

Building an Ideal Theatre

The Case of the Theatre NO99

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the course of theatre history, many actors and directors have dreamt about an ideal theatre. Many young European theatre makers in the twenty-first century have preferred working in their own groups with like-minded colleagues instead of joining big institutional theatres or have tried to revolutionize the institutions.

Dwelling on theoretical arguments about the terms “ideal”, “idealism”, and “utopia” in theatre, the article investigates what are the ideals of contemporary theatre makers, which ideals/utopias are realizable in theatre practice and how. To answer these questions, the case study of Estonian theatre NO99 is used. In 2004, Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper became the leaders of the state funded theatre Vanalinnastudio and tried to reorganize it into an ideal theatre. The article investigates what were the ideals of the theatre makers of the NO99, how their ideals were realized, which ideals endured, and which ones failed during the fourteen years. Finally, a discussion on the developments of theatre institutions in the twenty-first century will be presented.

KEYWORDS

Theatre NO99, Tiit Ojasoo, Ene-Liis Semper, ideals, utopian performatives, ensemble

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Introduction

Throughout the course of theatre history, many actors and directors have dreamt about their own and, presumably, an ideal theatre, at least from their individual perspectives. And some have achieved establishing such a theatre like Konstantin Stanislavski in the Moscow Art Theatre, Bertolt Brecht in the Berliner Ensemble, Jerzy Grotowski in the Theatre of 13 Rows, Eugenio Barba in the Odin Teatret, to name just a few. Many young European theatre makers have followed the same path in the twenty-first century too, preferring working in their own groups with like-minded colleagues instead of joining big institutional theatres or have tried to revolutionize the institutions. The crisis of institutional theatres was recognized first of all in Eastern and Central Europe after the collapse of the communist system in the 1990s and, later on, most notably in Germany.¹ Karolina Prykowska-Michalak mentions theatres like the Schaubühne Berlin (Germany), the TR Warszawa (Poland), the Krétaköre Theatre (Hungary), the OKT (Lithuania), and the New Riga Theatre (Latvia) as examples of “the model of a new 21st century theatre”² – probably because of their artistic independence and post-dramatic performances. Another institutional trend currently visible all over Europe could be labelled with Andy Lavender’s term “theatre of engagement”³, which is most notably represented by Rimini Protokoll, Shermin Langhoff in the Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin, and Milo Rau in NTGent.

One such attempt to revolutionize an institutional theatre was made by Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper in 2004 when they became the leaders of Estonian state funded comedy theatre Vanalinnastudio and reorganized it into the experimental art theatre Theatre NO99 because they wanted to make ideal productions and needed an ideal institution for that. Just a day before the first night of their first production, *NO99 Sometimes it Feels as if Life Has Gone by without Love*, Ojasoo stated that every production should be like a manifesto, every production (and every performance) should strive for having the courage to carry some kind of ideal.⁴ In 2018, the group decided to finish their activity and explained it as follows: “[F]or 14 years we have shared the same ideals, and today we apprehend jointly that it is no longer in our might to continue working to the full merit of the ideals we once set ourselves. Theatre NO99 has always been an idealistic endeavour, and when one no longer reaches the due merit of the ideals, then Theatre NO99 is no more.”⁵ As is apparent from the quotes, the words “ideal” or “idealistic” were consciously repeated in the discourse of the NO99, since idealism was the main principle and aim of their theatrical activity.

Since the team Ojasoo-Semper have expressed cravings common to other young generational

1 See for example Van Maanen, Kotte & Saro 2009; Prykowska-Michalak & Skjoldager-Nielsen 2017; Balme & Fischer 2021.

2 Prykowska-Michalak 2017, 16.

3 Lavender 2016.

4 Ojasoo *Sirp* 18.2.2005.

5 NO99 homepage.

theatre makers and the NO99 strongly influenced the Estonian theatre field in the twenty-first century, the case is worthy of investigation. In addition, the group toured, and the directors worked frequently in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Russia, thus the case might also raise some international interest. In 2017, the NO99 was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize for New Theatrical Realities. But most importantly, the case serves as a model for wider generalisations.

