

# Tallinn's

## Linnateater

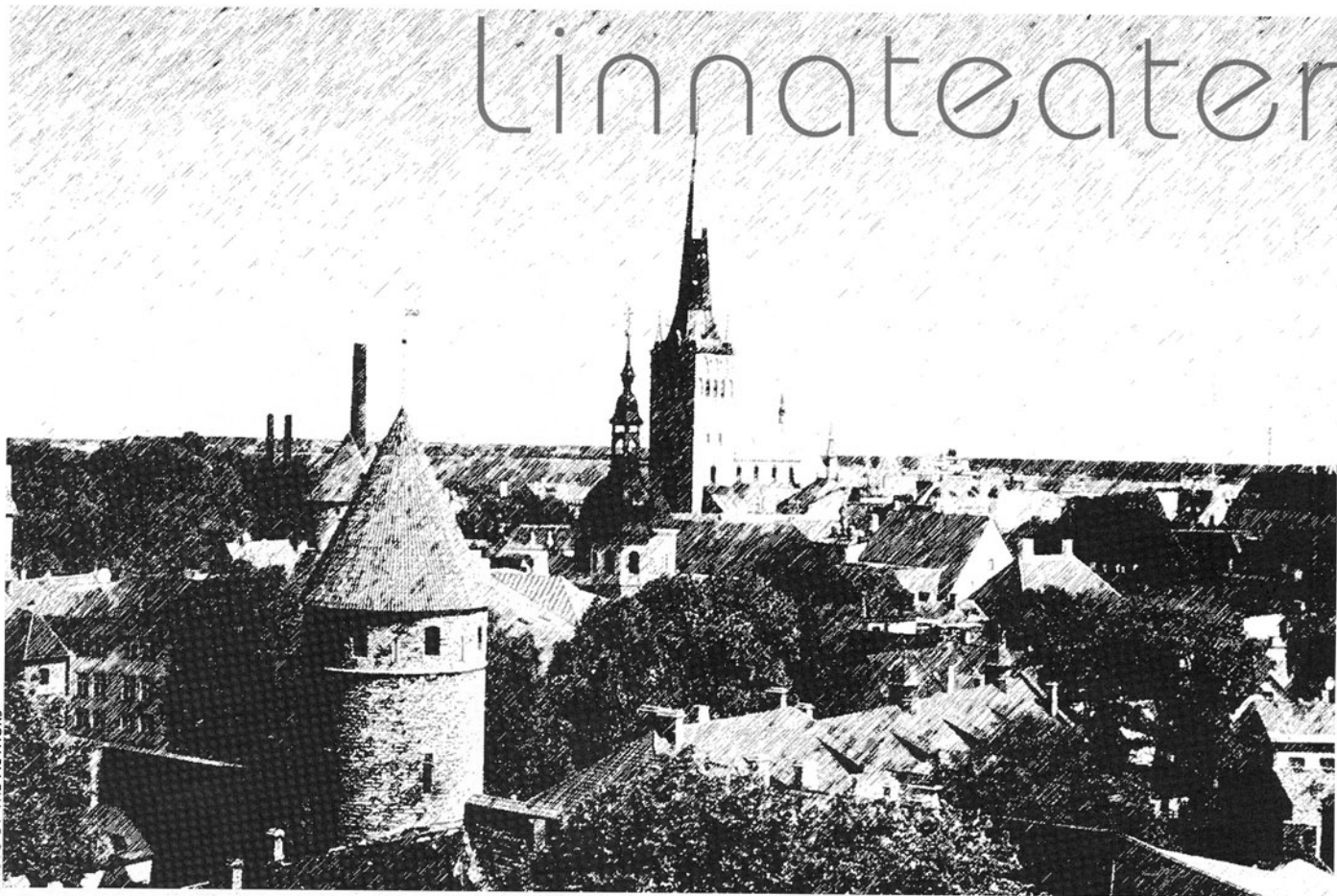


PHOTO BY THE AUTHORS

*Skyline of Tallinn's Old City looking north to the bay. (All photos courtesy the Linnateater except as noted.)*

## Mining Theatrical Gems from Medieval Ore

by  
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and  
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Tallinn, Estonia, with its ancient turreted battlements, crumbling Gothic cloister, and narrow cobblestone streets converging at the Raekoja Plats (Town Square), conjures images of walking through "Cinderella's hometown." The oldest part of this city is home to the Linnateater, one of the world's most innovative and marvelous theatre venues.

