

Ilaria Tucci & Meeri Tiensuu

Disclosures of Integration in Devised Theatre Practices

How can integration practices and diversity be represented on the stages of Finnish theatres? How can theatre provide spaces to understand better what peace and co-existence entail? This essay reflects on the experiences from the co-creative workshop titled *New Narratives on Finnish Stages*. Moreover, we focus on devising theatre and dramaturgy improvisation to explore what integration means and can mean in today's Finland.

Introduction

In January 2021, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MinEdu) published the “Final Report of the Working Group for Cultural Policy, Immigrants and Promotion of Cultural Diversity”. The report resulted from a lengthy consultation by the working group and experts from the cultural and artistic field, including individuals with foreign backgrounds. This publication resulted from many years of discussions, lobbying, and reflections regarding the increasing diversity the Finnish population has been experiencing in the past decades. Through this document, the need for mainstreaming “into the planning and decision-making procedures in arts and cultural policy” was recognized and officially validated.¹

Alongside the Working Group activities, many cultural actors, including theatre companies and theatre houses, have been engaged in promoting and implementing diversity in their work.² For instance, the Finnish National Theatre (fin. Kansallisteatteri) has committed to showcase the diversity of the Finnish society in the different activities of the theatre, both among the audiences and on the stages.³ One example of how the National Theatre has engaged with diversity in their program is the play *Tytöille, jotka ajattelevat olevansa yksin*, co-written by Ujuni Ahmed and Elina Hirvonen, and directed by Satu Linnapuomi. The play premiered in September 2023 and received a warm welcome: Most of the shows were sold out, and the reviews praised the energy of the young actors and the strong message of the play.

Undoubtedly, *Tytöille, jotka ajattelevat olevansa yksin* can be seen as an important

1 MinEdu 2021, 3.

2 We acknowledge that the work on increasing diversity in the Finnish cultural sector started before the Ministry of Education and Culture launched its Working Group. Significant contributions have been made, for example, by Ruskeat Tytöt, Sonya Lindfors, and Geoffrey Erista.

3 Kansallisteatteri 2024.

piece of art in the Finnish theatre stages, as it engages with the complexity of living between cultures in Finland while giving voice and space to members of marginalized groups, such as the Somali and BIPOC girls. However, much work must be done to promote diversity and inclusion in theatre practices in Finland. In this essay, we share our experiences and reflections from the research project *Homeward: exploring co-creation practices towards integration (2022–2025)*. *Homeward* is a project funded by the Kone Foundation in which we have studied through co-creative workshops how integration is experienced in Finland. In this text, we reflect on the lessons we learned from the *Homeward* project, and more specifically from one workshop targeted at theatre makers in Finland.

Through this essay, we argue that there is an unexplored artistic potential in including foreign background theatre makers in co-creation processes, dramaturgies and devising practices, and that such inclusion could lead to more diversity on Finnish stages. We enter this discussion from the critical feminist peace research perspectives.⁴ Our workshop provided one example of how foreign-background theatre makers can be actively involved in co-writing and conceiving migrant dramaturgies.⁵ We assert that to truly reflect diverse narratives, it is essential to tailor and re-consider the dominant theatre practices and dramaturgies. By incorporating voices from foreign-background individuals and communities, theatre can deepen our understanding of the multifaceted stories of migration and integration. Echoing other scholars, we also state that the dynamics within theatre rehearsal rooms and performances are tightly intertwined with broader societal contexts.⁶ Theatre, therefore, becomes a mirror to society, helping us navigate and adapt to changes in society. Moreover, embracing an inclusive and diverse approach in dramaturgy encourages meaningful interactions and dialogues that embrace multilingualism and intercultural encounters both onstage and offstage.

The workshop – *New Narratives on Finnish Stages*

Our *New Narratives on Finnish Stages* workshop was organized at the New Helsinki Theatre Festival: *Who belongs to Finland?*⁷ The workshop was held in Helsinki on the 10th of March 2023 at the premises of Luckan, the Finnish-Swedish Information and Cultural Centre. The workshop was part of the workshop series of the research project *Homeward*, aiming to explore and reframe how integration is understood and practiced through co-creative practices. In line with the project's objectives and through devised theatre practices,⁸ we explored how integration practices can be dramaturgically and artistically represented on the stages of Finnish theatres.

4 Wibben et al. 2019; McLeod and O'Reilly 2019; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic 2021; Premaratna and Rajkopal 2021.