In the following, key concepts like “ideal”, “idealistic”, and “utopian” will be discussed, and research questions related to the concepts and the NO99 will be set up. After that, the main results of the content analysis of public statements and interviews with leading figures of the theatre will be introduced, paying attention to the topics related to their ideals and aims.

Ideal, Idealistic, and Utopian in the Theatre

Concepts like ideal or utopian theatre are not new or rare in the field of theatre and theatre studies, but the connotation of the words is often contextual and discursive. In general, the word “ideal” might refer to 1) a standard of perfection, beauty or excellence, 2) a mental image, idea or conception that might exist in fancy or imagination only, 3) something exemplifying an ideal and often taken as a model for imitation, 4) a concept in philosophical idealism.⁶ The word “utopia” bears similar but considerably narrower connotations than “ideal” and is often connected to some imaginary space of perfection.⁷ Based on that, the terms “ideal” and “utopia(n)” are used as synonyms in this article.

In the following, I argue how the words are used and understood in the field of theatre. Todd London, for example, has published a book titled *An Ideal Theatre. Founding Visions for a New American Art*, but there are some more articles dedicated to the topic or even several theatres named with the words: Ideal Theatre, Théâtre de l'Idéal, Utopia Theatre, Utopian Theatre Asylum, etc. In his introduction to the book, London has made a typology of revolutionary ideas of founders of these “ideal” theatres based on their functionality. This can be summarized as follows: 1) celebrating diversity, 2) serving community and locality, 3) praising the creativity of amateurs, 4) realisation of a group spirit, 5) de-institutionalisation, 6) betterment of the world, and 7) idealism.⁸ When the first six ideas listed above signal more or less instrumental values of theatre, serving either community or society or theatre makers, only the seventh and maybe also fifth serve theatre as an art form.

In spite of the fact that idealism was mentioned last in the list, London makes a statement borrowing a quote from Sheldon Cheney, the founder of *Theatre Arts Magazine* in 1916: “Idealism (...) may itself be put down as the first ideal of the art theatre.”⁹ The word “idealism” in the context of theatre can be partly related to philosophical idealism and associated with the supremacy of ideas, aesthetic ideals over the reality of theatre making, i.e. idealism is a principle driving a person to pursue certain ideal(s) that is (are) hardly achievable.

Idealist expressions can also be found in Jill Dolan’s book *Utopia in Performance* where she argues that “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”¹⁰ Dolan calls the rare moments utopian performatives. These fleeting intimations might take place not only during performances but also during rehearsals in theatre. Recently, several theatre researchers have indicated a craving for a utopia¹¹ or utopian performatives¹² in ensemble playing, referring to it as a model of a collaborative, inclusive, communitarian, democratic, and transformative process, which is also applicable to society at large. Ensemble is “a model of ‘being with’ (...) for building community and a common culture”.¹³ Ensemble and ensemble playing are also central elements of an ideal theatre from the point of view of the theatre makers of the NO99.

6 Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

7 Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

8 London 2013, xvii-xx.

9 London 2013, xx.

10 Dolan 2010, 2.

11 Neelands 2009, Harries 2020.

12 Magnat 2005, Radosavljević 2011.

13 Neelands 2009, 176.

Dwelling on this general theoretical knowledge, I pose the following research questions for the article:

What are the ideals of contemporary theatre makers?
Which ideals/utopias are realizable in theatre practice?

To answer these questions, I use the case study of the Theatre NO99 as an empirical example, investigating:

- 1) What were the ideals of the theatre makers of the NO99,
- 2) How they were realized,
- 3) Which ideals endured, and
- 4) Which ones failed during the fourteen years of their existence.