With the Baltic Sea to the north and west and bordering Latvia to the south and Russia to the east, Estonia lies fifty miles south of Helsinki across the Gulf of Finland. It is the smallest of the three Baltic Republics, which also include Latvia and Lithuania. With a land area of 17,413 square miles, Estonia is slightly smaller than the combined states of Vermont and New Hampshire.



Of the many benefits USITT offers its members, for these authors, one of the most valuable is the opportunity to make connections with the world theatre community. At the 1999 USITT Annual Conference & Stage Expo in Toronto, Richard Durst, then president of OISTAT, the international affiliation of organizations like USITT, offered to secure a guest invitation for Barry to attend the annual OISTAT Technical Committee meeting to be held that August in Helsinki. Barry accepted immediately, eager for the opportunity to join professional colleagues from around the globe for three days of round-table discussions.

That summer, during Saturday's lunch at the Helsinki City Theatre, Estonia's delegate to the committee, Sirlu Bergström, invited everyone to take the ferry to Estonia and visit her theatre. She said modestly, "You might find it interesting." Most already had other plans, but John Mayberry from York University in Canada and Barry accepted the invitation. Seeing Tallinn's Old City alone made the trip worthwhile. Narrow cobblestone streets lead up to a high-gabled, five-story Medieval building that was the entry to the Linnateater (City Theatre) complex.

Bergström's theatre was much more than just interesting. Home to eight performance venues, the Linnateater is located in a block of merchant's houses dating variously from medieval times to the eighteenth century. Each theatre space has been carved out of the existing structures, maintaining as much of their historic integrity as possible. Many theatres incorporate artifacts and architectural remnants that go back to the thirteenth century. Consequently, the design and configuration of each performance space is varied and unusual, ranging from the intimate fifty-seat Kaminasaal (Chimney Room) in the basement to the state of the art Taevalava (Heaven) in the attic. After exploring for three hours the tour had not covered the entire complex but was cut short to catch the return ferry back to Helsinki.

The Linnateater is a remarkable achievement. Feeling that the story of this one-of-a-kind gem should be shared with the larger theatre community, the authors secured funding from the Department of Music, Theatre, and Dance and the College of Liberal Arts at Colorado State University to return to Tallinn for six weeks in the summer of 2000 in order to study the Linnateater's architecture, technical facilities and management structures. We gained a fascination and respect not only for

the Linnateater and its company but also for a theatrical tradition that has spanned centuries and withstood all sorts of threats to its very existence.

### Rich Cultural Heritage

Settlements in Tallinn date back to the ninth century, and Toompea, the large hill overlooking the Gulf of Finland, was occupied by a wooden fortress as early as the eleventh century. Because of its location, Tallinn was, and continues to be, a major trading center for northern Europe. Fortunately, unlike most of Europe, Tallinn has preserved much of its architectural and cultural history (Noble, Gaudie, and Williams 1997, 124).

Theatre has been popular in Estonia for five hundred years. The first recorded play, Terrence's *The Andria*, was performed in Latin by German school children in Tallinn's town hall in 1529 (Rähesoo 1999, 17). In the late seventeenth century separate theatre buildings emerged and Tallinn's citizens apparently enjoyed theatre performances on a regular basis. The arts and cultural events offered in the city throughout most of its history were imported commodities, not ethnic Estonian. It was not until the last half of the nineteenth century that Estonians, along with many subjugated counterparts across Europe, developed a growing sense of ethnic, cultural, and national identity referred to as the "National Awakening" (Rähesoo 1999, 32).

The new century heralded the rise of professional theatres in major Estonian cities. No financial assistance was provided by either the national Tsarist government nor by the respective municipal governments controlled by the Baltic German elites. All of these new structures were funded by small contributions from the ethnic Estonian people. As Rähesoo points out, "In Estonia the building of the new professional theatres became national temples—visible symbols of national self-consciousness and solidarity." (Rähesoo 1999, 32) Most of these structures were destroyed in World War

II. By 1991, after fifty years of Soviet occupation, ideological oppression and censorship, ten national companies and one municipal theatre were in place across Estonia.

