Hungarian Historical Review 15, no. 1 (2026): 90–115

Minority Networking Behind the Iron Curtain: The Petrozavodsk Finnish Theater and Finland, 1965–1985

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This article examines the role of the Petrozavodsk Finnish Theater (PFT) in cultural exchanges between Finland and the Soviet Union from 1965 to 1985. As the only professional Finnish-language theater outside Finland, PFT occupied a unique position within Soviet cultural diplomacy. Despite lacking the prestige of major ensembles and the ideological weight of propaganda groups, PFT was allowed to tour Finland six times, an exceptional frequency for a Soviet troupe. These tours not only introduced Finnish audiences to a little-known minority theater but also gave PFT access to new plays, professional contacts, and opportunities to sustain Finnish-language culture in the context of Russification. Drawing on interviews, Finnish archival sources, and the diary of theater actor and cultural administrator William Hall, this article highlights both the official frameworks and the informal networks that shaped these exchanges. While the Soviet state sought to showcase its nationality policy, PFT artists used the exchanges to pursue their own goals: artistic renewal, language preservation, and community survival. This study situates PFT within the broader history of Cold War cultural diplomacy, showing how a peripheral minority institution could leverage international contacts to carve out cultural space. PFT's story illustrates the entanglement of politics, identity, and theater across the Iron Curtain.

Keywords: cultural exchange, Cold War, minority theater, transnational networks, Karelia, Finland, Soviet Union

Cultural exchange between Finland and the Soviet Union became lively in the postwar years, despite Finland being a capitalist country. The most important forms of art in this cultural exchange were classical music and dance.[1] However, theater became increasingly important in the 1960s. Directors and entire theater troupes crossed the Iron Curtain, even though the language difference presented problems not faced by music and dance. Partly because of the language barrier, the Petrozavodsk Finnish Theater (PFT),[2] the only professional Finnish-language theater in the world to operate outside Finland, became particularly important in

1 Caute, *The Dancer Defects*; Mikkonen, "*Te olette valloittaneet meidät!*"

2 The abbreviation PFT is used here for the sake of convenience and to avoid mix-ups when speaking about Finnish theater and theaters in Finland.

DOI 10.38145/2026.1.90 http://www.hunghist.org

this respect. Furthermore, while cooperation took place within the broader framework of cultural exchange, it was particularly meaningful to Soviet Finnish speakers. Cooperation with Finnish theaters and directors brought new plays, new ways of doing things, and other influences from the West to Soviet Karelia, a northwestern Soviet periphery. In turn, PFT spread awareness of the Finnish community in Soviet Karelia, which was unknown to most Finns at the time.

Beginning in 1965, PFT completed six tours in Finland (in 1965, 1966, 1968, 1971, 1976, and 1984). This frequency was exceptional for any Soviet artistic ensemble, since foreign visits were strictly regulated, and few ensembles (or even individual artists) had the chance to visit Finland this many times. Furthermore, foreign tours were typically reserved for groups at a very high artistic level (such as the Leningrad Philharmonic) or groups that conveyed an ideologically significant narrative (such as the Red Army Choir). PFT was neither a leading Soviet theater nor an ideologically important institution. In addition, PFT's troupe included children of the so-called former peoples' enemies, or in other words people who had emigrated to the USSR from Finland and North America, whose loyalty had been questioned under Stalin.[3] Although the physical terror came to an end with Stalin's death (1953), the stigma was hard to escape. It affected, for example, people's right to work, travel, and study throughout the Soviet era. Yet, PFT was still allowed to tour Finland and host visiting Finnish theaters and directors. This enabled PFT to network with Finnish colleagues and stage several Finnish plays that were otherwise unavailable in the USSR.

The general context of this article is the curious role played by PFT in Finnish-Soviet cultural exchange. It focuses on the interactions and transnational networks that emerged from this official cultural relationship. The formal co-operation allowed a small minority theater to operate in a difficult setting, where its existence was under constant threat. Moreover, PFT's artists used Finnish networks to keep Finnish-language culture alive in the USSR. This article examines the importance of PFT's Finnish networking, the context that allowed it to take place, and the group's impact.

This paper uses data collected during research in Finnish archives. There is considerable relevant material in the National Archives of Karelia, but Russia's war in Ukraine has made work there impossible. Nevertheless, the work the first author did in Russian archives before 2020 helped contextualize Finnish-Soviet

3 Golubev and Takala, *The Search for a Socialist El Dorado*.

cultural exchange and thus provided a solid foundation for this article.[4] This allows me to reflect on the motivations of the Soviet authorities. On the Finnish side, the archives of the Theater Museum, the records of the Finland-Soviet Union Society (FSS), and the records of the People's Archives were important sources. Additionally, interviews with Finnish directors and actors who visited Petrozavodsk helped me contextualize the cooperative initiatives. Finally, the diary of William Hall, a long-time actor in PFT[5] who discussed the group in detail over several decades, played an important role. Hall was the son of Finnish immigrants from Canada. He wrote his diary in Finnish, but he also spoke Russian and English. He was a member of the Communist Party and an apparatchik,[6] giving him exceptional insight into many social and political developments in Soviet Karelia. At the same time, it turns out, Hall was an ardent defender of Finnish culture in Soviet Karelia.

Cold War-era cultural exchange forms the context of this study. The use of art to influence foreign populations has been called cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and soft power.[7] Common to these modes is an emphasis on state-level activity. Although PFT operated in the Soviet state system, its agenda differed from that of Soviet foreign policy and its ideological objectives. Furthermore, before the 1970s, the Finnish government was mostly passive in cultural exchange. It offered modest funding for a select few projects but did not initiate projects on its own. Instead, cultural exchange was managed by professional art establishments or by communist-leaning organizations such as FSS. In the case of PFT, traces of both can be spotted.

Finnish-language Theater in the USSR

In the Soviet era, Petrozavodsk had two theaters. One, established in 1918, was a Russian-language drama theater that also staged ballet and opera. It was a typical Soviet regional theater. PFT, on the other hand, was in many ways an exceptional Soviet establishment. It was founded by Finns residing in Petrozavodsk. Finns were a small minority in Soviet Karelia who were greatly

4 Mikkonen, "*Te olette valloittaneet meidät!*"; Mikkonen, *Äänirautaa rajalle*.

5 He was an actor from 1957 to 1972, occasionally after 1987, and full time from 1993 to 1996.

6 Before 1972, he was responsible for PFT's propaganda work as the representative of the Communist Party. In 1972, he started working in the Karelian regional committee's cultural section. From 1974 to 1979, he was the Vice Minister for Culture of the Karelian ASSR, and from 1979 to 1987, he served as Executive Director of the Kantele song and dance group.

