

Theatre Making “Space for the Unassimilable”

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Abstract

Addressing the cultural politics of what Mihaela Mihai calls “mnemonic care”, this paper considers three questions concerning Jewish identity and testimonial justice that are posed in a recent play (including in its very title) by the Estonian-Russian theatre maker Julia Aug, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?* The contrasting claims of and for official and unofficial national histories – both during and after the Soviet period – are explored here in terms of Mihai’s invitation for us to consider how such memory politics “make space for the unassimilable”.

Keywords

democracy, dramaturgy, dissensus, holocaust, Julia Aug, post-Soviet, pre-war, translation, yiddish

Theatre Making “Space for the Unassimilable”

The title of this paper offers an echo of Mihaela Mihai’s suggestion that academia engage reflexively with works of art that “invite us to stretch our political imagination to make space for the unassimilable – be it in relation to doxastic ideas of victimhood, resistance, or complicity – in a way that can catalyse processes of solidary attunement” (Mihai 2022, 239). Occasioning what Mihai calls “mnemonic care”, theatre offers such a space as it rehearses both dissensus and the potential of and for solidarity, modelled by the very example of theatre making. Exploring “space for the unassimilable”, the first part of this essay considers the contemporary context for reading the second (although the parts could also be read the other way round), where the latter addresses three questions concerning memory politics or testimonial justice posed in a recent play (including in its very title) by the Estonian-Russian theatre maker Julia Aug, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?* The dynamics of the play’s testimonial dramaturgy raise further questions regarding “national minorities” in the post-Soviet Baltic context, given a new dynamic with Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. The war – and its claims to a memory politics concerning “deNazification” – is, evidently, a closing down of “space for the unassimilable”. By contrast, reading Aug’s work in the light of what Mihai calls an “aesthetics of care” draws out threads of unofficial memory politics that are interwoven through that apparent oxymoron, “contemporary history”. Highlighting three questions of Jewish identity, in which the mother-daughter relationship in the play is given specific expression, the two parts of this essay explore Aug’s counterpoint to hegemonic, national claims concerning the past in the present.

I.

Writing in a special issue of the *Journal of Baltic Studies* (in 2010) on the “divergent social memories that exist in Baltic societies today”,¹ Siobhan Kattago posed a seemingly straightforward question: “How to recognise different interpretations of the past without falsifying history?”² While wanting to resist, precisely, a memory politics predicated on the

¹ Onken 2010, 278.

² Kattago 2010, 383.

falsification of history, as underpins Vladimir Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine, even this is a reminder that the past is perhaps better understood in terms of what it will have been than what it was. Displacing a half century of Soviet historiography in Eastern Europe, for instance, cannot be understood by consigning it to "the past" – still less by eliding its shifting memory politics with those of the former West.³ What were thought to be matters of cultural-political consensus in the post-war West (including the post-Cold War period) – condensed in the profoundly ambiguous European shibboleth of "never again" – may yet prove to have been but a screen memory for different forms of falsification, in the West as much as in the East. Assumptions of a post-war consensus regarding the legacies of the Second World War have been exposed as historically relative by the enduring dissensus of memory politics in the former Soviet Bloc (not least, in regard to Russian imperialism), especially since this erstwhile pillar of the West's historical self-understanding collapsed after 1989. What might be the memory politics entailed today when NATO and EU leaders suggest that Europe has entered into a new "pre-war" period?⁴ How might this development reframe an understanding of the "unassimilable" in the hermeneutics of a play such as Julia Aug's, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?*

"Post-War": Peace and Democracy?

If, as Carl von Clausewitz famously proposed, war is also waged with concepts of history (where the strategic fantasy of controlling the future is enacted through a politics of the past), we are necessarily engaged with the challenge of both solidarity and dissensus in questions of cultural memory. Consider, for instance, Mario Tronti's re-reading (in 1998) of Walter Benjamin, offering a palimpsest of Karl Marx's famous *Theses on Feuerbach*. Tronti's opening statement is acute in its challenge to liberal conceptions of modern history: "The workers movement wasn't defeated by capitalism. The workers movement was defeated by democracy. This is the problem which the [twentieth] century puts to us."⁵

Despite the ambiguities of this "problem" posed in the name of "democracy", the protection

³ One might think here of Oksana Zabuzhko's *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2012 [2009]), from which the theme of "fault lines" in the present essay is drawn.

