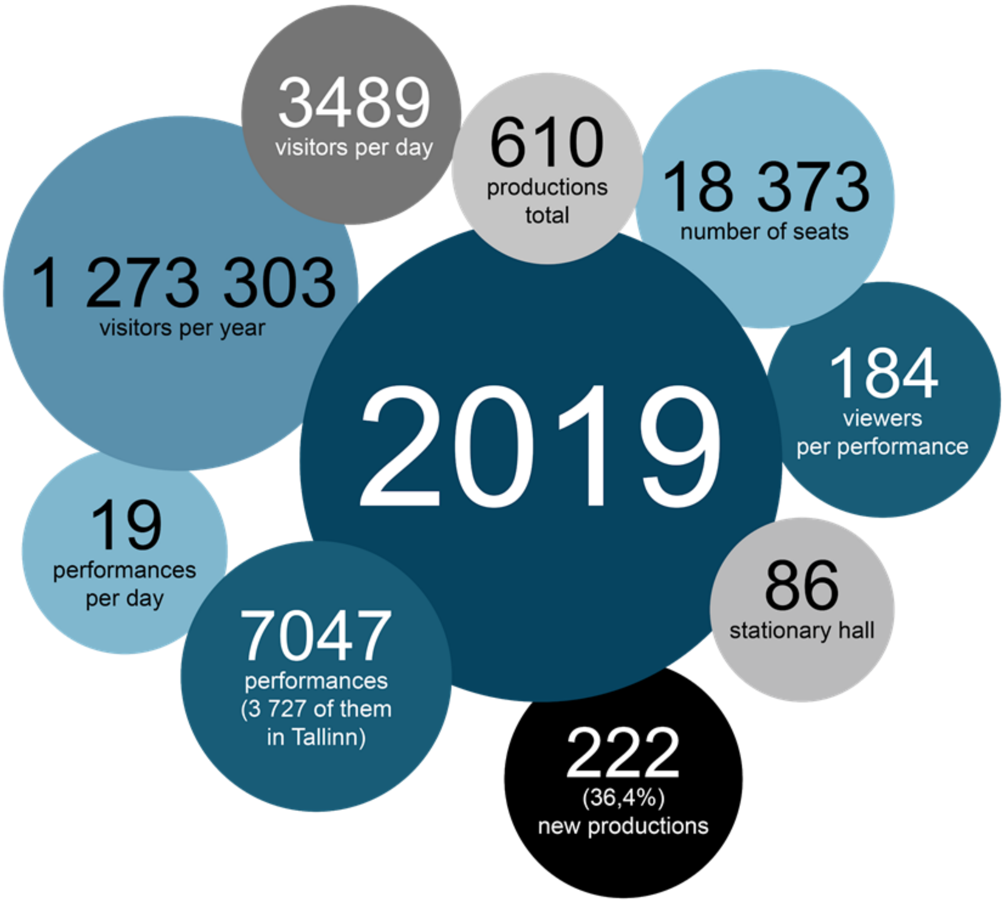
Greetings from the Year 2019 in Estonian Theatre

Once upon a time, in an independent nation of 1.3 million people, it was the year 2019 and theatres across the country welcomed nearly as many visitors through their doors as there were inhabitants in the land – more than seven thousand performances (7,047) had over 1.2 million spectators (1,273,303), with over six hundred stage productions in their repertoires (610), and over a third of those (222) were new productions. This was higher than the previous year, and the year before that, as more private theatre companies and independent production projects added their data to the statistics, setting a record of 65 participating theatre companies – the highest thus far. A decade ago, in 2009, there had been 28 theatre companies, but life and conditions had taken such an upward curve that the number of theatre companies has been constantly rising (37 in 2014, 47 in 2017, etc). In that year of abundance in 2019, in addition to the 10 theatre companies with state or municipal budgets, data was gathered for 55 private companies and theatre projects. 24 of them received funding support from the government.