The heart of Estonia's theatre is in its capitol city. During 1999, Tallinn's six professional theatres had a combined audience exceeding 510,000 who attended 2,146 performances (City of Tallinn 2001). Estonians go to the theatre twice as often as their Russian and German neighbors. About 800,000 theatre tickets are sold annually in



The Linnateater's main entrance at 23 Lai.

Estonia, where the population is only 1.5 million. (This attendance rate in the United States would equal 135 million theatre tickets. Imagine the economic impact this would have on our professional theatres.)

Vanalinn (Old Town) in Tallinn is home to two national theatres—the Nukuteater (Puppet Theatre) and the Vanalinnastudio (Old Town Studio)—as well as the city's own Linnateater. Following parallel paths of exploring new performance venues and preserving the historic architecture and character of the buildings, the Linnateater has developed eight performance spaces over the last twenty-five years as the company expanded from the origi-



nal house at 23 Lai to encompass almost all of the Ninth Quarter of the old city. The company produces eleven productions in repertory, in a season that stretches from August through June. In the 2000/2001 season, a total of 59,715 patrons attended 321 performances (Sinissaar 2001). Although the outdoor theatre seats up to 600, all of the indoor theatres seat 200 or less. Some are chamber theatres with minimal technical support and seating only fifty patrons, while the three larger theatres all have permanent technical support sys-

tems. There is, however, neither a proscenium nor a permanently fixed seat to be found in the complex.

### Stretching Artistic Boundaries in Intimate Spaces

The history of the Linnateater begins in 1965 when Voldemar Panso founded an Estonian language drama theatre called Noorsooteater (Youth Theatre), which, in spite of its name, did not focus on children's theatre. The Noorsooteater was first housed in a cold and

drafty 800-seat Soviet-style Palace of Culture, located outside of the city center in an industrial slum, with production shops for scenery, properties, and costumes scattered at different locations around the city. Yet, despite its dreary surroundings at the Palace of Culture, the Noorsooteater soon found an appreciative audience hungry for a wider range of artistic expression than served by the more academic-oriented Tallinn Drama Theatre. The Noorsooteater's repertory during its first decade included modern interpretations of classic works, such as *Hamlet*; contemporary Western dramas, including Anouilh's *Antigone* and Beckett, and Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*; and several chamber dramas, including Kilty's *Dear Liar*. The Noorsooteater also presented the Soviet Union's first production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1976 (Rähesoo 1999, 191).

In the mid-1970s, when the promised new theatre to replace the Palace of Culture never materialized, the company took it upon itself to find new performance spaces. The building used for rehearsals and administration at 23 Lai in Tallinn's Old Town was restored in 1974, and the company opened the Väike Saal (Small Stage) theatre in 1975 with a children's theatre production of *Aasal õitseb mablakann* (*The Sweet Violet is Blooming on the Meadow*) (Sinissaar 2001). This black box theatre is approximately 8.5 m x 11.5 m x 4 m (28' x 38' x 13') and seats 100 (Tallinn City Theatre 2000, 11). A balcony spans one side of the room and features the original double doors of the medieval granary that open to the outside three stories above Lai Street. The heavy beams of the peaked roof frame the playing space. The seating is flexible and during the production of *Pianola*, the seating was moved to a different configuration between acts. More intimate and often more interesting productions were staged in the Väike Saal, and this tiny flexible theatre gradually evolved as the group's main performance space.

The Noorsooteater's production team continued to explore and to develop new venues at 23 Lai. In 1983 the intimate Kaminasaal (Chimney Room) opened in the basement below the main lobby. With dimensions of approximately 10 m x 10 m (33' x 33') and a ceiling at 2.5 meters (8'-3"), the Kaminasaal seats fifty patrons and relies on a small portable lighting system (Tallinn City Theatre 2000, 7). To access the theatre one descends a



The Väike Saal (Small Stage) – The Linnateater's first venue at 23 Lai in the old city. Production: *Onu Teodor, kass ja koer* (*Uncle Theodore, the Cat and the Dog*), directed by Peeter Tammearu, scenery and costume design by Aime Unt.



The Kaminasaal (Chimney Room) chamber theatre.



rough-hewn stone staircase that leads past the theatre's cozy pub.