⁴ This has been invoked, for example, by Donald Tusk (Bayer 2024) and Josep Borrell (Foy 2024).

⁵ Tronti 2023.

of political freedoms – as in the 1930s – entails their exercise rather than conceding to their abrogation. This is acutely at issue in the “dilemma” noted by Philipp Ther that “if constitutional states respond in kind to the agitation of right-wing nationalists, they might quickly find themselves violating the foundations of liberal democracy and their own laws.”⁶ The paradoxes of this are highlighted in Tronti’s fifth thesis, where he declares that: “The century of democracy which defeated the dictatorships in war, did not give freedom in peace... The victorious ideological apparatus, the accumulations of dominant consensus, and the ‘social power’ that results from them are all conjoined now under the rubric of liberal democracy.”⁷

In our century (the twenty-first), this rubric has been extended by a term that was not current in Tronti’s lifetime, “the rubric of illiberal democracy”. Indeed, this is perhaps not quite the oxymoron that Ther supposes,⁸ given that (as Ther himself observes) its elected “illiberal” (indeed, even “neo-fascist”) representatives sit comfortably in the institutions of the EU without this apparent challenge to “democracy” – or to the potential of dissensus – making any real difference to their proceedings.⁹ While the “democracy of interests”¹⁰ contains opposition to it within its performative politics, in the claim to neo-liberal consensus (indeed, to there being “no alternative”) it seems that formal democracy is once again more effectively engaged with by the right than the left (precisely in the absence of a politically effective alternative).¹¹

The Spectre of Imperialism

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 does not, of course, prevent Putin using the Yalta settlement as a phantom of imperialist “legitimacy”, with grotesque claims about “Stalin’s gifts” to Eastern Europe of new borders and changed demographics. In Putin’s memory politics, 9 May (commemorating Victory Day since 1945) has been turned into a screen memory against both the pre- and post-war Stalinist terror within Russia, and against acknowledgement of the

⁶ Ther 2023, 180.

⁷ Tronti 2023, thesis V.

⁸ Ther 2023, xv.

⁹ As Ther writes: “The fundamental question now facing the EU is whether it can endure as a mixed system in which liberal democracies exist alongside antiliberal regimes” (2023, xvi). The same question is increasingly pressing with regard to the AfD in the representative institutions of German politics; not least, as regards the possible appeasement of Putin (not to mention with the re-election of Donald Trump in America).

¹⁰ Tronti 2023, thesis VIII.

¹¹ In the case of Estonia, this is discussed, for example, by Piret Peiker (2020 [2018]), especially 121-2.

Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, whose imperialist assumption of “spheres of influence” Yalta re-affirmed, including the annexation of the Baltic states. The tragic conflation of the sacrifice of millions into a “great patriotic” mythology is maintained by the very truth that it falsifies, subject to ever more repressive censorship.¹²

As Russia avowedly resists a reflexive “post-Soviet” memory politics, it remains invested in its imperial history. Indeed, one might say that once again “a spectre is haunting Europe” – the spectre of imperialism. Putin’s ambition does not offer a vision of the future (as the *Communist Manifesto* once did) but rather a vision of the past, that of the “Old Europe” of empires, which Marx and Friedrich Engels had believed would end with the coming proletarian revolution – instead of which Europe was plunged into two World Wars.¹³ This is still the problem that the past century puts to us, as the erstwhile vector from “pre-” to “post-” has been put into reverse; not least, in the West’s changing response to Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Here the potential of “mnemonic care” and of concern with testimonial justice is – once again – being overtaken by war in Europe as the pursuit of “geopolitics” by other means, which forecloses any sense of making “a space for the unassimilable” culturally and politically.¹⁴ As Madina Tlostanova observed (in 2018): “A quarter of a century has passed after the collapse of the USSR and there is an opinion that the Soviet legacy is already over and it is time to museumize it even for those of us who were shaped within its tight embrace and often in spite of it. On the other hand, the lacking self-reflection, the missing repentance or any work with cultural and historical complexes, traumas and memories, leads to a never-ending wandering in circles, to falling over into the same trap again and again, to a revival of the most dangerous imperial/Soviet *ressentiment*, for instance, in Russia.”¹⁵

¹² See the commentary in Anton Weiss-Wendt’s *Putin’s Russia and the Falsification of History* (2022), especially chapters 3 and 7. As is recalled in Scene 5 of her play, it should also be noted that Julia Aug is a “cancelled artist” in Russia, owing to her stance against the war in Ukraine since 2014 (for instance, comparing the occupation of Crimea with that of Estonia).

