

The Estonian Theatre Festival, Tartu 2018: A 'Tale of the Century'



For states across Central and Eastern Europe, 2018 marks the centenary of their national independence, gained in the aftermath of WWI. In the case of the Baltic States this independence was, of course, lost in the aftermath of WWII, when they became not simply a part of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, but were directly incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic countries initially reverted to their pre-war constitutions, seeking to affirm political legitimacy in terms of a restoration of sovereignty, rather than simply an assertion of “post-Soviet” independence. If the principle of “small nations” foreign policy is the forging of alliances, then the accession to the EU and NATO during the 1990s was another momentous historical change, even as these alliances are now beset by new challenges. (Paradoxically, Brexit may even have a unifying effect for the EU 27, faced with the rise of European nationalist parties.) Other destabilizing effects come not only from Russian interference in European political processes, but from the seeming disregard for historical understanding within the Trump administration, whether regarding Europe, the Korean peninsula, or climate change. By contrast, learning not only about, but also from, history has always been a touchstone of liberal education, one medium for which is, of course, theatre – a practice that remains state-supported throughout Europe.

In Estonia, the 1918-2018 centenary has been commemorated by a unique, year-long theatrical project – Tale of the Century – consisting of collaborations between big repertory theatres and small independent companies from all over the country, creating 13 productions, each focusing on a particular decade – with one addressing the next 100 years also. The Estonian government made specific funds available to the country’s union of theatres, which organized both the collaborations and the assignment of decades by lottery. How the companies – ranging from the national opera to a small touring group specializing in comedies – then used the funds was, of course, left entirely up to them. For the independent groups this often meant a significant budget to realize a project that would not otherwise have been possible; while

for major institutions these specific funds for a new commission could be supplemented, if necessary, from their existing budgets. Needless to say, not all of the collaborations worked out and some of the productions referenced their allotted decade rather tangentially – although whether the final piece was what would have been made with the themes anyway was not necessarily obvious.

As part of this year's Estonian theatre festival, held annually in Tartu, all the Tale of the Century productions were brought together in one week. Performed with translations (thanks to the Estonian Theatre Agency), the festival also invited an international audience – mostly from the Baltic region – to see them. This was a privileged opportunity to learn about how the idea of a national story (in the tensions between myth and history, “archive and repertoire” might itself refract the range of Estonian theatre (or, rather, theatres) today. Despite the device of the lottery, which forestalled any singular direction to the whole project, there still seemed to be some latent expectation in their reception that the productions might provide evidence for something of an identifiable Estonian “national character.” After all, theatre is itself one of the inherited national forms of cultural representation and audiences – despite the diversity of theatrical languages – still seem to look for an understanding of what it might mean “to be Estonian” today from the centennial project.

The appeal of – and to – such a phantom of “national identity” remains emblematic of populist politics, of course; as well as being typical of the era of authoritarian governments across the region during the inter-war period, still mostly conceived of as the founding era of (pre-Soviet) national sovereignty. This phantom is also a cause of ambivalence for those of other political persuasions, addressed, for instance, by Chantal Mouffe in her advocacy of a left-wing, “alternative” populism. As taken here – from a 1935 Estonian government publication for Anglophone visitors, which I found in a second-hand bookshop while in Tartu – the following suggestion is, after all, still resonant: “Estonian cultural life reflects the national aims and peculiarities of the people. If character is moulded by difficulties, the Estonian national character developed in the hardest of schools” Although eliding “cultural life” with “national character,” in a claim to speak for “the people,” remains an ambition of many politicians today, this was happily contradicted in certain respects by the centenary commissions. The ways in which, nonetheless, many of the productions conformed to such an expectation – which is, perhaps, the more interesting aspect to review, as it suggests that an “internationalist” perspective may itself be anachronistic – will be considered in the second part of this essay.

I.

At one level, then, what the festival demonstrated was that there is not – indeed, could not be – one Estonian story or theatre in the sense of the “small nation” myths that are so beloved of right-wing populism, there as elsewhere. (The Estonian equivalent of Poland's PiS and Hungary's Fidesz parties is called Ekre, whose leaders have made similar attacks on the principle of an independent judiciary, for instance.) What the festival celebrated was the diversity of both stories and theatrical idioms, not least in the examples of the failed collaborations, where different artistic practices were not reconcilable in terms of a commitment to any “national” story. This was strikingly manifested on the opening night, where neither of the two performances shown were joint productions: *Revolution*, by the renowned Tallinn-based company, NO99; and *Journeys. Promised Land*, by the distinctive performance artist, kadrinoormets. Both performances had clearly declined their invitations to the “national story” ball. But while the former offered a cosmic vision, drawing upon an epic poem, *Meter and Demeter*, by Hasso Krull (which gathers together myths of creation and destruction from across the world); the latter was

exemplary in simply invoking a particular “detail” of Estonian history, one that is generally ignored: the emigration during the 1920s of nearly three and half thousand Estonians to Brazil, taking up the offer of “a free one-way ticket – going to the promised land where they hoped to find rivers of milk and flowing honey” (kadrinoormets).



