The aim of the questions was to map different perceptions and evaluations of the performances, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of the key dimensions of their reception.

The questionnaire was divided into three distinct sections: a general section being mutual for both productions, a specific section containing items related to the production in question, and a background information section (including age, gender, and orientation on a liberal–conservative scale). In both the general and specific sections, participants were asked to rate statements about themselves on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 10 indicated strong agreement. The questionnaire for “Mephisto” (Appendix A) comprised 13 items, while the questionnaire for “A Societally Harmful Element” (Appendix B) comprised 16 items.

The questionnaire could be completed on two occasions: before and after the performance. In the case of “A Societally Harmful Element”, an additional opportunity was provided during the intermission; these responses were later combined with the post-performance data, as participants had already been exposed to the content of the performance. Participants were free to complete the questionnaire on both occasions or only on one, at their own discretion and they were asked to complete the questionnaire immediately prior to or immediately following the viewing of the performance.

During the preparation of the study, three pilot studies were conducted. The first pilot aimed to test the design and functionality of the questionnaire-based experiment. To this end, ten PhD students were recruited, selected primarily based on availability and willingness to participate. Participants were shown a 20-minute excerpt from the recorded performance of “God’s Zoo” in order to create as authentic a theatrical experience as possible within a controlled setting.

The experiment consisted of two stages of questionnaire completion: one before and one after viewing the recording. In both cases, participants responded to the same statements related to the performance. Although the small sample size precluded statistically significant conclusions, the pilot study revealed some

noticeable tendency for attitude shift following the viewing, as indicated by a Paired Samples T-test. This finding confirmed that the questionnaire design was functional and suitable for use with the main study participants.

The second and third pilot studies focused on finalising the composition of the questionnaires for the productions “Mephisto” and “A Societally Harmful Element”. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. They were asked to evaluate the statements presented once and, where possible, provide feedback on their clarity and comprehensibility. Based on these results, statements exhibiting low variability – where responses clustered at one end of the scale – were removed. Additionally, the wording of some questions was revised to reduce the possibility of multiple interpretations and to enhance clarity.

4.2. Interviews

The interview was designed as a semi-structured instrument to allow participants the flexibility to elaborate on their responses where necessary. The interview comprised of 22 questions and they were developed based on the different components of the psychological reception model to investigate their validity. The questions approached model’s components from multiple perspectives, addressing both explicit and implicit dimensions of audience experience. The interview guide remained the same across all performances, except for the section on attitudes, which was adapted to reflect the specific themes and message of each performance (Appendices C and D).

The interviews were conducted individually, on average two weeks after viewing the performance, either online or in face-to-face meetings, and were recorded with the participants’ consent. Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. All data were treated as confidential, and any information that could potentially identify participants was either removed or anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

4.3. Sample

The study sample was divided into two groups: theatre-goers who completed the questionnaire at the theatre, and participants who took part in the interviews.

Invitations to complete the questionnaire were distributed at the theatres or performance venues, and participants accessed the questionnaire via a QR code provided on the invitation. All theatre-goers present at the performances who had access to a smartphone were eligible to participate, and completion of the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

The sample consisted of audience members attending two theatrical productions. For “SHE”, a total of 115 participants completed the questionnaire (101 women, 13 men, and one participant identifying as other). The average age of

men was 42 years (range 26–62), and the average age of women was 36 years (range 20–63). For ‘Mephisto’, the sample included 128 participants (91 women, 35 men, and two participants identifying as other). The average age of men was 35 years (range 14–73), and the average age of women was 38 years (range 17–70) (Table 1).

All participants who participated in the interview were recruited through a public call shared on the social media platform Facebook in 2024, with individuals interested in participating contacting the researcher directly. Participants were required not to have any professional affiliation with theatre in order to ensure a sample as representative as possible of the general audience, and they must not have previously seen the performance under study. From the pool of volunteers, the final sample was selected with the aim of maximising gender and age diversity. Participants were assigned to different productions, meaning that scheduling and the performance venue were also determinants of participation. Approximately 70 individuals applied to take part in the study, of whom around 90% were women.

A total of 23 participants (20 women and 3 men) were selected to take part in the interviews, of whom 9 had attended performances of “Mephisto” and 14 had attended performances of “SHE” (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of participants in the study.

	Mephisto	SHE	Total
Interview	9 (8 F; 1 M)	14 (12 F; 2 M)	23
Questionnaire	128 (91 F; 35 M, 2 other)	115 (101 F; 13 M, 1 other)	243

4.4. Data analyses

All questionnaire statements were analysed individually to capture potential effects at the level of specific attitudinal dimensions. Inter-item correlations did not support the use of composite measures. Descriptive statistics were conducted to summarise participants’ responses before and after the performance. Means and standard deviations were calculated for all questionnaire items to provide an overview of central tendencies and variability in the data. Normality was evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test. Given unequal group sizes and violations of normality assumptions, group differences to compare before and after performance groups were tested using Welch’s t-test, which is robust to heteroscedasticity and moderate non-normality. Effect sizes were estimated using Hedges’ *g*, with 95% confidence intervals reported. All analyses were conducted using statistics program JASP.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, a subtype of qualitative content analysis (Kalmus *et al* 2015). Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the interview data, with a focus on participants’ understandings, expectations, attitudes, and experiences. Analysis units and categories were defined, and the texts were coded accordingly

(Kalmus 2015). This process enabled the quantification of the frequency of recurring themes and processes, allowing for an assessment of how many participants described experiences consistent with the processes outlined in the model.

4.5. Performances

This audience study examines the reception model and attitudinal development through two theatrical productions: “Mephisto”, and “Societally Harmful Element or SHE” (“Ühiskondlikult kahjulik element ehk ÜKE”). “Mephisto” represents political theatre, while “SHE” is an example of documentary theatre. The performances were selected for their engagement with socially relevant themes, such as low birth rates in Estonia, as well as politically significant issues, including moral and political dilemmas in times of crisis. Both performances also involve individual-level experiences of trauma and life difficulties. These themes had the potential to engage the spectator and activate the necessary processes, while the aesthetics of the performances remained sufficiently distinct, thus providing variety. Both political and documentary theatre address such themes by foregrounding concrete societal tensions and points of conflict rather than presenting purely fictional narratives. The following section briefly introduces the selected productions as well as the concepts of political and documentary theatre.

4.5.1. “Mephisto”

“Mephisto”¹⁴ is a stage adaptation of Klaus Mann’s novel of the same name by Kertu Moppel, exploring the relationship between art, power, and moral compromise in the context of a totalitarian regime in the times of Second World War. The production centres on the figure of an ambitious actor Hendrik Höfgen (played by Juhan Ulfsak) whose career advances alongside the rise of an authoritarian political system, raising questions about personal responsibility, conformity, and the ethical limits of artistic success, as well as themes of opportunism, loyalty, resistance, and self-deception that highlight tensions between private convictions and public actions.

The performance examines how individuals navigate shifting political realities and the extent to which professional ambition may lead to accommodation with oppressive power structures. Rather than offering clear moral judgements, “Mephisto” foregrounds ambivalence and contradiction, presenting ethical dilemmas as situational and historically contingent.

“Mephisto” represents political theatre, aiming to address socially significant issues, educate audiences, generate critical reflection and disagreement, and offer new perspectives, while employing specific aesthetic strategies that connect staged reality with lived experience. Political theatre can be defined through four

¹⁴ Estonian Drama Theatre, director Kertu Moppel, art director Arthur Arula, choreographer Jüri Nael, lighting designer Priidu Adlas, sound designer Lauri Kaldoja, video designer Epp Kubu, translated by Rita Tasa; premiered 12.02.2021.

criteria, which may co-occur but may also be absent or exist in tension with one another: thematic focus (engagement with political issues), functionality (the intended purpose of the performance), ideology (whether and which ideological positions are articulated), and aesthetics (the reception strategies employed by the production and its modes of representing contemporary reality) (Pesti 2016: 55–57).

4.5.2. “SHE”

“SHE”¹⁵ is a documentary theatre production based on interviews with women who do not have children. The project emerged from Siret Tuula’s personal experiences and observations and was developed from her original concept in collaboration with director Helen Rekkor. Through interviews, the production traces the life courses of women without children – from childhood experiences to imagined old age – highlighting the decisions and circumstances that have shaped their current lives (Vikerhommik 2024). The title refers to a statement made by an Estonian conservative politician, Martin Helme, who publicly described a 27-year-old childless woman as a ‘societally harmful element’ (Helme 2016).

The performance features four actors (Eva Püssa, Kaisa Selde, Silva Pijon, and Siret Tuula) presenting the stories of sixteen women. The narratives are delivered primarily as direct-address monologues, frequently interrupting one another, producing both a collective voice representing women without children and a multiplicity of distinct perspectives. Thematically, the production addresses a wide range of life experiences, including childhood adversity, domestic violence, alcoholism, neglect, poverty, mental health struggles, and other forms of trauma. These accounts are presented in a restrained, reflective manner rather than with overt emotional intensity.

“SHE”¹⁶ represents documentary theatre, which refers to theatrical practices that employ pre-existing documents as source material, including journalistic texts, archival records, reports, interviews, letters, statistics, speeches, photographs, and audio recordings (Pesti 2016: 19). At its core, documentary theatre is concerned with the relationship between theatre and reality. Contemporary documentary theatre emphasizes the multifaceted exploration of social issues by presenting multiple perspectives, fostering dialogue between differing positions, and engaging with conflict and its negotiation. (Ibid.: 82)

Taken together, this audience study is designed to capture theatre reception as a dynamic and multi-level process. By combining questionnaires and interviews, it brings together structured measurement and in-depth exploration of spectators’

¹⁵ Vaba Lava, author of the idea Siret Tuula, director Helen Rekkor, stage designer Jaanika Jüris, playwright Helen Rekkor, Siret Tuula and Kristiina Jalasto-Kallas, lighting artist Denis Bretško, video artist Piret Parrest, producers Triinu Reigo and Katarina Tomps, sound design Laura Sinimäe, sound technician Laura Romanova, stage manager Eliisa Vellama; premiered 14.11.2024 Vaba Lava Narva teatrikeskus

¹⁶ Like “SHE”, “God’s Zoo” is a documentary theatre production.

experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding than either method alone. The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses supports the testing of the model and its explanatory power and provides a broader and more nuanced view of reception, addressing its cognitive, affective, and reflective dimensions.

