

TARTMUS

WHEN THE STAGE LIGHTS CAME ON...

A Journey to the Beginnings of Vanemuine



Tartu Art Museum

17.01–29.03.2020

tartmus.ee

Tartu Kunstimuuseum

PLAYBILL FOR THE EXHIBITION WHEN THE STAGE LIGHTS CAME ON...•

The exhibition *When the Stage Lights Came On...* tells the multi-layered story of a theatre by displaying the folio of prints *Wanemuine 100*, which focuses on the beginning of the Vanemuine Theatre. The folio ties together two important moments in time: the birth of Estonian language theatre and the beginning of the 1970s, when the local theatre life was influenced by its Soviet environment but also by the beginnings of the theatrical renewal. Inspired by these layers, the folio is the impetus and central exhibit of the present exhibition.

The students of the Estonian Academy of Arts who curated the exhibition travelled from the world of art to the world of theatre and brought a small piece of Estonian theatre history to the museum. In all probability, the folio, which is part of the Tartu Art Museum's collections, has never been exhibited. This allowed us to unravel the collages from the folio like detectives and to delve into their sources to better understand the backstory of the folio. As a result of the research, this playbill that you are reading contains most of the photos that form the basis of the collages.

Archival materials tell a multifaceted story that covers the period from the birth of Estonian language theatre up to the founding of professional theatre. It includes images of the people associated with theatre, the public festivals, the costumes and the theatre buildings. The foundation of the Vanemuine Theatre took place during the phase of active construction of Estonian nationality. It focused on a national narrative, on connecting individual events and celebrating anniversaries that assisted in asserting a collective sense of continuity.

Eighteen years after the birth of Estonian language theatre, the writer Eduard Vilde, who had tried his hand at acting in the Vanemuine Theatre, wrote an article about the role that the theatre played in educating people. The introductory quotation in the folio comes from this text:

"If we consider literature to be a symbol of educating people, then theatre is an even bigger symbol of education. And if literature promotes the spirit of the people, then theatre does it to an equal if not greater extent. If we want to talk about Estonian theatrical texts and the way they are performed, then we must turn to the 'Wanemuine' Society with joyful and hopeful minds. If the first furrow has been ploughed anywhere to grow Estonia theatre, then it was done in 'Wanemuine'. And if anywhere the first shoots of Estonian theatre art sprout, then our hopes lie with 'Wanemuine', since the seeds have been planted here."

Postimees, 1888

The production of the folio in the 1970s can be seen as a symbolic gesture to look back at a chapter in the history of Estonian theatre. At the same time, a younger generation (Mati Unt, Evald Hermaküla et al.) were rising to prominence and the importance of theatre in Estonian culture was on the rise. Improvisation and an implied visual language increasingly tested the audience.

The Project Space of the Tartu Art Museum is the meeting place of these beginnings, where the prints denote the formation of the first chapter in the history of Estonian theatre and the sound excerpts of the theatre performances made for the 100th anniversary of Vanemuine signify the renewal of the 1970s. The exhibition space has been inspired by the scenography of Estonian theatre in the 1880s, where showing an interior usually meant bringing a large table from the theatre bar to the centre of the stage and surrounding it with bistro chairs. Just as back then there was no distinction between a farmhouse, a noble castle or an urban flat, the exhibition space offers constant transformations and food for thought on Estonian theatre at the present time and throughout history, using both the experiences of visitors and exhibited items.

OVERVIEW OF THE FOLIO OF PRINTS

THEATRE WANEMUINE 100 FOLIO OF SILKSCREEN PRINTS

Calligraphy and design: Villu Toots

Prints: Olev Soans

Quotations: Karin Kask *Teatritegijad, alustajad*
(*The People Behind Theatre, the Founders, 1970*)

Consultant: Lilian Kirepe, senior researcher at the
Theatre and Music Museum

Hand printed by the actor Olev Eskola

Twenty-five copies of this folio of prints were made at the request of the Ministry of Culture of the ESSR. They were signed and numbered by Olev Eskola in 1970 at the Experimental Studio of the Art Foundation of the ESSR in Tallinn.

THE CREATORS OF THE FOLIO OF PRINTS

The quotations in the folio of prints come from the theatre historian KARIN KASK's (1919–1998) book *Teatri-tegijad, alustajad* (*The People Behind Theatre, the Founders*, 1970). Kask has contributed to Estonian culture a substantial history of theatre and shorter monographs on actors and directors. Her continuous striving to document Estonian theatre has included reviews on television, programmes on the history of theatre, recording rehearsals and working with actors at a drama school.