The first two research questions are answered in the following chapter of the article and the last two in the succeeding one. The preliminary conclusions of the research are presented here but because of the limits of this article, several aspects (for example, the aesthetics of the productions) have been tackled only shortly. In the end, I intend to discuss the general and potential developments of theatre institutions in the twenty-first century and how theatre has become a kind of testing ground for utopian communality.

The Ideals of the Theatre Makers of the NO99

The main spokespersons of the theatre were the financial and artistic director Tiit Ojasoo and his partner, the second artistic director and scenographer-director Ene-Liis Semper, who mostly gave interviews to journalists. Dramaturge Eero Epner, who had a background in art history, wrote a different type of meta-text to the productions, educative essays about the new aesthetics and edited the journal of the NO99. Altogether, the public discourse about the theatre was well thought-out and conducted by the theatre makers themselves which is strikingly exceptional in Estonia.

Despite the fact that phrases like ideal or idealistic theatre were mentioned quite often by Ojasoo and Semper, especially in the opening and closing phases of the theatre, usually the ideals were not explained in direct connection with the words because of their dislike of manifestos and slogans.¹⁴ Even though all of the representatives of the theatre strictly avoided any direct opposition to other institutions or artists, the opposition was implicitly and discursively present most of the time. A dialectic statement like the following was a rare exception: "We do not want to be an illustration or caricature of reality; we want to be the living thing itself."¹⁵ Thus, the following list of ideals of the theatre makers of the NO99 is, to a certain extent, a construction based on the content analysis of public statements in media and of my own interviews. After identification of recurring topics and keywords in the texts, the following categories could be formed starting from the dominant ones: theatre as a community of like-minded people, combination of strengths of repertoire and project-based theatre, maximum artistic freedom, maximalism at work, collective authorship. The content and background of these categories will be discussed first and breaches in these ideals will be analysed in the next chapter.

Theatre as a community of like-minded people. To my question, which theatre in Estonia or Europe is the most similar to the NO99, Ojasoo and Semper responded that none – the NO99 was unique because they had the opportunity to invite the theatre people they liked.¹⁶ Furthermore, dramaturge Laur Kaunissaare stated that in theatre art, where the result of the work is extremely temporary, the invisible wordless collegiality that unites employees and that is sometimes even bigger than friendship is very important.¹⁷

How was that possible? In 2004, the Ministry of Culture chose Ojasoo as a new director of the state theatre Vanalinnastudio that was bankrupt having almost one million Estonian

14 Ojasoo *Sirp* 18.2.2005.

15 Ojasoo *Sirp* 28.1.2005.

16 Ojasoo, Semper 7.9.2021.

17 Kaunissaare *Postimees* 22.12.2018.

crowns (sixty-four thousand Euros) in debts. Ojasoo disengaged a half of the employees (thirty out of fifty-nine), including all ten actors,¹⁸ and wrote off the whole repertoire of the comedy theatre. Next, he changed the name of the theatre to NO99 but the name of the body in law – Vanalinnastuudio – was maintained. The new theatre was officially opened in February 2005 with the production *NO99 Sometimes it Feels as if Life Has Gone by without Love* that had a manifest-like title and content. At first, the NO99 operated as a project-based theatre where artistic staff were hired for special projects. For the summer of 2005, four actors, and for 2006, ten actors had signed long-term contracts with the theatre. Ojasoo invited some of his course mates (Andres Mähar, Tambet Tuisk) from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, some actors (Rasmus Kaljujärvi, Jaak Prints, Mirtel Pohla, Kristjan Sarv) he had worked with in his previous productions in other theatres, and some fresh graduates from the academy to join the troupe. Ojasoo (b. 1977) was twenty-seven when he became director of the theatre and the actors were either younger or the same age, except Gert Raudsep (b. 1970) and Marika Vaarik (b. 1962). Thus, the troupe was relatively homogenous age wise and in education but not entirely, since more important than these social characteristics was their shared idealism.