Promised Land. Photo: Kadrinnormets.

In contrast to the big gestures of the NO99 production – evoking the mechanized world of the 1920s, the “timeless,” spiritualized world of both Dervishes and Aboriginal peoples, and a future apocalypse – kadrinoormets’ solo performance was itself dedicated to small details, explicitly avoiding grand metaphors. This dramaturgical principle was also an invitation – perhaps even an instruction – for the audience not to overlook the implications of what is judged of minor consequence when pursuing the “bigger picture”; implications that concern the very means (and meaning) of the performance itself. Resisting any “vision” that was not enacted as (rather than simply by) the performance, kadrinoormets made her show with (rather than simply for) the audience’s presence. Addressing us directly – whether in reading aloud from a book (with fragments of a poetic diary) or in eliciting the participation of audience members in her “proposals” for simple actions (concerning the stage management of objects or a direct complicity in particular moments of her performance) – it turned out that the “promised land” of the title was the performance itself, for the duration of our being gathered together, and not in that “other country” which the past is said to be. In this way, kadrinoormets’ piece stood apart from all the others, which (albeit in different ways) were engaged in the more familiar work of stage representation. As she writes in

her program note-manifesto: “this here is an individual in a space (either in the hall or on stage) who has made an independent decision to enter. There are no guarantees added to the theatre ticket, there are no guarantees available outside.”

During the festival, besides the performances, I also had the pleasure of reading the Estonian writer Kai Aareleid’s 2016 novel, *Burning Cities*, with its comparative example for exploring historical narrative. Giving voice to the handing on of individual objects between generations, from before the war up until 2013, her novel offers many occasions for thinking again about details in the work of the stage. At the heart of Aareleid’s story, a woman, Tiina, reflects on growing up in Tartu during the 1950s, constructing the memories in which the reader becomes immersed, woven around the few items which have survived the passing of lives and which, ultimately, fit into a shoebox. In almost the last line of the book, the reader shares the thoughts of the now aged Tiina, looking at “[a] beaker bearing Dad’s monogram – strange how it’s still here when so many other things have vanished, one by one. Like a bridge to a bygone time when everything still held together intact.” It is curious that the past is so often evoked in offering such a vision of unity in place of fragments – a vision, perhaps, of retrospective hope (despite the historical facts of war, for example). In such hope, it is the detail – bearing the sense that at some point things could always have been better than they turned out to be – that both stands for, and yet refutes, an unrealizable whole.



Revolution. Photo: Teater NO99.

In the twentieth century, the question of hope was not confined to such a retrospective poetics of the

private, of course; but publically mobilized in a politics of the future. Here the same metaphor of building bridges, this time as a collective endeavor, provided a significant shift away from the ostensibly utopian beginning of the NO99 performance. As a group accomplishment, an arch was constructed by the performers on stage – both materially and symbolically transcending individuals – through their balancing of multiple pieces of wood. “Revolution” was no longer understood in terms of the spiritual whirling of the Dervish (with which the performance began) but as practical work. To start this section of the show, however, the cast had stripped themselves of the red vestments of their initial ritualized appearance to reveal blue overalls beneath – and their bodies became transformed from the meditative devotion to a spiraling energy (connecting earth and sky, inside and outside) into spasmodic bodies, crippled by the modern separation of inner and outer. In the dystopian aftermath, the “revolutionary” cycles of renewed life (the figure of Demeter) gradually turned the human destruction of life into the very self-destruction of humanity, with strange underwater organisms the only heirs to a second deluge covering the face of the earth. Here the “national” was subsumed in the global (in terms that one might associate with Donna Haraway’s 2016 invocation of the Chthulucene, which relativized the idea of “independence” far beyond the appeal of 100 years, in what could also be taken as a reflection on the ambition of the centennial commission itself. I must confess, however, that there were moments when I wondered how seriously I was supposed to take the performance, where it seemed contrived rather than developed, stuck in a dynamic of repetition rather than exploring the varied senses of “revolution” that were proposed. Or then again, perhaps this very dynamic was the “lesson” being offered as, precisely, an experience of theatre.