7 See, e.g., Nye, "Public Diplomacy"; Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*.

outnumbered by Russians and Karelians. Yet, the aftermath of the Finnish Civil War in 1918 had brought a few thousand educated, leftist refugees to the area. Under the early Soviet nationality policy, Finns (Karelian was considered a Finnish dialect at the time) were deemed the national elite in the area. Even if Russians and Karelians formed most of the population, Finnish-language culture gained a strong foothold in Soviet Karelia. Furthermore, thousands of emigrants arrived from Finland and North America in the late 1920s and early 1930.[8] They were educated and culturally active.[9] In 1928, a group of Finns began training in Leningrad with the purpose of establishing a Finnish-language theater in Petrozavodsk. As a result, PFT was established in 1932.

After a lively early period, PFT plunged into a crisis as Finns were subjected to Stalinist persecution beginning in 1935.[10] With the rise of Stalin's terror, Russification became a major force that had a considerable impact on Karelia as well. After the war, the theater gradually resumed its activities with the remaining actors, but Finnish-language culture was still facing difficulties in the mid-1950s.[11] In 1956, the Karelian Republic was downgraded to an autonomous republic within the Russian SFSR, further weakening the status of the Finnish language.[12] PFT probably managed to remain open simply because a new generation of actors had almost completed their training at the time of the Republic's dissolution. In 1957, 14 young actors started performing at PFT, including William Hall, Toivo Haimi, Pauli Rinne, and other individuals discussed in this article.[13] The theater's position was further stabilized when a new theater was built in central Petrozavodsk in 1965.[14] While PFT seemed to be on a firmer basis than ever before, there were concerns about theater's diminishing audience base. Audiences were vital to convince the authorities of the necessity of a

8 As many as 130,000 Finns lived in the USSR at the time, at least half of whom were in Karelia. Takala, "Suomen kieli Venäjällä."

9 Their story is recorded in Golubev and Takala, *The Search for a Socialist El Dorado*.

10 Kilin, *Suurvallan Rajamaa*. The Finns were the first nationality targeted in Stalin's purges.

11 Rentola, *Niin Kylmää Että Polttaa,* 209–15; Kurki, "Non-Russian Language Space." PFT's funding changed notably from 1945 to 1965. Shorokhova, "K voprosu o gosudarstvennom f inansirovanii." 29–33.

12 Hyytiä, *Karjalais-Suomalainen Neuvostotasavalta*, 158–59.

13 Kiiranen, *Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*; Hyytiä, *Karjalais-Suomalainen Neuvostotasavalta*, 158. In 1970, the theater received a new generation of 14 actors trained in Leningrad. Kiiranen, *Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 68. The last Soviet generation of actors in PFT graduated in 1985. Thus, they were trained in waves about every 15 years.

14 Kiiranen, *Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 37. See also William Hall, diary, February 3, 1965.

Finnish-language theater in an area inhabited increasingly by Russians.[15] In Finland, moreover, knowledge of Soviet Karelia and its Finnish population was very limited before the 1960s.

During World War II, Finland had waged two campaigns against the USSR. Since the autumn of 1944, when Finland had narrowly avoided Soviet occupation, the leadership of Finland had made the reduction of tensions the main objective of Finnish foreign policy. This allowed the USSR to import its culture to Finland. Additionally, the Finnish Communist Party was legalized, and the Finland-Soviet Union Society was established, significantly changing the Finnish social and political landscape. Beginning in January 1945, the USSR sent several major ensembles to Finland, ranging from the Red Army Choir to the Moiseyev Dance Ensemble.[16] Up to the mid-1950s, numerous Soviet ensembles and high-profile musicians and artists visited Finland. They were hosted almost exclusively by the Finland-Soviet Union Society.[17] With Stalin's death, however, the USSR initiated major changes in its approach to foreign affairs. The USSR began to open doors for cultural exchange with Western countries, but also for foreign tourism. Music and dance still dominated cultural exchanges, mostly for linguistic reasons. This change in Soviet cultural diplomacy eventually became PFT's trump card.

In Finland, PFT was largely unknown until the early 1960s. Already in the early 1950s, the Soviet Committee for Ties with Foreign Countries (VOKS), which managed Soviet cultural exchange, was planning to send promotional material on PFT's productions to Finland.[18] The material was likely intended to publicize PFT's tour to Finland, but the project was aborted and the materials were never sent. Soviet authorities were still too suspicious to let Soviet Finns go to Finland. Things started to change after the mid-1950s. The opening of the USSR to tourism gradually awakened Finnish interest in Soviet Karelia.[19] Meanwhile, PFT's position was still uncertain. This is evidenced by negotiations over the future of the theater in the mid-1960s and many times afterwards. For instance, in autumn 1965, Hall wrote several times in his diary about performances that were poorly attended or even cancelled due to poor ticket sales. He feared

15 William Hall, diary, February 2, 1966; PFT archive, National Archives of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia.

16 Mikkonen, "Interference or Friendly Gestures?"

17 Gould-Davies, "The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy."

18 Finnish Theater Museum, Eklund Collection. VOKS' advertising package is dated September 15, 1951.

19 Timonen, "Karjalan suomalainen teatteri."

that if PFT could not prove its worth, it might face closure.[20] Due to the constantly decreasing number of Finnish speakers, PFT's performances were already simultaneously translated into Russian through headphones attached to the seats. Interest from Finland became one of PFT's key means of demonstrating its value to Soviet officials. Even more importantly, connections to Finland quickly expanded, allowing PFT's key actors to pursue objectives far beyond those set by the Soviet authorities for foreign cultural exchange.

The First Tour

Plans for PFT's tour in Finland had been in the making since the border opened and Finnish communists learned about the theater. The idea was first presented by the Finland-Soviet Union Society.[21] First, artists from Soviet Karelia were able to visit Finland in 1961 and 1962, but not from PFT. The artists sent to Finland were dancers and musicians, mostly ethnic Russians.[22] These visits, however, received a notable amount of publicity and indicated to Soviet authorities that Finns were very interested in the Finnish culture in the USSR. In 1963, Petrozavodsk received a chapter of the USSR-Finland Friendship Society, which were established only in places where connections to Finland were more common (and considered desirable) than elsewhere. This was a significant step towards PFT's first foreign tour.