*Combination of strengths of repertoire and project-based theatre*¹⁹. One of the strengths of the NO99 was their working method as an ensemble, i.e., a limited number of people who worked together for a longer period of time.²⁰ As Ojasoo stated, to invent some kind of personal [aesthetics] language, one must build up one's own troupe,²¹ and they succeeded in this aim, at least for the next six years. Semper explained the advantages of working with your own troupe: "It's ideal when one doesn't need to agree on rules before every new production."²² Thus, they stressed the importance of a permanent troupe of performers and a whole stable likeminded collective (incl. technicians and administrative staff). Furthermore, the size and compactness of the institution assured that all employees were aware of each other's business, which helped to form a kind of wholesome organism.²³ Since the troupe was rather small (from six to ten performers), and the theatre had only one stage, they didn't need to split up the troupe, and often a role was invented for every performer in every production. On the tours to Germany and the UK, theatre critics highlighted the ensemble playing, mutual sensibility, and the ability of co-playing as special features of the NO99.²⁴

On the other hand, however, some principles of a project-based theatre were also brought into use. The core members of the troupe performed often fifteen to twenty nights per month since a repertoire theatre in Estonia had to play five to six nights per week to cover the salaries and other running expenses. In addition to Ojasoo-Semper, other directors were also invited to work at the NO99 and sometimes they brought along their own performers. For example, Moscow-based choreographer *Sasha Pepelyaev* brought out three productions with students of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Anne Törnpu, the initiator of heritage theatre often worked under the auspices of the theatre and several others. All these productions made by guest directors with guest performers can be considered as independent projects. To facilitate and diminish the workload of performers and technical staff, productions were played *en suite*, i.e. several nights in a row, which is often characteristic of project-based theatres.

*Maximum artistic freedom*²⁵. Usually either economic or political constraints or certain social responsibilities limit the freedom of theatre makers and institutions. In spite of the fact that the new theatre inherited a considerable debt from its predecessor, state support, ticket sales, and

18 Maimets *Postimees* 26.6.2004.

19 Sibrits *Postimees* 22.12.2018. In the interview Semper stated that from the beginning they were trying to combine the strengths of repertoire and project-based theatre.

20 Sibrits *Postimees* 23.12.2017, Epner 25.1.2022.

21 Sibrits *Postimees* 22.12.2018.

22 Sibrits *Postimees* 22.12.2018.

23 Similar terms and metaphors for ensembles have been used by other theatre makers. Russian director Lev Dodin stressed the longevity and like-mindedness of his ensemble (Radosavljević 2011, 144), British director Alan Lyddiard compared his ensemble to a family (Radosavljević 2011, 159), the intendant of Berlin's Volksbühne 2017-18 Chris Dercon, a laboratory (Boenisch 2021, 34), etc.

24 Roos *Õhtuleht* 8.3.2013.

25 Sibrits *Postimees* 22.12.2018. In the interview Semper stated that they were very close to maximum artistic freedom.

revenues earned abroad provided certain financial security. For example, in 2005, seventy-seven percent of their total income (10,5 million Estonian crowns, i.e. 671 thousand Euros) came in the form of a state subsidy.²⁶ In 2018, 1,1 million Euros (sixty-five percent) of their budget of 1,8 million was the state subsidy, while ticket sales provided only four percent.²⁷ Theatre critic and politician, Jaak Allik, has called the institutional conditions of the NO99 “state greenhouse”.²⁸ In addition, as Ojasoo and Semper had gained the mandate from the Ministry of Culture to establish an experimental theatre when Ojasoo applied for the position of director of Vanalinnastudio, their activities were symbolically and politically safeguarded beforehand. Since there were no other boldly experimental groups in Estonia at the time, the audience favoured the theatre, too.