A cosmic perspective on the “Tale of the Century” was also offered by the one opera project, performed in the middle of the festival, which was (for me) a high point, *Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock*, offered a collaboration between the Estonian National Opera company and an independent arts collective, Kanuti Gildi Saal – represented by a fictional composer, Manfred Mim, who was also one of the principal figures on stage, together with the historical polymath, Lennart Meri, and another fictional character, an ancient Greek explorer and poet. The familiar opening speech about switching off mobile phones was already part of the show – as we were invited to believe that certain sonic frequencies used in the opera would wipe data from electronic devices if they were not completely switched off! While this idea turned out to be consonant with the themes of the work, it was interesting how the suggested assault on the device felt like a threat to the person, such is the dependence – imagined or otherwise – on digital technologies.

Then the houselights went down and the opera started, accompanied first by a film in which space dust coalesced into fragments of a cup and saucer which, in a demonstration of time running backwards, rearranged themselves as resting on the desk of a writer, bashing out thoughts on a typewriter – Lennart Meri – the author of the novel (*Silverwhite* [1976]) on which the opera draws (and, amongst other things, the first president of post-Soviet Estonia). A traveller appears and Meri, now revealed to be sitting in a desert of his own imagining, learns about the origin of the world – and, in particular, that part of it which would become Estonia – from a disguised Manfred Mim. The opera goes back and forth in time and place – including scenes in 1964 at the Werner Café in Tartu (which is still in business), ancient Athens in 300BC (with a cameo from Aristotle), Turkmenistan in 1962, and especially in revisiting 7000 years of the island of Saaremaa and its famous Kaali crater made from the explosion of a meteorite, which provided the “shock” of the opera’s title, galvanising the original appearance of human beings, transformed from other creatures.

Mim’s idea of tracing the sonic echo of this pre-historic explosion in the lines of the local limestone – a

sort of mineral Raudive experiment – is doubled by Meri’s idea of following its traces in folklore. Both projects explore, as it were, the ur-sound of Estonia as it threads through the satire of Mim’s time travel experiments, culminating in his instigating the building of the Song Festival pavilion in Tallinn (completed in 1960) as a resonating chamber to condense the weight of Estonian depression, which will allow for the bending of time! With over 30,000 people singing together of their national misery, a great experiment is accomplished, allowing a satirical return to the first, mythical Estonian community, rather than evoking the historical “foundation” of the 1918 republic. Besides orchestra, electronics, and an on-stage Café band of muted trumpet, drums, and double bass, there was also an unearthly chorus singing from the back of the auditorium, who made a range of evocative sounds, not only vocally but also with the rustling of leaves or by wiggling fingers in amplified glasses of water. Bringing together the experience and resources of a major institution with the invention and wit of a maverick artistic collective, this “Shock” proved one of the most dynamic collaborations in the festival.



Estonian History. A Nation Born of Shock. Photo: Rahvusooper Estonia.

II.

By contrast to these three productions, which took on the fact that the past is not what it used to be while yet evading the question of what it still could be (historically, at least, rather than imaginatively), the majority of the other shows seemed caught in the dilemmas of the centenary commission. Despite all the differences between them, the productions also demonstrated the hold of certain tropes that seemed to

speak already for a “100 year story.” Each production evinced – in its own way – a dynamic not only of reflecting on the past as a story of people’s desired “freedom” or “independence;” but also a desire to be free of, or independent from, this past – without, however, effecting a new drama that was not still defined by it. An analogy might be made here with the Laocoön Group, a nineteenth century copy of which was commissioned for Tartu University’s Art Museum, where it is still displayed, precisely, as an “example” of the changing meaning of such models of and for artistic expression. Like the snakes that hold onto the priest and his sons, an image repertoire of the past (often citing the folkloric) seemed to be culturally prescribed for evoking questions of “national” identity, regardless of the research undertaken in particular productions. Distinguishing between the myth of the national, then, and the repetition of national myths was not always obvious.