5. APPLICATION OF THE MODEL

The application of the model was examined through both interviews and questionnaires. The interviews provided evidence that the model is applicable and possesses descriptive power in illustrating the spectator's reception process through the combined lens of reception theories and psychological mechanisms. The questionnaires, in turn, outlined the potential influence of theatrical performances on spectators' attitudes. The results indicated that performances may either reinforce existing attitudes or contribute to shifts in them. At the same time, the questionnaire data helped illustrate the relationships and processes described in the model, offering additional support for the connections between theatrical stimuli, psychological mechanisms, and spectators' interpretative responses.

5.1. Case Illustration of the Psychological Reception Model

The results and analyses of the interview data are presented in Article III. This chapter further illustrates the functioning of the psychological reception model through the example of one interview participant (Participant L¹⁷) who attended the performance "SHE" (Table 3). The responses of other interview participants could likewise be positioned within the model, demonstrating its capacity to accommodate diverse reception experiences within a coherent analytical structure. By mapping the interview material onto the model, this example illustrates its analytical applicability and explanatory power in tracing how spectators' interpretations emerge from the interaction of cultural frameworks, prior experiences, cognitive processes, and the specific conditions of the performance event. These components are mediated by psychological mechanisms such as attention, affect, priming, and two pathways linking cognitive processing to the personal database. Although these mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping reception, they are not explicitly represented in the table, as they operate largely implicitly.

¹⁷ All participants were assigned letters to ensure anonymity.

Table 3. Model components compared with the answers from the interviews: performance “SHE” and participant L.

Model Component	Answers from the Interview ¹⁸
Presentation of Information	[All elements presented in the performance; the performance itself]
(Partial) Noticing of Cues	Older people, somewhere around the table, ask “well, what are the plans for starting a family and why aren’t there any children yet” // on stage, there were just a few elements, like the circle there // few actors, but many stories.
Wide horizon of expectations	I was familiar with the topics (related to childlessness – <i>author’s note</i>) // I had also heard about this “societally harmful element” before // what had been written in the media.
Narrow horizon of expectations	[Related to the depicted topic]
Attitudes and Beliefs	A woman’s goal isn’t just to have children, and women can pursue a career just as well, and women’s opinions, ideas, and all of that are important.
Prior Experiences	I would say that my father has always been there for me in my life, and I grew up in a family with both a mother and a father, but still that father role – or, for example, some emotional closeness, like sitting down with your dad and discussing things – has been missing. I think this topic also came up once in the performance, that the father is physically present, but at the same time he’s occupied with other things. It’s a theme about childhood patterns. // Yesterday, an older relative called and asked about my own situation here (regarding having children – <i>author’s note</i>).
Group Processes/ identification	<i>Group:</i> Career-focused, 30+ years old, female, single. <i>Identification:</i> This part, where one woman went to a so-called clairvoyant (to know if man is ready to have children – <i>author’s note</i>). That moment, it raised the question of, you know, how men in society nowadays really feel – like, who actually wants a family, children, and, for example, marriage.
Empathy	Lack of a suitable partner. //... // You can’t just ignore it or fail to acknowledge that window of opportunity eventually closes (to have children – <i>author’s note</i>). And if you don’t take action, maybe that’s exactly it – you actually belong to that group of people who don’t have children. And, I don’t know if you could say it’s really my choice – well, in a sense it is – but still, on one hand, I’m empathetic about it, and on the other, I also strongly identify with it.
Evaluation	[Familiar perspectives // similarity to one’s own knowledge and thoughts.]
Interpretation	Women’s position in society; prevalence of childless women.
Attitude Formation	I think that this is exactly each person’s own choice (to have children – <i>author’s note</i>), and it definitely shouldn’t be judged or viewed differently in any way.

Note. [...] – not the participant’s exact words, but a description of the process, which would otherwise be impossible to capture through the interview.

¹⁸ Translated by the author, originally held in Estonian.

The model demonstrates that spectators are influenced by culturally embedded ideas, such as prevailing notions of motherhood, and approach the performance with expectations shaped by these ideas – a wide horizon of expectations. It is shown that certain moments within the performance emerge as particularly salient, “catching the eye” of the spectator. These moments are guided both by expectations linked to the performance topic and by the spectator’s personal database – for instance, older relatives asking about them having children, or the experiences with emotionally unavailable men. These elements also become focal points for empathy and identification. Spectators without a partner, or those who have had experiences with emotionally unavailable men, may identify with characters in similar situations – such as those seeking guidance from a clairvoyant because their partner is not ready for commitment – while also feeling empathy towards them. The spectator interprets the performance in terms of how common such experiences are for women and considers the broader societal position of women. Her evaluation of the performance is therefore closely tied to her own familiarity with and engagement in the topic. This process is reinforced by the cultural frame, as the spectator recognises that society often evaluates women primarily through the lens of motherhood. It is further mediated by the theatrical communication frame, as the spectator notes at the end of the interview that seeing many other women in the audience – potentially facing similar life circumstances – made her realise that she is not alone.

The interviews also illustrated generational differences in responses to the performances. Younger spectators tended to express more liberal views regarding having children, often framing it as an individual choice, whereas older spectators were generally more inclined toward the idea that having children is an expected or desirable life path. This difference may reflect broader societal changes, as contemporary societies offer a wider range of life possibilities beyond parenthood (Pärli 2025). It may also be related to cognitive biases and prior life experiences: older spectators have been shaped by different social norms and may hold more established stereotypes, while younger spectators may be more inclined to question perceived injustices and remain open to external influences, including those emerging from theatrical experiences. These dynamics are discussed in greater detail in Article III.

With an understanding of how the model functions, the next question concerns the potential influence of theatre and its connection to the model, as well as the broader benefits of this framework.

5.2. Potential Influence of Theatre Performances

The potential influence of theatre performances can be examined through audience’s attitude formation – whether the performance alters the way spectators evaluate the world and the issues it presents. In this study, such developments are assessed based on questionnaire data, providing empirical insight into how

performances may engage with and shape individual perspectives. Data overview is presented in the Appendices E and F.

5.2.1. Reinforcement of Attitudes

For “Mephisto”, comparisons between before and after performance groups revealed no statistically significant differences across individual attitude items (all $p > .01$). Effect size estimates (Hedges’ g) were small, and 95% confidence intervals included zero, indicating negligible group differences (Appendix E). Thus, according to the data of “Mephisto”, no shifts in attitudes appeared.

When the results are interpreted through the psychological reception model, it becomes possible to explain why attitudes remained largely unchanged in the case of “Mephisto”. The reception process begins within the cultural space frame and the wide horizon, both of which shape spectators’ expectations. In this case, the performance activates a historically sedimented framework shaped by the cultural memory of the Second World War, collaboration, and moral compromise. From the cultural space frame and the wide horizon, spectators approach the performance and form a narrow horizon of expectations that relates to specific elements of the staging, such as the representation of Nazi characters or the depiction of moral dilemmas. These expectations are further shaped by the spectator’s personal database, which consists of previously acquired knowledge, personal experiences, and encounters with morally complex situations. Cultural influences – such as education, films, and other cultural narratives – play an important role in shaping both this knowledge base and the attitudes connected to it.

During the performance, attentional processes guide the selection of information that enters further cognitive processing. Spectators evaluate the reliability and meaning of the presented material – for example, whether the events appear historically plausible – while processes such as identification, empathy, and interpretation become activated. Through identification, spectators may implicitly determine which characters correspond to their perceived in-group or moral standpoint, while empathy and interpretation support the construction of meaning within the unfolding narrative. When the performance corresponds with spectators’ existing knowledge and presents moral conflicts that are already familiar from historical narratives of the war, the experience is likely to reinforce existing attitudes rather than transform them. In such cases, the performance becomes integrated into the spectator’s personal database as an additional example confirming culturally shared values and beliefs. From the perspective of the psychological reception model, this demonstrates how theatre can stabilize and reaffirm attitudes when reception processes operate in alignment with already established cultural and cognitive frameworks.

Performance often engages directly with central societal issues, giving form to shared values, fears, and moral tensions that circulate within a society’s cultural memory. At the same time, performance itself functions as a culturally situated event that mobilizes historically and socially embedded meanings, aesthetic conventions, and normative frameworks. Because theatre takes place within publicly

recognized cultural institutions, it may also function as an authoritative cultural space, lending legitimacy to the perspectives it presents. Consequently, performances may be perceived by audiences not only as artistic expressions but also as implicitly endorsed interpretations of social norms, values, or moral positions. The aesthetic strategies of a performance can further activate associations between the fictional stage world and contemporary socio-political contexts. For instance, the production “Mephisto” incorporated aesthetic references that resonated with the Estonian political context, thereby creating an interpretive bridge between the events portrayed on stage and ongoing political debates in Estonia. Such references may also function as a form of cultural priming, directing spectators’ attention and activating prior knowledge, thereby shaping the narrow horizon of expectations, all of which contribute to the interpretation of the performance. In this way, performances do not merely reproduce existing cultural meanings but actively mobilize them. By presenting perspectives that audiences might otherwise ignore and, at times, deliberately provoking or shocking through the transgression of established boundaries, theatre invites spectators to reconsider, negotiate, or re-evaluate culturally familiar interpretations.