Maximalism at work, or always give maximum effort. The concept of the NO99 in which all productions were numbered, starting from ninety-nine down to one, indicated the intention of the makers of the group to approach every production as if it were the last one, as if the theatre had already come to an end. This was supposed to have happened first in about fifteen years.²⁹ Later, Ojasoo commented on this endeavour, saying: “Artistic quest and passion are important. Both actors, technicians, and the administration in Sakala 3 shared it.” And Semper continued: “14 years of self-torture and whipping is quite a long time.”³⁰ In one-way, maximum effort was seen in the continuing quest for new theatrical tools of expression, and in another way, in the endurance of the performers who were tested at every rehearsal and in every performance. No distinctions were made between performances at home and those abroad or when playing for large or small audiences.³¹

Everyone interviewed for the research stressed two special working principles as strengths of the NO99 in the context of Estonian and partly also European theatre. First, the work ethic that pertained to both rehearsals and performances, and second, ensemble-playing. Rehearsals started usually sharp at 11 a.m., and everybody was expected to be present both physically and mentally, fully concentrated on the forthcoming activities. A rehearsal started usually with some kind of short physical exercise depending on the performer’s choice that helped to warm up and prepare for improvisations. “We were the jogger people,” as Marika Vaarik remarked.³² When somebody had any side business (film shootings, etc.), s/he had to prioritise the work at the home theatre. Since the troupe followed these principles quite strictly, newcomers also had to adjust to the routine.

Ensemble-playing was understood at the NO99 as full concentration on their partners and the tiny events taking place between the performers at any particular rehearsal and performance. This technique assured the specific liveness of roles and performances, creating an impression of improvisation right in front of the spectators’ eyes, even though the roles and *mise-en-scènes* were quite precisely fixed and performances of one production did not significantly differ from each other.

Collective authorship. It was well known and sometimes also indicated in the programmes that Ojasoo and Semper usually used devising as their main method of creation, i.e. in addition to them, dramaturge Eero Epner and the actors, as well as sometimes technicians and administrative staff were involved in the creative process, too.³³ During the first five years of their activity, Semper always acted as the scenographer, sometimes also as the dramaturge and Ojasoo as the director. Sometimes, Semper was named as the second director in the programmes. On the billboards, however, the authorship was shared on a more equal basis – often names of writer, director, and scenographer were mentioned in one row. The NO99 was the first theatre in Estonia that, during the final applause, started also to acknowledge the merits of the light, sound, and video technicians, pointing to the back of the auditorium and

26 Eesti Teatristatistika 2005, 2006, 63.

27 Eesti Teatri Agentuur, https://statistika.teater.ee/stat/stat_filter/show/incomeOfPerformances.

28 Allik 2006.

29 Ojasoo *Sirp* 28.1.2005.

30 *Sibrits Postimees* 22.12.2018.

31 *Sibrits Postimees* 22.12.2018.

32 Vaarik 25.2.2022.

33 Ojasoo, Semper 7.9.2021.

shouting “sound, light, video.”

From 2011, the name of Ene-Liis Semper started to figure as the first artist-director in front of the name of Ojasoo in the programmes. In 2014, Semper made her first independent production. Sometimes the names of Ojasoo and Semper were presented in reversed order on the billboards and in the programmes. When I asked Ojasoo, if there was any ideological principle or practical system behind the order of the names, he responded that they wanted to stress the authorship of Semper that was more significant than just scenographer and that critics tended to ignore.³⁴ Thus, the history of the theatre demonstrates that authorship issues were tackled quite delicately but also the emancipation process of Semper as an author.

In 2018, the group decided to disband the theatre. Their initial plan was to produce 99 productions but the last one was numbered thirty. What happened and why did these above-mentioned ideals not last any longer?