5 Meerzon and Pewny 2021.

6 Kuftinec 2009; Cohen et al 2011; Premaratna 2018; Leffler 2022.

7 Read more: <https://svenskateatern.fi/fi/new-theatre-helsinki-who-belongs-to-finland-festivaaleilla-juhlitaan-suomalaisen-nayttamotaitteen-monimuotoisuutta/>

8 Oddey 1994; Tucci 2022.

The workshop was advertised on different platforms, for instance the newsletter of TINFO and New Helsinki Theatre, the mailing list of the research team, as well as on social media and personal contacts of the research team. We received 16 registrations of people with different backgrounds in terms of genders, ages, education, and cultures.

While registering for the workshop, the participants were asked to answer the following question: “What are, in your opinion, the challenges in creating new narratives on Finnish stages?” The answers supported us in planning, facilitating, and reflecting on the workshop. The answers not only addressed barriers related to funding, resources, and language but also raised notions regarding the lack of inclusion of artists with foreign backgrounds in Finnish theatres. Moreover, the answers indicated that “[f]oreigners in Finland are often pigeonholed into only being able to tell stories about their struggle” (excerpt from the registration form answer). During the workshop preparation, we discussed how the migrant narratives and representations usually bounce between the successful story of an “integrated migrant” and the miserable life of an “excluded migrant”. All the different nuances in between, which compile the everyday existence and homemaking of many migrants, are often ignored in the mainstream representations of them. With our workshop, we wanted to give the participants a chance to share, narrate, and create stories that they considered meaningful. At the same time, we aimed to contribute to increasing diversity on Finnish stages.

After reading through the answer registration forms, an email was sent to the registered participants for further guidelines for the workshop. We asked them to prepare two things for the workshops: First, to bring an item which (may) represent integration practice(s) for them. Second, to take a quotation, sentence or poem related to the concept of integration or co-existence.

Finally, six theatre-makers showed up to the workshop. They had different professional backgrounds and connections with theatre. From our research team, three researchers, including the authors, joined the workshop. One of the researchers, who is also a professional theatre practitioner, facilitated the workshop’s activities with the help of the other researchers. In total, there were nine people present in the workshop, everyone with their personal relationship with the nexus of theatre-migration-diversity and with a broad range of nationalities, mother tongues, professions, ages, and genders. During the workshop, some moments of restitutions, improvisations and reading of texts, for example, were recorded with a video camera. For this essay, we as the authors have analysed those videos with the support of our observation notes and post-workshop reflections. We decided to use pseudonyms when referring to the workshop participants⁹

Integration and homemaking in devised theatre activities

The workshop started with an introduction during which the items and sentences were also presented. It was followed by the first activity in which children’s books were used as

9 When welcoming the workshop participants, everyone signed a consent form and agreed that their contributions and participation could be anonymously used as part of the research.

a starting point. We had more than twenty children's books in different languages, such as Finnish, German, Arabic, Italian, and French. All the books the researchers selected beforehand had a connection with the themes of encounters among diversity, inclusion, and integration. The main idea of using the books was to get inspired by the images regardless of the languages used.

After giving the participants time to review the books' images, we asked them to choose one character, situation, or emotion as a starting point for the workshop activities. Once the participants made their choices, we asked them to write a short description related to their chosen character, situation, or emotion, keeping in mind the urgency and the need for that character/situation/emotion. They were asked to freely think about the character, be the character, or refer to the character with the following guiding question: "What are the thoughts that freely are coming to you?" As an example, one participant provided the following:

Character: Bird with Long Legs;

Her action: Approaching a mysterious shadow;

Her feelings: Curiosity, longing.

This brief thinking-and-writing exercise was followed by the second activity where the created material was to be used. The following collective exercise included a round of soliloquies that the participants improvised using the characters, situations, or emotions created. We left the tables' setting and created a working space to work on the floor and positioned some chairs in the audience setting. In the working space, there were two chairs, not perfectly aligned but one closer to the audience and the other a bit further away; however, it was possible to see one another when sitting on the chairs. The round had a self-organized system that started with one participant and ended with the same one. The participant sitting in the front chair (A) was the one speaking, while the one sitting in the back (B) was silently listening. They were aware of each other's presence and were allowed to interact with the instruction that B would remain silent during the soliloquy. The soliloquy of A was built on the previously produced activity and improvised at that very moment. After three minutes, the alarm was ringing as a sign for A to conclude and leave the stage while B changed the seat to the front chair to become the speaking character (A). Another participant entered the stage and took the seat in the back, becoming B, the listener. The round went on until the first participant, who started as A, took the seat as the listener (B).