The calligrapher VILLU TOOTS (1916–1993) made billboards for cinemas in Tartu and worked as a graphic designer. He was also known as a teacher and researcher of typography. Textbooks on calligraphy that deal with the history of writing, fonts and typefaces and teach how to write in various styles are considered his greatest contributions.

The printmaker OLEV SOANS (1925–1995) started his career as an illustrator and billboard artist. Soans's main creative outlet was info graphics, which he usually conveyed in great detail and with precision using various printmaking techniques. For example, he created maps for the history of literature, theatre and ornithology, and the protection of heritage. A whole team of specialists usually participated in creating the maps, but the final outcomes were decided by Soans himself.

The actor OLEV ESKOLA (1914–1990), who actually printed the sheets, is recorded in the history of Estonian culture mainly as a film actor who had 58 roles in the major studios of the Soviet Republics: in Mosfilm, Lenfilm and in Tallinnfilm. Some of his most important roles were in the films *Gladiator*, *Dangerous Games*, *The Gang* and *Indrek*. Eskola's voice also became well-known since he participated in radio plays and read selections from the literary masterpieces of the world.

THE BIRTH OF ESTONIAN LANGUAGE THEATRE

Under the leadership of Lydia Koidula, the first Estonian language play, *Saaremaa onupoeg* (*The Cousin from Saaremaa*), was staged on 24 June 1870 in the building of the Vanemuine Society on Jaama street in Tartu.

“One day at the beginning of June, Lydia came home and enthusiastically suggested that we should organise a theatrical performance for the fifth anniversary of Vanemuine. Many were doubtful, since we had no plays. Lydia rose to the challenge and promised to write the play herself. She took Körner’s *Der Vetter aus Bremen* and half an hour later she returned and read *The Cousin from Saaremaa* for the first time.” Heinrich Rosenthal

A simulation of a farm house and painted scenery curtains were specially made for the play. The venue accommodated 225 people and the entrance fee was about 65 roubles. The demand for tickets was enormous and they ran out an hour before the show.

Johann Voldemar Jannsen's family.
Lydia Koidula is the first on the left.
KIRMUS



Vanemuine
Theatre on
Jaama street,
the end of the
19th century.
TMM



"Today you will hear a theatrical performance in your beloved language for the first time! You will no longer be presented with a piece of foreign life in some foreign language but will be shown in the Estonian language something from the life of our own people that has been idealised by the work of an artist. Artistic and scientific work, however, are the things that make the intellectuals and the buildings of a nation stand out."

C. R. Jakobson

KOIDULA'S THEATRE



Carl Robert Jakobson's play *Arthur ja Anna ehk Vana ja uue aja inimesed* (*Arthur and Anna, or People of the Old and New Eras*) became the most performed play besides Koidula's plays at the beginning of the 1870s. KIRMUS / Lydia Koidula, 1871. KIRMUS / In 1866, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald became an honorary member of the Vanemuine Society. KIRMUS

Koidula didn't limit herself to one attempt at theatrical writing. The approval of the Estonian audience lent her the strength for new undertakings in theatre. Interest in Koidula's plays among the Estonian public increased since the plays were topical and the ideas that were expressed were familiar and exciting. After *The Cousin from Saaremaa* premiered in 1870 and *Maret ja Miina ehk Kosjakased* (*Maret and Miina, or the Betrothal Birches*) in 1871, Koidula's most successful play, *Sääärane mulk ehk Sada vakra tangusoolal* (*What a Bumpkin!, or One Hundred Bushels of Grouts*), was staged.

Koidula intentionally approached writing her plays through the educational aspects of theatre: *"How invaluable for assisting with educating people would be a theatre stage with a suitable repertoire! To an extent, all those who have the necessary intellectual capabilities are certainly obliged to appreciate the importance of the present moment."*

The stage lights came on: with her first three plays, Lydia Koidula had created the basis for Estonian theatre.

