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Remains of a past production: A short film *Theatre* (1957)

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*This paper discusses the use of a documentary film as a source material for theatre history. The central case study analyses Theatre, directed by Jack Witikka in 1957, it presents the making of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot at the Finnish National Theatre, which premiered on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1954. The paper follows the process of an event turning into an object, and at the same time I explore how the film preserves and traces material conditions of the theatre production: the physicality of the actors, their moving bodies, their position on the stage and the sound of their voices.*

In June 1999, I visited the dark room at the Finnish Film Archives, staring at the very small screen and waiting for the archivist to show me a film called *Theatre*, exploring the making of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the new Small Stage of the Finnish National Theatre. When the film began, I felt as if something from the past was moving before my eyes. Naturally, the film did not take me to the fall 1954 when the stage production of *Waiting for Godot* was staged. Nor did it take me to the spring 1957 when *Theatre* was actually filmed. Still, the immediate question was: can a film as material testify to the aesthetic and perceptual conventions of past theatre productions? The film obviously does not record the performance, but rather, a story

about the making of a performance, featuring rehearsal scenes that refer to many theatre conventions. It was not made for archiving purposes but for broadcasting.

Jack Witikka and Sol Worth wrote the screenplay for *Theatre* and directed it by using dramaturgical conventions of film in 1957.<sup>1</sup> It is categorized in the Finnish National Filmography as an art-documentary, a concept that needs further elaboration. It has two titles as well as two versions: a Finnish speaking *Kuinka draama syntyy (A Drama Is Born)* and a bilingual, Finnish and English speaking, version *Teatteri (Theatre)*. Nevertheless, the two versions are similar to each other.<sup>2</sup> The film includes parts of the material remains of the performance, especially the ones which do not get visibility and are ephemeral like acting. It includes the voices and dialogue, movements of physical bodies of the four actors and glimpses of theatrical interplay together with practices of theatre labour and broadcasting of the 1950s.

According to Mikel Dufrenne, aesthetic objects do not die as living things, but they grow old, too. In his well-known example he proposes that it is still possible to see rhythm or movement in the half-obliterated friezes of the Greek temples.<sup>3</sup> Material remains of a performance have a different kind of a relationship to the performance than friezes and ruins of a temple. The concrete object of a performance is never tangible; Not even when the performance is performed to the public. The performance is often a combination of materials that stay and living things that disappear and die. In the film, different elements of the past production are, literally, incorporated in the bodies of the actors on stage in a different way than in the pictures or documents about the production.

In the film, Jack Witikka, in his role as narrator, says: 'This play was written by an Irishman, Samuel Beckett, in French, and we produced it in Finnish. The name of the play is *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>4</sup> According to Witikka, the film focuses on the 1954 production he had directed, part of the material remains of the performance.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, I would like to argue that though the film is not a remnant remain of the production in itself, some elements captured in the film can indeed serve as vestiges from the theatre production: the movements of the actors' bodies, voices and pauses. The dramaturgy follows a chronological order, where the actors are reading the play and then rehearsing it on stage. In addition, the minimalistic scenography of the film matches the description of the scenography of the performance in the reviews. The physicality of the actors is more present in the film as they move on the stage than in the black and white close up pictures, I had been able to find earlier. Also, reading the Finnish translation of *Waiting for Godot* does not transmit the actor's lines, dialogue and pauses as assuredly as the film does.

This film is therefore an interpretation of a theatrical event taking place in 1954, not the event itself. There is a significant difference between the past and history as recognized in postmodern history writing and we can never achieve the past in its complexity. However, as Keith Jenkins has pointed out, the past, in order to exist, depends on representations and representors producing histories; as he puts it, no representations, no past.<sup>6</sup> Witikka had directed the production he claimed the film was about. At the time the film was shot, the performance was already part of the past, but the voices, movements and interaction of the actors were captured in the film.<sup>7</sup>

By directing *Theatre* Witikka created a legacy for the production he had directed, or if we follow Jenkins's train of thought, by directing the film he created an existence, a representation, for the past production. Compared to historians who usually write about the past events, Witikka used the means of film and recording for his own account of the past production. He can thus be considered as a historian who has also participated to the events s/he is writing about. In other words, using the film as a source can be compared to using any other historical commentary written about a production between the time of the production and the time of the researcher.

Despite having the same director, actors and place, there are many differences between the film and the stage production. In the film, the scenography designer of the Finnish National Theatre, Pekka Heiskanen, reveals his sketches, though in the 1954 production, Witikka designed the scenography.<sup>8</sup> In 1957, Witikka and Heiskanen cooperated in the first Finnish production of *The Endgame* premiered in 3 October 1957. The scenography seen in the film matches with the descriptions delineated in the reviews of the 1954 production. The few photographs of the production are mostly close-ups of actors and only the film transmits the actors using the space of the Small Stage of the Finnish National Theatre.

The dramatizations in the narrative of the film and the almost two and a half year gap between the actual premiere and shooting of the film make this film an art-documentary rather than a document.<sup>9</sup> The definition of an art-documentary is not fixed, and yet with this concept I acknowledge that there are artistic aims for the film, that exceed its documentary aims. An example of an artistic feature in the film, can be traced in its musical soundtrack, composed by Benjamin Lees. Lees used a twelve-

tone technique, a way of composing used by many Finnish composers, for example, Erik Bergman, Einojuhani Rautavaara and Joonas Kokkonen, in 1950s. Perhaps the interest of the Finnish composers towards twelve-tone technique was one of the reasons why Lees wanted to stay in Finland in the 1956–1957. In other words, the film is an artefact, a fictional construction.

