



## Smeds Ensemble

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### **Kristian Smeds – a hooligan and a humanist**

Kristian Smeds is the face of Finnish theatre today. Famous in Europe as a director, Smeds overcame geographical boundaries and language barriers and was able to retain all the native features of the beautiful Finnish theater.

Smeds' performances are clearly and superbly social. They appeal to the viewers sitting in the audience, addressing what really hurts, without offending or wrenching the soul. Kristian Smeds is a satirist who uses irony to show affection toward the objects of his rather ruthless criticism. His irony does not contain poison, but the antidote.

Kristian Smeds contributes to Finnish and Northern European theater one very important thing: It inherits both the dramatic tradition of Ibsen and Strindberg, on one hand, and the Stanislavsky tradition on the other. One way or another, it has a serious impact on the region, and the classic Finnish theater remains informal.

The audience views the play largely as a confession, rather than as a performance. In this sense, Smeds is a modest director. He is against the linear construction of a plot. In all his performances, he breaks the drama into parts: the smaller the parts, the better. It is better if the plot is not understandable and paradoxical, rather than dull, narrative and prosaic.

Smeds loves to use impressive special effects, sometimes even on the verge of kitsch. He brings to the stage a healthy combination of pop culture filled with postmodern irony. In addition, he uses video on stage (sometimes the stage has only video images that are projected from offstage), computer-aided design and aggressive sound images. Smeds, in this sense is not afraid to exhaust the viewer because he understands that theater is still weaker in terms of effect than other forms of media – for example, advertising, Internet and television.

Kristian Smeds is a genuine freak. He is not Finnish at all in his outward appearance. There was a time when he likes to strut into European festivals in unironed, rumpled t-shirts, wide scarlet pants, soldier's boots and a Tolstoy-like unwieldy beard. At the same time, Smeds is always smiling and has a completely childish, almost Russian-looking face. In my opinion, this is how Teterev should look like in Gorky's "Philistines," or Dikoy in Ostrovky's "Thunderstorm." He does not look like a sleek, refined European director. Smeds, with his half-lumpen appearance, satirizes himself and his imaginary greatness.

### **Three sisters**

Smeds became known throughout Finland after he was able to raise the profile of a provincial theater in the northern town of Kajaani, a place that one would hardly expect to make a cultural impact, even in Finland. One of the best plays in Kajaani was based on "Three Sisters," but it was the Finnish sisters by the name of Rompaynen. "Vershinin" became the mayor of the city, sent from Helsinki, "Salt" - a rock musician, "Tuzenbakh" - a postman. From the first moments of the play, we are in a noisy house of the sisters, which resembles the gypsy chaos of the films of Emir Kusturica. The sisters sing happy chansons along with the accompanying music of a live orchestra, Irina performs miraculous acrobatic feats, and the Gypsy Baron Protopopov, who is in smoky glasses and gold chains around his neck, pays for it all. A kind and wise gypsy grandmother sits at the head of the table, in which each finds solace and approval. It's the mother of the Rompaynenovs who is busy with the life of directing weddings and funerals, as one might expect after Kusturica.

Three-fifths of the play was presented in video. The cameraman ran around chasing the actors around the entire theater and tried to capture their tireless energy. The most important element of this video is the word «live» shown in red letters in the lower right edge of the screen. Smeds satirized the whole structure of traditional scenes. The viewer sees firsthand how much more "live" the actresses are on the video than they are on stage. In the second act, Smeds' fun ends abruptly, realizing that he is unable to continue all the gypsy scene when the main theme was endless human suffering, separation and death. Abandoning the video presentation, the sisters sit on a circus carpet like little girls, who are embracing with their backs to the audience. On the screen, a wise gypsy mom reads them their own final monologue in the spirit of a good bedtime story. Just like children, the sisters fall asleep.

### **The Seagull**

Many of Smeds' best performances have not reached Moscow for two reasons: One, a century in Finland is not a long time, and the promotion of new play takes a lot of time; and second, there are technical complications and hurdles when dealing with complex plays. Nonetheless, Smeds produced "The Seagull" in Tallinn in the von Krahl Theatre, allowing the Russian public to experience and recognize Smeds' genius. Actor Lembit Ulfsak, who Russians know well, played the role of Arkadina. The skinny actor wears a long, black woman's dress that goes down to his shoes. In this costume, Arkadina manifests all of the banality and falseness of an experienced actress – and the theater itself -- turning the actor into a ridiculous mannequin that dons masks and clothes. You could think of acting as "spiritual prostitution," if you will. The arts are a virus full of lies that can easily infect a person, for which there is no cure. There is no antidote.