Although the Noorsooteater was now producing productions in all three venues—the new spaces at 23 Lai and the old Palace of Culture—the disparity between the location, size, and environments of these spaces projected a confusing image of the company. After several years of searching the Old Town area for a suitable site on which to build a new performance hall for the Noorsooteater, the Tallinn Executive Committee decided in 1983 to explore using the buildings adjacent to 23 Lai and the inner courtyard as the location for a new main stage. The building was to be completed by 1990, in time for the company's twenty-fifth anniversary. "According to the soviet cultural policy, the future theatre was to be named Interclub—a place to promote cultural contacts between the Soviet republics." (Tallinn City Theatre 2000, 24) Four years later, in 1987, the theatre acquired the entire block of historic buildings surrounding 23 Lai. With funding from Moscow a new 500-seat performance hall was designed to be erected in the courtyard of the complex, and excavation began in 1988.

In spite of the initial Soviet support, however, and the increasing freedom under Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, construction for the new theatre never moved past preliminary excavation and foundation work, even after Estonia became a free republic in 1991. Two separate issues halted this project. First, neither the Soviet Union nor the fledgling Estonian Republic could spare the funds to finish the new performing space. And, compounding the funding dilemma was how a new 500-seat theatre would negatively impact this part of the old city. In addition, exploratory excavations in 1984 had found that the courtyard was a significant archeological site yielding important information about the early development of the town and its ethnography (Böckler and Maiste 1993, 181). In 1988, the project was halted, leaving a water-filled crater in a scarred courtyard.

In 1991 the Noorsooteater was in a state of turmoil. The theatre had abandoned the decrepit Palace of Culture and depended on the small Väike Saal as its primary venue. But they began an exciting new era the next year when the young director, Elmo Nüganen, assumed the duties of Artistic Director, and Raivo Pöldmaa was appointed General Manager.



The construction crater left in the Linnateater's courtyard after the Interclub construction project was abandoned.



Artistic Director Elmo Nüganen.



The restored Diele (Lobby Theatre).

Faced with the need to find other venues, Nüganen and his colleagues began to explore "environmental theatre" opportunities within the existing buildings. Director Madis Kalmet staged Mankell's *The Prince of Fools* in the unrestored top story at 19 Lai in the spring of 1992 to open the Pööningusaal (Attic Stage). Nüganen and his production team developed a new venue in the theatre's entry room, the Diele (Lobby Theatre), in the fall. The Diele, which seats an audience of ninety in the 12 m x 16 m x 4.5 m (39' x 52' x 15') room and accommodates a portable lighting system, "blends a beautifully restored eighteenth-century Baroque staircase with elements of the original Gothic Hanseatic kitchen." (Böckler and Maiste 1993, 93) In addition to the mas-

sive stone fireplace in the corner, the focus of the playing space revolves around an ornately carved late Gothic stone pillar that is the supporting post of the main ceiling beam. The staircase, with its painted Rococo balustrade, was the perfect backdrop for the theatre's premiere production of *Romeo and Juliet*. This production was both a popular and critical success and in 1994 was invited to participate in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

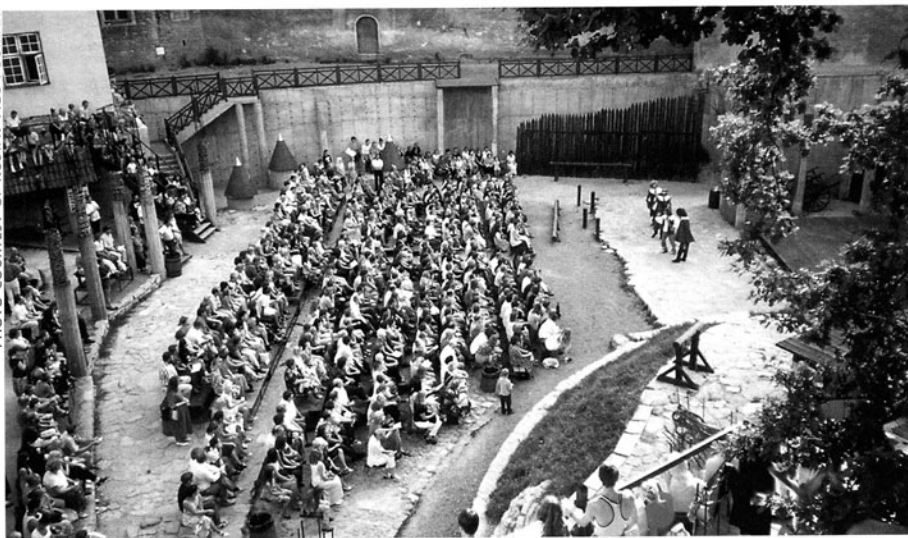
In 1994, when the Noorsooteater officially became the Linnateater (City Theatre), Nüganen and his colleagues were still exploring the complex to "mine" new theatre spaces from the historic buildings. Taking advantage of funding which was available for cultural and historic preservation, a strategy was developed



Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in the Diele. Directed by Elmo Nüganen, scenery and costume design by Kustav-Agu Püüman.



Scene from Act III of *Kolm musketäri* (*The Three Musketeers*) staged in the rustic Pööningusaal (*Attic Theatre*). Directed by Elmo Nüganen, scenery and costume design by Kustav-Agu Püüman.



*Kolm musketäri* (*The Three Musketeers*) in the Lavaauk (*Courtyard*). Directed by Elmo Nüganen, scenery and costume design by Kustav-Agu Püüman.

to first find an environment suitable for a production and then restore the space to meet both the performance and historic preservation goals.

The most ambitious of these preservation projects emerged out of the chaos of the aborted construction in the courtyard. In 1995, using as its impetus an innovative production of *Kolm musketäri* (*The Three Musketeers*), staged by Nüganen, the water-filled excavation crater was transformed into the Lavaauk (*Courtyard*) theatre. Adjacent buildings and alleys were incorporated into the performing space for the Musketeers production complete with wagons, horses, and plenty of action. The first two acts were played outside in the courtyard. For the third act, the audience was moved indoors to the rustic Pööningusaal theatre where an attic window provided unexpected entrances and novel exits. In the summer of 2001, a sequel to *Kolm*

*musketäri* was produced in the Lavaauk, *Musketärid - Kaksikümmend aastat hiljem* (*Musketeers—Twenty Years Later*).

Although it is a large performing space, 300 to 600 seats, the Lavaauk is, of course, only a summer venue. Limited by the only indoor theatres being the 100-seat Väike Saal and the 50-seat Kaminasaal, between 1992 and 1998, the Linnateater produced only six plays per season. In 1997 the theatre presented only 247 performances for 38,000 patrons (Rähesoo 1999, 197). These numbers were far below what the company was used to (in 1982 Linnateater produced thirty-five shows) and also much less than other Estonian companies produced.

The next two performance spaces carved out of the historic buildings occupied physical extremes in the expanded complex, and were appropriately christened Hell and Heaven.

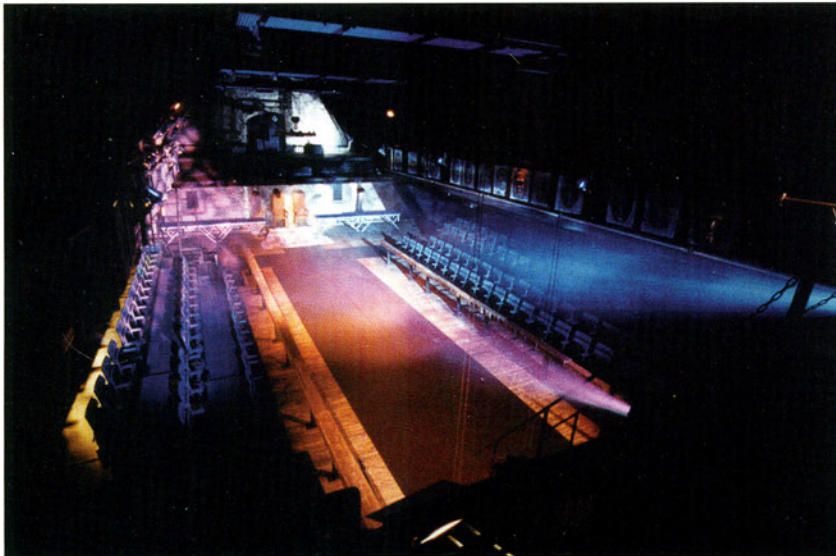
When planning a production of *The Three Penny Opera*, Nüganen wanted to stage the play in a warehouse environment. He searched the city for an abandoned or unused building to rent, but nothing suitable was found within the budget. As the opening drew closer, the production team decided that the basement connected to the main building at 23 Lai could be converted into the ideal venue for this production, and renovation of another space commenced.