The Growth of Theatre Makers and Activity

Making a comparison between 2019 and the data from previous years it becomes evident that the increased number of theatre makers precipitated a rise in the number of productions in repertoire (559->582->610) and the volume of new productions (204->212->222), in relation to the previous two years. The state and municipal theatre companies produced a more or less consistent number of new shows, at around the one hundred mark (92), and they had a traditional 320-ish (314) productions in repertoire, out of the 610 in total. This, in turn, indicates that the annual rise or fall in the number of new productions tends to hinge on private theatre companies and project work. As before, new theatre makers emerged in 2019, supporting a rising trend that most self-respecting institutions consider a theatre project to be part of a good marketing campaign. The agency team have – as in previous years – also collated figures on all other new theatre productions for which we have no visitor data and are therefore excluded from the statistics. In 2019 there were 43 of them. When we add in public performances of student work by universities (10), radio drama (8) and shows by amateur theatre collectives (92), the total number of new theatre productions in 2019 comes to **375**. Yes, you read that right. A year earlier the same calculation yielded a tally of 307.

For the second consecutive year the data includes summary figures from amateur theatres, accounting for 48 companies – new productions (87), works in repertoire (162), number of performances (893) and visitors (40,413).

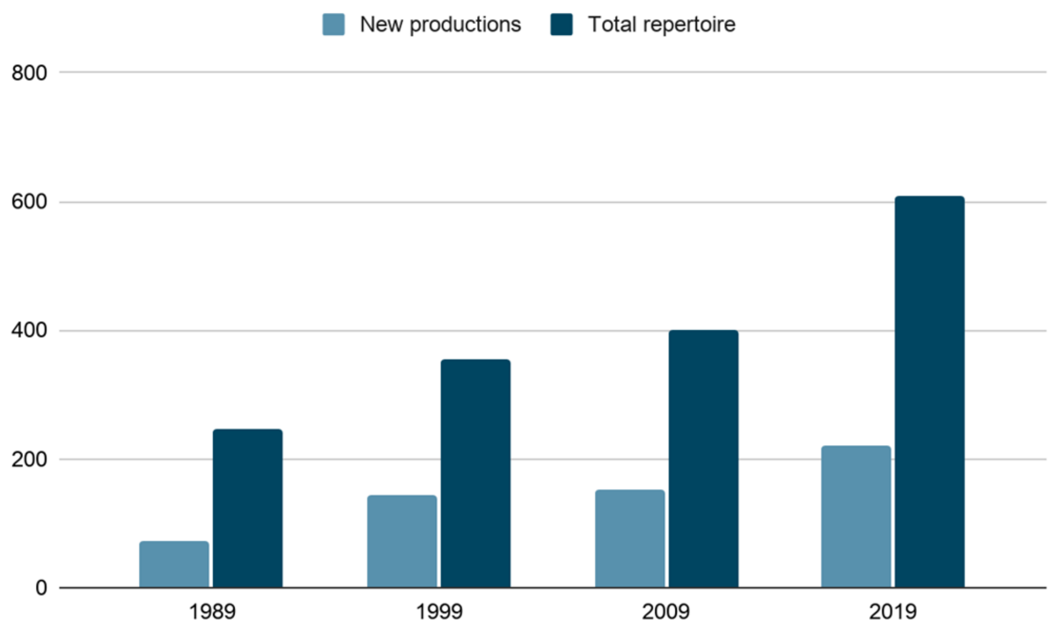
Spectator Choices

The level or interest from theatregoers did not lag behind the increase in theatre makers and their activity. On average, each performance in 2019 had 184 people in the audience, there was a choice of 19 different shows per day, and the daily total attendance stood at 3,489. For the sake of clarity, this calculation does not exclude rest days or public holidays. Yet another high across the last five years (173-180).

The largest share of the audience attended drama productions, adding up to 62.5% of total visits (390 drama productions accounting for 63.9% of the repertoire, with 4,931 performances representing a 70% share), followed by musical productions at 14.2% (representing 7.5% of the repertoire with 46 productions, and 5% of performances with 351) and interdisciplinary productions with an 11.7% visitor share (12.6% of the repertoire with 77 productions, and 12.1% of performances with 852). Dance productions brought in under a tenth of the audience – 7.9% (60 productions accounting for 9.8% of the repertoire, and 391 performances representing 5.5%), while puppet and object theatre productions saw a share of 3.6% (37 productions with 6.1% of the repertoire, and 522 performances representing 7.4%).