Finland had a vibrant theater scene at the time, with amateur and semi-professional theaters in almost every town. In the 1960s, many of these semi-professional theaters became city theaters and began receiving regular funding. Amateur theaters remained popular, however, and several were linked to workers' movement. Most Finnish towns had workers' clubs, which were used for theater, among other activities. Although these clubs had reached their prime decades earlier, they remained relevant into the 1970s. In Finland, the worker's movement had been divided between communists and social democrats since 1918, with this division extending to the clubs. Finnish communists had an organization called the Center for Cultural Work (Kulttuurityön Keskus), which managed communist workers' clubs, providing them with programs. Instead of the

20 William Hall, diary, e.g., entries on March 15, March 25, May 27, June 28, December 8, December 12, and December 27, 1965.

21 Laurikainen, Uuno. Letter to the Finnish Ministry of Education, January 7, 1960. KA, SNS, folder 399. The plan was already drafted on November 26, 1959.

22 "Karjalasta ja kauempaa"; Valto, "'Sampo' – elävää kulttuuria."

Finland-Soviet Union Society, it was the communist-leaning Center for Cultural Work that hosted PFT's first four tours in Finland.

This is likely attributable to two factors. First, Finland and the USSR had signed an agreement on cultural exchange in 1960. In the mid-1960s, the Society was assigned several projects related to official cultural exchanges, and its position was thereby redefined. Due to its official responsibilities at the time, it could not participate in a project that was not part of an official cultural exchange. After all, the Finnish government was not involved in PFT's tour in any way, not even as a funder. Another contributing factor was the simple fact that the Society had never imported a Soviet theater and was not used to organizing such tours. Finally, PFT's tour was not a commercial project. Although Soviet musicians and ensembles were occasionally sent to Finland for the purpose of earning foreign currency, there were no financial benefits for PFT's first tours. For PFT's actors, the first tour was a source of enthusiasm. Although the tour took place in November 1965, rumors were circulating already in March about which plays would be chosen for the tour. This would determine who would be allowed on the trip. Hall bitterly recorded this in his diary: "I didn't fit in."[23] The troupe was carefully prepared for the trip. It consisted of 20 people, 15 of whom were actors.[24] This first tour (and many later ones) included people born in Finland, in North America, and even in Siberian exile under Stalin, based on travel records that identify Siberian prison camp sites as birthplaces.[25] Considering that the troupe included several stigmatized members, the timing of the first tour was significant. The tour was being planned when Khrushchev's term at the helm of the USSR had just ended, but the tightening of censorship and increasing social discipline were not yet reflected in the cultural sector. One significant event in this respect was the crushing of the Prague Spring in August 1968, as after this, the party's stance on cultural life and national minorities in the Soviet Union toughened again.[26] PFT's first tours came before the Prague events, and the third had been agreed upon well before.

PFT's first tour featured two plays: Samuil Alyoshin's *All Remains to People* and Martin Andersen Nexø's *The People of Dangaard*. Although both plays had

23 William Hall, diary, April 7, 1965.

24 William Hall, diary, November 22, 1965.

25 A list of employees of the State Finnish Drama Theater KASNT, who will travel to Finland for a tour in August 1976. KA, SNS, folder 145.

26 Mikkonen, "Kansallista kulttuuria elvyttämässä."

been in PFT's playlist before,[27] both were revisited and "cleansed," as Hall put it in his diary.[28] Alyoshin's play had been widely performed in the USSR and even made into a film. The play was written in 1959 and filmed in 1963 (with the lead actor being awarded the Lenin Prize). Andersen Nexø, on the other hand, was a Danish communist author. We have been unable to pinpoint the year in which the play was written, but it was staged in East Germany as early as 1951 and subsequently featured in many other socialist countries. Thus, both plays were safe choices. In practice, PFT had limited power to influence the repertory of its first tours. The repertoires of foreign tours were strictly controlled in the USSR. The result was that the plays were found a bit dull by the Finns. In general, the Finnish media showed strong interest in the tour, but the plays did not garner very good reviews.[29] Part of the problem was that the venues were typically workers' clubs, with few performances staged in actual theater buildings. Nevertheless, PFT's staff felt that the Finns had shown considerable interest in Karelian culture. Many new contacts were established, and calls for PFT to visit Finland again were voiced throughout the tour.

During their tour in Finland, PFT's staff also had opportunities to see local plays, such as Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (1964) at the National Theater.[30] While they praised many actors when speaking with the Finnish media, they reported that they disliked "the pornographic content."[31] This comment reflects the fact that in the USSR, even the slightest eroticism or nudity was publicly met with disapproval. *Marat*, which had premiered the previous year, had spread rapidly across Europe, but not to the USSR. This case highlights how the Finnish tours provided opportunities to explore a culture that was accessible only outside the Soviet Union.

This tour was important for the Karelians. Led by Juho Miettinen, Deputy Minister of Culture of Karelia, the tour provided an opportunity to showcase the Finnish culture of Petrozavodsk around Finland. This opportunity was also seized by the Finnish media. During the tour, the newspapers highlighted the fact that PFT was the only professional Finnish-language theater company in the world operating outside Finland.[32] This was also important for the Soviet

27 Kiiranen*, Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 27.

28 William Hall, diary, October 23, 1965.

29 "7.XI-6.XII."

30 The full title is *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade.*

31 Helin, "Suomalainen teatteri."

32 E.g., "7.XI-6.XII"; Helin, "Suomalainen teatteri."

authorities; allowing cultural autonomy, even for small minorities, was used as proof of the success of the Soviet nationality policy. It could not be mentioned publicly, however, that PFT was under continual pressure in a predominantly Russian-speaking city with a constantly shrinking number of Finnish-speakers.