Social dimension of theatre further intensifies these processes. Cultural meanings and interpretations do not emerge solely at the individual level but are negotiated within collective contexts. Theatre constitutes a particularly powerful environment for such processes, as it gathers spectators in a shared physical space and temporarily forms a bounded social situation in which interpretive and emotional responses can become mutually visible. As Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008: 32–33) argues, the dynamic exchange between performers and spectators creates a continuous feedback loop that connects those present in the space. This dynamic produces co-presence, emphasizing that spectators respond not only cognitively but also sensorially and affectively to the performance. Theatre therefore operates as a space of intensified perceptual and emotional engagement rather than as a medium of detached interpretation. Through this shared presence, spectators may implicitly evaluate whether their own reactions align with those of others or diverge from what appears to be the collective response. Immediate audience reactions – such as laughter, silence, visible tension, verbal responses, or shared emotional intensity – function as forms of social feedback. In such contexts, processes of social validation may strengthen the perceived legitimacy of certain interpretations (Cialdini 2001: 78). When spectators observe others responding emotionally or evaluatively to the same stimulus, these reactions can contribute to a sense of consensus that stabilizes individual interpretations.

Moreover, attitudes are often embedded in culture and can have a crystallizing effect. Particularly revealing in this regard is the analysis of the themes addressed by performances. “Mephisto” provides compelling case studies for examining how performances activate culturally embedded memories and interpretive frameworks within the spectator’s reception process. With “Mephisto”, it becomes evident that cultural memory – especially memories related to the Second World War – continues to exert a strong influence on the audience’s wide horizon of expectations. For Estonians, profound ethical dilemmas were shaped not only by the

war period but also by the subsequent forty-five years of living under Soviet rule, which had its impact on the formation of attitudes. Over time, such attitudes become embedded within collective memory and continue to circulate through social narratives, cultural representations, and shared interpretations of the past. Trauma, fear, and moral ambiguity associated with this historical period thus become important interpretive resources through which later generations understand both past and present events.

From a psychological perspective, repeated exposure to particular interpretations may reinforce perceived truths through several interrelated mechanisms and cognitive biases. Familiarity effects suggest that the more often individuals encounter a stimulus or idea, the more likely they are to perceive it as credible or valid, even without deliberate analytical evaluation (Zajonc 1968: 23). This process is closely connected to heuristics, for example the representativeness heuristic, in which objects, persons, or situations are evaluated against existing mental prototypes. These prototypes are shaped by the frequent co-occurrence of particular features, causing certain representations to become dominant within specific categories. (Tversky, Kahneman 1974: 3–20) In the context of theatrical reception, such heuristics guide the spectators' perception and facilitate the formation of associations. When a performance draws on events or themes that are familiar or readily accessible in spectators' memory, these associations are activated more easily. In some cases, aesthetic elements themselves may trigger such associations. For instance, when a performance incorporates recognisable national symbols – such as the colours of the Estonian flag, as in the production “Mephisto” – these elements may activate spectators' existing knowledge and interpretations related to the Estonian political or cultural context. As a result, previously established associations may be reinforced, and spectators may more readily connect the fictional events on stage with contemporary societal realities. Consequently, the staged events may appear more relevant or significant, and spectators may more easily transfer meanings from the fictional world of the stage to their lived social reality.

This tendency is understandable: once an attitude or opinion has been formed, individuals are generally reluctant to dismantle it. Cultural narratives associated with the past – such as those addressed in “Mephisto” – often play an important role in helping individuals and communities make sense of historical experiences. Their repetition in cultural representations may therefore contribute to maintaining and stabilizing certain interpretations while simultaneously creating opportunities for reflection and renewed engagement with these meanings. In this sense, cultural narratives and interpretations of the past are not static but are continually revisited and renegotiated in relation to present-day concerns. Such moments reveal an intersection where historically formed attitudes, cognitive frameworks, and contemporary social contexts meet. When the present context supports explanatory frameworks developed in the past, attitudes may remain stable, as existing interpretations continue to provide coherent and meaningful explanations. In this process, spectators may actively seek or attend to contemporary information that confirms their existing attitudes, a phenomenon consistent

with confirmation bias. In other words, selective attention and memory processes contribute to reinforcing prior interpretations, making attitudes more resistant to change. This dynamic is consistent with psychological theories of attitude structure and change. According to the balance theory (Heider 1946: 112), individuals tend to modify only those elements within their attitudinal systems that can be adjusted with minimal disruption to the overall coherence of their belief structures. In other words, people often seek interpretations that preserve cognitive consistency while requiring the least psychological effort. Consequently, spectators are more likely to notice and accept elements in a performance that resonate with their existing views rather than those that fundamentally challenge them.

At the same time, interpretations of the past may serve as symbolic resources through which individuals and communities legitimize certain values, identities, or social positions in the present. Historical narratives and shared cultural memories therefore provide frameworks that shape how contemporary events are interpreted. However, these frameworks may also embed deeply entrenched defaults and biases that become resistant to change over time (Hamedani *et al* 2024: 392). Within the theatrical context, performance thus becomes a space where spectators may find support for their existing beliefs regardless of the director's original intentions. Through repeated cultural circulation, such interpretations can gradually accumulate symbolic significance and become part of a shared cultural repertoire.

Accordingly, attending a theatre performance does not necessarily result in direct attitudinal change. Instead, interpretation unfolds within already established belief systems that guide attention, emotional engagement, and evaluative responses. In this sense, the significance of a performance does not lie primarily in measurable changes in specific attitudes but in the activation of themes, questions, and tensions during the moment of reception. From the perspective of the psychological reception model, this finding may be interpreted as an example of how performances can primarily activate already established interpretive frameworks rather than transform them. When culturally shared narratives are strongly embedded in collective memory and supported by widely shared social attitudes, exposure to similar representations may reinforce existing interpretations instead of producing measurable attitudinal change.

5.2.2. Shifting of Attitudes

For “SHE”, comparisons between before and after performance groups revealed a significant difference for the statement “Men contribute more to raising children than women,” indicating that after the performance, participants rated men's contribution to raising children significantly lower than before the performance. The Welch's t-test indicated a statistically significant group difference ($p = .001$), with a moderate to large effect size (Hedges' $g = 0.68$, 95% CI [0.29, 1.07]). Other statements did not have a significant difference (Appendix F). Thus, according to “SHE” some shift appeared in attitudes, whereas others remained the same.

On the one hand, “SHE” activates culturally entrenched assumptions about gender roles, motherhood, and societal definitions of womanhood, as these ideas are repeatedly reinforced through social discourse and cultural representations. Spectators may therefore rely on familiar heuristics that associate womanhood with motherhood, reflecting attitudes that remain deeply embedded in the culture. On the other hand, “SHE” attempts to destabilize established frameworks by highlighting the conflicts, pressures, and ambiguities surrounding reproductive expectations. Attitudes, while generally stable, are not immutable, and theatrical performance can under certain conditions engage with and activate specific attitudinal structures. It is therefore important to emphasize that, although broad attitudinal shifts were rare, the present study demonstrates that performances may access and ‘poke’ particular attitudes under favourable circumstances. In “SHE”, for example, a significant attitudinal change was observed with regard to perceptions of men’s role in childcare. This suggests that theatrical performance can meaningfully affect specific, context-sensitive attitudes.

Within the psychological reception model, such changes can be understood as moments when the performance introduces perspectives that challenge or complicate existing cognitive frameworks. When spectators encounter perspectives that partially contradict their established beliefs or expectations, cognitive dissonance may arise, potentially motivating reconsideration or adjustment of attitudes. While these processes do not necessarily produce immediate, permanent, or uniform changes across the entire audience, they illustrate how theatre can create conditions in which previously stable interpretive frameworks become open to reflection and renegotiation.

In contrast to “Mephisto”, which operates through relatively stabilized interpretive frameworks, “SHE” engages with more fluid and contested social issues. The topic of declining birth rates in Estonia (Eesti rahvaarv langes... 2026), together with deeply rooted beliefs about gender roles and motherhood as a woman’s social responsibility, constitutes a highly politicized and publicly debated issue. Such visibility increases the cognitive accessibility of related attitudes, as they are already activated through ongoing public discourse. In psychological terms, sustained societal debate can function as a priming mechanism, particularly when an issue is perceived as socially relevant, unresolved, and personally meaningful. Under such conditions, theatrical performance may not introduce entirely new ideas but rather intensify, reframe, or destabilize already activated attitudes, thereby increasing their susceptibility to change.

The performance “SHE” foregrounds the complex dynamics surrounding parenthood by including men as active participants in the narratives presented on stage, acknowledging that decisions surrounding motherhood and family life are shaped by both partners. By doing so, the performance draws attention to the relational nature of childcare and the social expectations placed upon women. Contemporary understandings of womanhood and women’s roles in society have diversified, requiring long-standing assumptions about motherhood to be recon-

sidered and renegotiated. Because these attitudes are currently undergoing transformation, their underlying structures may be less consolidated, creating greater openness to reinterpretation and change.

Two central – yet partly opposing – mechanisms support these processes and transformations in theatre: aesthetic distance and identification. Aesthetic distance is the space between the spectator's everyday reality and the fictional world of the performance; or the balance of emotion, and cognition (Bleuer *et al* 2018: 7). Within this space, meanings are not simply reproduced but can be reinterpreted and reconfigured. Distancing is closely related to the process of identification and can serve various psychological functions, including emotional self-protection, interpretive reflection, and cognitive analysis. As Cohen (2001: 253) notes, one needs to retain his or her self-identity and interact with the character, thereby maintaining at least a minimal social distance. Although interpretation ultimately emerges from emotional engagement with the performance, distancing plays an important role in facilitating understanding.