As in Aareleid’s novel, the question of which “era” we are in was a recurrent concern. In the novel, this question even refers to a model provided by theatre: “Mrs Wunderlich stares at Tiina. Her eyes glisten and her hand trembles slightly. ‘That was before,’ she concludes, ‘in the Estonian era.’ Tiina ponders. ‘But what era is it now?’ she asks. ‘Now’s a different era, the Soviet era.’ Visits to Mrs Wunderlich’s room are always like a journey back in time. There’s nothing there from the ‘new’ era It was a little like being at the theatre. Once the lights come up, you realize that you’ve been here but also somewhere far away.” Perhaps the most direct examples of this analogical “theatre” were offered by the two collaborations that had commissioned new plays from one of Estonia’s most popular writers, Andras Kivirähk. Indeed, in terms of audience reception these were unquestionably the most successful shows, with full houses in contrast to the sometimes half-empty auditoria for the more formally demanding projects.

III.

The presentation of *Sirk’s Estonia (It could have gone differently)* at the Estonian National Museum was a collaboration in three parts (each quite separate and so, perhaps, not really a collaboration at all) between the independent groups, VAT Theatre and Labyrinth Theatre Group G9, and the National Library in Tallinn, part of which was adapted for the museum in Tartu. Built into the site of a former Soviet military airfield, the new National Museum building is itself testimony to the changing fortunes of Estonia, with its collections’ own history ranging from the folk ethnography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through to an installation marking the invention in Estonia of Skype. For the performance, there was a small exhibition in the museum foyer devoted to a fictional propagandist, Ernst Meel (1920-1999), author of an annual Estonian “national theatre” – in the sense of an Orwellian feel-good show, embracing the whole population within its unifying make-believe (much like the anniversaries, commemorations, and other public spectacles of the Communist times). The exhibition about Meel turned out to be “background” to the figure whose portrait greeted us later on when entering the theatre, as a counterpart to the historical figure of Artur Sirk, a right-wing nationalist politician of the early 1930s, whose memory was being celebrated – or, perhaps, rehabilitated – in the play “proper.”



Sirk's Estonia (It could have gone differently). Photo: VAT Teatre.

As a mute prologue, however, while we were waiting to be let into the theatre space, members of the audience began separating themselves from the rest, to the doleful beat of a drum. Dropping their bags and items of clothing, they left us in the foyer, separating themselves off in the zone between the inner and outer doors of the museum. Before the opalescent glass, then, was a field of abandoned shoes and other items; and beyond it only human silhouettes. Gradually that in-between space turned into a sauna, with the figures beating each other with branches, as the drumming changed rhythm. Finally, there was silence and the naked figures left to the outside. The smoke that had filled that transition space swirled out into the foyer, lapping up to the audience, while the departing figures headed toward the horizon of the old Soviet runway. This was a very effective use of the site, adapting a performance which had been originally made for the National Library in Tallinn, evoking not just the dead but the specific memory of the mass deportations to Siberia in June 1941 and March 1949 especially.

Then we descended to the museum's basement theatre space (via the queue for earphones for the translation) to watch the play. Presiding over the stage was a portrait of the fictional Ernst Meel – the founder of the “national show” (a thinly veiled reference to the centenary project itself, perhaps). The paradox here was that the Sirk narrative, offered by the rehearsal of an “alternative” show which constituted the main part of the performance, turned out to be another reality-denying fiction. Interestingly, *Sirk's Estonia*, by Aare Toikka and Mihkel Seeder, was composed, then, of two plays which interrupted each other – an established “national spectacle” and an insurgent challenge to it. The

latter offered a counter-factual “history,” exploring a narrative of the inter-war republic in which Sirk – the leader of a right-wing nationalist movement, the VAPS (founded as an organisation of veterans of the 1918-20 war of independence) – was successful in a planned coup in 1934. The parallels between Sirk and his contemporaries, Mussolini and Hitler, were made in the play (although one might also mention Smetona, Horthy, Antonescu, and others), which made for a complex context for the ostensible “desire for historical truth” expressed by its fictional author on stage (and perhaps also by the real ones off stage), set against the framing device of Meel’s fictions.



Sirk's Estonia (It could have gone differently). Photo: VAT Teatre.

The play’s project appeared to be to restore Sirk, who has been excluded from mainstream “independence” narratives of the Estonian republic, to contemporary attention. The established narratives have been written in the image of Konstantin Päts, who became the head of state in a “pre-emptive” coup of his own against the VAPS movement in 1934. With the following suppression of parliament, this began what Estonians call the “era of silence,” as independent politics was curtailed under Päts. For the authors of the play (and their fictional surrogate on stage) not only did Päts and the head of the military, Johan Laidoner (himself previously linked to the VAPS), conspire to destroy this source of populist politics, but also to have Sirk killed whilst in exile in 1937. (Historians generally agree that Sirk committed suicide.) In the play’s “miracle” alternative history, the VAPS coup succeeded, however, and Sirk headed a government of national unity – under which “the people” would have resisted the Soviet threat (as Finland did) in 1940. Indeed, the play ends with footage of the famous “armoured train”

divisions of the anti-Russian resistance in 1918, as if the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact didn't signal a completely different reality than the collapse of the Romanov Empire.