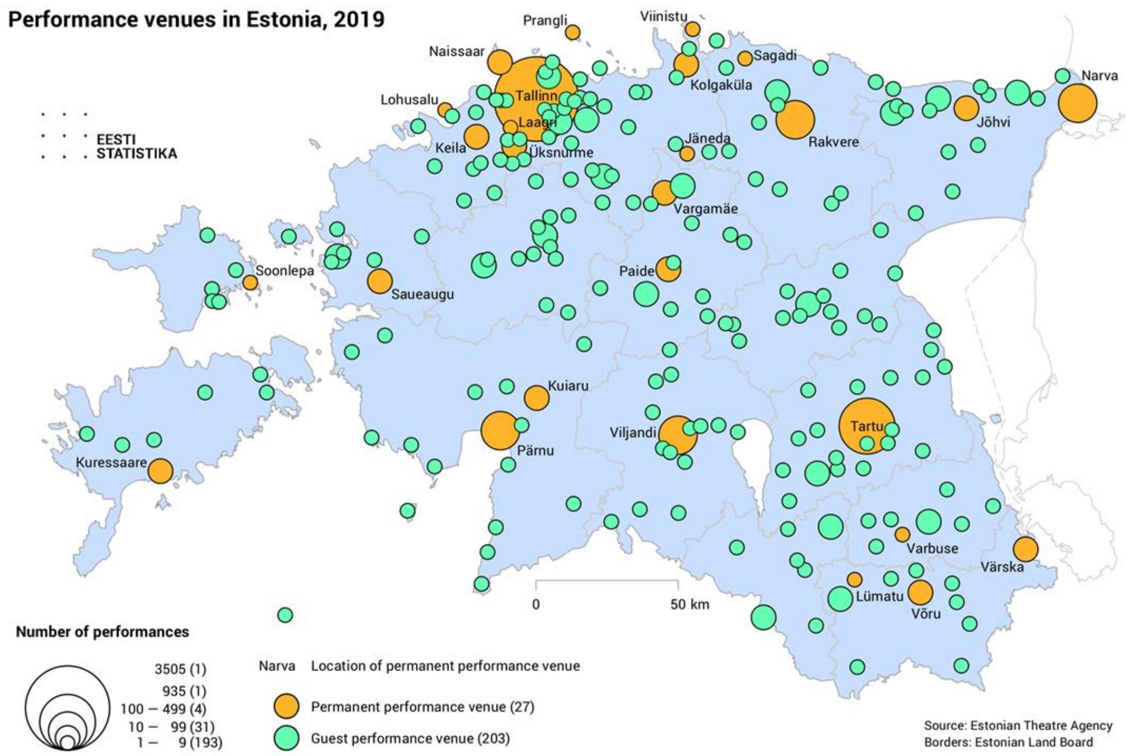
Repertoire

Looking at the share of new productions across all categories, it is interdisciplinary and dance theatre that rotate their repertoire most actively – new productions make up 58% and 41.7% of their repertoires respectively. Musical and puppet theatre productions enjoy a longer lifespan (both at 21.7%), while drama productions saw a rotation of 34.3% in their repertoire. As mentioned above, in 2019 drama productions represented a 63.9% share of the repertoire, with a 60.4% share of all new productions. This proportion has remained constant over the years – a stable 60% of the total, in both new and existing productions in repertoire.



It is also worth noting the origin of texts for drama productions in 2019: out of 390 drama productions, 45.6% (178) are texts written for the stage by Estonian authors (including 150 plays and 28 adaptations); when it comes to new drama productions (134 in total), Estonian authors represent an even higher share at 56% (75 productions, or 66 plays and 9 adaptations). Productions of works by foreign authors presented texts from 25 different countries. The most authors were from Russia (41), followed by the United Kingdom (27), the United States of America and France (both at 18), Sweden (14), Germany (10), Poland (6) and others.

The summer season, lasting from the end of May until September, included 86 productions (among them 15 productions by state and municipal theatre companies), of which 49 were new works. Performances were largely held at established summer venues or entirely new sites, with only 12 productions in traditional theatres.