The Põrgulava (*Hell Theatre*) lies six meters (20') underground and seats 120 to 135. The room has an odd triangular shape and the ceiling is only 3.5 meters (11'). The seating is flexible, and there is no fixed stage space, but there is a permanent lighting system. Steel grates cover some of the old city's original storm drains that run through the theatre's floor, and a whimsical mural depicting citizens of medieval Tallinn adorns a portion of the original foundation walls. This project proved to be one of the theatre's most hectic since the time period from the beginning of renovation to the opening night of *Kolmekrossiooper* (*The Three Penny Opera*) was only four months (Bergström and Püüman 2000).





*Kolmekrossiooper (The Three Penny Opera) in the Põrgulava (Hell Theatre). Directed by Elmo Nüganen, scenery design by Vladimir Anshon, costume design by Jaanus Orgussaar.*



*Opening scene from Hamlet in the Taevalava (Heaven Theatre). Directed by Elmo Nüganen, scenery and costume design by Aime Unt, lighting design by Martin Laubre.*



*The Kammersaal (Chamber Theatre).*

At the other extremity, the existing Pööningusaal (Attic Theatre) was converted into the Taevalava (Heaven Theatre). Measuring 14 m x 20 m x 6 m (46' x 66' x 20') and seating 199, the Taevalava is the Linnateater's largest and most technically sophisticated indoor venue. Its completion marked the culmination of the renovations of the new spaces at 19 and 21 Lai, and the opening ceremonies were held 27 March 1999, to coincide with The International Day of Theatre (Tallinn City Theatre 2000, 25). Estonia's thirteenth professional staging of *Hamlet* since 1913 opened the Taevalava in December of 1999.

As with the other venues, the seating for the Taevalava is flexible. A 2.5-meter (8') balcony follows the perimeter of the space and may be used for seating or acting areas. The four catwalks that bridge the theatre across the narrow dimension are motorized and move along a track spanning the length of the hall. The technological enhancements do not completely hide the original structure. Heavy beams are visible above the catwalks, and at the far end of the room another functional old granary hatch is embedded in the ancient stone wall.

Two more small venues bring the total number of theatres in the complex to eight. The elegant Kammersaal (Chamber Theatre) is located in the eighteenth-century palace at 21 Lai. It seats sixty in the 9 m x 13 m x 2.5 m (30' x 43' x 8') room and has a small permanent lighting system. This theatre's most intriguing element is a tiny shuttered window at the back of the audience area. A small door in a back hallway leads to an extremely narrow, winding stone staircase that ends at the window. As the story is told, this is where the seventeenth-century servants would come to observe the dinner parties of their masters.

The newest theatre space in Linnateater is the Vaatesaal (a room with a view), located next to the Taevalava. The 11 m x 11 m (36' x 36') room will be a versatile venue. It has the highest ceilings of the three chamber theatres at five meters (16') and it has a permanent lighting system. However, it currently serves as a storage vestibule for scenery and props for the adjacent production of *Hamlet*.

#### Expanding in All Directions

Today, the Linnateater houses eight performance venues, presents a repertory of eleven to twelve productions annually, and future plans now focus on improving the modest support spaces. Although the costume shop can

usually support the new productions and maintenance of the repertory with in-house resources, a good deal of the scenery construction, especially metal work, must be fabricated outside the Old City complex, often with the help of other professional theatres.

The recent renovation projects also included construction of other improvements like permanent dressing rooms for the resident company, new automated box office facilities, and better office space for the administrative and production teams. Two delightful amenities, not found in any American theatres but given high priority at the Linnateater, are the sauna and plunge pool. Sauna is an important aspect of Estonian culture, viewed as "close to a religious experience" (Noble, Gaudie, and Williams 1997, 66). The company maintains a regular schedule for employees to relax and take sauna with their families and fellow workers.

In June 2000 the Ministry of Culture acquired the buildings at 25 Lai and transferred them to the Linnateater. Theatre manager Põldmaa was asked how much more the theatre plans to expand. With a grin he replied, "Until we reach the sea."