Breaches in the Ideals

Theatre as a community of like-minded people. A community of like-minded people has still certain power relations and hierarchies embedded in it. Richard Schechner, based on his work with the Performance Group, has identified four types of group structures in the theatre: 1) *the leader outside the group*: leader is a kind of father figure and the identity of group members depends on the leader, 2) *a group in the leader*: the leader is a super mind to whom all is revealed and the members' ego boundaries are very weak, 3) *the leader as a special group member*: leader stays in disguise and functions as a screen for others, 4) *the leader as a group member*: a) democratic model with a single leader who may be replaced, b) collective (participatory) model where every member is the leader in certain circumstances.³⁵ I introduced the typology and showed Schechner's drawings separately to two actors of the NO99 asking was any of the types characteristic to their troupe. They responded quickly and self-confidently to the question, pointing to group types two and three but had opposite opinions about the chronological order. It was mentioned, the group went through different stages and also rehearsals were somehow different, since productions differed (from drama to post-dramatic devised theatre).³⁶ The actors and dramaturge Eero Epner³⁷ unanimously considered both Ojasoo and Semper as the leaders of the group. The interview with Ojasoo gave the impression that he saw himself rather as an autocratic leader, who takes full responsibility for both the aesthetic and economic rises and falls of the theatre.³⁸ (I got the idea to use Schechner's typology for the research later and thus did not test it with Ojasoo and Semper.) In conclusion, the ideal to build and maintain a theatre organisation as a community of like-minded people endured almost until the end. As Vaarik mentioned, “We all kept the ideal alive.”³⁹

In 2016, Ojasoo was accused of using physical violence against a former student and current female colleague while trying to resolve issues of a personal matter.⁴⁰ After the disclosure of the incident in the media, Ojasoo apologised publicly and was compelled to withdraw from the position of the director of the NO99. Semper, who was his partner in the theatre and personal life, became the director of the theatre. Semper had started to stage her own productions already in 2014 and continued on that path, doing some productions alone and some together with Ojasoo. Nevertheless, the aesthetic disagreements between them grew stronger in the course of time making collaboration harder and the emotional climate in the theatre almost unbearable. This was one of the main (publicly unspoken) reasons for the shutdown of the NO99.

Collective authorship. As was pointed out earlier, collective authorship has also its pros and cons. According to Schechner, all described groups can produce “good”, but nevertheless, different kinds of theatre. The first kind of group is secretive in its actual distribution of power

34 Ojasoo 24.1.2022.

35 Schechner 1994, 265-7.

36 Raudsep 25.2.2022, Vaarik 25.2.2022.

37 Epner 25.1.2022.

38 Ojasoo 24.1.2022.

39 Vaarik 25.2.2022.

40 Teder *Postimees* 14.6.2016.

since the director seems to be absent. “The second kind of group produces hierophanies, extremely powerful but often mysterious and private images and acting out. (...) The third kind of group shows the strong hand of the director. The fourth kind of group – especially the leaderless version – is the most flexible, capable of adapting its structure to meet different needs. Therefore, the kind of performance such a group can make varies widely.”⁴¹

As far as the productions of the NO99 are concerned, they represent types two to four. First, the productions varied widely from each other even when made by the same people – from musicals and comedies to political theatre, performance theatre and performative actions (*Aktion* in German, *aktsioon* in Estonian). Ojasoo and Semper had their strong directorial signature that was often connected to German postdramatic theatre. But the works also definitely represented a collective authorship since the troupe invested a lot of their ideas, improvisations, and energy in creating productions. Nevertheless, the authorship of the dramaturges and performers was hardly acknowledged officially or clearly with few exceptions like *NO76 Tallinn – Our City* (2010), *NO63 Pedagogical Poem* (2012), *NO60 Every True Heartbeat* (2013), and *NO39 The Filth* (2015). At the same time, one must admit that in devised postdramatic theatre the authorship issues are often complicated.

Combination of strengths of repertoire and project-based theatre. This organisational ideal seemed to endure the best because it was the least dependant on individuals and personal choices made by the group members.