Venues

Leaving aside the active summer season and the even more active amateur theatre scene, the visitor data confirms that there has been no increase in the number of performances held outside urban areas. Out of all visits to performances by Estonian theatre companies, a million of them (83.2%) occur in the six cities with permanent state or municipal theatre companies: Tallinn, Rakvere, Pärnu, Kuressaare, Tartu and Viljandi. That leaves the counties (and other towns and cities) with a 14.1% and tours abroad with a 2.7% audience share.

Tickets ** All the prices are shown without VAT.*

The average cost of a ticket has again followed a consistent upward trend compared to the previous year. In line with that, the growth of total ticket revenue from performance activity was 5% (€704,912). The average cost of a theatre ticket in 2019 was €13.44*, or slightly over 1% of the average monthly wage in Estonia. Across all disciplines, the highest average ticket cost was for musical productions, understandably so, – at €18.75* – and the lowest for puppet theatre productions at €6.3*. There were notable differences in ticket prices depending on the target audience. The highest average ticket cost was for youth productions at €17.6. There were relatively few productions aimed at young people – 38 (out of 610), however they appear to require a large budget. The majority of theatre productions were aimed at adults, with an average ticket cost of €14.85*, while productions intended for teenage audiences had a slightly lower average ticket cost of €13.92*. The lowest average ticket cost was for productions aimed at children and toddlers, with €8.75* and €5.17* respectively.

Theatres

The theatres with the largest visitor numbers were yet again Estonia (157,363), Vanemuine (152,601) and Estonian Drama Theatre (100,898). Among private companies, the highest visitor numbers were seen at stand-up theatre POINT (37,646), Tartu New Theatre (29,261), and Piip and Tuut Theatre (31,979), with nearly twenty-five thousand visitors each to VAT Theatre and Sõber Children's Theatre. Among the figures, the 'Theatre projects' line may also draw attention with the number of new productions (15) and visitors (36,916), which includes those collectives, organisations and collaboration initiatives that produce one or two shows a year or which do not legally consider themselves a theatre. The proportion of these theatre makers has been growing year-on-year. For 2019, data was presented by 21 different collectives (with 30 productions, 296 performances and 36,916 spectators).

Government Funded vs. Private Theatres

A comparison of theatres with state or municipal budgets and private theatre companies drew attention to the fact that while the number of productions in repertoire and the number of performances was nearly equal between the two groups, the audience share was not. The majority of theatregoers visited a state or municipal theatre venue, making up 68% of all visits. Private theatre companies had a 32% share. The average number of visitors was 86,933 per state/municipal and 11,542 per private theatre. In comparison to 2009 the percentage has shifted by 17 points. However, when it comes to new productions, the proportion of new work has been rising in private theatre companies – in 1999 this group had a 23% share of new productions, but by 2019 it had gone up to 59%. Nevertheless, comparing all the data between the two groups, the balance appears to have reached equilibrium. In terms of the number of productions in repertoire and performances given in 2019 they had a nearly equal share each. One can see a positive in the fact that more and more people find their way to independent performing arts institutions.

The analysis gave a clear indication that the balance of shares between the two groups was rather more similar between 1999 and 2009 than between 2009 and 2019, indicating that significant changes in the field have mainly occurred over the last decade.

International Movement

Visits by foreign performers to Estonia saw 57 companies touring 62 productions. Estonian theatre companies have traditionally given about a tenth of their performances abroad, with 2019 seeing a total visitor share of 2.7%. Broadly in line with the field in general, nearly half (44%) of the shows toured abroad were drama productions. In 2019 Estonian theatre companies performed 57 productions in 29 different countries.

21 theatre and other performing arts festivals with varying target audiences were held, all of which were international in nature.

Other Activity by Theatres

In addition to growing performance activity, in 2019 Estonian theatre companies also made a remarkable contribution to the wider culture scene. When we add all the festivals, concerts, balls, film viewings, lecture series and workshops to their regular performances, their collective contribution to culture adds up to 8,900 events for 1.43 million visitors.

