

**STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL MEMORY:
ADAPTATIONS OF OSKAR LUTS'S *SPRING* IN THEATRE
AND FILM**

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Abstract. The article is focused on stereotypes as cognitive phenomena, as well as on cultural mechanisms of representation and memorization, by studying their formation, petrification and decomposition more broadly in culture, and more specifically in theatre and film. For an empirical example, I draw on the Estonian novel *Spring* by Oskar Luts, and on its adaptations in theatre and film. Theatre as an art form is constituted by two specific conditions: firstly by a performance, which is connected with the performer's body; and secondly by the presence of the spectator. In the performative arts, artefacts lack a material carrier; the primary carrier of a production is human memory. Theatre can thus be considered an art of memory – an art of remembering, recalling, reminiscing and reiterating. Such repetitions give rise to phenomena which can be called stereotypes. Performances function as special storehouses and recreational tools of stereotype and identity, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging personal and collective memories.

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1. Introduction

Stereotypes as social phenomena gain their power from everyday practice, social agreement, and tradition. Usually they have a lengthy historical background that gives the power of perpetual validity to symbolic and speech acts that are performed using stereotypes (see e.g. McConachie 1992). To attain a deeper level of generality, stereotypes must be explicitly or implicitly shared by an entire community. And the bigger is the community, the bigger the legitimacy of the figure.

Both theatre and film provide stages for acts of collective commemoration, actors do so by embodying characters and performing stories and audience by perceiving and remembering them. Whereas films, once recorded, become part of

the stable archive of collective memory, theatre as a series of embodied acts lacks preservable material artefacts. The primary carrier of a production is human memory: the memory of both the performers and the spectators. Thus, theatre can be considered an art of memory – an art of remembering, recalling, reminiscing and reiterating.

In his book *The Haunted Stage* (2003), theatre researcher Marvin Carlson draws our attention to theatre's reiterative and preservative nature. According to Carlson, reiteration in theatre proceeds on at least four levels: spatial (theatre buildings), dramaturgic (plays), material (primarily actors) and the level of reception. Such repetitions also give rise to phenomena which we call stereotypes. Theatre buildings simply frame performances, although the stage in itself - unlike airplane black boxes or the many other places that function as memory banks – does not preserve anything, rather it is designed to be an empty place free of former connotations. But plays (especially classics) and actors are the main sources for the preservation and creation of stereotypes. Since theatre directors and actors are also members of the community, where particular stereotypes circulate, they can predict the reception of audiences and are therefore able either to strengthen or deconstruct stereotypes. Consequently, theatrical performances can become rituals of remembering – reproductions of the past, acts of recollection, which are at the same time attempts to impose interpretations on the past and to sculpt the mind, and through this to shape social identity (Burke 2003:48).

In this article I will focus on stereotypes as cognitive phenomena for perceiving, collecting and memorizing new information, as well as on cultural mechanisms of representation and preservation of collective myths and traditional values. The phenomenology of stereotypes is exposed by studying their formation, petrification and decomposition more broadly in culture, and more specifically in theatre. As an empirical example I draw on the Estonian novel *Spring* by Oskar Luts, and on its interpretation in theatre and film.

2. Formation and function of stereotypes in cultural memory

In scientific discourse, stereotype (Greek *stereós* 'solid, hard' + *typos* 'print, figure') is a term most often used in psychology and sociology. Both social psychologists and cognitive psychologists state that generally people tend to simplify the reality, collecting knowledge rather at the molar level in unifying similarities than handling every single feature in its pure form. Thus the creation and application of complex fixed images, a form of cognitive figure usually defined as stereotypes, is one of the primary means for occupying the world. Stereotypes are mostly not created by an individual person, instead they are passed on from one person, group or generation to another through education and life practice.

Thinking in stereotypes has gathered additional strength and functionality in an age where the grand myths and tales about the way the world operates have

lost their validity and credibility. Stereotypes have much in common with mythologies: they primarily consider and explain the mystical Other, the strange, be it another nation or gender, the two concepts most closely associated with identifying a person and stereotypical thinking, but more broadly all unfamiliar features. It's precisely the archetypal nature of stereotypes that makes them rather resilient to various processes of undermining and even to deconstruction. Since figurative thinking is led by automatism, people turn to stereotypes when short of time, in complicated situations, in case of contradictory or insufficient information and often just from convenience.

As a consequence, thinking in stereotypes is comfortable and secure, as it makes the world and its people seemingly fit into the overall system, and, knowing this, the subject gains control over his or her surroundings. By the same token, the atypical is difficult to generalize and control, because it is not known what is typical in the atypical. Cognitive psychology presents us with many examples of how and why novel or atypical phenomena are frequently neglected as aberrant or unimportant, or are lumped into the same category with known phenomena (Fiske and Taylor 1991:468–470). Consequently, human beings notice and memorise what they already know and remember. For a novel cognitive figure to appear, time and a large amount of empirical material is required.

Both in psychological as well as in sociological discourse, the notion of 'stereotype' usually carries a markedly negative connotation because it is considered to be a tool of simplifications and mental oppression. But stereotypes also have some positive functions. Stereotypes as cognitive figures help to perceive, code, analyse, memorise and transmit new information faster and more effectively. On the level of personal and collective identity, they define and reinforce the subject's identity, guarantee an inter-group homogeneity and solidarity, and in the end produce a feeling of security for both the individual and society (Rapport and Overing 2000:346).