In the reception of “SHE”, distancing may manifest in different ways. For some spectators, distancing may take the form of rejection or denial, in which case existing attitudes remain unchanged or is even reinforced (e.g. participant A introduced in Article III). For others, distancing may remain partial, allowing them to engage with the performance while simultaneously reflecting on their own beliefs (e.g. participant C introduced in Article III). In such cases, spectators may entertain alternative interpretations without fully abandoning their prior views. This partial openness may create conditions in which cognitive dissonance emerges as the performance challenges established assumptions. To reduce this discomfort, individuals may either modify their attitudes or reinforce their previous beliefs by rejecting the new perspective.

Identification is encouraged through the multiple perspectives offered in “SHE”. Spectators who recognize elements of their own experiences on stage may experience a strong sense of immersion, particularly when previously under-represented perspectives gain visibility. Such identification may emerge through personal experience, when spectators encounter situations that resonate with their own lives, or through attitudinal alignment, when emerging perspectives on womanhood and parenthood are articulated in ways that challenge long-standing social expectations. In this sense, the performance creates a space where inherited assumptions about gender roles can be reconsidered and alternative viewpoints explored.

This openness to multiple viewpoints also creates a space for negotiation between different perspectives. Performances such as “Mephisto” and “SHE” illustrate how theatre can simultaneously stabilize existing interpretations and open possibilities for reconsideration. While “Mephisto” tends to reinforce historically established moral frameworks, “SHE” more explicitly exposes their instability and invites reflection on their relevance within contemporary social conditions. Thus, theatrical performance allows spectators to explore, encounter and experiment with different viewpoints without the immediate consequences associated with real-life decision-making. Studies have suggested that theatre can

contribute to the analysing cultural transformations, shaping of public discourse and the development of social awareness (Gulkhara, Farzaliyeva 2025: 256–260). Theatre thus operates as a kind of experiential simulator, enabling spectators to revisit established patterns of thought, integrate new information, and reconsider existing conclusions (an idea that is explored further in Article I).

The results from the audience study suggest that the performances activated different psychological processes in spectators, which in turn may influence the formation, reinforcement, or transformation of attitudes. While the responses related to “Mephisto” did not indicate notable attitude changes, the results of “SHE” suggest that some spectators experienced shifts in perspective. From the perspective of the psychological reception model, these differences may be understood as the outcome of different configurations of reception processes activated during the performance. Attitude shift, therefore, does not arise solely from the thematic content of a performance but from the psychological processes through which spectators engage with it. This highlights the importance of analysing reception processes in detail, as they provide insight into how theatre can function as a space for reflection, negotiation, and potential transformation of attitudes.

More broadly, these findings contribute to ongoing debates about the role of theatre and art in society. Because of its condition of co-presence, theatre offers a distinctive environment in which spectators can collectively encounter and explore social dilemmas, ethical conflicts, and competing value systems. While other media also reflect cultural values, theatre provides an embodied and shared experiential framework in which audiences can observe, feel, and momentarily inhabit alternative social realities. Humans rely on models to make sense of the world, and those models that are experientially convincing – situations that spectators can momentarily perceive as plausible or imaginable – may become particularly influential in shaping interpretation and understanding.

5.3. Broader Benefits of the Model

Understanding the processes – particularly the psychological mechanisms – underlying the reception of art is essential for advancing knowledge about human experience. There are multiple reasons for studying these processes, as well as ways in which such knowledge can be applied beneficially. These issues have been discussed in detail in Articles I and II. The following points summarise some of the key insights.

First, it helps us understand why audience members respond differently to a performance – why some become deeply engaged while others remain unaffected. The model provides a framework for describing the influence of prior experiences and pre-existing attitudes, as well as the roles of attention, autobiographical memory, and group processes associated with identification and empathy. By integrating these psychological mechanisms, the model clarifies how individual and social factors interact to shape the reception of theatrical events.

Moreover, the model can be used to examine how theatrical performances contribute both to the development of new attitudes and to the reinforcement of existing ones. Such insights may have practical implications across several domains. For theatre practitioners, the model can increase awareness of how dramaturgical choices, thematic focus, and aesthetic strategies may shape audience engagement and interpretation. Beyond artistic practice, the framework may also have relevance in educational and therapeutic contexts. In these settings, theatre can function as a way of opening the topic, as psychoeducational material, or as a narrative framework through which different life situations, choices, and their consequences can be explored and discussed. In this way, theatrical performances may serve as valuable learning material that enrich the spectator's personal database. At the same time, the performative context can provide a relatively safe environment in which complex or difficult topics can be encountered, reflected upon, and discussed without the immediate pressures of real-life decision-making.

At the same time, the aesthetics of the performance significantly shape how such representations are perceived and processed. Aesthetic choices may emphasise realism, encouraging spectators to interpret the events as closely related to real-life experiences. In this case, the capacity of authentic representation plays a particularly important role in this process as when characters and events are portrayed in ways that spectators perceive as credible or psychologically convincing, they are more likely to activate the spectator's personal database, including autobiographical memories, prior knowledge, and previously formed attitudes. This activation allows spectators to connect the staged events with their own experiences and interpret the performance through personally meaningful associations. Alternatively, performances may employ more stylised or spectacular forms that distance the representation from everyday reality while still provoking reflection and emotional engagement. In both cases, aesthetic strategies guide attention, structure interpretation, and influence how the spectator's psychological resources – such as memory, identification, and empathy – are mobilised during reception.

While theatre does not need to serve a therapeutic function, nor should its value be limited to such contexts, awareness of its psychological impact and underlying mechanisms suggests that it can provide opportunities for emotional engagement, reflective processing, and the reconsideration of attitudes, thereby contributing to broader discussions of well-being. Moreover, due to its capacity for the authentic representation of complex life situations, including psychological difficulties and disorders – as discussed in detail in Article I – theatre may also offer possibilities for addressing sensitive issues such as trauma.

For such potential to be realised, the processes through which theatrical experiences influence spectators need to be understood at a deeper level. In this regard, the model proposed in this study offers a multilayered framework for analysing the reception of theatre beyond its role as entertainment, highlighting the cognitive, emotional, and cultural processes that shape how audiences engage with and interpret performances.

CONCLUSION

Theatre reception always involves psychology, as the spectator is a psychological being. This interdisciplinary study examines the reception of theatrical performances and the associated psychological processes, as well as their impact on our attitudes. The primary focus is on major reception theories and related concepts, alongside the psychological processes that make information processing and the understanding and interpretation of characters possible. The study addresses a gap frequently noted in audience and reception research, but which has remained insufficiently systematized.

This study employed qualitative and quantitative methods and consisted of four distinct stages, which are also reflected at the level of research methods. First, a comparative analysis of various theories and processes was conducted, followed by a theoretical synthesis; second, the performances were analysed in order to theoretically test the model; third, in-depth interviews were carried out to test the model on a real sample; and fourth, questionnaires were used to test attitude formation within the framework of the model.

to study the impact. At the outset of the study, three research questions were formulated:

1. How can psychological processes explain the reception of theatre performances?
2. How do individual aspects of spectators, such as age, cognitive biases, and prior life experiences, affect the reception of theatre performance?
3. In what ways can theatre performances contribute to the processes of attitude formation among spectators?

This study highlights five main findings and contributions, which correspond to the research questions posed.

First, a **psychological reception model of theatre performance was developed** within the framework of this study. The model is based on major reception theories and key psychological processes that must be considered in the reception and processing of information. The reception model consists of three levels, two frames, and mediating processes. The levels are as follows: (1) presentation of information, in which information is presented in an unprocessed and uninterpreted form; (2) noticing of information, where partial information is selected from the presented material; and (3) cognitive processing, in which the presented information is processed through cognitive mechanisms. The two frames are necessary for understanding reception and continuously and implicitly influence the reception of the performance: (1) cultural space frame, which affects both the selection of performances and the audience's perceptions and moral frameworks, and (2) theatrical communication frame, including temporality (duration of the performance), spatial containment (difficulty of leaving the environment), co-presence (audience and performers sharing the same space), liminality, and embodiment. The mediating processes involve selective attention, autobiographical

memory, and both implicit and explicit pathways, which connect the experience- and belief-based database to the level of cognitive processing. Simplified versions of the model have also been created, which can serve as tools for analysing or studying performances and their associated psychological processes. This model directly addresses the first research question.

Second, **this study brings together psychological processes and reception theories, marking a significant step toward interdisciplinary approaches in a field increasingly committed to fostering dialogue across diverse discourses.** The findings illustrate that disciplines are not isolated domains but mutually complementary, and that their integration enables a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the processes at play.

The themes addressed in the performances elicited diverse audience reactions. A third key finding is that **socially relevant and emotionally ambivalent topics presented in the theatre can facilitate shifts in attitudes. Themes that are not rigidly established in society and that provoke robust discussion may gain additional momentum through theatrical presentation, shifting in accordance with the performance's message.** A potential factor influencing this process is the performance's narrativity and artistic presentation of information, which employs theatre-specific tools to generate empathy, foster identification, and prompt the re-evaluation of the spectators' own experiences. Transportation into the performance allows the audience to experience alternative perspectives and become immersed in the narrative in a way that everyday attentional demands do not compete with the presented fiction. This finding addresses the third research question.

Similarly, a fourth key finding emerged: **the treatment of rigid and culturally crystallized themes in theatre reinforces existing attitudes.** Themes presented in the theatre that are associated with clearly established societal attitudes support the audience's sense of the correctness of their own beliefs and generate a new mental experience that affirms them. Specifically, the information presented aligns with the spectators' existing knowledge or provides material that validates and strengthens their attitudes. Thus, theatre can function both as a reinforcer of existing attitudes and as a provider of alternative perspectives; however, this effect depends on the strength of the pre-existing attitudes and the openness of the topic to societal discourse. This finding also addresses the third research question.