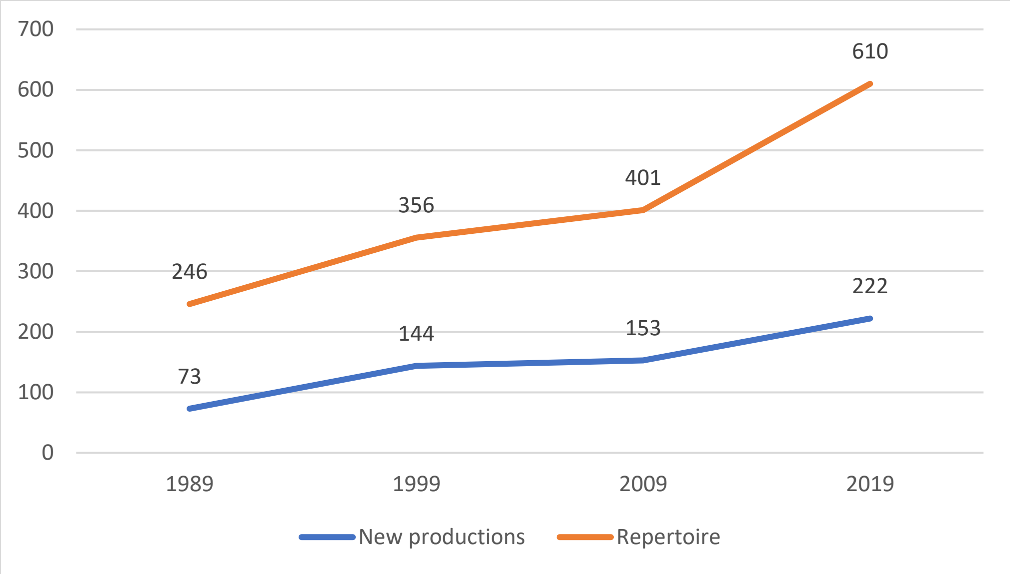
Comparison to Previous Years

A systematic approach to collating statistics about Estonian theatre was adopted beginning 2004, prior to that figures were collated as part of the annual chronicle *Teatrielu.* From 2004 until 2011, statistics about theatre were published in a dedicated print edition, and from 2012 onwards the statistics are accessible in an online database (statistika.teater.ee) and also included in the *Teatrielu* chronicle.

With a certain amount of comparable data already in store, one can reliably consider 2019 a top year in every aspect. Particularly so in light of 2020, with a global health crisis having introduced changes that will significantly impact future theatre making. This year we had Tiina Braun – a student from the University of Tartu – doing work experience at the agency as part of her sociology and information science degree; in cooperation with her we undertook a comparison of four specific years from the last four decades: 1989, 1999, 2009 and 2019.

During the entire span of 1989-2019, the number of theatre companies, productions in repertoire (incl. new productions) and performances made a steady rise, the largest fluctuations have occurred in the number of visitors.