Lydia Koidula's collection of poems *Emmajõe Õpik* (*The Nightingale of the Emajõgi*), 1866. SALM / Stone Bridge, Georg Friedrich Schlater, 1830–1840. ERM





*The singer of the fatherland, who was both fragile and
manly, lit the fire of theatre with her own work, spirit and words.
She was the pioneer. Her three plays formed the foundations
of a theatre with a clear intention, style and phrasing.
We rightfully call it Koidula's theatre and its power does
not lie so much in the lighting of the fire as in the fact
that the flame remained lit.*

BEGINNING OF ESTONIAN MUSICAL THEATRE

In Koidula's play *What a Bumpkin!, or One Hundred Bushels of Grouts*, the prompter was August Wiera, who was an apprentice of the cabinet maker Bandelier but was interested in singing and theatre. By 1878, Wiera had become the head of the choir, the orchestra and acting at the Vanemuine Society.

In 1883, under August Wiera, the first musical drama was staged: Karl Maria von Weber's *Preciosa*. This is considered the year that Estonian language musical theatre was born. It was performed 114 times until 1903, and back then that was a very long run for a show. The second musical performance, Planquette's operetta *The Bells of Corneville* (1885), was equally popular. Thanks to Wiera being the head of the theatre, a number of operettas and musical plays were staged and by the end of the century they formed a large part of the repertoire.

The choir of Vanemuine at the end of the 1870s. TMM





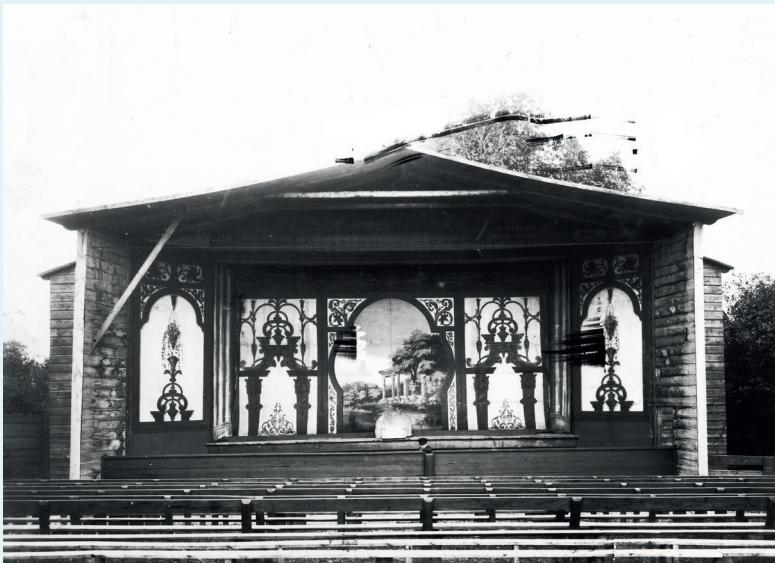
*First and foremost, August Wiera was an enthusiast.
His days began and ended with theatre.
He introduced music to Estonian theatre;
under his conductor's baton, the first Estonian language
musical drama production was born.*