¹³ I have explored this in a review article on the 2023 Vaba Lava Freedom Festival in Narva for *Contemporary Theatre Review* 34.1 (101-06). As Anton Weiss-Wendt writes (“as of... Winter 2020”): “In Putin’s Russia, obsession with the past comes in lieu of plans for the future” (2022, 2 & 42).

¹⁴ See, for example, the investigation by Forensic Architecture of the bombing of the theatre in Mariupol (Forensic Architecture 2024).

¹⁵ Tlostanova 2018, 101-2.

A Pre-Soviet Future?

The evident asymmetry between Estonia and Russia regarding an understanding of the post-Soviet “transition” also extends to the pre-Soviet sovereignty of independent Estonia, as providing a constitutional basis for governmental legitimacy today. In this particular concept of history, the appeal of and to a pre-Soviet future, as it were, is also a prism for a “democratic” understanding of national minorities, where the evocation of a “return to Europe” cannot be simply conflated with commitments of EU membership. This concerns, for instance, the recognition of cultural autonomy for minorities within Estonia’s own independence history, relative to the geopolitical commitments of the post-Soviet present.¹⁶

In terms that hint at potential (even if unintended) continuities between Soviet and post-Soviet historiographies regarding the “unassimilable”, Eva-Clarita Onken observed (writing in 2010, in the wake of the Bronze Soldier contestations in Estonia): “Parts of society experience the establishment of ‘historical truth’ as a state-sponsored policy of exclusion. From their perspective, the independent Baltic states are forcefully establishing and institutionalising a particular narrative of the state and nation that ignores many personal experiences and memories.”¹⁷ This sets the scene for thinking through a dissensus that is echoed in Aug’s play – not as political antagonism but as an “aesthetics of care” with respect to civic space – where Estonians of Jewish heritage today are often also those of Soviet-Russian heritage. In the Baltic states, entanglements of memory politics as contemporary politics are exposed in the various fault lines between narratives of “liberation” and “occupation” that inform different concerns with sacralization of the past – both personal and national – as, precisely, its politicization (or as the continuation of war by other means).

Before turning to discuss the distinctive temporal dramaturgy of Aug’s play, then, let us heed the caution offered by Kattago “against a sacralisation of memory, which too easily slides into accusations of collective guilt,” given that “the very meaning of democracy is challenged when different groups link their core identity to ethnic or national memories.”¹⁸ As is disturbingly

¹⁶ See, for example, Alenius 2007 and Peiker 2020.

¹⁷ Onken 2010, 277-8.

¹⁸ Kattago 2010, 383.

obvious, political dissensus all too easily becomes polarized by the affects of sacralization, where memory politics is abstracted from questions of history and therefore from understanding the dynamics of political-cultural change. How to distinguish between this mutability and “falsification” in concepts of history? How to avoid the historical trap that is sprung in the “democratic” narrative of transition from “pre” to “post”, which proves to have mistaken itself in a lack of care for a past that is still to come? How might theatre specifically make “space for the unassimilable”, precisely when haunted by the spectre of this memory politics?

Democracy, Dissensus and “Mnemonic Care”

After all, as Kattago notes (in 2010): “The politicisation of the past in Estonia challenges how democracy as both a set of institutions and as a way of life is understood...”¹⁹ Between the state and civil society (or, indeed, between theatre and politics) such challenges take on both symbolic and affective forms – as between sacralisation and falsification, authoritarianism (or even totalitarianism) and democracy; between life stories and official narratives, the intimacies of family memory and the rituals of public commemoration; between the challenge of dissensus and consensus.

Theatre offers the potential to rehearse such relations, exploring the memory culture of civil society distinct from the narrative hegemony attempted by the state – particularly, as we shall see with Aug, regarding the historical relationality of citizenship and nationality.²⁰ Theatre offers a form of affective experience that can be both questioning and questionable in terms of aesthetic understanding, distinct from the political assertion of affective identifications. As a question of and for theatre practice, then, civic space – as a matter (with Mihai) of “mnemonic care” – may provide examples of resistance to the mobilization of nationalism.