The geopolitical situation at the start of the Second World War was, after all, scarcely comparable to that at the end of the First World War; and so, perhaps, the most telling aspect of Sirk's Estonia is how anyone could suppose that they were similar. The revisionist account against Päts "handing over" sovereignty to the Soviets without a fight takes many forms, across the political spectrum. But he is widely held to have "capitulated," rather than being recognised as trying to avert a greater destruction – as, indeed, occurred when (in contrast to the pseudo-"democratic" coup of 1940, which installed a pro-Soviet puppet government) the Soviet Union invaded in 1944, "liberating" or "reconquering" Estonia from the Nazi occupation that followed the unilateral abrogation by Hitler of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1941.

Nonetheless, the play foregrounded precisely its own fictional construction – made explicit, for example, in having both Sirks and Laidoner played by women, even as the Päts narrative, as though it were the only one repressed by the Soviet version of history, was being challenged. The irony of this, however, is in its refusal to recognize its own historical (distinct from theatrical) conditions of possibility, where, for example, the role of Germany in Estonian history (and not just during the totalitarian decade) was simply absent – in this play, as in all the others at the festival. It appears as if the post-1918 republic had, indeed, successfully wiped away centuries of relations with the Baltic Germans (a theme of Anton Tammsaare's 1935 novel "I loved a German," for example [2018]) in its own account of "independence" and "sovereignty." One might then wonder about other voices that are also "silenced" in the return to the Päts era, as if to the only historical alternative in overcoming the post-war Soviet era. One such example was provided by the counter-culture of Estonian Hippies, evoked in the collaboration of two regional companies, Ugala Theatre and R.A.A.A.M, in their production, *Hippie Revolution*. (A heroic tale about Estonian psychonauts travelling into the heart of the Soviet Union).



Revolution. Photo: Teater NO99.

IV.

The performance that came trailing the most critical success was the award-winning *BB at Night*, a collaboration between two independent companies, the Tartu New Theatre and Tallinn's much longer established Von Krahl Theatre. The production was in three parts and based on Mati Unt's last novel, *Brecht at Night* (2009 [1997]), which I was glad to have read beforehand, since even the Estonian audience found it hard to follow the performance, especially the fragmentary scenes in the third part. What most distinguished this production was its use of a railway journey, with two audiences – one travelling from Tallinn, the other from Tartu – meeting at Tapa, whose station had been a collecting point during the Soviet deportations. (The upgrading of the Estonian railways in the past decade has left the central platform at Tapa unused and its station building closed; in contrast, for instance, to the gleaming restoration of the old building at Tartu station.) The quarter of an hour difference in arrival times between the two audiences was itself factored into the first scene at the station, in which both audiences were inscribed in a role play as extras in a film production set in the 1940s.



BB at Night. Photo: Von Khral.

Arriving at Tapa, then, the audience participates in the fictional filming of different scenes, with the old station building as a background. The harassed director wants us first to be waving farewell to departing deportees; and then to be waving a welcome to a delegation arriving by train from Moscow. In a third moment, we are asked to “react” angrily to a speech by Päts, as if “recreating” the historical scene in which he was indeed jeered during the sham elections that deposed him and that installed the pro-Soviet government in 1940. (Päts, like Laidoner and most of the 1930s’ political elite, died in Soviet imprisonment.) All of this audience “participation,” however, seemed uncritical in repeating the very theme of state-management of “the public” (albeit now as willing volunteers, rather than terrorized or humiliated ones). The smiles and engagement of the audience – why not, after all? – in facilitating the production would return from this filming at the very end of the show, in a recursive image of the waving projected on to the walls inside the building where we were then seated (having just watched a final scene that, with its walls of birch trees, was perhaps an echo of the Zurich premiere of Brecht’s *Pantaleone* play in 1948. Rather than as a caution about the public spectacle of the totalitarian years, these images were received – perhaps inevitably – with a welcome recognition by the audience of themselves, with no apparent sense of questioning the underlying repetition. The media through which an audience’s presence is re-inscribed are so familiar, it seems, as to be politically invisible – even as we were being told that the world’s most popular song in 1942 was Irving Berlin’s *White Christmas*. What might have been a dialectical point about tragedy and entertainment in a Marcel Ophüls production seemed to be offered as simply an up-beat ending.