Dorrit Cohn has argued that historians ‘play’ with time in the same sense as novelists: their departures from chronology and isochrony tend to be functional – dictated by the nature of their source materials and the subject matter and their interpretive arguments rather than by aesthetic concerns or formal experimentation.<sup>10</sup> These artistic motivations can be seen in *Theatre*, too. The theatre practices from reading the play to the dress rehearsal are inscribed into the film. Still the cuts, close-ups and other narrative means of the film are motivated by artistic grounds.

Desmond Bell, a documentary filmmaker, has captured: ‘The photographic image (still of moving) can be seen as ‘a fragmentary survival from the past’.<sup>11</sup> For a theatre historian, I submit, a film can serve as a historiographical source more than a photograph, although the film is an interpretation or a historical account of the actual theatre production. In the early scenes of *Theatre*, the actors are sitting around a table reading the play. The film transmits their positions, their voices and practices of theatre labour of 1950s – three of the actors are wearing suits, white shirts and ties and smoking while reading and rehearsing the play. Three of the actors are wearing a pair of eyeglasses. One of them is shown taking them off and putting them in his pocket while walking on the stage. Many practices of theatre labour are inscribed into this

short film. As historian, Witikka decided to focus on these practices. The topic of his film is the process of making a stage production rather than the final production.

Bell argues that documentary film-making is crucial for historiographical work as it undermines objectivist historical accounts and encourages its audiences to actively engage with how we make sense of the past. Referring to Jacques Rancière's poetics of history, Bell understands as 'critical consideration of history's literary practices in relationship to a broader field of cultural production.'<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, *Theatre* shows the poetics of history: it transmits the physicality, voice and movement of the actors on stage better than the other archival material about the production. And yet, it is an artwork on its own.

### **The bilingual version and the purpose of the two films**

In the bilingual version of the film, Jack Witikka speaks English and the actors rehearse the play in Finnish. Most likely, the actors did not know English at all. On the contrary, Witikka had studied English already as a schoolboy, which was exceptional in Finland in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>13</sup> In my opinion, it was a way to showcase the artistic work of the Finnish National Theatre and the recently opened Small Stage abroad. Perhaps Witikka, who had studied film directing in UK in 1948–1949 and visited US three times in mid-1950s, aimed at an international career at the time.<sup>14</sup>

The bilingual film was aimed at an international audience as part of the Finnish National Theatre's attempts to increase international connections. In the 1950s the

theatre had visited Paris in 1955 and Stockholm in 1956. In 1957 when Witikka was shooting *Theatre*, he participated in the preparations of visits of the Finnish National Theatre to Copenhagen and Vienna in the summer 1957 and directed a play in Stockholm.<sup>15</sup> Most likely, the film promoted not only Jack Witikka's career as a director but also the modern repertory and stage the Finnish National Theatre had towards the end of 1950s. It was among the first theatres to perform Beckett's plays in 1950s. Especially *Endgame* was produced very quickly, only six months after the world premiere in 1957. Also, it was argued that the theatrical equipment of the recently built stage was the most modern in Europe.<sup>16</sup> *Theatre* won awards at the Berlin and Cannes Film Festivals in 1957 and 1958. The film was chosen for the permanent film collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

To conclude, the historical value of the film lies in its ability to transmit information about the past production in the form of a moving image including the physicality of the actors and their movements in the theatre space. It also allows us to see the materiality of theatre and theatrical practices and labour of the 1950s.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Witikka was a Finnish director who directed film, theatre, opera and radio plays. Sol Worth stayed in Helsinki as Visiting Professor of Documentary Film and Photography funded by Fulbright in 1956–1957.

<sup>2</sup> *Theatre* was written, directed and edited by Jack Witikka and Sol Worth and produced by T. J. Särkkä.

Finnish version of the film can be seen at the digital archive of the Finnish Broadcasting Company.

<http://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2012/04/03/huomenna-han-tulee-1954>. The bilingual version is at the collections of the National Audiovisual Institute.

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<sup>3</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Witikka, *Theatre*, 11:07–23.

<sup>5</sup> In 1954–7 the play was produced only once in Finland.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Jenkins, *At the Limits of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> After the premiere of the film on the 13.5.1957, a theatre critic Maija Savutie wrote an interesting review where she compared the theatre production and the film. M. S. [Maija Savutie] ”Teatterityöstä filmikuvin” *Kansan Uutiset* 15.5.1957. According to her, the film was about the theatre production she had also reviewed.

<sup>8</sup> The program of *Waiting for Godot* production. The Archive of the Finnish National Theatre.

<sup>9</sup> The last (35.) performance of the 1954 production of *Waiting for Godot* was performed on 15.2.1956. It is possible that the last performance was connected to the filming since the previous performance (34.) had taken place ten months earlier on the 14.4.1955. The Diary II. The Archive of the Finnish National Theatre; Ulrika Maude mentions that the film is done almost two and half years after the premiere. Ulrika Maude, ‘Beckett’s Nordic Reception’, in Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman, eds., *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*. (London Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 236.

<sup>10</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> Desmond Bell, ‘Documentary film and the poetics of history,’ *Journal of Media Practice* 2011 vol 12:1, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Maria-Liisa Nevala, *Jack Witikka Suomalaisen teatterin suurmies*. (Helsinki: Minerva, 2018), pp. 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Katri Mehto, ‘Ifigenia ja Seitsemän veljestä maailmalla. Kansallisteatterin vuoden 1957 vierailut kansallista identiteettiä vahvistamassa’. In Pirkko Koski, ed., *Niin muuttuu mailma*, Eskoni. Tulkintoja kansallisuuden näyttämisestä. (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999), p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> Urmakka [Urho Kittilä] ”Pienoisnäyttämöä vihkimässä” *Päivän Sanomat* 7.9.1954; Risto Mäenpää ”Kansallisteatterin Pienen näyttämön näyttämötekniset laitteet” *Arkkitehti* 6/1955.



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