This is perhaps acutely pertinent in the case of what Tlostanova trenchantly evokes as

¹⁹ Kattago 2010, 383.

²⁰ Theatre can offer a model of – and for – civic space that is distinct from the populist pretention of the nation state to “incarnate the universal” (Balibar 2004, 37), which offers an abstraction that is invariably partial (in both senses) in its recognition of citizens’ interests. Crucially, the founding constitution of the Estonian republic recognized the plurality of residents’ nationality in its definition of citizenship: “The Estonian Declaration of Independence itself was directed to ‘all the nations of Estonia’, instead of referring to ‘the people’ or ‘the Estonian nation’ in the singular” (Alenius 2021, 74).

“victimhood rivalries”, which “have become ubiquitous instruments of populist politics at all levels – from regional to national and transnational. Being masked as politics, in reality they replace politics with manipulative moral zeal and consequently withdraw the dimension of the future as a collective existential condition from the horizon...”²¹ While the dynamics of such “victimhood rivalries” are always particular, examples may, nevertheless, be addressed theoretically through their comparative possibilities in translation. Here questions of the “unassimilable” are, precisely, those of how cultural production – including academic work – situates itself in relation to the manifold forms of social-political violence and testimonial justice condensed in “structures of feeling” (as articulated by Raymond Williams in response to materialist concepts of history).²²

Rather than simply applying a critical framework to an artistic work, the reference to an “aesthetics of care” (with Mihai) in the second part of this essay seeks to draw out how Aug’s play itself already offers an example of thinking what this might mean in theatrical-civic practice. The underlying question of concepts of history is here engaged by the manifold conditions of a work written in Russian and translated into Estonian for performance; and translated again into English for performance with surtitles for international audiences.²³

II.

Writing in – and of – translation, then, my discussion of Aug’s play touches upon things that, while they are not necessarily untranslatable, remain perhaps untranslated or unsaid as her play evokes them in their different registers, whether understood in terms of relations between languages – in this case, Russian and Estonian; either of these and English; or all of them and Yiddish (as well as German and even Swahili) – or in terms of relations between past and present; events and testimony; or between performers and audience. After all, between what is already said and what might still be said, a reading of Aug’s play, even – or perhaps especially

²¹ Tlostanova 2019, 94.

²² Williams 1977, 128-35.

²³ As far as I am aware, the play has not been published and my discussion is based on having seen performances and having access to the script, for which I am very grateful to Märt Meos of Vaba Lava (“Open Space”), the Estonian theatre company that produced the work (and of which Aug is herself an artistic director). The quotations here are from the original Russian text, translated by Seth King.

– in translation, should engage with the very questions of testimonial justice that the play is itself engaged with. Wanting to avoid a falsification of the play, a reading should try to evoke not simply what it says but how. Indeed, as Yuri Lotman notes regarding “the language of theatre”: “The first question of any dialogue is: In what language? The theatre conducts a conversation in the language of theatricality.”²⁴

A First Question

To start with, then, the very title of this play, *Mum, is our cat also a Jew?*, which immediately invites reflection on the potential meanings generated within cultural memory between translation and affect, between modes of expression and their particular expressivity, as between symbolic form and feeling. Heard in the play’s final scene, this emotionally freighted question is, evidently, addressed by a child to her mother. It encapsulates a scenario of innocence asking after a knowledge that concerns the very relation in and of which it is being asked, as this registers a fault line between the familial and the societal, between domestic and national identities:

From Scene 17

- “Mama, is our cat also a Jew?”
- “No, my darling, our cat is a Siamese.”
- “What about the dog?”
- “The dog isn't a Jew, he's a poodle.”
- “And Papa?”
- “Papa isn't a Jew, Papa is an Estonian.”
- “So, who is a Jew?”
- “I am. You, if you want.”
- “Does Papa love us?”
- “He loves us, my darling. He loves us very much.”