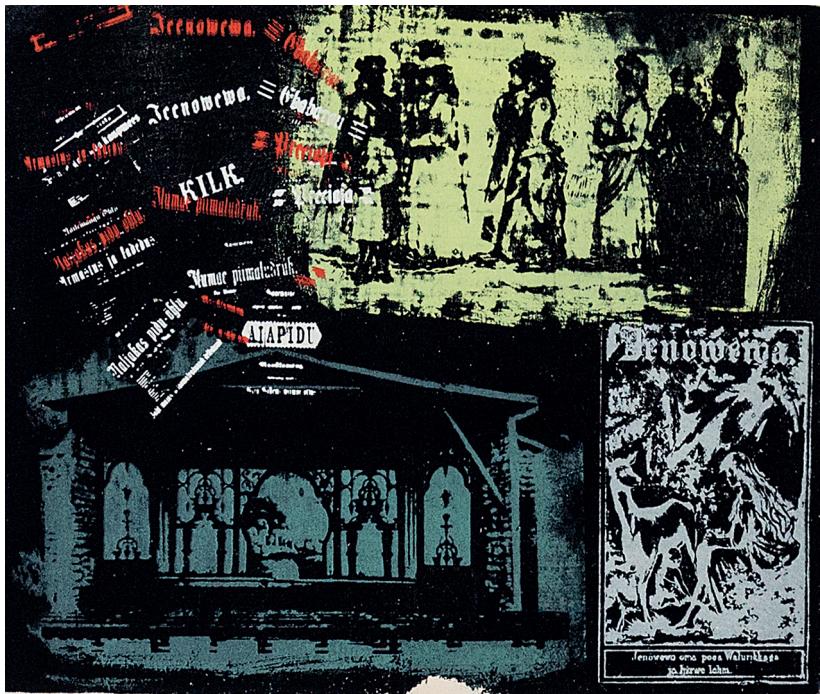
PUBLIC FESTIVALS

Beginning in 1883, every August public festivals that diversified the nature of the theatre were held at Vanemuine. Attendance at the festivals numbered in the thousands and sometimes even over twenty thousand. Some came on foot and others by horse. The audiences included town dwellers, cottagers, farm owners and farm hands.

These festivals were joyful occasions for Estonians. They were repeated each August and started with cannon salutes. The festivals consisted of singing, music and plays. Each year the programme grew: magicians, clowns, jugglers, muscle-men and high wire artists from Tallinn, Riga, St Petersburg and even further afield performed. The festivals were also special because the guests themselves could perform or participate in competitions. Despite the enormous popularity, the festivals were finally discontinued. The media criticised the events, saying that they vulgarised the public taste.

The summer stage of Vanemuine on Jaama street, 1902. KIRMUS





So many people flocked to see it from near and far, from the cities and the countryside.... It created unspeakably beautiful and colourful images. The public festivals offered songs, various musical pieces and theatre performances. The presentations took place both in the hall and the garden of Wanemuine. Participation was all-inclusive.

PLAYING WITH COSTUMES

V

The cast of
The Bells of Corneville, 1903.
TMM



Under the direction of August Wiera, the theatre started paying increasing attention to the stage itself and its decorations. In the 1880s, the Vanemuine stage was enlarged and the wardrobe rooms were placed underneath it. On both sides of the stage, fountains were placed, but their use was soon discontinued. The reason was simple: the water would fall on the orchestra, particularly damaging the sheet music and the string instruments.

As was common with 19th century theatres, the scenography was based on stock scenery. This meant that the theatre had three main sets and types of costumes that were then used in different plays. One set was a room, the second a forest and the third a city street. The theatre had to make do on a tight budget.

The actress Amalie Konsa in
Preciosa, or the Gipsy Girl,
1883. KIRMUS



The actor Adolf Lass in costume, at the end of
the 19th century. TMM





Costumes were made out of old items, were borrowed or were acquired by the cast themselves. Specially made clothes were rarer. Preciosa contained a mixture of Spanish coats, costumes of German knights and the clothes of Estonian peasants. Dawn and Dusk used Greek and Roman clothing. The sailors in The Bells of Corneville used the uniforms of Russian seamen of that time and the soldiers had to make do with firefighting helmets worn backwards.

THE CURTAIN LIFTS ON THE THEATRE BUILDING

VI

On 13 August 1906, a new theatre building designed by the Finn Armas Lindgren was opened on Aia street (currently Vanemuise street). Before he started working on the project, he asked for a copy of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* so that his design could convey its mood.

"The building has character and the construction artist who planned it has put something into it, and has managed to say something with it. We are touched, and the feelings are familiar and intimate: they are in harmony with us. [...] The street front of the building, with its two mighty towers, reminds us of something heavy, long-lasting and enduring, something that cannot be trod into the dust easily, something that does not bend, something that wants to defend itself. [...] However, while the artist made the street side monumental in its strength and influence, the garden side is light, open and joyful; it opens to beauty and the sun. [...]"
August Kitzberg. Postimees, 12 August 1906.

To find a suitable play to inaugurate the theatre, a competition was held. Of the twenty-two entries, Kitzberg's drama *The Whirl of Winds* was selected and directed by the head of the theatre, Karl Menning.

The first Vanemuine building was destroyed at the end of 1944. The present large building was constructed on the same location in 1967.

The theatre building of Vanemuine, before World War II. KIRMUS





On August 13, 1906 the curtains of the newly constructed 'Vanemuine' Theatre were opened for the first time. The first play in 'Vanemuine' was A. Kitzberg's drama The Whirl of Winds. The festive inauguration of the building had taken place a day earlier and now it was time for the actors to take the stage.

FOUNDING OF ESTONIAN PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

VII

In the Vanemuine building that was opened in 1906, the first Estonian professional theatre began and was headed by Karl Menning. He was a broad-minded and educated man who had studied theology in the University of Tartu and had continued his studies in Western Europe.