When analysing the video recordings of the soliloquies, we observed and identified 'moments of personal disclosures of integration'. We describe these ephemeral occasions as moments when it was not clear if the participants were entirely using their biographies or if they were playing a character improvised on the spot. For instance, when analysing the recorded video material, we paid attention to the soliloquy of Laura, who started the round of the chair exercise. Laura began her monologue with a broken voice, and in our interpretation full of emotional charge and intention. She performed her soliloquy in her mother tongue instead of using a language that everyone in the room could understand.

For us as her audience, Laura's words and body language seemed that she was thinking out loud and letting go of something she had been speculating on her own for a long time, but finally did it in public. At the end of her monologue, Laura said, "Thank you, Laura," mentioning her name. At that moment, the doubt arose for us: did she follow the instructions? Was Laura acting or was she just being herself? Did she use this exercise as a chance to let something go, something she had been processing for a while? Or was she using her professional acting skills and performing the character or moment from the book and coincidentally mentioning her name?

Laura's performance was very much linked with the topic of the workshop. In her soliloquy, Laura expressed her feelings of not being enough for/in Finland. "I am not good enough to be in the big stages",¹⁰ she would repeat several times. She brought to the stage a story in which the audience heard about her hard attempts to belong to Finland, but time after time, she still had the feeling that she failed and was not accepted. Whether her soliloquy was based on the children's books or not, it revealed important personal and emotional aspects of migrants and their homemaking processes.

According to Leffler, when working in the context of applied theatre, there might be a limitation in using participants' real-life experiences as the personal can become too disruptive of the intimacy and of the trust among the participants.¹¹ That is why "we may need fictional stories, mythic or archetypal stories to facilitate the type of play that will take us deeper into a dialogue about systemic iniquities".¹² Following Leffler's note, when planning the workshop, we decided to use the children's book illustrations as a starting point for devising characters, stories, and situations rather than personal experiences. We embraced existing images and illustrations to engage with the creative process. Nevertheless, devising theatre in the workshop seemingly became personal for many participants because the topics of integration and homemaking were relatable, familiar, embodied, and mundane for many of them. Having the books available in the room gave us a chance to return to them when needed, especially for taking distance from the personal stories emerging from the devising. Children's books became our external reference which we could use as a safe spot in case of need.

Temporalities of homemaking and integration

After the round of soliloquies, we took a break during which the facilitators divided the six participants into three pairs. After the break, the exploration of new narratives continued with pair work where the participants were asked to develop dialogues starting from the material already produced in the chair exercise. The pairs were suggested to include some circumstances or contexts, such as a bank, office, school, neighbourhood, social services office, workplace, café... It was also suggested that in their devising the pairs could use sub-themes, such as lack of trust, misunderstanding, colourfulness, language barrier, blaming someone, fun, learning new things, connected with the main theme of

¹⁰ Our translation.

¹¹ Leffler 2022.

¹² Leffler 2022.

integration and homemaking. The pairs were given little time to think and discuss what to do, but the scenes were mainly improvised in the working space.

Despite the instructions being the same for every pair, three scenes that were devised were completely different in terms of styles applied, languages used, and messages conveyed. The same instructions allow different creative processes.¹³ Similarly to the integration process, language plays a crucial role in devising theatre and improvisations; the decisions of the participants in using or not using their native languages impact the development of the devised dramaturgy. In the pair exercise, two couples used their native languages, playing around with the element of mis/understanding because of the different languages, while one pair used English as a *lingua franca*. Also, many different styles were devised and performed which implied different ways of working. One multilingual scene was about a car stuck in the snow, while the other one was an abstract dialogue on diversity through physical contact and mirroring the bodies of the workshop participants. The last scene, in English, was an existential dialogue between two characters who were both interrogating themselves on the sense of life.

From the pair exercise, participants' personal journeys of integration and homemaking emerged in the dramaturgical texture of the improvisation. The 'moments of personal disclosures of integration' were closely tied to the temporalities and phases that each participant was experiencing in their own homemaking process. The varying temporalities of the participants became an important element of the stories they represented in the improvisation.