The child’s question is one of love, as this is figured in the relationship between her two parents and herself, as also between her identities as both Jewish and Estonian, within the context of

²⁴ Lotman 2020 [1989], 89.

her Soviet-Russian heritage and the enduring experience of anti-Semitism. The question of nationalities or so-called ethnicities and minorities is translated into the common suggestion of a child asking, “who loves me more?” It registers the emerging awareness of a world in which the possibilities identified with her maternal and paternal heritage are discovered, in terms of the wider society, to be different. Here the question of the unassimilable involves turning inside out the underlying concern with “for whom” is such an identification in question? The vulnerabilities entailed by questions of “nationality” – including, historically, in the multinational Soviet empire – are refracted further by allusion to the innocence of the family pets. After all, being-in-language concerns not only those who speak but those who are spoken for, attesting to the often prejudicial or even persecutory motives (as much as the celebration) of social identifications and their associated memory politics.

A Second Question

As with most of the play’s text, the dialogue in which the title question occurs is reported rather than enacted – there is no child actor on stage, save for the one who speaks in the audience’s (hopefully) empathetic understanding of what they are hearing. This final scene also recalls another question – one that is posed in the play’s opening scene, which begins poetically by imagining the thresholds between waking and sleeping, daily life and dreaming, family life (at home) and social life (at school); and which also encourages us to reflect on the threshold between stage and auditorium, the performers and the audience, broaching a question of shared meanings.

In this opening scene, the child’s question to her mother refers to an experience of violent bullying at school – a Russian language school in Narva during the Soviet period in Estonia – which again marks a changed understanding of her social being, with its implication for the audience’s own identification with the language in which it is spoken: “Mum, what is a Jew?”

From Scene 1:

When I got home after school, Mama noticed that all my textbooks and exercise books were scuffed.

"Julia, what's all this? What happened?" she asked.

"Mama, what's a 'Jew'?" I asked.

Mama's eyes grew wide and she threw up her hands!

"Good Lord! Julia! What are you saying?! Where did you hear that?!"

Artur, come here, we have to talk!"

She called Papa. They began to learn where I had heard this word. I told them everything, all that had happened at school.

That's how I found out that I am a Jew. Not only Estonian, because my papa is Estonian, but also a Jew, because my mama is a Jew.

All evening my parents comforted me and tried to explain what it all meant. But they couldn't explain to me why this meant my classmates had to torment me like that, and why after this they began to treat me worse than before.

The singularity of this question – not "who are Jews?" or even "are we Jews?"; but, "what is a Jew?" – is itself manifold. And it implies another, underlying question: for whom and why is being Jewish in question, between Russian and Estonian, Soviet and post-Soviet, contexts? This is crystalized in the emblematic question of "hermeneutic care" – unravelling that of an official "national history" – regarding the legacy of the designation, made during the Nazi occupation, of Estonia as "Judenrein". This dread phrase appears in the play in German, precisely, as linguistically "unassimilable".

A Third Question

The question of context is that of the play itself – presented as an enquiry by the author who writes herself into the text being performed, as both the daughter and later the mother in these two scenes. The opening scene ends, for instance, with her addressing the audience authorially

about the composition of the very play that we are watching: “When I began to collect materials for this play, I went to all the Jewish people of my acquaintance, and ones I didn’t know so well, who had been born in the USSR, with the question: ‘Tell me, how did you find out that you were a Jew?’”

This third question encapsulates the play’s temporal dramaturgy – refracting a past that is spoken of through the present of the performer’s speaking, making what would otherwise be documentary into testimony. Indeed, in Aug’s play, even the dead – historical persons, not fictional ones – speak to us from the stage in the present tense, where the question of post-Soviet memory follows cultural fault-lines that are not directly assimilable (although not, perhaps, unassimilable) into prevailing Estonian national narratives.

Recalling Lotman’s invitation to think with (and not simply about) the term, the play’s mother-child “dialogue” – beyond a dramatic relation between characters on stage (“within the world of the play”) – concerns the audience’s implication in understanding the meaning (indeed, the translatability) of what may be said (and heard) across three generations. This expanded sense of dialogue touches on questions of Jewish identity between home and school or work – as shared, in the theatre, with the world of the audience. The play offers a double register here in its own example of cultural transmission – both the public manifestation of anti-Semitic threat in a national language (as it is also translatable) and the intimate sound of different maternal generations singing lullabies in Yiddish (even when this has ceased to be the shared language of family life at home). The lullaby brings a transgenerational affective experience that inscribes mother and daughter, as both addresser and addressee, into the memory of a family and the heritage of a community, where – in another instance of the play’s temporal dramaturgy – the daughter in the first scene is the mother in the last one.