*Company sauna.*



*Sauna plunge pool.*

Artistic Director Elmo Nüganen and Managing Director Raivo Põldmaa oversee a resident company employing twenty-four full-time actors. Stagehands typically play minor non-speaking roles. (In the 1999-2000 season, the actor appearing in the most performances was a stagehand). Other members of the resident production team include two full-time directors, a dramaturge, a music director, two scenographers, and a production manager/technical director. In addition, guest directors

and scenographers are hired for each season as well. A complement of thirty-eight production workers are employed to mount and run the productions; and with the administrative, front-of-house, housekeeping, and catering departments, the Linnateater company includes more than 125 employees.

Although the Linnateater has not yet expanded to the sea, there are currently no plans to expand the facility further. The theatre has now reached the point where they need to



mount more productions in order to offer more performances in the existing venues. In order to do this, they need to expand the acting company and add another director or two. Producing plays in these intimate settings inevitably mean higher ticket prices. Tickets to Linnateater productions cost 150 Kroons—a little less than US\$10.00—but it's still fifty percent more than what it costs to attend most other Estonian theatres.

Plans are also on the table to revisit some of the renovations and enhance the facilities already in place. Under consideration are a

new lobby and coat check facility for the Põrgulava theatre. This addition would include a separate direct entrance to this venue off of a side street to the complex. Although one of the charms of attending Linnateater productions is traveling through the maze of passages up and down the complex to find your venue, finding your seat by curtain time can be a daunting experience.

The theatre has continued to expand international connections. Guest artists from France, Germany, Russia, and the United States have been invited to direct or design for the

theatre. In spite of the economic and logistic challenges, the theatre has taken productions to several European theatre festivals and tours to cities with Estonian communities in the United States and Canada. Since 1994 productions have been presented in Russia, Finland, Poland, Germany, and Great Britain. Although touring is a challenge for any company, it is especially so for the Linnateater. Not only is the repertory disrupted by the absence of the cast members for a particular production, but the settings for most of the Linnateater productions are site specific and often do not translate effectively to other venues. These strictures not only limit the theatre's ability to showcase their productions at other professional theatres, but it is also difficult to bring productions originally mounted in larger and more traditional stages into the Linnateater.

Despite the challenges posed by inviting other theatre companies to showcase their productions on the Linnateater stages, Põldmaa and Nüganen decided to host an international theatre festival in the facility. Between Christmas and New Year's, 2001, the Linnateater hosted the first *Rabvusvabeline teatrifestival Talveõ Uenenägu (Midwinter Night's Dream International Theatre Festival)*. Theatre companies with small, non-traditional spaces were invited to submit applications to the festival. A jury selected seven companies, representing Russia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, to join the Linnateater's production of *Hamlet* for the event. These eight productions were stage in five of the complex's seven indoor venues. The Young Spectator's Theatre of Moscow's production of *K. I. from Crime and Punishment* was staged in the unrenovated space in the newest addition to the complex. The three-day festival was packed with the multiple performances, evening critiques and feedback sessions, and the stimulating dialogues that occur when colleagues from around the world have the opportunity to meet and interact.

Although Estonia lies somewhat off the beaten path for most European travel itineraries, Tallinn certainly should be included in any travel plans to Scandinavia. If you are able to visit St. Petersburg, Tallinn is connected by daily overnight train service. Tallinn does have a small international airport and this is the best way to reach the city during the winter months. Although summer is the high tourist season, the Linnateater and other theatres in Estonia are closed for holiday between



Midsummer and August 1. Two members of the Linnateater's design and production staff are active members of OISTAT standing committees. As mentioned earlier, Sirli Bergström is Estonia's representative on the Technical Committee, and Kustav-Agu Püüman is the delegate to the Design Committee.

So take an opportunity to walk in Cinderella's footsteps. Enjoy the Medieval charm of Tallinn's old city late into the evening during the White Nights of summer. Or, visit during midwinter when it dons a very different magical charm with the holiday lights and sounds. Regardless of the season, when you visit Tallinn, there is no doubt that "You will find it interesting."

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For general information, the Linnateater has a Web site at [www.linnateater.ee/eng.html](http://www.linnateater.ee/eng.html). It's mostly in Estonian, but the one page in English has a good historical account as well as current contact information for the box office and administrative office. ❖

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