Through the diverse phases and temporalities of the personal homemaking process, the participants contributed to the artistic exploration of new narratives and, together with the facilitators, created a 'liminal space' within the workshop. The liminal space in the workshop allowed everyone to explore and experiment with different roles, mirroring the processes people go through in real life as migrants or foreign-background individuals adjusting to Finland. Those adjustments may change and evolve over time while assuming the roles of mother, colleague, and taxpayer, for example. Reflecting on the exercise, we learned about the shifts in behaviour and identities through different phases of homemaking. For instance, the way a newcomer interacts and perceives the new environment differs in their approach and perspective as time passes. The exercise showed that temporalities in homemaking processes are crucial as well as individual and that settling down is rarely a linear process. Interestingly, time and temporality were the central themes of one of the scenes created by one pair. In their scene, Pekka and Eva explored an existential question of how identities are in continuous change and how our sense of belonging shifts over time.

Moreover, the role played by temporality in the integration processes of the participants and thus in the devising theatre was clear in the final activity which was an individual task. Everyone was asked to continue developing their character or situation by reacting to the instructions, which were given one at a time with intervals between one and three minutes. The instructions were meant to develop further the characters or situations already identified and devised by the participants in the previous exercises.

13 Maturana and Varela 1998.

The texts were read out loud and recorded before closing the workshop.

During her final monologue, Carla who was a fresh migrant in Finland wrote that she should be her best self in terms of succeeding in her integration process. Her character with a car stuck in the snow and in need of help would say: “Will I find anyone to help? Should I get a reflector? How interesting [it] is that this object had no meaning to me at all before Finland. (saying to herself) Be your best self and try all the strategies to integrate (consciously). GET A REFLECTOR!” In this exercise, getting a reflector, an item that did not mean anything to her before living in Finland, became the symbol of integration.

On the other hand, Laura, who has been living in Finland for more than ten years, expressed how she had made lots of efforts to understand and adjust to her new life. In her final text, again in her mother tongue, she wrote about the fatigue of living in such gloomy weather: “Oh, what grey colours there are out there! Who likes to live in a place like this?”¹⁴

These are a few examples of how devised theatre revealed ‘moments of personal disclosures of integration’. According to Leffler, play allows us to engage with those dimensions and emotions of ourselves that we usually suppress in everyday life.¹⁵ When assuming roles, we play “a mutant version of ourselves, and when we collectively play out a relationship or a society, we are co-creating a world that reflects the ones from which we are embedded”.¹⁶ Those moments not only mirror our personal lives and identities; they can also lead to emancipation. By engaging in devised theatre and migrant dramaturgy, we believe it is possible to experience collective learning and transformation. Furthermore, these processes can deepen understanding of migration and integration and promote the potential of theatre as a tool for exploring and reshaping the multiple voices and experiences in our society.

Conclusions

One of the continuous questions in peace research, especially within our increasingly diversifying societies, is how to manage conflicts that arise from cultural diversity and differences. As we navigate an intercultural everyday life where different needs, beliefs, and interests meet, finding ways to deal with interpersonal conflicts and to foster peaceful co-existence emerges. Intercultural theatre practices can serve as a meaningful response to these challenges and align also closely with the aims of feminist peace research. These practices can inspire people to reconsider aspects of their identities, to challenge norms and dominant narratives, and to redefine ways to ethically engage with differences.¹⁷ We argue that theatre holds a great potential to examine these complex matters while fostering understanding and co-existence.

In this text, we have shared our experience to exemplify how foreign-background theatre makers can be involved and actively engaged in co-creation processes, dramaturgy,

14 Our translation.

15 Leffler 2022.

16 Leffler 2022, 9.

17 Leffler 2022.

and devising practices that could lead to more diversity on Finnish stages. In a limited three-hour workshop time, we could devise and co-create written texts and improvised scenes with the participants. We consider these initial efforts as the beginning of what could evolve into a more profound artistic exploration. We – the authors and some of the workshop participants – are willing to pursue this exploration further. We envision a follow-up where we can investigate deeper into the artistic process, continuing to develop and find new narratives and performances for the Finnish stages.

With this essay, we wish to encourage Finnish theatre makers and scholars to seek intercultural cooperation with an inclusive approach. We understand the extra effort that inclusive practices often require, such as reaching the potential collaborators and allocating time and resources for intercultural communication and possibly for interpretations from one language to another. However, these efforts are essential steps towards creating a more inclusive and representative theatrical landscape in Finland.