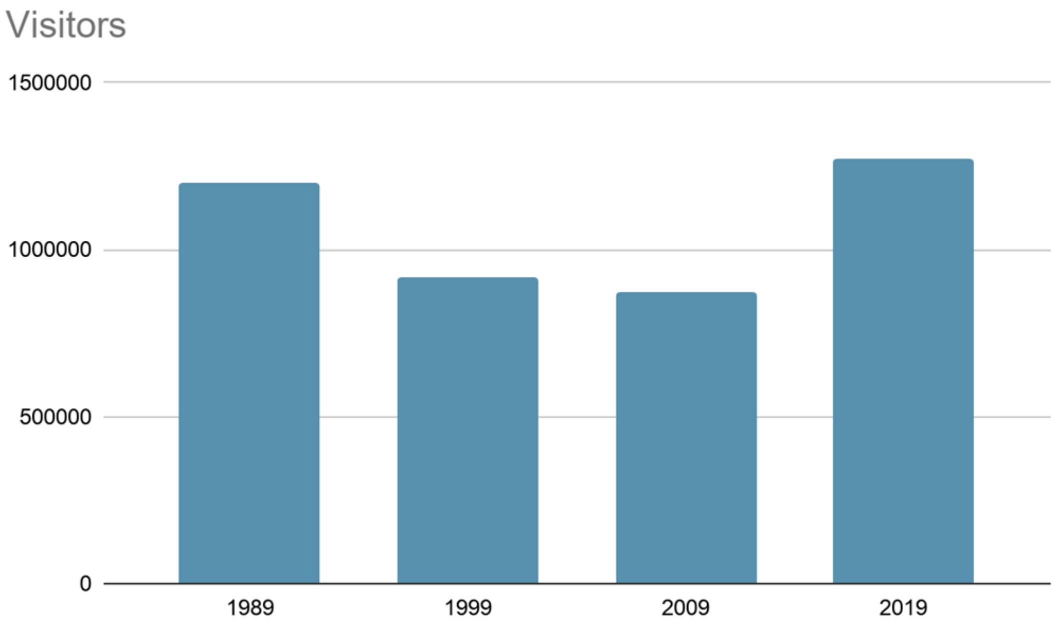
Our analysis was able to draw on data from 10 performing arts institutions for 1989, 19 institutions for 1999, 28 institutions for 2009, and 65 institutions for 2019. These figures do also reflect the reality out in the field, where the largest rise in the number of performing arts institutions has occurred in the last decade, and alongside this rise the entire theatre scene in Estonia has become more bountiful (meaning both in quantity and diversity).



Graph 1. *The number of new productions and productions in repertoire in Estonian theatres in 1989, 1999, 2009 and 2019.*

While the 1989 combined repertoire of theatre companies had a total of 246 productions, by 2019 this had grown by an extra 364 productions. The number of new productions has also risen remarkably. 2019 saw 222 new productions on stage, 149 more compared to 1989. The years 1999 and 2009 appear more similar, as there was no significant shift in the number of new productions or the repertoire as a whole – the difference in new productions comes to 9 and in the full repertoire to 47 productions. Graph 1 has indicated a clear rise in both the number of new productions and productions in repertoire, and we can see a similar growth in the number of performances. In 1989 performing arts institutions gave a total of 3,406 performances, however by 2019 this number had doubled (7,047 performances). Yet again the difference between 1999 and 2009 in terms of the number of performances given does not reflect a considerable change: 2009 saw a total of 4,731 performances, which is 245 more than in 1999.

As mentioned above, it is evident such consistent growth did not occur in the number of visitors. From 1989 to 2009 the visitor numbers kept declining, but had gone up again by 2019.



Graph 2. *The number of visits to Estonian theatre performances in 1989, 1999, 2009 and 2019.*

The highest overall visitor tally belongs to 2019, when 1,273,303 people attended a theatre performance. The fewest visits occurred in 2009 with just 873,802 in total. There may be several reasons behind the fall and rise of visitor numbers, such as political, economic and other factors. The most exceptional year in this comparison by its very nature is 1989, as Estonia was then still part of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the primary reason why 1999 and 2009 have few differences in their figures lies in the economic crisis during 2009 which affected visitor numbers. The increase in visitors in 2019 is a mark of improved economic conditions and people treating themselves to more theatre visits. Upon comparison of 2019 visitor numbers to the population of Estonia as recorded at the beginning of 2020 – according to Statistics Estonia it's 1,328,976 (Statistics Estonia, 2020) – one can say that in 2019 we had nearly as many theatre visits as there are people in the country. Another certain indication of an improved economic climate is the growth in the number of performing arts institutions over the years, leading to a more diverse repertoire and increased opportunities for theatregoers to find shows that cater to their individual interests.

The Estonian Theatre Agency has been consistently gathering theatre statistics since 2004, this data is relayed to Statistics Estonia, published in the online statistics database and the annual theatre chronicle *Teatrielu.* The statistics are collated and processed in cooperation with The Ministry of Culture and Estonian theatre companies. The data represents all state and municipal theatres – the so-called repertory theatres – who must present the statistics as part of their budget grant report: this includes the public opera and ballet company Estonia, municipal theatres, foundations, performing arts centres, as well as private and project-based theatre companies.

Do not hesitate to contact us!

Tiia Sippol

tiia@teater.ee