

## **OUTSIDERS OR INNOVATORS? THE UNTOLD STORY OF QUEER THEATRE IN ESTONIA**

During the transition period, Estonian society started to return towards the Western semiosphere. As censorship was abolished at the end of the 1980s, a wave of memory theatre and the theatre of the absurd flooded the stages. It enabled a distanced view at the totalitarian past. A vision for the future was displayed in contemporary Western dramaturgy along with impulses of political theatre.

The arrival of sexually liberal dramaturgy has so far been largely overlooked. In it, crucially, emerged queer dramaturgy, a litmus test of democracy. The first, subdued homosexual characters reached Estonian stages in the Anglo-American dramaturgy, e.g. by Delaney and Williams, around the time homosexuality was decriminalized (1992).

The first openly queer and widely discussed production “Angels in America” (1996) was directed by Georg Malvius from liberal Sweden. Despite the contradictory reception to the long-time taboo topic, Malvius went on with queer classics like “Bent” and “Cabaret”. He stressed the need to cultivate pluralism, equality and tolerance in the xenophobic post-Soviet society. Although his thematic and aesthetic breakthrough was received by many as too foreign, didactic and shocking, his technical skills could not be overlooked. He was appreciated for his masterful productions full of performative scenes. However, his innovation in queer aesthetics with transgressive bodily messages, fight with prejudices and attempt to legitimize the plurality of sexual identities have not been recognized.

Later, others developed queer theatre from gay to queer, trans and drag issues, using a variety of styles and techniques from original full-length plays, devised and documentary theatre to dance shows. On a metalevel these productions have contributed to the breaking of the mental iron curtain, left from the post-communist times.

Until now, queer theatre in Estonia has remained politicized and poorly covered. Therefore, the current presentation aims to give one of the first overviews of it, drawing inspiration from the history of queer theatre and the ethical turn in theatre studies.

## **Biography**

Eva-Liisa Linder is a theatre researcher at the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. She holds an MA in theatre studies from the University of Tartu and continues her studies at Tallinn University, where her research is focused on the changing theatrical public sphere during the transition period of Estonia. As a freelance editor and critic, she has edited collections on theatre history and pedagogy, and published several articles.