Maximum artistic freedom. For outsiders, the financial situation of the NO99 seemed secure, protected even. But in the interview with Ojasoo, financial pressure was a constant subtext and he has also pointed to low salaries of performers and technical staff in his other public statements.⁴² Gert Raudsep, who was the head of the Union of Estonian Actors at the time, admitted that according to the inquiries the union ordered, salaries of the actors of the NO99 were the second or third lowest in Estonia.⁴³ It means that actors were forced to accept extra jobs outside the theatre to make a decent living and some bigger popular productions in the NO99 were made with the aim of earning money.

In 2017, Ojasoo and Semper admitted, in an interview, that they had not experienced any constraints on their artistic freedom or that some topics were not allowed to be tackled. The response to the next question “But the pressure of an empty hall?” was more explorative – they explained that their avant-gardist ambitions might not be immediately grasped or followed by audiences.⁴⁴

The interview needs some contextualisation. In 2017, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), a national right-wing populist party, started to threaten the NO99 with cuts in their state subsidy as a response to the critique of their ideology by dramaturg Eero Epner.⁴⁵ In 2016, when Ojasoo was accused of using physical violence against his female colleague, some ethically inclined groups of spectators decided to boycott the productions of the NO99 and Ojasoo in particular. In 2018, when the Republic of Estonia celebrated its 100th anniversary, a new scandal was born because Ojasoo and Semper were asked to stage the artistic programme for the President's reception. The first outburst of protest against this took place a couple of months prior to the event, when a petition signed by 104 people was sent to the President protesting against the assigning of the symbolic role to Ojasoo.⁴⁶ The petition, which was initiated by the #metoo campaign, clearly polarised society between supporters and critics of Ojasoo and influenced the reception of the artistic programme. Instead of a traditional live concert, the NO99 presented at the President's reception a video entitled *A Journey*, in the style of a road-movie through Estonia, balancing between a festive state celebration and social critique. The content and the style of the video irritated many, but it enabled artistic and moral issues to invade the public sphere.⁴⁷ As a result of these events, the number of sold tickets

41 Schechner 1994, 269.

42 Ojasoo 24.1.2022, Mikomägi *Teatritasku* 2010 July, 3.

43 Raudsep 25.2.2022, Raudsep 28.2.2022.

44 Sibrits *Postimees* 23.12.2017.

45 Epner *Postimees* 8.9.2017, Koorits *Delfi* 16.11.2017.

46 Reisenbuk *Postimees* 16.1.2018.

47 Saro 2019.

dropped considerably: 40 665 (2015), 23 331 (2016), 18 882 (2017) and 9 183 (2018).⁴⁸

Thus, even when Ojasoo's and Semper's perceived artistic freedom was not directly affected by these events, ideological, political, and economic circumstances became more complicated for the theatre during the years of 2016–2018.

Maximalism at work. Idealism and maximalism might lead to immersion in work and exhaustion. Working schedules in a theatre with a limited number of employees puts extra pressure on every member. Since usually the whole troupe was involved in both creating new productions in the morning hours and performing older ones in the evening hours, it led to extreme exhaustion. On average, actors performed fifteen to twenty nights per month. Touring abroad also put extra pressure on employees. Both performers and other employees, especially the technical staff started to abandon the theatre one after another. For example, in 2012 four and in 2014 three performers from the initial group (established in 2005–2006) left the theatre and only three stayed. But the group was renewed with six graduates from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre whom Ojasoo had supervised. These facts lead to the main weaknesses of the maximalist endeavor of the NO99 – exhaustion and dispersal of focus.

Everyone interviewed by the author of this article pointed out that members of the group got tired of the workload, of constant artistic explorations⁴⁹, and finally were not able to inspire each other anymore. Ojasoo believes that every organisation goes through five to seven yearly circles, and this was the reason why their initial group dispersed.⁵⁰ But according to some actors, the other aspect that caused this was the dispersal of focus by Ojasoo himself when he became the supervisor of the acting course in the academy in 2010, and was not able to invest his full attention and energy in the theatre.