Soviet-era histories of the theater mention PFT's visits to Finland only briefly and in passing.[33] These brief references do not come close to capturing the significance of the opening of the border for Karelians. Many had relatives in Finland who they had last seen in 1918, in the 1920s, if they had seen them at all. Liisa Sevander, for example, who took part in PFT's second trip to Finland in 1966, remembers how her husband's relative approached her after the performance looking for his relatives. It had been 50 years since their last meeting.[34] Ernest Haapaniemi, – a stage technician whose father was from Lapland, managed to find relatives using a phonebook at one of the tour stops. After phoning his father's relatives, they drove several hundreds of kilometers in two cars to meet Haapaniemi. In an emotional encounter, it was revealed that the brother had little knowledge about what had happened to Ernest's father, apart from the fact that he had departed for North America.[35]

This kind of personal contact was a concern for the Soviet authorities. They were able to limit such contact by making tour schedules as tight as possible, thereby limiting the members' free time. In practice, actors compromised on sleep, and meetings often extended into the early hours. In addition to personal meetings, another ideological problem for the Soviet authorities was the encounter with consumerist society and Finnish culture. For instance, when returning from Finland in the late 1960s, William Hall wrote several times about his astonishment at the cleanliness of Finland. He sometimes wrote of his shame at the USSR's material conditions when crossing the border; returning felt like stepping back into the past.[36] Pauli Rinne, actor and director of PFT, described similar feelings. Despite the shared language, he often found himself wordless in a completely alien culture when in Finland.[37]

33 Kiiranen, *Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 55.

34 Sevander, Liisa. Interview. April 30, 1993. Theater Museum, Eklund Collection.

35 Haapaniemi, Ernest. Interview. April 29, 1994. Theater Museum, Eklund Collection.

36 William Hall, diary, November 8, 1968.

37 Rinne, *Karjalaan kaikonneita*, 96.

Repertoire, Venues, Artistic and Ideological Agendas

PFT made several tours to Finland within a few years (in 1965, 1966, and 1968). Common to these first three tours was that the plays could have come from the playbill of any Soviet theater. Furthermore, with only one exception, productions taken to Finland were helmed by directors from outside Karelia. The repertory was tightly controlled by the authorities. Before the tour, there were intense discussions about the plays. PFT could only state that they let "Moscow and Finland" argue about this question.[38] Thus, while the plays were selected from PFT's repertory, PFT itself did not have much say over which ones were eventually chosen. The second tour's repertory included Karl Čapek's *The White Plague*, Maxim Gorky's *Vassa Zhelezhnova*, and a Finnish classic, Maiju Lassila's *When Roses Bloom*. Gorky's play was written in 1910 but premiered only in 1936, after he had revised it. Čapek's antiwar play, which foreshadowed Nazi expansion, was first performed in 1937. It was translated into Russian in 1950 and performed widely across the socialist world. Both were directed by Russians invited specifically for the occasion. The Finnish play, a comedy from 1912, was directed by PFT's own actor.

PFT's second tour was its longest, lasting 2.5 weeks and visiting 16 locations around Finland. This tour was organized by the Center for Cultural Work.[39] The tour focused on the northern part of Finland, especially Lapland.[40] In his diary, Hall estimated that the total number of spectators for the whole tour was around 5,300.[41] This can be considered a very high turnout, as some of the venues were very remote locations in the wilderness of Lapland. The exact audience figures were ideologically important from the Soviet point of view, as they were used to assess the extent of the audience the performances reached.

For the Finnish organizer, a major function of the tour was to establish a program for ideologically aligned cultural houses around Finland. Performances were only rarely held at regular theaters. Most of the time, they were held in communist clubs. In such cases, performances were at least occasionally preceded by speeches by local communist politicians. Although PFT's staff was used to these kinds of events, it seems that some Finns would have preferred to focus on theater performances. In his diary, Hall was puzzled about why "the Finns

38 William Hall, diary, August 31, 1966.

39 William Hall, diary, November 20, 1966.

40 "Teatterivierailu Petroskoista."

41 William Hall, diary, November 20, 1966.

treat all Soviets as communists." Apparently, he did not realize that certain venues were communist workers' houses and, as such, locales that non-communist Finns found difficult to approach. Even so, the venues during PFT's first tours were mostly full. In one town where the performance did not draw a full house, Hall was told that this was because it was a "bourgeois town."[42]

Although PFT was considered to represent the USSR, its goals for the tours were artistic rather than political. The troupe tried to give it their best, even if the interests of the Finnish organizer were at least partly political.[43] The Finnish tours seem to have significantly energized PFT and its actors. They also increased local interest in the theater back in Petrozavodsk. Visits by Soviet art institutions abroad often attracted the interest of domestic audiences. This seems to have been the case with PFT as well. Local party representatives observed that in 1966, after PFT's first tour to Finland, audience interest in theater had clearly increased.[44] This raised PFT's standing in the eyes of Soviet authorities and paved the way for more exchanges.

PFT's third tour in Finland in 1968 was very similar to the first two.[45] The two-week tour featured two plays: Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Bathhouse* (1929) and Estonian Juhan Smuul's *The Wild Captain* (1962). *Bathhouse* is an interesting choice because it is a satire that criticizes bureaucracy and totalitarianism but was also Mayakovsky's last play before his suicide. After its premiere, the work faced severe criticism, but it was praised in theater circles. The play was revived as early as the final years of Stalin's reign. In Finland, the play was marketed as proof that internal systemic critique was possible in the USSR, countering an argument repeatedly voiced by Finnish critics of communism. Juhan Smuul, for his part, was the chairman of the Soviet Estonian Writers' Union and a party member. In 1952, he was awarded the Stalin Prize and wrote poems in praise of Stalin. Again, both plays had visiting directors: Ivan Petrov (1926–2012) from the Petrozavodsk Russian theater directed *Bathhouse*, and Epp Kaidu (1915–1976) from the Tartu Vanemuine Theater directed *Captain*. On the one hand, Finnish critics praised *Bathhouse* as an interesting piece never performed in Finland. On the other hand, it was considered partly inaccessible to the Finns, as it focused

42 William Hall, diary, November 20, 1966.

43 "Jyväskylän teatterin katsojamäärä nousi."

44 William Hall, diary, March 17, 1966.

45 Reutsalo, Mauri. Letter from Reutsalo (Centre for Cultural Work) to the Soviet Ministry of Culture. October 27, 1967. KA, SNS, folder 85.

on the 1920s in the USSR, about which most Finns knew very little.[46] PFT's main achievement during its first three tours was to expand networking with Finland, leading to multifaceted cooperation in years to come. PFT's key aim was to integrate more Finnish plays into its repertory.