For those who opt into theatre-making, applied theatre can offer a space of dynamic, intercultural play. It can provoke us to explore high-stakes topics through epic narratives. And in certain forms, it can enable us to brush up against unyielding oppression and to regroup, in ways that invite reflexive analyses of power and inequity.¹⁸

As Finnish society, alongside other European societies, continues to evolve, we face ongoing challenges to our everyday co-existence. Devised and applied theatre practices can serve as important tools for not only to understand the present moment but also to envision the future we have yet to see. Through theatre we can imagine and craft a world that reflects the diversity and potential of our collective experiences and dreams.

Postdoctoral researcher **Ilaria Tucci** (Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University) specializes in the co-production of knowledge, collective dramaturgies, applied theatre practice, and peace research. Besides her academic career, she has extensive experience in community-based theatre practices and devised theatre methods; for over twenty years, she has worked with youth, children, and non-professional and professional actors in collaborative theatre projects, where dramaturgy was often created with a group of participants. During her career as a playwright, she has written eight theatre plays.

MA **Meeri Tiensuu** (Peace and Conflict Studies, Tampere University 2021; Development Studies, University of Helsinki 2019) is a doctoral researcher at the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) in Tampere University. In her PhD, Tiensuu investigates how peace and conflict intersect within migrant integration in Finland. She is a feminist peace researcher interested in studying and understanding intersections of inequalities, co-existence, and creative, collaborative methodologies in knowledge production.

¹⁸ Leffler 2022, 193.

References

- Björkdahl, Annika and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic. 2021. "Methodologies for feminist peace research." In Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, and Catia Cecilia Confortini (eds). *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 40–49.
- Cohen, Cynthia E., Roberto Gutiérrez Varea and Polly O. Walker. 2011. "The Permeable Membrane and Moral Imagination: A Framework for Conceptualizing Peacebuilding Performance." In Cynthia Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea, and Polly O. Walker (eds). *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict: Volume II: Building Just and Inclusive Communities*. New York, NY: New Village Press, 161–190.
- Kansallisteatteri. 2024. "Yhteisöt ja osallisuus." <https://www.kansallisteatteri.fi/tietoa-meista/yhteisot-ja-osallisuus> (10.6.2024)
- Kuftinec, Sonja. 2009. *Theatre, Facilitation, and Nation Formation in the Balkans and Middle East*. Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leffler, Elliot. 2022. *Applied Theatre and Intercultural Dialogue: Playfully Approaching Difference*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Linnapuomi, Satu. 2023. *Tytöille, jotka ajattelevat olevansa yksin*. Ujuni Ahmed (author), Eva Buchwald (dramaturg). Kansallisteatteri, Helsinki, Finland. 21.9.2023.
- Maturana, Humberto and Francisco Varela. 1998. *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston: Shambhala.
- McLeod, Laura and Maria O'Reilly. 2019. "Critical peace and conflict studies: Feminist interventions." *Peacebuilding* 7:2, 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1588457>
- Meerzon, Yana and Katharina Pewny. 2021. *Dramaturgy of Migration. Staging Multilingual Encounters in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Routledge.
- Ministry of Education and Culture (MinEdu). 2021. *Art, Culture and Diverse Finland: Final Report of the Working Group for Cultural Policy, Immigrants and Promotion of Cultural Diversity*. Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland 2021:5. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-263-884-7>
- Oddey, Alison. 1994. *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Premaratna, Nilanjana. 2018. "Theatre for peacebuilding: transforming narratives of structural violence." *Peacebuilding* 8:1, 16–31.
- Premaratna, Nilanjana and Praveena Rajkopal. 2021. "The Arts as a Peacebuilding Approach: Feminist contributions and directions". In Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Elise Féron and Catia Cecilia Confortini (eds). *Routledge handbook of feminist peace research*, London: Routledge, 260–269.
- Tucci, Ilaria. 2022. *Community-Based Theatre as Conflict Transformation in Lampedusa: Co-Producing Knowledge about Life at the Militarised Border of Europe*. PhD diss., Tampere University. Tampere: Tampere University Press. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-2376-9>
- Wibben, Annick T. R., Catia Cecilia Confortini, Sanam Roohi, Sarai B. Aharoni, Leena Vastapuu and Tiina Vaittinen. 2019. "Collective Discussion: Piecing-Up Feminist Peace Research." *International Political Sociology* 13:1, 86–107. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly034>