Menning introduced new principles and methodology to Estonian theatre. Educational aims were in the forefront and they were the basis of a conscious selection of a repertoire that included Eduard Vilde's *Pisuhänd* (*The Hobgoblin*, 1913) and August Kitzberg's *Libahunt* (*Werewolf*, 1911). Instead of light entertainment, contemporary Western European plays about important issues and the critical dramaturgy of Estonian authors were introduced. Menning considered operettas a danger to the good taste of the actors and the audience and therefore amateurish musical theatre was not allowed.

Menning cultivated and educated his actors and his audiences in a very systematic manner. The educational function for the audiences was important and he organised evenings where plays were explained; he was also the teacher of the first generation of paid actors in Estonia. The theatre gave lessons on corporal techniques and vocal training, imposed a strict work discipline and demanded continuous self-education. Menning dreamed about establishing a performance arts school in Estonia.

Eduard Vilde's *Pisuhänd* in Vanemuine, 1914. KIRMUS





"K. Menning has given birth to the 'school'. That is what we call his initiative, which is often mimicked and widely copied. Menning created a stage that could teach all of the other stages of our country and they have indeed learned from it." J. Luisa, 1912

VANEMUINE 1870–1970

Four different excerpts that characterise the theatre of the 1970s can be heard in the exhibition space. The plays were made for the 100th anniversary of Vanemuine and a montage of them was first shown on TV in March 1971.

FIRST EXCERPT: ŌNNE-MÄNGIJA (THE GAMBLER)

Sergei Prokofiev's opera in four acts
Libretto: Sergei Prokofiev, after
Fyodor Dostoyevsky's story
Premiere: 29.09.1970
Director: Ida Urbel
Artist: Georg Sander
Singing in the excerpt: Ivo Kuusk,
Lehte Mark, Valentine Hein,
Maimu Krinal, Endel Ani,
Helend Peep and Evald Tordik

In 1972, the Vanemuine troupe visited the Small Opera and Ballet Theatre in Leningrad, where they performed recent productions that had received the best critical responses. The opening night was Sergei Prokofiev's opera *The Gambler*.

"The audience contained a lot of music and theatre professionals – actors, singers, musicians, directors and conductors – but also young people studying to become directors at the conservatory. Everybody I talked to said that the orchestra and the singers worked well together. Of the actors, Lehte Mark and Ivo Kuusk were highlighted, but most of the compliments were offered to the director Ida Urbel and the conductor Erich Kõlar. [...] Even though the performance was not

translated, the directing and acting were of such high quality that the text, which is not actually that well known, was completely understandable. [...]" Timur Kogan, conductor, Sirp ja Vasar, 3.11.1972.

SECOND EXCERPT: SÜDASUVI 1941 (AT THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER 1941)

Mati Unt's and Evald Hermaküla's version of Paul Kuusberg's novel *At the Height of Summer*
Premiere: 02.10.1970
Director: Evald Hermaküla
Artist: Liina Pihlak
Performing in the excerpt:
Lembit Eelmäe, Kulno Süvalep,
Jaan Kiho, Ande Rahe, Einari Koppel
and Ülo Rannaste

At the Height of Summer 1941 was one of the highlights of the theatrical renewal of the 1970s. About a year after the premiere, the theatre critic Valdeko Tobro's article *The Function of Theatre and the Mentality of the Artist*, dealing with young directors and experimental theatre, was published in the weekly cultural newspaper Sirp ja Vasar:

[...] The problem of the new generation in art has always been closely associated with the term 'experiment in art'. This is also connected with young directors in Estonian theatre. But first we must agree on two main issues: the right of experimentation, and the expediency of the experiment. It is clearly abnormal that, for example, in the case of E. Hermaküla's play At the Height of Summer 1941 the critics had to continuously

and at length prove that the director had the right to experiment, that the director had to prove something that should not have to be proven. [...]” Sirp ja Vasar, 13.08.1971

THIRD EXCERPT: MAALID OR KONTRASTID II (PAINTINGS, OR CONTRASTS II)

Parts of the ballet evening: *Impression* (Claude Debussy), *Danse Macabre* (Camille Saint-Saëns), *Pearl Divers* (Kosaku Yamada) and *Chicago* (Richard Rodgers)
Librettos: Ülo Vilimaa and Epp Mikkal
Premiere: 30.11.1969
Director-choreographer: Ülo Vilimaa
Artist: Meeri Säre