A Finnish Program for Soviet Audiences

Plays imported from Finland had a special place in PFT's repertory. PFT had been established as a Finnish theater, and in the 1930s, its repertory consisted mostly of Finnish classics. Staging new plays was trickier. Furthermore, even if PFT managed to get a script, it had to be accepted by the censors. For this reason, scripts had to be translated into Russian. Despite these obstacles, PFT managed to stage several Finnish plays in the 1960s (over half of its playbill).[47] Although pre-1917 classics were mostly unproblematic, PFT also featured contemporary works by Finnish playwrights with no connections to communists. Of these, Leena Härmä's *Virtaset ja Lahtiset* became one of PFT's most popular plays, performed well over 100 times.[48] It had premiered in Finland in 1957 and was adapted into a movie in 1959. PFT staged it in 1963, keeping it in their repertory throughout the 1960s.[49] How the script ended up in the USSR is unknown. However, there was no copyright agreement between the USSR and Western countries. Thus, in principle, works could be published and performed easily. The main obstacle was simply censorship.

PFT's staff often translated plays into Russian only for the censors, although the works themselves were never meant to be staged outside Petrozavodsk. Leena Härmä's *Virtaset and Lahtiset* is a case in point. A similar approach was adopted for Härmä's *Viekää Tuhkakin Pesästä* (1971), staged by PFT in 1974.[50] Both plays are comedies. *Virtaset ja Lahtiset* (both very common Finnish family names) deals with the relationship between two upstart families. *Viekää Tuhkakin Pesästä* focuses on suburbanization and related speculation in Finland. Thus, it was possible to present both plays to the Soviet authorities as critiques of Finnish (capitalist) society.

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46 Veltheim, "Satiirin saunaa"; Arpiainen, "Pyhän byrokratiuksen."

47 On the history of the theater, see e.g. Kiiranen, *Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*. Soviet-era informational materials on the theater contain the same information.

48 Kiiranen*, Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 42.

49 Handbill, *Virtaset ja Lahtiset*. Theater Museum, Eklund Collection, folder 36.

50 Handbill, *Viekää Tuhkakin Pesästä*, Theater Museum, Eklund Collection, folder 36.

A slightly more challenging case was the contemporary Finnish epic *Under the Northern Star* (1959–1962) by Väinö Linna. It dealt with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finnish history, placing strong emphasis on the Finnish civil war, which had driven many Finns to Soviet Karelia. This epic was the first major work to offer a balanced view of pre-1918 Finnish society, as history which until then had been written entirely from the perspective of the (right-wing) winners. This epic had a major impact in Finland. Toivo Haimi, the main director of PFT, discovered it and brought it to PFT,[51] which worked on it as early as 1967.[52] However, while ideological permission to begin working on the play was given, the production itself was not ready for several years.[53] The premiere of the play was continuously delayed, taking place only in 1970.

PFT's version of *Under the Northern Star* was Haimi's adaptation of the book.[54] The long preparation period was apparently related to the authorities' criticism of the play's contents. In his diary, Hall describes the trouble related to staging the play. For example, the Finnish red guard had to be portrayed as if it had been more organized (contrary to the reality), and cursing had to be notably curbed. In one scene, the red guard forced a woman to bark like a dog and then shot a man who came to her defense. Authorities considered this ideologically problematic. The end of the play was also debated. According to the authorities, it conveyed the idea that launching a revolution was a mistake, and overall, they thought the play should present a more polished image of the Finnish red guard. Hall wrote in his diary that Haimi had taken a conscious risk in this respect. Long meetings with local party representatives were arranged, who pressured Haimi to change the play. When *Under the Northern Star* was finally staged in 1970, it was only with many compromises.[55] The play did not stay in the repertory very long and was never taken outside Petrozavodsk. Overall, Haimi's stubbornness was necessary even to stage the play.

51 The work had been accepted in principle in autumn 1967, when it received approval to be rehearsed (William Hall, diary, October 11, 1967). Rehearsals were postponed several times and were finally going to begin in earnest only in November 1969 (William Hall, diary, August 29, 1969). Finally, rehearsals were postponed again to January 1970, and the date of the premier was set for March 5, 1970 (William Hall, diary, January 5, 1970).

52 Lev Kolmovsky was visiting Finland in 1967 and asked the Finnish (communist-leaning) artist Tapio Tapiovaara to make the sets for this play. Haimi, Toivo. Letter to Karvonen [n.d.]. KA, SNS, folder 85.

53 William Hall, diary, October 11, 1967.

54 Handbill, *Under the Northern Star*, Theater Museum, Eklund Collection, folder 36 (playbills).

55 William Hall, diary, March 12, 1970.

Haimi was the chief director of PFT (1965–1973) and then its manager. He represented PFT during most tours to Finland, together with the local vice minister for culture. Haimi was an ardent defender of Finnish culture and the Finnish language. During PFT's tours in Finland, he actively met and spoke with Finnish actors and directors, sometimes scouting for works he could import to Petrozavodsk. Originally an actor from the class of 1957, he had also trained as a director in Moscow, graduating in 1965.

Bringing Soviet-Karelian Culture to Finland

PFT's first tours did not include any works by Soviet Finns, but their fourth tour in 1971 featured only one play: *Otatko Miut Karjalan Mua?* (Will You Take Me, Karelian Land?) by Karelian author Antti Timonen (1915–1990). It was an adaptation of his book *We Karelians*, prepared together with the play. Theater histories pay special attention to this play because it dealt with events in Karelia during the critical years from 1918 to 1922. It had been well received in Karelia, partly because it was the first time local experiences of the Civil War were put on stage.[56] While the Civil War was a common subject in the USSR, the narratives of this conflict were strictly controlled and typically reiterated the central government's perspective rather than local ones.

Initially, the Soviet authorities were somewhat hesitant about allowing the play on the tour because its contents were believed to irritate Finns. The Finnish Civil War had been a highly divisive event, followed by campaigns of Finnish voluntaries in Soviet Karelia. The play had faced criticism in the USSR as well. Hall wrote that some authorities had considered the play reactionary, as if it were flirting with Karelian nationalism.[57] The Soviet Union was constantly balancing between highlighting minority cultures and restricting them while stamping out even the smallest germs of nationalism. Timonen's play was one of the first in Karelia that did not fully align with the official party line. The play had originally premiered in 1969, but an improved version was developed for the Finnish tour, both directed by Toivo Haimi. However, the Soviet authorities kept repeating their concern that the play might cause unrest and

56 Kiiranen*, Valtion Suomalainen Draamateatteri*, 65–67. Kurki, *Rajan kirjailijat*, 247–65. Kurki has studied the novel *Me karjalaiset* (We, the Karelians) and its reception. The work subtly challenged the centralist interpretation of the Civil War. Of course, this could not be uttered publicly. The subtle nuances were probably missed by audiences during the tour in Finland.