Another important finding is that while individuals' attitudes toward real-life situations or themselves remained relatively stable, their responses became more empathetic and nuanced when evaluating the characters and their choices on stage. Audience members recognized the motivations behind the characters' actions and reflected on the ambivalence of these decisions as presented in the performances. This pattern suggests a potential implicit shift, growth in empathy or implicit new knowledge, where spectators' latent positions softened, even if their explicit attitudes toward familiar, everyday situations remained unchanged.

A fifth key finding is that **individual characteristics of audience members strongly influence the reception of a performance. Prior personal experiences, in particular, shape not only how spectators view and immerse themselves in a performance but also how they interpret it.** Most participants reported recalling specific experiences in response to what they observed on stage. Empirical evidence from both the model and interviews further suggests that cognitive biases and age shape the reception process, as exemplified by stereotyping, heuristic processing, and social proof, which influence interpretation, empathy, and identification, while age-related differences indicate that younger and older individuals differ in their relative emphasis on openness, cognitive rigidity, and perspective-taking, with younger spectators potentially being more open to attitudinal change. While not surprising, this result demonstrates how individual psychological factors can be systematically observed and understood within the framework of the model. This finding addresses the second research question.

On a broader level, this model can serve not only as a tool for understanding theatre reception, but also as a starting point for studying the spectator's mind and the ways in which it is influenced by theatre. It can reveal how theatre shapes our thinking, which memories are activated, and which attitudes are reinforced or challenged. In this way, it can become an important point of reflection for spectators, both in everyday life and on a deeper psychological level. **As theatre has the potential to present clinically accurate representations of disorders, it can not only psychoeducate spectators but also offer a safe framework for exploring traumatic experiences, related disorders or difficulties, associated memories, and existing attitudes, while creating opportunities for reflection, psychological distance, and the exploration of alternative perspectives.** Theatre thus becomes a source of information that can be observed, studied, and reflected upon within a secure and meaningful context. The created psychological reception model offers an instrument for approaching this process systematically and for establishing clear connections between theatrical experience and psychological response.

Limitations

Due to the scope of the dissertation, the study focuses on staged spoken performances within a psychological framework, specifically on works featuring psychologically developed characters. The documentary material used in the performances may have influenced reception and should therefore be taken into account. In addition, all selected performances engage, to varying degrees, with themes related to psychological disorders or difficulties. Therefore, it would be necessary to examine the model and attitude formation in other types of performances as well, in order to understand whether and which processes occur in those contexts. It should also be noted that the sample size used in this study imposes certain limitations on interpretation, and this constraint must be considered when making generalizations.

Further Research

The psychological reception model developed in this study requires further investigation across other theatrical genres and refinement to enhance its accuracy and descriptive power. Research on attitudes also points to interesting tendencies in both the reinforcement and the modulation of attitudes, suggesting that continued study in this area is warranted to identify the key factors that sustain or alter attitudes in a theatrical context. This study primarily examined short-term attitude change, making it important to also investigate theatre's effects longitudinally. Additionally, as this study highlights the therapeutic value of theatre by demonstrating psychological processes and showing how these can be integrated into self-reflection through drama methods, it would be highly beneficial to continue research in this field. Such work could broaden the application of theatre and offer diverse ways of supporting and improving well-being. In addition, future research could employ quantitative methods or a mixed-methods approach to expand understanding of theatre, its processes, and its impact.

Final Thoughts

Theatre is remarkable in its very nature – it can both alter our attitudes and reinforce those already held. Both directions of influence carry consequences that must be considered. Shifts in attitude indicate that theatre can generate new understandings, thereby enriching society and shaping the ways in which our thinking may evolve, depending on what is presented on stage. Attitude reinforcement, on the other hand, strengthens existing opinions and makes them more entrenched. This effect does not always reflect the intentions of the director but relies on the spectators' own mental structures and the knowledge base upon which decisions are made. In this way, cultural or generationally inherited knowledge is consolidated and further crystallized.

This dynamic establishes a strong connection with the psychological reception model, in which, on one hand, we are framed by culture, and on the other, we are influenced by our own experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. These form the basis of expectations as well as the processes involved in noticing, information processing, and interpretation. All of this constitutes what we experience as the reception of theatre, which this study has translated into the language of psychological processes.

KOKKUVÕTE

Teatritretseptsioon hõlmab alati psühholoogiat, kuna vaataja on psühholoogiline olend. Käesolev interdistsiplinaarne uurimus käsitleb teatrietenduse retseptsiooni ja sellega seotud psühholoogilisi protsesse ning nende mõju meie hoiakutele. Põhirõhk on peamistel retseptsiooniteooriatel ja nendega seotud mõistritel ning psühholoogilistel protsessidel, ilma milleta ei oleks võimalik infotöötlus ega tege-laste mõistmine ja mõtestamine. Uurimus täidab lünka, millele paljud on publiku- ja retseptsiooniuuringutes viidanud, kuid mis on jäänud piisava süstematiseeri-miseta.

Käesolev uuring kasutas nii kvalitatiivseid kui kvantitatiivseid meetodeid ja koosnes neljast erinevast etapist, mis peegeldub ka uurimismeetodite tasandil. Esiteks viidi läbi erinevate teooriate ja protsesside võrdlev analüüs ning teoree-tiline süntees; teiseks tehti etenduse analüüs, et testida mudelit teoreetiliselt; kolmandaks viidi läbi süvaintervjuud, et mudelit testida päriselu valimil ja neljan-daks kasutati küsimustikke, et uurida hoiakute kujunemist mudelile põhinevalt. Uuringu alguses sõnastati kolm uurimisküsimust:

1. Kuidas kirjeldavad erinevad psühholoogilised protsessid teatrietenduse vastu-võttu?
2. Kuidas mõjutavad vaatajate individuaalsed omadused nagu vanus, kognitiiv-sed moonutused ja varasemad elukogemused etenduse vastuvõttu?
3. Kuidas mõjutab teatrietendus vaatajate hoiakute kujunemist?

Antud uuringus võib esile tuua viis peamist tulemust ja panust, mis vastavad ka esitatud uurimisküsimustele.

Esiteks loodi käesoleva töö raames teatrietenduse psühholoogiline vastuvõtu-mudel, mis põhineb olulisematel retseptsiooniteooriatel ning peamistel psühho-loogilistel protsessidel, mida tuleb arvestada info vastuvõtmisel ja töötlemisel. Vastuvõtumudel koosneb kolmest tasandist, kahest raamist ning vahendavatest protsessidest. Tasandid on järgmised: (1) info esitamine, kus info esitatakse tööt-lemata ja interpreteerimata kujul; (2) info märkamine, kus kogu esitatud infost selekteeritakse vaid osaline, (3) kognitiivne töötlus, kus esitatud info töödeldakse kognitiivsete protsesside abil. Kaks raami on vajalikud vastuvõtu mõistmiseks ning need mõjutavad etenduse vastuvõttu pidevalt ja vaikimisi: (1) kultuuriruum, mis mõjutab nii etenduste valikut kui ka vaatajate arusaamu ja moraali, (2) teatrikommunikatsioon ehk ajalisus (etenduse kestvus), ruumi suletus (raskused keskkonnast lahkuda), kaaskohalolu (vaatajate ja etendajate samas ruumis ole-mine), liminaalsus ning kehastamine. Vahendavad protsessid hõlmavad selek-tiivset tähelepanu, autobiograafilist mälu ning implitsiitset ja eksplitsiitset seosta-mist, mis ühendavad kogemustel ja uskumustel põhineva andmebaasi kognitiivse tööt-luse tasandiga. Mudelist on loodud ka lihtsustatud variandid, mida saab kasutada tööriistadena etenduste ja nende psühholoogiliste protsesside analüüsi-miseks või uurimiseks. Antud mudel vastab otseselt esimesele uurimis-küsimusele.

Teiseks integreerib käesolev töö psühholoogilised protsessid ja retseptsiooni-teooriad, mis on oluline samm teaduses, kus järjest enam otsitakse interdistsiplinaarseid lahendusi ja dialoogi erinevate diskursuste vahel. Töö näitab, et erinevad distsipliinid ei eksisteeri eraldiseisvalt, vaid täiendavad üksteist ning nende omavaheline sidumine võimaldab anda põhjalikuma ülevaate aset leidvatest protsessidest.

Etendustes käsitletud teemad kutsusid vaatajates esile erinevaid reaktsioone. Kolmanda olulise leiuna ilmnes, et teatris esitatud ühiskonnas aktuaalsed ja ambivalentseid tundeid tekitavad teemad võimaldavad hoiakutel nihkuda. Ühiskonnas nõrgalt kinnistunud ning avalikku arutelu esile kutsuvate teemadega seotud hoiakud võivad teatrietenduse mõjul saada tõuke ja nihkuda etenduse vahendatud sõnumi suunas. Selle protsessi potentsiaalseks mõjuteguriks on etenduse narratiivsus ja kunstiline infoesisitus, mis kasutab teatrile omaseid vahendeid empaatia ja identifitseerumise tekitamiseks ning vaataja suunamiseks oma kogemusi uuesti hindama. Transportatsioon etendusse võimaldab vaatajal kogeda teisi perspektiive ja sukelduda loosse viisil, kus igapäevased tähelepanu nõudvad tegurid ei konkureeri esitatud fiktsiooniga. Antud leid vastab kolmandale uurimisküsimusele.