In addition to regular and musical theatre, Ida Urbel's 1939 performance *Karnevalisüüt* (*The Carnival Suite*) introduced dance as another important component of Vanemuine. In the summer of 1970, the theatre critic Vello Kõllu reflected on the ballet season that had just concluded. He first mentioned the success of Ülo Vilimaa's performance and mentioned the director's ability to compile a cast and also his personal charm as the cornerstones of his success. Kõllu didn't consider the ballet *Paintings* to be Vilimaa's best work, but still saw it as a success:

“The central element of Vanemuine's ballet in the previous season was Ülo Vilimaa's performance Paintings. With Contrasts (under the subtitle Contrasts II) they formed the most important part of the season's

repertoire. The interest in Paintings was great. There were repeated completely sold out performances in Tallinn and praise in the media. I cannot remember any other ballet performance that has enjoyed such a response in recent years.” Sirp ja Vasar, 17.07.1970

FOURTH EXCERPT: SÄÄRANE MULK EHK SADA VAKKA TANGUSOOLA (WHAT A BUMPKIN!, OR ONE HUNDRED BUSHELS OF GROUTS)

Lydia Koidula's comedy in three acts
Premiere: 25.09.1970
Director: Kaarel Ird
Artist: Meeri Säre
Performing in the excerpt:
Benno Mikkal, Herta Elviste, Raivo Adlas and Kais Adlas

About a month before the premiere of Kaarel Ird's production of *What a Bumpkin!, or One Hundred Bushels of Grouts*, he offered an overview of the upcoming season to the University of Tartu newspaper and talked about his dream of organising opera balls like the great theatres in Vienna and Paris did. The beginning of the anniversary decade is summarised as follows:

“The decade of celebrating the 100^b anniversary of Vanemuine begins today and also includes K. Ird's performance of Lydia Koidula's What a Bumpkin! (artist M. Säre). [...] This is completely original and is considered Koidula's best play. Looking back, we must all admit that all three of Koidula's plays are the cornerstones of both Vanemuine and Estonian national theatre.”

*Sirje Endre, Tartu Riikliku Ülikooli ajaleht,
1970*

(Recordings from the archive of
Estonian Public Broadcasting)

CONNECTIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

Koidula's plays have become symbols that have been of interest throughout the years, and they will probably remain captivating in the future. The most popular of them has been *What a Bumpkin!*, which was last staged in the Endla Theatre in Pärnu only three years ago (director Kaili Viidas, 2017). In the introduction to the play, it is called one of the most important texts for Estonians and an inseparable part of our identity. In his review in Sirp, Tambet Kaugema wrote that the audience of the National Awakening lacked experience with theatre: Ibsen-like plays wouldn't have captured their attention for long and they would have inevitably walked out. The demand for Koidula's performances proves that in their own time the topical themes and originality of her plays, which are now often seen as light-hearted comedies, were precisely what was needed to make theatre seem natural.

The favourites of the audience of the Vanemuine Theatre today are musicals that rose to prominence in the 2000s. They offer singing, dancing and speaking and are therefore a guaranteed success. The audience numbers for operas and operettas are completely surpassed by those for musicals: in 2018, 52,115 people attended musicals, 12,350 people

attended operettas and 10,028 attended operas. The biggest musical hit was *Detectiiv Lotte* (*Detective Lotte*, 2008), directed by Ain Mäeots, and its sequels. The success is probably due to its originality, the music-loving target audience and the participation of famous singers. The first of Vanemuine's musical plays, *Preciosa*, was on stage for twenty years. *Detective Lotte* has a long way to go since, including a short pause, it has been on stage for only twelve years. The size of the venues and the frequency of performances are definitely two factors that today influence how long a performance will stay in the repertoire.

Not only Koidula and Menning have desired to educate the audience and future actors. The latter's dream of a drama school materialised in 1957 in Tallinn. But many theatres across Estonia also try to educate audiences by introducing theatrical skills into the educational programmes of children and teens and by offering lessons in theatre practices, necessary skills for theatre and acting. The active contribution of the theatres to education can be seen as a separate educational effort.

This publication acts as a playbill for the Tartu Art Museum exhibition *When the Stage Lights Came on... (17.01–29.03.2020)*.

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