Here is, surely, where the art of the production could (should) have come into play – interrupting in some way the imagined suturing of fictional past and “immersive” present – especially where the play has as a leading figure one Bertolt Brecht. In its own fiction of “filming” – as if “selfie” culture does not require something different in “representing” an audience – was this naivety or cynicism on the part of the performance makers? Or an irony associated with the “post-modern”, in which the clichés of the reception of Unt’s work still seem to be stuck? Or was there, indeed, an echo of the dialectical (evoked in the name of Brecht) – not as an explanatory way out of an artistic conundrum, but as emblematic of the conundrum itself? Given that the most jarring aspect of the performance was its use of snippets of recorded orchestral music (from Prokofiev, Sibelius, and, most bizarrely, Elgar’s Land of Hope and Glory) – which offered no connection with the acoustic of the place that we had been brought to specifically – the last option seems unlikely.

Set inside the derelict station building – which we were not invited to discover through the performance, however, but which served simply as if it were its own representation of the past (albeit distinct from buildings that have been restored virtually out of existence) – the third part of the performance enacted scenes of “everyday life” counterpointing more familiar images associated with war time. These scenes also returned to aspects of Unt’s narrative of Brecht’s arrival in Finland in 1940, itself counterpointed with historical references to what was happening just across the Baltic Sea in Estonia – describing the world renowned exile’s ignorance of the fate of such small nations, subsumed in the History of the century’s new empires. As Unt quotes from *Izvestiya* in 1940 – which “says it straight out:” “Recent events, such as the occupation of Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg again prove that the neutrality of small countries is sheer phantasy, as they are in no position to defend their own neutrality. Small nations have very few chances of maintaining their sovereignty. All negotiations they enter into with large countries regarding rights and wrongs are simply naïve, since the latter make the decisions in war as to whether small countries will survive or not.”

The first part of the production had already introduced us to Unt’s account, through an audio play that directly lifted passages from the novel, which we listened to during the hour and a half journey to Tapa. On picking up the headphones at Tartu station, we were told to switch off our mobile phones to avoid interference in the sound – but there was no accounting for the fact that the other passengers on the train were, of course, using theirs. Here the boundary between the theatre and society was actively, if unspokenly, tested by the sonic interference that was, indeed, constant as the audio performance unfolded to the rhythm of the train and the passing landscape (over which a white sun occasionally appeared through the clouds). With musical and contextual sound effects, we heard the voices of Brecht, Weigel, Steffin, Berlau, and their host in Finland, the Estonian-born writer, Hella Woulijoki (whose play *The Sawdust Princess* was transformed by Brecht into *Puntila and his Man Matti*), juxtaposed with the present, both inside and outside the carriage, allowing us to reflect on the pluralities of a journey in time. To quote again from Aareleid’s novel: “[W]ar is what’s feared the most. War. It’s a phantom, yes, but one of the word’s associations is ‘some time before’. The word ‘war’ is so often accompanied by a whispered ‘before the’. In a different era.”

V.

To conclude: I must admit that I am also sensitive to the question of “small nation” politics, coming from the UK, which is an island off the coast of continental Europe, where politics – still immersed in the phantasies of empire – totally fails to engage with this minor status. Indeed, that it is the exploitation of

resources – not only mineral but also human – from empire that made Britain “great” seems scarcely part of mainstream political, or even educational, discussion. As a consequence of its imperial history, Britain is one of the world’s richest countries, whilst endemic poverty persists and inequality is so institutionalized that it is seen as part of the national heritage – in which people even, perversely, take pride. Returning to the juxtaposition between cosmic stories and historical details offered in the festival’s opening night’s productions, I have cause to reflect on where I came from to be at the performances. The lesson that small nations need alliances – cultural and not just commercial – is brutally denied by a significant part of British politics, which (not least with the Brexit referendum) has captured government. The post-Soviet peace in Europe that we have been so privileged to enjoy is in new jeopardy from the refusal to develop the understanding of “sovereignty” through internationalist commitments. (It is worth remembering that 2018 is also the fiftieth anniversary of the invasion of Czechoslovakia; and that the Crimea is now an annexed territory.) Amongst the “lessons of history” – not least, through metaphors offered by the arts (“building bridges to the past” or even “slipping from its coils”) – is that the very relation between learning about and from history is not a given, but concerns a capability for which theatre and literature still offer keys.

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