

## Warm in Tallinn: NAKS has the Knack!

*Paul Harman re-visits Estonian TYA after ten years – what's changed?*

Must have been the red wine – *Dank u wel, KLM* – but I started scribbling in Russian as soon as we reached the Baltic. Mediaeval Hansa ports, from Bruges and Lubeck to Tallinn, traded furs and other valuable goods between Russia and the booming West. Today 26% of Estonian citizens are of Russian origin and many speak no Estonian at all. My hotel was staffed mainly by Russian speakers - though all had excellent English. By contrast, the young theatre people performing and running this year's annual NAKS festival and most of their audiences were all Estonian speakers. When I last came in 2008 a couple of companies played in Russian.

Arriving from Helsinki by ferry you find modern Tallinn feels brighter and has more bustling energy than the rather stolid Finnish capital. But Estonia is still coping with its dark Soviet legacy. On the eve of celebrating 100 years since the declaration of independence in 1918, the opening of a sober new memorial to the many thousands of Estonian victims of Communist 'occupation' from 1940 – 41 and from 1944 to 1991 is a clear re-statement of separation - a Western-looking Estonian population and their Russian fellow citizens.

And yes, their theatre styles are completely different. A heavy-handed, modernist production of *Richard III* at the state-funded Russian-Estonian theatre had all the marks of Moscow avant-garde you can find all the way to Tashkent. It's a shouty style, full of testosterone, cynical and slick as the auteur director imposes his vision on the text. But the ornate 1920's cinema, home to this highly competent company since 1947, was only a quarter full on a Saturday night. The well-dressed, ageing audience applauded the hard work of the actors but would, I think, have preferred their Shakespeare stirring, not shaken up.

By contrast, the base for much of NAKS' programme of 10 shows, lengthy discussions and workshops was the home of Piip ja Tuut, a Lecoq-trained clown couple who have 20 years success behind them, regular overseas tours, tv shows, modest public funding and the evident affection and loyalty of local middle class families. Their single space has a wood burning stove and dining table at one end, a play room up open stairs and a tiny stage. It used to be a restaurant and so families still come for Birthday Parties and celebrations. Before a jolly Saturday afternoon show by two actors from the Danish company Batida, Mrs Piip took orders for a pile of pancakes with strawberry sauce and ice-cream – made during the show by Mr Tuut. My response to their own show in the festival, *Piip & Tuut play Lion and Rabbit*, was hysterical from start to finish. She as Rabbit speaks Estonian so fast you'd think it impossible to pronounce so many syllables a second. He as slow, gentle Lion charms his way through an IKEA routine, building a house with planks and pegs, creating an image of family life that is warm and cuddly but with differences in the way adults behave realistically performed. This is fine, warm theatre on many levels and the audience is totally respected, young and old.

Star of the festival, as in 2008, was VAT Theatre. They are well funded and have a small theatre space in the basement of the National Library. Here they presented *Do Fish Sleep?*, a German text in which a ten year old girl tells us how she and her family responded to the death of her little brother and all the questions that raised about life. The actress had all the agility of a ten year old when needed but her performance was wonderfully contained, relaxed, warm and vocally varied as she

performed all the characters in her story. The dramaturg had prepared an excellent English text shown on a large TV screen to one side of the stage. But the actress would like to perform it in English – so making it available to audiences across most of the world. Top quality performance and a serious theme tackled with great discretion and sensitivity.

Young Estonians have excellent English. All our daily discussions of the shows were conducted in confident English, chaired by a local journalist, with show performers and directors, a youth jury of five 14 to 16 year olds and overseas guests from Finland and Denmark. Plus one Englishman and an Irishman sponsored by Baboro Festival, Galway. (A three person team on a buying mission from Sian, China were friendly but could not join in the talking bits.) All observations were tough but fair, I think, and nobody, young or old, was afraid to argue their case.

Batida from Denmark is a large collective from the 70's and produces rich musical shows full of humour and some sharp political opinions. *A Man Called Rolex* is their show about the life of an artist under corrupt communism, Ceausescu's Romania in this case, and was a great excuse for superb Balkan music, chaotic family scenes and debates on politics, freedom and solidarity. Alex Byrne of NIE was responsible for many of the ideas. One of their best yet, I think.

Tallinn's Old Town is magic, the weather was surprisingly warm and the atmosphere positive. Next year they want more shows from abroad so the best small UK and Irish productions will fit in perfectly.

[www.assitej.ee/naks2018/](http://www.assitej.ee/naks2018/)

[www.piipjatuut.ee](http://www.piipjatuut.ee)

<http://vatteater.ee/en/lavastused/104/do-fish-sleep.html>