Mnemonic Care: Between Lullaby and Law

The association with the dream-world of Jewish heritage in the lullaby – in this case with the metaphor of almonds and raisins (*Rozhinkes mit mandlen*) for the bitterness and sweetness of life – opens a question of memory culture and the socially-politically (un)assimilable that does

not align simply with hegemonic narrative vectors supposed by reference to the prefix “post”. This is particularly the case in conjunction with the historical designation of the Soviet, as if it defined an understanding of the post-war.

Aug’s play addresses a fundamental absence in the return of – as a return to – national sovereignty (within the presence of, precisely, a Soviet Russian heritage), evoking the “care” expressed through an intergenerational “aesthetics” of Yiddish culture in the context of Estonian “belonging”. This also bears upon the cultural life of the renascent Jewish community in Tallinn – where the city’s Jewish school taught in Yiddish before the war and today teaches in Hebrew, as well as in Russian (although this is now being displaced by Estonian in accordance with new laws concerning the language of state education).

Manifestly, “restoration of the interwar Republic” as the condition of and for post-Soviet independence has a distinct resonance for Estonian Jews, where we must reference the pioneering research of Evgenia Gurin-Loov (1994), on which Aug’s play draws substantially. Indeed, the play offers an example of precisely what Gurin-Loov called for at a commemoration of the Holocaust in Tallinn in 1989: “We came here today in order to remind the titular population, the Estonians, that Jewish tragedy also concerns them... [T]his was a tragedy also for the people who lived side by side in friendly relationship with Jews, this was a tragedy that took place on Estonian soil.”²⁵

While the civic presence of Jews seems to have been comparatively unproblematic in the interwar Estonian Republic – Jewish cultural autonomy (along with that of resident Swedes, Germans, and Russians) was guaranteed within the legal framework of the pre-Soviet republic – similarly, the absence of Jews in national cultural memory appears to have been relatively unproblematic (or unproblematized) in the post-Soviet Republic. In the context of the genocidal demographic changes owing to the Nazi occupation, it is important to remember not only the 1925 Law of Cultural Autonomy and the establishment, in 1934, of a Chair of Jewish Studies at Tartu University “that exerted a magnetic attraction” for students;²⁶ but also the effective pre-

²⁵ Quoted in Weiss-Wendt 2017a, 272-3.

²⁶ Weiss-Wendt 1998, 309.

war exclusion of Jews from either state or military service,²⁷ despite their major contribution to both the economic and professional life of the country.²⁸

To recall Kattago's advocacy of democratic "challenges", the politics of constitutional restoration is haunted here by the sense of care conveyed by the sound of Yiddish in Aug's play, as this is also an echo of Soviet history in the Estonian present. The lullaby offers an affective challenge to the tragic braiding of genocide and modernity, as characterizes both the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Aug's work offers, then, an instance of what I would call a "theatre of testimony", transforming the understanding of documentary theatre by giving voice not only to living participants in the work's research, but also to the dead (drawn from Gurin-Loov's archive study), who are heard speaking in the present – as if speaking for themselves, distinct from simply being spoken of. Here the potential of theatre "to make space for the unassimilable" within the field of cultural-political dissensus is shown in the very example of its dramaturgy.

A Theatre of the Real?

Far from being simply a documentary drama, or a theatricalized autobiography, Aug's play interweaves the poetic with the actual, the historical with the contemporary, in a form of "dramaturgical innovation" characteristic of what Carol Martin has called a "theatre of the real". Introducing this term, Martin proposes: "Theatre of the real, also known as documentary theatre as well as docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact, has long been important for the subjects it presents. More recent dramaturgical innovations in the ways texts are created and productions are staged sheds light on the ways theatre can form and be formed by contemporary cultural discourses about the real both on stage and off."²⁹

As is suggested by the plurality of theatrical forms cited by Martin (theatre of witness, verbatim theatre, etc.), such a contextualization ("theatre of the real") does not mean reducing Aug's play simply to an example of a genre. The play offers an assemblage of attitudes and

²⁷ Weiss-Wendt 1998, 310.

²⁸ See, for instance, Alenius 2021, especially 70-1 & 74-5; Parming 1979.