Sarnaselt ilmnes neljas oluline leid: rigiidsete ja kultuuriliselt kristalliseerunud teemade käsitlemine teatris kinnitab olemasolevaid hoiakuid. Teatris käsitletud teemad, mille suhtes on ühiskonnas selgelt välja kujunenud hoiakud, võivad neid hoiakuid tugevdada, kinnistada arusaamu nende kehtivusest ning luua seda kinnitava uue mentaalse kogemuse. Täpsemalt haakub esitatud info vaataja olemasoleva teadmise ja või pakub sobivat materjali, mis kinnitab ja tugevdab tema hoiakut. Seega võib teater toimida nii hoiakute kinnitaja kui ka alternatiivsete perspektiivide pakkujana, kuid see sõltub olemasolevate hoiakute tugevusest ning teema ühiskondlikust diskussioonile avatusest. Antud leid vastab ka kolmandale uurimisküsimusele.

Samuti on oluline esile tuua, et hinnates reaalelulisi olukordi või iseennast, püüsid inimeste hoiakud suhteliselt stabiilsena. Kui vaatajatel paluti hinnata etenduses nähtud tegelasi ja nende valikuid, muutusid vastused samas empaatilisemaks ja mõistvamaks. Vaatajad tõid esile põhjused, miks tegelased antud valikud tegid, ning kirjeldasid nende valikute ambivalentset viisi, nagu etendustes esitati. Seega võib see viidata implitsiitsele muutusele, empaatiakasvule või implitsiitsetele teadmistele, kus vaatajate varjatud seisukohad leebusid, isegi kui eksplitsiitselt jäadi kindlaks tavapärastele hoiakutele.

Viienda peamise leiuna ilmneb, et vaatajate individuaalsed omadused mõjutavad tugevalt etenduse vastuvõttu. Eriti olulised on varasemad isiklikud kogemused, mis kujundavad nii seda, kuidas vaatajad etendust jälgivad, kui ka seda, kuidas nad seda tõlgendavad. Enamik osalejaid märkis, et teatud kogemused tulid meelde etenduse kontekstis. Empiirilised andmed nii mudeli kui intervjuude põhjal näitavad, et kognitiivsed moonutused ja vanus mõjutavad etenduse vastuvõttu, sealhulgas stereotüüpide, heuristikute ja sotsiaalsete tõendite kaudu, mis omakorda mõjutavad tõlgendamist, empaatiat ja identifitseerumist; samal ajal viitavad vanusega seotud erinevused, et nooremad ja vanemad inimesed erinevad oma

rõhuasetuses avatusele, kognitiivsele rigiidsusele ja perspektiivivõtule, kusjuures nooremad vaatajad võivad olla suurema tõenäosusega avatunud hoiakumuutusele. Kuigi tulemus ei ole üllatav, näitab see, kuidas individuaalsed psühholoogilised tegurid on mudeli raames süsteemselt jälgitavad ja mõistetavad. See tulemus vastab teisele esitatud uurimisküsimusele.

Laiemal tasandil võib see mudel toimida mitte ainult teatrivastuvõtu mõistmise vahendina, vaid ka lähtepunktina uurimaks vaataja psüühikat ja teatri mõju sellele. Mudel aitab näidata, kuidas teater kujundab meie mõtlemist, millised mälestused aktiveeruvad ning milliseid hoiakuid see kas tugevdab või proovile paneb. Sellisel viisil võib etendus kujuneda oluliseks refleksioonipunktiks vaatajale nii igapäevasel tasandil kui ka sügavamal psühholoogilisel tasandil. Kuna teatril on potentsiaal kujutada korrektselt kliinilisi häireid, saab see lisaks vaatajate psühhoharimisele pakkuda ka turvalist raamistikku traumaatiliste kogemuste, nendega seotud häirete või raskustega seotud mälestuste ning kujunenud hoiakute uurimiseks, luues samal ajal võimalusi refleksiooniks, psühholoogiliseks distantsiks ja alternatiivsete vaatenurkade avastamiseks. Teater muutub seega infoallikaks, mida vaataja saab turvalises ja tähenduslikus kontekstis vaadelda, uurida ja reflekteerida. Loodud psühholoogilise vastuvõtu mudel pakub vahendi selle protsessi süstemaatiliseks käsitlemiseks ning selgete seoste loomiseks teatrikogemuse ja psühholoogilise reaktsiooni vahel.

Piirangud

Doktoritöö mahust tingituna keskendus uurimus psühholoogilisest vaatenurgast sõnalavastustele, täpsemalt teostele, milles on psühholoogiliselt välja arendatud tegelased. Vastuvõttu võis mõjutada lavastustes kasutatud dokumentaalne materjal, mistõttu tuleks seda tulemuste tõlgendamisel arvesse võtta. Lisaks käsitlevad kõik valitud lavastused erineval määral psüühikahäirete või psühholoogiliste raskustega seotud teemasid. Seetõttu oleks vajalik uurida mudeli toimimist ja hoiakute kujunemist ka teist tüüpi lavastustes, et mõista, kas ja millised protsessid neis kontekstides aset leiavad. Samuti tuleb arvestada, et käesolevas töös kasutatud valimi suurus seab teatud piirangud tõlgendustele, mistõttu tuleb seda piirangut silmas pida üldistuste tegemisel.

Edasised uuringud

Antud töö raames loodud psühholoogiline vastuvõtumudel vajab edasist uurimist ka teistest teatrivormidest lähtuvalt ning täiendamist, et suurendada mudeli täpsust ja kirjeldusvõimet. Samuti viitavad hoiakute uurimised huvitavatele tendentsidele nii hoiakute kinnistamise kui ka nende nihkumise osas, mistõttu oleks mõistlik jätkata uurimusi selles valdkonnas ning tuvastada peamised tegurid, mis teatri kontekstis säilitavad hoiakuid ja mis neid muudavad. Käesolev uuring käsitles hoiakute muutust peamiselt lühiajaliselt, seega oleks oluline uurida teatri mõju ka longituudiliselt. Lisaks, kuna käesolev uurimus toob esile teatri terapeutilise väärtuse, näidates psühholoogilisi protsesse ja seda, kuidas neid saab draamameetodite kaudu eneserefleksiooni integreerida, oleks väga kasulik selle valdkonna

uurimist jätkata. Selline töö aitaks laiendada teatri rakendusvõimalusi ning pak-
kuda erinevaid viise heaolu toetamiseks ja parandamiseks. Lisaks võiks teatri
uurimist jätkata kvantitatiivsete meetodite või segameetodiga lähenemise abil, et
laiendada arusaamist teatrist, selle protsessidest ja mõjust.

Lõppsõna

Teater on oma olemuselt tähelepanuväärne – ta võib muuta nii meie hoiakuid kui
ka kinnitada juba olemasolevaid. Mõlemas suunas liikumisel on omad tagajärjed,
mida tuleb arvestada. Hoiakute muutumine tähendab, et teater suudab luua uut
arusaama, rikastades sellega ühiskonda ja mõjutades seda, millises suunas meie
mõtlemine võib areneda, sõltuvalt sellest, mida lavastuses esitatakse. Hoiakute
kinnistamine tähendab, et olemasolevad arvamused tugevnevad ja muutuvad
veelgi kindlamaks. See ei sõltu alati lavastaja eesmärgist, vaid tugineb vaataja
enda mentaalsele struktuurile ja andmebaasile, mille põhjal otsuseid tehakse. Nii
muutuvad kas kultuurilised või põlvkondlikult pärandatud teadmised tugevamaks
ja kristalliseeruvad veelgi. See loob tugeva seose psühholoogilise vastuvõtu-
mudeliga, kus ühelt poolt oleme raamitud kultuuriga, teiselt poolt mõjutavad meid
meie enda kogemused, hoiakud ja uskumused. Nende alusel kujunevad ootused,
aga ka protsessid, mis puudutavad märkamist, infotöötlust ja interpretatsiooni.
See kõik on see, mida me kogeme teatri vastuvõtuprotsessina, kuid mille käesolev
töö on tõlkinud psüühiliste protsesside keelde.

SUMMARIES OF ARTICLES

Article I. Jürjo, Merilin 2025. The Authenticity of Trauma and Depression in Drama: A Clinician's View of the Possibilities of Art. *Interlitteraria*, 30 (1), 32–53.

Drama might not be the first place to seek help for trauma or depression, nor should it be. However, we cannot overlook its potential to provide valuable tools for expression, analysis, visualisation, and exploration of different outcomes. A play often portrays people and their lives, and it can similarly depict mental disorders or traumas, leaving space for readers (or, in the theatre, the audience) to interpret and personalise the narrative. Well-crafted plays can accurately reflect real-life symptoms and demonstrate how they interact with everyday life and decision-making. For example, drama can depict a depressive stream of consciousness, as seen in “4.48 Psychosis” by Sarah Kane (2000), or construct flashback-like scenes, as exemplified in “Emesis” by Heneliis Notton (2021).

To facilitate reception, plays use various psychological processes that also influence the reader. Plays and their characters are intertwined with group processes, which can serve as a gateway to specific audiences who might greatly benefit from the content. Additionally, plays can illuminate or simplify the interpretation of situations or aspects that, in real life, might be obscured by emotional intensity or proximity to the issue. Drama also provides a unique space to explore different pathways, allowing spectators to draw conclusions or discover functional coping mechanisms to consider and potentially employ.

A play offers something that trauma often lacks, in the form of a cohesive narrative. It can construct or depict stories with a clear beginning, showing how events unfolded, how others behaved, and the circumstances leading to the traumatic incident. Additionally, drama can “fast forward”, illustrating what happens after the incident, showing the struggles and potential paths to recovery. By leaving room for the reader's imagination and personal details, drama can serve as a “trauma simulator”, providing a safe space to explore trauma and the associated thoughts. It can also facilitate engagement with beliefs by either activating existing ones or challenging them with counter-evidence. This process can create cognitive dissonance, a critical catalyst for changing attitudes and beliefs.