Johan Ulfsak, Lembit Ulfsak's son, is a radical young man with a white marks on his face, similar to the front man in a punk band. Johan Ulfsak plays the role of Treplev. The relationship between Arkadina and Treplev in this model becomes clear as we have just washed the window. The famous father and notorious son, a skilled actor and aspiring writer with a genius' sense who tries to eclipse his father's fame. Johan Ulfsak's hereditary talent is brilliantly demonstrated in the finale. After Zarechnaya's visit, which is full of passion, courage and the love of art, Treplev sits at a table and, like a student, puts his hands on the white table cloth, like a man prepared to die. His eyes are full of primeval terror -- screaming eyes that persecute others. The artist has destroyed his life with a passion for the arts. Together with his own talent, he scooped out a will to live. But there was not talent, nor a desire to live, nor love. Just one dull, barren and exhausting desire to write.

## Unknown Soldier

Smeds' top performance is "Unknown Soldier," a production staged at the National Theater. It is rowdy and daring, particularly considering the fact that such a radical director was invited to the citadel of the Finnish theatrical world. Smeds, producing a play about the Soviet-Finnish War, treacherously enters the territory of national pride, questioning and debunking the basic foundation of national mythology, suggesting to his viewers that the "Finnish spirit" did win the war, but that the conflict ended in the death of Finland. The death of Mumm-mum occurs right at the beginning of the play under the music of Sibelius. When Smeds' evil genius fires shots in the end, not sparing the incumbent president or national pride – Carl Gustav Mannerheim – it is as if he shooting at all of Finnish society.

Interestingly, the performance of "Unknown Soldier" is based not only on the book by Vaino Linna, but also based on a simple film by the same name that the whole country watches each year on Independence Day. Smeds accomplishes an amazing postmodernist maneuver: He pulls from popular culture thoughts that are worn out by endless repetition as if to return them to the pristine environment of avant-garde art. Imagine if in Russia the film "Only 'Old Men' Are Going to Battle" was redone by, for example, Ivan Vyrypayev or Boris Khlebnikov. Here, using irony and parody, you can try to return the pristine emotion that became part of "folk memory" and had lost signs of originality.

There is one paradoxical message in the play when it is suggested that the war should not be remembered forever, but should be forgotten – along with the defeat and the wounded pride -- so that the "ulcer" does not swell any further. This performance addresses how the nation's conscious is manipulated politically. One must refuse to participate in the mass psychosis and bury the historical grievances to make way for the construction of a new historical era.

The play does not come right out and say that the Soviet Union is an enemy and that Finland is deeply downtrodden. Rather, the real battle is against an internal enemy -- cynical fascist officers, who were much more aggressive than with the Soviet occupiers. This performance is about the superiority of defeatist philosophy over victorious philosophy -- that it is better to be a victim than to rule Europe and the world. "It becomes so easy when you're defeated!" thought the old man Santiago in Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," after the battle with the sea. "And who defeated you?" Santiago was asked. "Nobody," he answered.

Kristian Smeds uses every centimeter of the big stage to create a impressive effect of a massive stage. He uses extremely aggressive, savage dialogues – for example, soldiers cursing each other and particularly with the their officers, who circle them like herding dogs that bark ferociously at a herd of cattle. Smeds' image of the enemy -- washing machines, or metal skeletons, that no longer work any more. They are thrown onto the stage from above, and the Finns strike them with large construction hammers. The loud sounds of heavy falling washing machines simulate heavy artillery fire and screeching aircraft flying across the theater. The spinning and turning of the washing machine drums is meant to represent the Soviet blitzkrieg through Karelia. By creating such a brutal image of the Soviet occupation, Smeds immediately changes his point of view. The Finns pull out of the washing machines – or the "corpses" -- wallets filled with rubles, a portrait of Lenin and a matryoshka doll. And at that point, the viewers witness a real theatrical miracle: Finnish soldiers enjoy the beauty of the wondrous toy, which suddenly reminds them of home. They take a closer look at the doll, take it apart, lick it like a Popsicle and beat each other's heads with the toy like eggs during Easter. For a second, we experience a moment of beauty amid the horrors and chaos of war.

The final scene puts everything in its proper place. Smeds is brutally provocative. The orchestra played a song with one line "Finland has died," and on the backdrop images of well-known Finnish figures from President Tarja Halonen to celebrities, from Protestant ministers to cartoon dogs are shown. Shots are fired at these portraits with bullets piercing them. It is an execution of the Finnish elite, a public scandal and a affirmation of the fragility and vulnerability of the Finnish state. After this shootout, Finnish soldiers make huge pile of weapons, birch tree that were taken from backstage, crosses made from pinewood and mutilated washing machines. History, thus, is a trash dump.

In this finale, Smeds addresses a very important idea -- the need to come to terms with national defeat. He says that, yes, Finland after the Winter War and the pointless advance into Karelia together with the Nazis has died after losing its territories, citizens and pride. But if Finland had won, it would have carried tremendous responsibility for history. And so ... bayonets into the ground, his cloak over his shoulder, and everyone went home.

This show does not relate to history as a moral category. It does not assign blame and does not instill fear. In the finale, the philosophy of defeatism as salvation and liberation is formulated. The idea of liberation from history, from its dogmas and psychosis a very important one. Or, as Thomas Carlyle once put it: "Blessed is the nation that has no annals."

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