57 William Hall, diary, September 18, 1971.

protests in Finland. Hall noted that the actors had grown worried as the tour approached.[58] In retrospect, this concern seems touchingly exaggerated. The play did portray Finns in a negative light by highlighting failed Finnish campaigns in Karelia, but there were no strong public reactions. If the play had discussed territories ceded by the USSR World War II, the reactions might have been different. But it focused on Karelia, which had never been part of Finland.[59] It is also possible that the passages that could have provoked Finns were removed from the 1971 version.

PFT's fourth tour was ultimately a success. The play was performed 15 times in Finland.[60] According to one critic, "the play was interesting and enlightening—and also artistically strong, the best of this theater so far." This critic also noted that the Karelian perspective was strongly apparent in the play. Furthermore, while she observed that the Red Army was presented in a clearly positive light (and Finns in a negative light), the emphasis was on the people, and propagandistic elements were mostly absent.[61] The play received mainly positive reviews.[62] In the end, the concern about strong reactions was unfounded.

In six years, PFT concluded four tours. Helsinki was on each tour, but overall, the geographical range was vast. For the USSR, it was important to reach as wide an audience as possible. In this respect, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) was an important partner. YLE had broadcast many concerts by Soviet musicians and was beginning to do so with theater performances. It made recordings during PFT's tours, but it went to Petrozavodsk for more. The first such broadcast was transmitted in spring 1966.[63] As Finnish directors started to visit Petrozavodsk around the same time, YLE asked them to direct several radio plays. For example, Kurt Nuotio directed Gogol's *The Gamblers* and Chekhov's *The Huntsman* on his first visit (1968).[64] The radio version of Timonen's 1971 play was directed by the Finn Sakari Puurunen.[65] Later, YLE would also have PFT's Toivo Haimi direct Timonen's other plays, such as *After the Storm* (1972) and *Birthday* (1979).[66] Especially early on, critiques of PFT's television and

58 William Hall, diary, September 17, 1971.
59 William Hall, diary, September 19, 1971.
60 Siikala, "Itäkarjalainen kohtalonnäytelmä."
61 Veltheim, "Teatteria Petroskoista."
62 Gröndahl, "Karelsk dramas om gästspel."
63 Kajava, "Mäntylää petroskoilaisittain."
64 "Petroskoin teatteri esittää."
65 "Vierailu Petroskoista."
66 Kajava, "Outo, silti toimiva 'Syntymäpäivä.'"

radio performances focused on language. The language used by PFT's actors was typically praised for its faithfulness, but the pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm were criticized.[67] This criticism was reflected in the reviews of many plays,[68] and it was sometimes even characterized as a hindrance that made it difficult to follow the play.[69] Finnish linguists were interested in the development of Finnish in Karelia, since several decades had passed without any contact with Finland. For PFT, however, the crucial issue was credibility.

Improving Finnish Language Skills

Haimi's key objective was to use the contact with Finland as a means of improving PFT's linguistic proficiency. Haimi felt that PFT had a national mission, which could not be fulfilled by simply staging Finnish classics as the theater had done in the past. Haimi emphasized that to survive, PFT needed fresh directors and actors with impeccable Finnish skills.[70] To achieve this aim, visiting Finnish directors were crucial. For PFT, language was a matter of life or death. If PFT performed in Russian, it was seen as just another Soviet theater and likely subservient to existing Russian theater. One way to fight this trend was to stage Finnish plays not performed elsewhere on Soviet stages. In his diary, Hall (now Deputy Minister of Culture of Karelia) made the summary observation that PFT's Finnish-speaking audience was too small. To attract enough Russian speakers, its repertoire needed to include plays not performed in Russian theaters. Hall concluded that PFT needed world-class plays staged by excellent directors if it was to survive.[71]

When Kurt Nuotio, the first Finnish visiting director, worked with PFT in 1968, it was a major event. Nuotio had met PFT's actors during their first tour.[72] During the second tour, he was approached by Haimi. Nuotio had directed the American musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) for Helsinki City Theater, which Haimi had seen and had been impressed by. Nuotio argued that PFT's actors might have found the musical relatable. It discussed antisemitism, and Finns themselves were a persecuted minority. Afterwards, Haimi had sought out

67 Riik, "Petroskoilaisten Huijarit."
68 "Petroskoilaista radioteatteria."
69 Kajava, "Yksitoikkoinen metsästäjä."
70 William Hall, diary, October 6, 1969.
71 William Hall, diary, June 15, 1976.
72 "Kaksi kuukautta Petroskoissa."

Nuotio, convincing him to visit PFT as a guest director. Things moved surprisingly quickly, and the visit was mentioned in a protocol of cultural exchanges as early as 1967.[73] Nuotio was allowed to choose a play, and he selected Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. It had been translated into Russian but never staged in the USSR.

Nuotio visited Petrozavodsk for the first time in December 1967. According to Nuotio, people made concerted efforts to make him feel welcome, and they succeeded in this. It also became clear to him that foreigners still remained something of a rarity in Petrozavodsk at the time. On his first trip, he followed PFT's performances. The first performance was a Russian play translated into Finnish in Petrozavodsk. It made Nuotio anxious because he hardly understood what was being said on stage. The intonation and word order were "too Russian" (Russian is structurally very different from Finnish). He relaxed a bit after the second play, a Finnish original.[74] Thus, Nuotio's experience confirms that language was indeed an issue.

In the spring of 1968, Nuotio arrived for two months to direct *The Crucible*. He reports having received excellent treatment, but cultural clashes were inevitable. There were also clashes with the local work culture. Abundant consumption of vodka was one problem. Nuotio recalls that on every possible occasion, toasts were raised, and days often stretched into the early hours, making it difficult to get any work done. The first workday was completely wasted. It also turned out that PFT was inexperienced in hiring foreigners. Once rehearsals began in earnest, local militia armed with submachine guns stormed the theater, taking Nuotio to the station. PFT's management had forgotten to report the presence of a foreigner. Nuotio did not suffer long. PFT's management arrived to reprimand the militia and take Nuotio back to resume rehearsals.[75]

Yet another clash ensued with the technical staff. The sets for *The Crucible* were repeatedly delayed. In his diary, Hall noted his embarrassment over PFT not being able to make the sets on time despite the director's entreaties.[76] In his account, Nuotio recalls how the problems began with finding all the parts needed, and then the sets were assembled sloppily. During a rehearsal, with local notables present, the sets collapsed. Nuotio started to shout for the stage manager, Sergei, but was told that Sergei had gone fishing. He then shouted for the technical director, Anatoly, who had gone with Sergei. As a result, Sergei was

73 Nuotio, Interview with the author.

74 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*.