In the context of depression, drama can offer valuable tools for addressing core beliefs and cognitive patterns. By enabling readers to embody alternative roles and rehearse more supportive self-talk, such methods can enhance various behavioural techniques and facilitate the reworking of autobiographical memories. This experiential aspect of drama allows individuals not only to reflect on change, but also to actively live through it and potentially create new pathways to healing. Drama and theatre are closely tied to emotion, offering a medium that allows people to experience feelings they might typically avoid or have difficulty accessing. It provides a safe space to explore and process emotions, enabling individuals to live through stories in a controlled and constructive way. A play also fosters empathy by engaging the reader or audience with characters' experiences,

which can be particularly beneficial for victims or individuals struggling with mental illness who often lack empathy for themselves. By building empathy for characters facing similar challenges, drama can help individuals redirect that compassion inward. Given these qualities, many therapy methods already incorporate drama-based techniques. Further exploration of drama's potential in therapeutic contexts could uncover new creative and emotionally impactful approaches to support those in need.

Article II. Jürjo, Merilin 2025. Kuidas teater võiks mõjutada meie heaolu. Teatrietenduse psühholoogiline vastuvõtumudel (How Theatre Might Influence Our Well-being: A Psychological Reception Model of Theatrical Performance). *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica*, 28 (35).

This article introduces a psychological reception model for theatre performances and explains how theatre can influence mental well-being. By combining psychological phenomena such as cognitive processes, changes in belief and attitude, and cognitive dissonance with cultural theories such as the horizon of expectations and identification, I propose a framework that illustrates how these processes are activated during a performance and how they shape the audience's experience. These psychological mechanisms and cultural theories are integrated into a psychological reception model for theatre, which explains what happens to the audience on a psychological level during a performance. While this model is partially based on previous theories, it offers an innovative synthesis that provides new perspectives on the psychological effect of theatre. Additionally, my analysis draws on my background in psychology, both from academic studies and from practical work as a psychologist and therapist.

The research is based on examples from Estonian theatre productions that are directly or indirectly related to mental well-being. First, I analyse "Kui sa tuled, too mul lilli" ("When You Come, Bring Me Flowers", Ugala Theatre, directed by Liis Aedmaa and Laura Kalle, 2021), which explores domestic violence. I then turn to "Muustrastas" ("Blackbird", Nuutrum and Oliivipuu OÜ, directed by Johan Elm, 2022), which deals with the topic of paedophilia. In both cases, my focus is on how these performances are received through the lens of a psychological reception model, how they help illuminate the psychological impact of theatre, and in what ways they may shape audiences' attitudes and beliefs toward the issues portrayed.

My study is guided by two main research questions: first, what are the psychological foundations of theatre reception, and second, what impact does a theatrical performance have on the audience? These two questions are closely connected because the psychological mechanisms of reception directly shape how theatre affects the spectator, for example, which emotional and cognitive processes are activated and how do they, in turn, influence attitude and belief change. I argue that because human cognition is engaged in any activity involving perception or thought, it is impossible to discuss theatre reception without considering psychological processes. Watching a performance activates thought processes and emotions, as well as deeper mechanisms such as attitude and belief systems that

shape the interpretation of what unfolds on stage. At the same time, cultural context influences receptivity, as individuals are shaped by the cultural environment in which they have grown up and the informational landscape that surrounds them.

Furthermore, I argue that theatre has the power to influence the audience's knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. During a performance, the spectator enters a new informational field where they are exposed to novel perspectives that can reinforce existing attitudes or, conversely, create cognitive dissonance, a situation in which previously held mental frameworks require revision. This can lead to modifications in attitudes and perceptions, which, in turn, can affect everyday life and personal decision-making.

When addressing health issues, we often turn to practical solutions such as bandages or medication. Similarly, we could view theatre as a practical tool that can support our mental well-being. Theatre is not merely entertainment, it is an experience that allows us to make sense of our lives and generate new perspectives. Since new perspectives are crucial when dealing with mental health challenges, theatre could serve as an important resource alongside therapy and medication.

Article III. Jürjo, Merilin 2025. Infotöötlus ja ootushorisonid teatri psühholoogilises vastuvõtus: lavastuse „Ühiskondlikult kahjulik element“ juhtumi-analüüs (Information Processing and Horizons of Expectations in the Psychological Reception of Theatre: A Case Study of the Performance “Societally Harmful Element”. *Ariadne Lõng*, 21, 132–170.

The article examines the psychological reception of theatre through a case study of the documentary performance “Societally Harmful Element” (“Ühiskondlikult kahjulik element”) by Vaba Lava, which addresses the socially sensitive topic of childlessness and voluntary child-freedom in Estonia. The study investigates how spectators process and interpret theatrical information when confronted with such a delicate subject, and which psychological processes influence their reception. The analysis is conducted using a previously developed psychological reception model that integrates concepts from theatre studies and psychology, including horizons of expectation, selective attention, information processing, autobiographical memory, attitudes, and emotional responses.

Empirically, the study is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen spectators who had not previously seen the performance and were not professionally connected to theatre. Interviews were conducted approximately two weeks after attending the performance and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate that although the same information is presented to all audience members, spectators notice and interpret different aspects of the performance depending on their personal experiences, beliefs, and emotional associations. Selective attention, affective responses, and autobiographical memories guide what elements of the performance become salient for each spectator.

The results highlight how theatre reception emerges from the dynamic interplay between theatrical communication, cultural context, and spectators' cognitive and emotional processes. The study thus contributes to interdisciplinary audience research by providing a psychologically grounded framework for analysing theatre reception and demonstrating its applicability in empirical research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Questionnaire for “Mephisto”

The following questionnaire was used in the study of “Mephisto”. The original version was developed and administered in Estonian; the English version presented here is the author's translation.

General Section:

1. Theatre should address shortcomings in society
2. People should speak out more strongly in defence of their beliefs
3. Injustice should be actively opposed

Specific Section:

4. Society requires strong leadership to function effectively
5. Democracy is an effective way to address societal problems
6. A conservative approach contributes to societal progress
7. Ordinary people know best how the state should be governed
8. People should feel proud of their nationality
9. Complying with immoral demands from those in power is unacceptable
10. Individuals should prioritise their own well-being

Background Information Section:

11. I consider myself liberal / conservative
12. Age
13. Gender

APPENDIX B: Questionnaire for “SHE”

The following questionnaire was used in the study of “SHE”. The original version was developed and administered in Estonian; the English version presented here is the author's translation.

General Section:

1. Theatre should address shortcomings in society
2. People should speak out more strongly in defence of their beliefs
3. Injustice should be actively opposed

Specific Section:

4. Men have a strong influence on a woman's decision to have or not have children
5. Women have a strong influence on a man's decision to have or not have children
6. Women are expected to be devoted to their children.
7. Men are expected to be devoted to their children
8. Women contribute more to raising children than men
9. Men contribute more to raising children than women
10. Women are more responsible for raising children than men
11. Men are more responsible for raising children than women
12. Society values men with children more than men without children
13. Society values women with children more than women without children

Background Information Section:

14. I consider myself liberal / conservative
15. Age
16. Gender

APPENDIX C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide for “Mephisto”

The following interview guide was used in the study of “Mephisto”. The original version was developed and administered in Estonian; the English version presented here is the author's translation.

The following introduction was read to participants before the interview.

The purpose of this interview is to explore how you experienced the performance, how you made sense of it, and how it did or did not relate to your attitudes. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested only in your personal experience and interpretation as a member of the audience. You may decline to answer any question if you do not wish to do so.

1. What do you think the performance was about?
2. What was the main message of the performance for you?
3. Were there any moments that stood out to you / resonated with you particularly strongly? Why?
4. What expectations did you have before attending the performance?
5. What had you heard about the production before?
6. Before the performance, did any (historical or political) events come to mind in connection with the performance?
7. Is there any social group that you identify with (particularly strongly)?
8. In which character did you see yourself? At what moment(s), and why?
9. Was there a character you particularly sympathised with or cared about? What made you feel that way?
10. Which character did you find the most difficult to relate to? Why?
11. Which character did you feel the greatest empathy for? At what moment(s)? What evoked that empathy?
12. What are your views on complying with the demands of an occupying power?
13. To what extent do you think people should stand up for their own well-being?
14. To what extent should they stand up for the well-being of others?
15. What do you think of Höfgen's choices? (If another character resonated more strongly with participant, he/she may also reflect on that character's choices.)
16. What do Höfgen's choices reveal about him?
17. Did you take anything from the performance into your everyday life? Why or why not? Did it influence your views in any way?
18. What did you find particularly convincing? Were there any details, situations, lines of dialogue, or other aspects that stood out to you? What did you notice during the performance?
19. Did the performance remind you of any personal experiences or world events?

20. Did any moment, theme, or situation make you feel uncomfortable? If so, what were you thinking at the time? How did it affect the way you experienced the performance?
21. To what extent are you willing to reconsider or change your beliefs and opinions regarding the themes addressed in the performance (e.g., religion, religious people, political views, or political choices, depending on the participant's responses in the previous interview)?
22. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of the performance?

APPENDIX D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide for “SHE”

The following interview guide was used in the study of “SHE”. The original version was developed and administered in Estonian; the English version presented here is the author's translation.

The following introduction was read to participants before the interview.

The purpose of this interview is to explore how you experienced the performance, how you made sense of it, and how it did or did not relate to your attitudes. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested only in your personal experience and interpretation as a member of the audience. You may decline to answer any question if you do not wish to do so.