Blurring of public and private life, work and leisure. The point extends the latter one and covers several diverse aspects. First, as often is the case, employees are not able to make a clear separation between their working and private lives: tensions in private life accompany people to the domain of work and the other way around. To create an ideal theatre institution, one needs also ideal employees. Blurring work and private life is also used as a tool in the performing arts: performers use their psychophysical material in creating their roles and productions, especially in devised theatre and performance art. Performers of the NO99 often played stage characters, who had the same name as the performers thus the division between real and fictional/playful was blurred. Public performance is also a form of public exposure where roles stick to performers and might influence their leisure time and public life. This might create not only uneasiness and discomfort but serious psychological problems.

Conclusion

In 2004, Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper reorganized the state supported comedy theatre Vanalinnastudio into an experimental institution Theatre NO99. Since they wanted to make ideal productions, they also needed an ideal institution for that. Based on their public statements (articles and interviews) and interviews conducted for the article with some core representatives of the theatre in 2022, I detected the following leading ideals of their activity: a combination of strengths of repertoire and project-based theatre, maximum artistic freedom, theatre as a community of like-minded people, maximalism at work and collective authorship.

In a broader context of European theatre and institutional developments, these ideals are hardly exceptional. As has been pointed out in the beginning of the article, many so-called model or paragon theatre institutions and theatre makers endeavour toward greater artistic freedom and greater engagement with their colleagues and society in general. Artistic freedom is dependent not only on extrinsic conditions like financing and the political atmosphere but also on intrinsic, i.e. institutional conditions like general organisational and working principles. The ultimate aim of the engagement is either an ensemble or a community. In the twenty-first century and in democratic societies, ensemble or community⁵¹ can be built only on collective authorship, not on an autocratic director or text centred model of theatre making of earlier times.

48 Kajak 2022, 55.

49 Sibrits *Postimees* 23.12.2017.

50 Sibrits *Postimees* 22.12.2018.

51 See for example Rau 2018.

Strategies like devising and collective authorship often used in the creation of postdramatic theatre or performance seem to need a group of “like-minded people”, thus flexibility is one of the preconditions of theatre institutions in the twenty-first century.

The most enduring ideal of the NO99 tackled the organisational structure where principles of repertoire and project-based theatre were combined. The artistic freedom of a theatre depends most of all on the level of economic and political freedom but also on the support of audiences or society in general. Political circumstances in Estonia changed within these fourteen years and the support of audiences and society for the NO99 diminished to a considerable extent but Ojasoo and Semper did not perceive a decline in their artistic freedom. The endurance of other ideals depended mostly on the members of the group and on their idealism that did not last longer than for five to eight years on average because of exhaustion and dispersal of focus of the persons. It can be concluded that for building an ideal theatre one needs ideal people.

Based on this research, I conclude that utopian performatives can sometimes appear by a lucky chance, but they also can be evoked by certain tools and technics, which Ojasoo and Semper tried to implement in their theatre practice and in search of an ideal theatre. Not all their ideals endured for long, but a broader philosophical quest of idealism was confirmed – some ideals are realizable in practice, some are reachable for certain moments like utopian performatives, some just trigger our thoughts and activities.

In Todd London’s typology of American theatre, ideals introduced at the beginning of the article, (utopian?) communality dominated over artistic ideals and this is often the case with young theatre makers in the twenty-first century because some of them see their theatre group as a utopian model for a new society. But communality in theatre is sometimes opposed to professionalism, discipline, and productivity.⁵² Ojasoo and Semper united communality and professionalism in the NO99 and nested their experimental group in the framework of state supported institutional theatres. With this endeavour, they overcame several popular oppositions in the field of performing arts and in the discourse of theatre studies. An ideal theatre is needed for making ideal art works where all parties can realise their full potential and these fleeting intimations of a utopia can happen both in established institutional and in independent theatres, either in an ensemble or in a community.

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⁵² For example Schechner 1994, 264.

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