75 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 80–81, 84.

76 William Hall, diary, May 17, 1968.

fired. Later, Nuotio spotted Sergei on the street and feared that Sergei might well beat him up. Instead, Sergei approached and gave him a hug. Sergei was happy about having gotten a better job at the tractor factory.[77] This incident made Nuotio wonder about the socialist policy of full employment.

Miller had written *The Crucible* in 1953. Set in Salem in the late 1600s, it is an allegory for McCarthyism. For Nuotio, it was an allegory for persecuted dissidents in general. One evening at Haimi's home, he discussed the Daniel-Sinyavsky trial, which had been held two years earlier. He compared the play to the fate of Soviet dissidents. Haimi agreed with Nuotio, but he pointed out that the play would be reviewed by authorities. Haimi hinted at having been interrogated by the KGB in the past, and he insisted that Nuotio keep the connection with dissidents to himself.[78] Thanks to this conversation, Nuotio did not publicly make the comparison. When speaking to the local media, he said (perhaps passing on words put in his mouth) that Miller was criticizing "the absurdity and arbitrariness he experienced in the hands of the House Un-American [Activities] Committee."[79]

The PFT production of *The Crucible* passed the scrutiny of a team of about 30 inspectors,[80] premiering in May 1968. Hall wrote in his diary that many in the audience considered the play the best production PFT had ever staged.[81] Sulo Tuorila, PFT's star actor at the time and a director, agreed.[82] *Leninskaya Pravda* ran a full-page review of *The Crucible*, which PFT's staff considered exceptional. Critics also praised the production and considered it a great success.[83] In 1969, *The Crucible* was performed in Tallinn and other parts of Estonia, underlining its success.[84]

Nuotio's first visit to the USSR was widely publicized, but he felt that he was also somewhat exploited. For instance, on May Day, he greeted 12 million people on Soviet television, representing progressives in the West. In many interviews, he was asked about social problems in Finland, and he talked about his experiences as a poor student. In Finland, his naivety backfired, and he was vetted by the

77 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 89–90.
78 Nuotio, interview with the author; Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 87–88.
79 "Kaksi kuukautta Petroskoissa."
80 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 92.
81 William Hall, diary, May 23, 1968.
82 Meeting Notes.
83 Nuotio, Interview with the author.
84 William Hall, diary, April 23–May 27, 1969.

security police.[85] This was likely also because the KGB had tried to recruit him. Although he had rejected the effort, the same man approached him again in Finland in the early 1970s. This man of Finnish descent brought him brandy and chocolates. He also tried offering Nuotio money in exchange for reports on Finnish-Swedish circles (thus effectively asking him to serve as a spy). Moreover, he knew where Nuotio's mother lived in Helsinki, and this frightened Nuotio. The next time Nuotio met Haimi (in Finland), he told him about this and said that he dare not come to the USSR if this continued. Haimi promised to deal with the issue. Nuotio was not directly bothered by the KGB after this, neither in Finland nor in the USSR.[86]

Nuotio's Second Visit

After Nuotio, PFT managed to secure another Finnish director for a visit in 1970. He directed a French play, Jean Anouilh's *Lark* (about Joan of Arc). It did not have the same success as *The Crucible*. PFT thus started planning Nuotio's second visit. The problem was his busy schedule.[87] Nuotio returned in 1974 in a window between two commitments.[88] He was asked to direct a production of the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic. In June 1974, Nuotio held rehearsals for four weeks, six days a week.[89] In the autumn, Nuotio spent a few more days finalizing the play for its premiere. The choice of play made Nuotio's second visit particularly meaningful. The production was planned to coincide with the 125th anniversary of the publication of the so-called *New Kalevala* in 1849 (a revised and expanded version of the *Old Kalevala*, published in 1835). It became another landmark event for PFT.

In Finland, a *Kalevala* stage boom began after the Hungarian Thalia Theater brought its interpretation to Helsinki in 1970. In 1972, Paavo Liski produced the *Kalevala* for the Oulu City Theater, and several other versions followed. PFT managed to ride this wave. Haimi was well informed about developments in the Finnish theater scene, and it was he who suggested the *Kalevala* to Nuotio. The play received better resources than most of PFT's projects. The handbills, for

85 Nuotio, interview with the author.
86 Nuotio, interview with the author.
87 Nuotio, interview with the author.
88 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies,* 291, 295.
89 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 295.

example, were printed on better paper, and the cover was in color.[90] Usually, PFT's handbills were simple printouts. In the USSR, even mildly sophisticated printing required permits and approval from the authorities. Furthermore, the entire cast of the theater was used.

The *Kalevala* production premiered in October. The Soviet reviews were very positive. The play became another staple in PFT's repertory. The production was then taken to Finland, but with a delay. PFT's previous tours had been organized by Finnish communists, but after restructuring, they lacked organs capable of importing Soviet artists. Thus, PFT lost some of its earlier contacts. This time, the tour was organized by the Finland-Soviet Union Society (FSS). Although FSS had experience with tours by Soviet artists, it managed numerous simultaneous projects, which often slowed one another down. Furthermore, it had experience organizing concerts and entertainment, but not theater tours.

More importantly, PFT's 1976 tour was part of the official cultural exchange, requiring government funding and solutions to several bureaucratic problems. Since FSS arranged the tour, Finnish internal politics were not as central as in earlier tours. While FSS had links with communists, it also had many non-communists among its members. In 1974, FSS's theater section discussed issues related to theater exchanges between Petrozavodsk and Finland. Several Finnish theaters had expressed their interest in exchanges. Official cultural exchange worked on a reciprocal basis, necessitating state funding and approval. Each country usually paid the costs incurred within their borders. Thus, the problem was securing government approval.[91] It seems that tour costs contributed to delaying PFT's fifth tour until September 1976.