²⁹ Martin 2012, 1.

narrative possibilities – Aug composes her text with interviews, historical statements, personal reminiscences, and (as quoted earlier) a structure of questions that attest to differences of cultural-political identification – through which the audience’s assumptions about the legal and historical relationship between Estonian citizenship and national minorities are explored, not only in terms of rights but also of prejudices. In this theatre of testimony (or, with Miranda Fricker, 2009, a theatre of “testimonial justice”), Aug presents us with questions of “belonging” that offer a contemporary counterpoint for the refraction of pre- and post-Soviet historical understanding today; that is, a refraction of these terms as the very means of and for an understanding of “national minorities” in the present. (This refraction concerns, precisely, what was in question in the first part of this essay in terms of “democracy”, especially as situated in a geopolitical context.)

Here the interest of documentary and of dissensus concerns the very medium of the performance – as it attests to the work of theatre (rehearsing cultural-political differences in the civic space modelled by its artistic form), rather than simply offering a descriptive paraphrasing of narrative content. What the play is “about” is not limited to what is said, but concerns questions of context regarding how its voices may be heard – including in the language, so to speak, of its translatability, as well as (with Lotman) of its theatricality. The concern of testimony, then, broaches an aesthetics of care in which “it is via an analysis of these stories that we can both identify the bodies marked for exclusion from official mnemonic regimes and estimate the cost of those exclusions to present relationships and politics.”³⁰

Echoes Between “Mnemonic Hesitation” and the “Unassimilable”

Regarding the history of the Holocaust in Estonia (and the fearful legacy of the Nazi phrase *Judenrein*), with the profound political questions it raises in terms of the “falsification of the past” (as global forms of Holocaust denial are manifold and prolific), the play’s authorial persona asks (in Scene 14): “Hasn’t the time yet come for an open, honest, calm conversation, without emotions and insults, about everything that happened during the war in Estonia, with

³⁰ Mihai 2022, 12.

Estonia and Estonians? Wouldn't this help the older generation to find peace of mind, and the young to gain a proper understanding of historical events? Maybe then it won't happen again.” That this reply to Gurin-Loov’s appeal in 1989 comes from a member of the contemporary Russian-language “titular community” offers a complex echo of pre-war Jewish Estonian life in the civic space of today’s theatre.³¹

If Holocaust memory has been marginal – or marginalized – in Estonian historiography, in both the Soviet era and in post-Soviet narratives (such that the historian Anton Weiss-Wendt ironically wondered in 2017 whether the subject had already been “exhausted” without ever having been developed), there remain the implications, as with Aug’s theatre of testimony, of voices that are otherwise unheard in the hegemonic suppositions of “pre-” and “post-” in history – especially with regard to enduring questions of testimonial justice.

Theatre offers a particular form of civic space, where questions of implication concerning the past may be dramaturgically refracted in the present, as an instance of what Mihai calls a “mnemonic hesitation” – “opening up a space for remembering and imagining differently.”³² This is at the heart of Aug’s play, of which I have presented only one aspect – that is, the cultural-political echoes in and for civic space offered not simply by national languages (and their identifications), but by their translatability in the context of so-called ethnic claims about citizenship, which tend to exclude such “hesitation” (as a care for differences in cultural memory).

Alongside reference to Mihai, we could also contextualize Aug’s dramaturgy, with respect to the pluralism of cultural memory (and with it questions of dissensus within democratic politics), by engaging with Michael Rothberg’s suggestion that: “Socially constituted ignorance and denial are essential components of implication; as such, they are also potential starting points for those who want to transform implication and refigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity.”³³ It is the potential of such solidarity – where, as Rothberg comments, “the ultimate point... is not to dwell on or in implication but to transfigure

³¹ Weiss-Wendt 1998, 309-10.

³² Mihai 2022, 46.

³³ Rothberg 2019, 200.

it: to acknowledge and map implication in order to reopen political strategies beyond the defensive purity of self-contained identities”³⁴ – that performances such as Aug’s rehearse (at least, in so far as they gain an audience); in this case for addressing the potential of solidarity between Estonians, recognizing the diversity of cultural memory in an understanding of that freighted conjunction, “national minorities”. The intergenerational sense of this term, the meaning (and tensions) of which are historically mutable, is evoked by Aug in the voice of a child addressing her parents. When the question of the cat is addressed to our political imagination, the scope of wanting “to transform implication” (distinct from wage war) opens up the theatre of memory to futures past that might, indeed, “make space for the unassimilable”.

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³⁴ Rothberg 2019, 201.

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