1. What do you think the performance was about?
2. What was the main message of the performance for you?
3. Were there any moments that stood out to you / resonated with you particularly strongly? Why?
4. What expectations did you have before attending the performance?
5. What had you heard about the production beforehand?
6. Before the performance, did any (historical or political) events come to mind in connection with the performance?
7. Is there any social group that you identify with (particularly strongly)?
8. In which character did you see yourself? At what moment(s), and why?
9. Was there a character you particularly sympathised with or cared about? What made you feel that way?
10. Which character did you find the most difficult to relate to? Why?
11. Which character did you feel the greatest empathy for? At what moment(s)? What evoked that empathy?
12. What are your opinions on women having children?
13. What are your opinions on women choosing not to have children?
14. In your opinion, what societal expectations are placed on women (regarding having children)? What do you think of these expectations?
15. To what extent do you think men's attitudes and decisions influence a woman's decision to have children or not? What role do men play in this?
16. What do you think of the choices made by the main characters?
17. Did you take anything from the performance into your everyday life? Why or why not? Did it influence your views in any way?
18. What did you find particularly convincing? Were there any details, situations, lines of dialogue, or other aspects that stood out to you? What did you notice during the performance?
19. Did the performance remind you of any personal experiences or world events?

20. Did any moment, theme, or situation make you feel uncomfortable? If so, what were you thinking at the time? How did it affect the way you experienced the performance?
21. To what extent are you willing to reconsider or change your beliefs and opinions regarding the themes addressed in the performance (e.g., religion, religious people, political views, or political choices, depending on the participant's responses in the previous interview)?
22. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of the performance?

APPENDIX E: Data Overview of “Mephisto”

Descriptive statistics were conducted to summarise participants’ responses before and after the performance. Means and standard deviations were calculated for all questionnaires items to provide an overview of central tendencies and variability in the data. Normality was evaluated using both the analyses of skewness and kurtosis and Shapiro–Wilk¹⁹ test.

For “Mephisto”, the mean scores for all items ranged from 3.848 to 9.226 in the before-performance group and from 3.303 to 9.076 in the after-performance group on a 10-point scale. Standard deviations ranged from 0.999 to 2.247 in the before-performance group and from 1.057 to 2.239 in the after-performance group, indicating moderate to relatively high variability. Assessment of normality suggested that skewness (before: –1.569 to 0.728; after: –1.444 to 0.906) and kurtosis (before: –0.421 to 3.053; after: –0.622 to 2.780) showed some deviations from normality. The Shapiro–Wilk test further indicated that most item distributions in both groups were not fully normal (before: Shapiro–Wilk = 0.764–0.962, $p < .001$ –.052; after: Shapiro–Wilk = 0.799–0.965, $p < .001$ –.057). All the prementioned deviations were taken into account in subsequent analyses.

¹⁹ The Shapiro–Wilk test examines whether the distribution of the data differs from a normal distribution. The null hypothesis states that the data are normally distributed. A test statistic value close to 1 indicates a normal distribution. A p -value < 0.05 suggests that the distribution significantly differs from a normal distribution.

Table 4. Before and After Performance Differences in Attitudes: ‘Mephisto’

Statements*	Before	After	t**	p***	Hedges' g****
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>			
Theatre should address shortcomings in society	7.339 (2.247)	8.015 (1.909)	-1.830	.070	-0.323
People should speak out more strongly in defence of their beliefs	8.016 (1.645)	7.955 (1.612)	0.214	.831	0.038
Injustice should be actively opposed	9.226 (0.999)	9.076 (1.057)	0.826	.410	0.145
Society requires strong leadership to function effectively	4.210 (1.917)	3.848 (1.867)	1.079	.283	0.190
Democracy is an effective way to address societal problems	7.274 (2.018)	7.379 (1.887)	-0.302	.763	-0.053
A conservative approach contributes to societal progress	3.581 (2.037)	3.303 (1.797)	0.816	.416	0.144
Ordinary people know best how the state should be governed	4.790 (1.985)	4.924 (2.002)	-0.380	.705	-0.067
People should feel proud of their nationality	7.823 (2.116)	7.606 (2.239)	0.563	.575	0.099
Complying with immoral demands from those in power is unacceptable	8.323 (1.897)	8.076 (2.078)	0.702	.484	0.123
Individuals should prioritise their own well-being	5.968 (1.983)	5.970 (1.905)	-0.006	.995	-0.001
I consider myself liberal/ conservative	7.161 (1.926)	7.106 (1.656)	0.173	.863	0.031

Note. * Originally in Estonian; translated into English by the author; ** Independent-samples t-test: Welch's t statistic;

*** p < .005 indicates statistical significance; **** 0.2 – small, 0.5 – medium, 0.8 – large.

APPENDIX F: Data Overview of “SHE”

Descriptive statistics were conducted to summarise participants’ responses before and after the performance. Means and standard deviations were calculated for all questionnaires items to provide an overview of central tendencies and variability in the data. Normality was evaluated using both the analyses of skewness and kurtosis and Shapiro–Wilk test.

For “SHE”, the mean scores for all items ranged from 3.364 to 9.295 in the before-performance group and from 2.225 to 9.225 in the after-performance group on a 10-point scale. Standard deviations ranged from 1.002 to 3.147 in the before-performance group and from 0.929 to 2.974 in the after-performance group, indicating moderate to high variability. Assessment of normality suggested that skewness (before: -1.663 to 1.354 ; after: -2.369 to 1.431) and kurtosis (before: -1.171 to 3.983 ; after: -0.98 to 7.63) showed some deviations from normality, including a small number of more pronounced asymmetries and peaked distributions. The Shapiro–Wilk test further indicated that most item distributions in both groups were not fully normal (before: Shapiro–Wilk = 0.711 – 0.963 , $p < .001$ – $.172$; after: Shapiro–Wilk = 0.702 – 0.948 , $p < .001$ – $.006$). All the prementioned deviations were taken into account in subsequent analyses.

Table 5. Before and after seeing the performance differences: “SHE”

Statements*	Before	After	t**	p***	Hedges' g****
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>			
Theatre should address shortcomings in society	7.886 (1.895)	7.944 (2.267)	-0.146	.884	-0.027
People should speak out more strongly in defence of their beliefs	8.091 (1.444)	8.268 (1.612)	0.375	.709	0.072
Injustice should be actively opposed	9.295 (1.002)	9.225 (0.929)	-0.610	.543	-0.115
Men have a strong influence on a woman's decision to have or not have children	6.250 (2.886)	6.915 (2.156)	-1.318	.192	-0.259
Women have a strong influence on a man's decision to have or not have children	6.341 (2.449)	5.859 (2.799)	0.970	.334	0.182
Women are expected to be devoted to their children.	8.750 (1.332)	8.986 (1.469)	-0.887	.377	-0.167
Men are expected to be devoted to their children	5.136 (2.358)	4.746 (2.606)	0.827	.410	0.156
Women contribute more to raising children than men	8.227(1.891)	8.732 (1.585)	-1.479	.143	-0.288
Men contribute more to raising children than women	8.732 (1.585)	2.225 (1.322)	3.427	.001	0.681
Women are more responsible for raising children than men	6.773 (3.147)	7.239 (2.974)	-0.789	.432	-0.151
Men are more responsible for raising children than women	3.045 (1.711)	2.535 (1.788)	1.528	.130	0.290
Society values men with children more than men without children	5.636 (2.412)	5.521 (2.552)	0.244	.808	0.046
Society values women with children more than women without children	7.909 (1.915)	7.592 (2.115)	0.830	.408	0.156
I consider myself liberal / conservative	7.455 (1.562)	7.643 (1.858)	-0.582	.562	-0.109

Note. * Originally in Estonian; translated into English by the author; ** Independent-samples t-test: Welch's t statistic; *** p < .005 indicates statistical significance; **** 0.2 – small, 0.5 – medium, 0.8 – large.

PUBLICATIONS

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2022 „Antidepressant“ („Edasi“ Magazine; Short Story Competition,
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2017 „Kui tee viis üle jõe...“ (Pegasus)
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Publications:

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Jürjo, Merilin 2019. „Räägime depressioonist ehk kuidas kujutatakse depressiooni draamakirjanduses ja kuidas seda lugeda“. Teater.Muusika.Kino.

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2022 „Antidepressant“ (ajakiri „Edasi“; novellikonkursi äramärgitud töö)
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2009 „Haldja naer“ (kirjastus Pegasus)

Publikatsioonid:

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Jürjo, Merilin 2025. Kuidas teater võiks mõjutada meie heaolu. Teatrietenduse psühholoogiline vastuvõtumudel/How Theatre Might Influence Our Well-being: A Psychological Reception Model of Theatrical Performance. *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica*, 28(35).

Jürjo, Merilin 2025. Infotöötlus ja ootushorisonid teatri psühholoogilises vastuvõtus: lavastuse „Ühiskondlikult kahjulik element“ juhtumianalüüs. *Ariadne Lõng*, 21, 132–170.

Jürjo, Merilin 2019. „Räägime depressioonist ehk kuidas kujutatakse depressiooni draamakirjanduses ja kuidas seda lugeda“. Teater.Muusika.Kino.

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DISSERTATIONES DE STUDIIS DRAMATICIS UNIVERSITATIS TARTUENSIS

1. **Eike Värk.** Näitleja loomingulise pikaajalisuse ja mitmekülgsuse fenomen Salme Reegi näitel. Tartu 2012, 242 lk.
2. **Ott Karulin.** Rakvere Teater „täismängude” otsinguil aastail 1985–2009. Tartu 2013, 269 lk.
3. **Hedi-Liis Toome.** The functioning of theatre in the city of Tartu: a comparative perspective. Tartu 2015, 256 p.
4. **Madli Pesti.** Poliitiline teater ja selle strateegiad Eesti ja lääne kultuuris. Tartu 2016, 166 lk.
5. **Sven Karja.** Eesti teatrite repertuaar aastatel 1986–2006. Tartu 2020, 175 lk.
6. **Anne-Liis Maripuu.** The role of modern dance in shaping artistic and gender discourses in Estonia in the 1920s. Tartu 2020, 162 p.