Another issue was reciprocity. Originally, Kuopio City Theater (led by Nuotio) was to visit Petrozavodsk before PFT's fifth tour.[92] However, the visit was postponed when the city administration in Kuopio withheld its funding decision.[93] The tardiness of FSS played a role as well.[94] As the project was part of the official exchange, issues ranged from allowances to fees and permissions.[95] Eventually, PFT's tour was much shorter than the previous ones but more professionally organized. At each tour destination, it was hosted by a Finnish

90 Handbill, *Kalevala*. Theater Museum, Eklund Collection, folder 36.

91 Minutes of the theater section. August 26, 1974. KA? SNS, folder 145.

92 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies,* 349.

93 "Kuopion kaupunginteatterin peruskorjaus."

94 Nuotio, Kurt. Letter to Riitta Korhonen. March 24, 1976. KA, SNS, folder 145.

95 Lehtinen, Kalevi. Telegram to Kokonin (in Russian), August 24, 1976. KA, SNS, folder 145.

theater. In addition to a production of the *Kalevala*, the tour included Ivan Gontsharov's *A Common Story* and Ion Drutse's *The Birds of Our Youth*. Thus, it included one Russian classic, one contemporary Soviet play, and one Finnish play. Drutse's *The Birds of Our Youth* was also recorded by YLE.[96]

Kuopio City Theater ultimately made its reciprocal visit to Petrozavodsk in 1977. It was the first visit of a stable theater company from Finland. KOM, a communist-leaning traveling theater, was the only foreign professional theater to have visited Petrozavodsk. Kuopio City Theater brought an all-Finnish program. Two of the plays were classics, while a more modern work dealt with the aftermath of the Finnish Civil War.[97] The visit lasted ten days, and each play was performed three times.[98] *Kullervo* (1859/1864), by Aleksis Kivi, was based on the *Kalevala*. Maiju Lassila's *Rival Suitors* (1913) was a comedy. The third play was Johan Bargum's *Homecoming* (1975, based on a 1919 novel). As a mere reciprocal visit, the encounter does not seem to have left a strong imprint on PFT. Furthermore, in retrospect, it seems to have ended the most active period in PFT's collaboration with Finnish theaters and directors. This is not because PFT would not have wanted the collaboration to continue but rather because the ideological tides were turning, complicating collaboration.

In the 1980s, a single collaborative project with Finland materialized, again related to the *Kalevala*. Finnish actor and director Paavo Liski, who had experience staging *Kalevala*-themed plays in Finland, directed a production of the *Kalevala* in Tallinn in 1980. Haimi was present at the premiere, and he invited Liski to Petrozavodsk. Since the production had already been staged, they ended up choosing a production of *Kanteletar*.[99] Like the *Kalevala*, *Kanteletar* is a collection of poems that do not form a coherent story. It was therefore made into a musical by the author Leo Suomela and composer Seppo Paakkunainen in 1976. Liski had already directed productions of *Kanteletar* twice in Finland (in 1976 and 1980). For PFT, the play became an opportunity to celebrate its 50th anniversary. PFT brought *Kanteletar* to Finland in 1984 in its final Soviet-era tour.

This tour was not supposed to be the last. There were plans to bring PFT to Finland in the late 1980s, but they were postponed several times and eventually cancelled. The perestroika period increased cultural collaborations between Finnish and Soviet art circles, but the USSR decreased its funding, and these

96 Korhonen, Riitta. Telegram to Kokonin (in Russian), July 23, 1976. KA, SNS, folder 145.

97 Kolmovsky, Lev. Letter to Kurt Nuotio (in Russian) [n.d.]. KA, SNS, folder 145.

98 Nuotio, *Everstiksi epäilty mies*, 401.

99 Kinnunen and Lepola, *Paavo Liskin ohjaajavierailu*.

kinds of collaborative undertakings increasingly assumed a commercial basis. PFT's tour was not considered profitable. However, PFT was facing difficulties of its own towards the end of the Soviet era. In 1990, several actors moved to Finland, almost prompting PFT to shut down. Only by the end of the 1990s did PFT manage to overcome these setbacks.

Conclusion

Petrozavodsk Finnish Theater illustrates the surprisingly impactful role that a small minority institution could play during the Cold War. The Cold War limited mobility but also enabled certain groups and individuals to network, sometimes quite successfully. Although PFT lacked the prestige and ideological weight of leading Soviet ensembles, it became a recurring act in Finland, with more tours than almost any other Soviet institution. This was not simply the result of Moscow's cultural diplomacy. It also offers eloquent testimony to the determination of PFT's artists, who used the Finnish connection to sustain their language and artistic traditions under constant pressure. It must be emphasized that had the Soviet authorities not viewed PFT's tours in Finland as ideologically useful, these tours would not have been possible. Nevertheless, when PFT was allowed in Finland, it managed to push its own agenda and create professional networks for its own benefit.

For Soviet Finns, such exchanges provided access to new plays, professional renewal, and cultural recognition at a time when Russification was steadily advancing. For Finns, PFT's visits fostered awareness of a Finnish community across the border that was otherwise little known while also enabling professional collaboration. Beyond official agreements, the personal encounters, family reunions, and professional networks forged across the border highlight the importance of informal ties in sustaining transnational cultural life. Most importantly, there was room for maneuver and even innovation on the margins of the Soviet space. Although connections abroad were seemingly easier to forge from Moscow, marginal actors could assume more agency than the conventional understanding of center-periphery power relations would imply. PFT and its actors managed to use this agency by leveraging the overall Soviet commitment to cultural diplomacy and internationalism, along with its need for external recognition. These grand forces were exploited by a small regional theater to pursue its own agenda and also to survive and even thrive.

In retrospect, PFT's heyday, especially in terms of cultural exchange, lasted from the late 1960s through the 1970s. Shrinking audiences, a tighter copyright regime, and the USSR's shifting foreign policy priorities eroded PFT's position so that, by the 1980s, its exchanges with Finland became increasingly difficult. At the same time, PFT's legacy remains significant. It demonstrates how cultural actors working on the periphery could appropriate official structures for their own purposes, complicating the image of cultural diplomacy as a purely state-driven enterprise. The networking of PFT's actors with Finnish actors and directors is particularly impressive. It led to some of the most important plays in PFT's history, such as productions of the *Kalevala* and *Kanteletar*, which were used by the theater as their calling cards in the USSR.

Today, with political tensions on the rise and borders becoming increasingly closed, the story of PFT serves as a reminder of the fragility and resilience of minority cultures. Its history shows how cultural exchange, even in the shadow of the Iron Curtain, could create spaces for dialogue, artistic growth, and the survival of language and identity.

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