However, the legitimacy of stereotypes as inherited or created cognitive units needs constant retention and verification, and this is done based on everyday life, social practices, and artistic experience. From early on, art as an ideological institution has participated in the process of constantly shaping and preserving traditions and memories, whereby the remembered past is transformed into myth (i.e. ways by which public memories are transmitted). In what follows, I will narrow down the topic and ask how, why and for what reasons stereotypes are created, used and interpreted in the discourse of arts and cultural memory, using Oskar Luts's *Spring* as an empirical case study.

3. Recreation of stereotypes in theatre and film adaptations of Oskar Luts's *Spring*

The Estonian classic, *Spring*, by the hugely popular Oskar Luts was written between 1912 and 1913 and depicts life in a turn-of-the-century village school.

Here we have Toots, a prankster with wild fantasies, an inept suck-up Kiir, an introverted, romantically and aesthetically sensitive Arno, a handsome and confident musician Imelik, a slow and straightforward stocky Tõnisson, and the self-centred beauty Teele. The author's point of view is given through the eyes of Arno – a rather extraordinary bright teenager whose gaze and worldview is veiled by nameless yearning and melancholy. The latter is considered to be one of the main characteristics of atmosphere in Luts's works and his attitude towards the modern man (Undusk 1987). For a young reader, always optimistic and inventive, though with a distinctive lack of enthusiasm for learning Toots could be a proper role model, also his attention catching actions seem more fascinating than the lyrical reflections of Arno. The most unpleasant character is probably the assiduous Kiir although he does not make a completely negative impression, evoking just pity and laughter. All the main characters in the novel represent different types of individuals, who have become eponymous common nouns for several generations of Estonians over the course of the 20th century. Recalling their days at school, Estonians often describe the Tootses and Kiirs, Tõnissons and Teeles of their class.

There are no remarkably strong or significant antagonists to the group of schoolchildren in the plot of *Spring*. Only two ideologically significant events emerge: frictions with the parish priest and a mud-fight with German boys. Both battles seem initially to be won by the Estonian boys, but soon they must pay a heavy price for their victories. However, social classes and problems have not played a significant part in the reception and interpretation of this work. The classmates' different economic backgrounds and conflicts and the more troubled adult side-plot centring on the boozy bellringer Lible, are almost forgotten in favour of youthful adventures: the first clandestine alcohol, scaring classmates at night, skating and snowball fights, disruptions in class, etc. Thus in many respects *Spring* can be compared to other popular works of literature, which are sometimes called children's books but which actually function as bridges between different periods of life, between the generations and between different social and local identities. To name a few: 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer', by Mark Twain, 'Master Detective Blomquist', by Astrid Lindgren, 'Harry Potter', by J. K. Rowling, etc.

For a lot of people, the most intense association with fiction takes place during their school days, and this gives rise to one of the pedagogic functions of theatre and film – to be a source of relatively attractive and concentrated artistic information, and to popularise literature. The tradition of dramatisation of epic prose for theatre began in the 19th century and was partly connected to the emergence of realistic novels. *Spring* was dramatised and staged for the first time in many different theatres all over Estonia at the second half of the 1930s, but the biggest success was achieved in the Estonian Drama Theatre (premiere in 1937) with 40 000 spectators. The production concentrated strongly on the comic adventures of Toots, played by 47 year-old actress Mari Möldre who had already proved popular as Toots with her feuilletons and variety performances. Photos

demonstrate that Möldre's Toots, with greasy hair and running nose, did not physically differ so much from Kiir (See Plate 3, Photo 1, and Plate 4, Photo 2.).

The practice of dramatizing Luts's narrative reached an important milestone in 1969 with the film¹ and theatre productions² of *Spring*. Whereas earlier theatrical interpretations tended to emphasize the comic aspect of the story, Voldemar Panso's 1969 staging and Arvo Kruusement's film both proceed from the viewpoint of the melancholy Arno, resulting in a more bittersweet tone of the film. Veljo Tormis's joyless yet alluring music contributed to the overwhelming mood. With its melancholy tone and constantly surfacing problems, the film's deeper undercurrents follow the author's original intentions much more closely than many earlier and latter theatrical versions. The conditions for the reception of these different art forms also play a role: a reader's or television viewer's solitary smile might easily turn into a burst of laughter in the theatre.

Another fascinating phenomenon concerns other immensely popular Estonian films, known by every Estonian, seen by most of the people numerous times and from which they can quote verbatim. Some examples: *Spring* (1969), *Summer* (1976), 'Men Don't Cry' (1968), 'The Last Relic' (1969), 'Here We Are!' (1979) etc. The popularity of these films is not so much based on their indisputably high artistic level, but rather on the general comic tone and familiar, beloved, Estonian actors. With the exception of *Spring* and *Summer*, the fact that these films are based on literary works has not had a considerable impact, meaning that this fact is usually not actively present in the viewer's consciousness. An integral element for them in becoming a cult film is rather the frequency with which they have been broadcast on television. The numerous broadcasts and the social nature of film-watching have turned a cult film into something that binds different generations and tastes into a means of preserving cultural continuity. Enjoyment based on repetition and familiarity (such as repeatedly watching/reading the same work), especially prevalent among smaller children, is not alien to adults, as it helps to add continuity to living in the chaos of contemporary society, and increases the feeling of security. The above argument is supported by researchers of popular culture, who have pointed out that a culture based on mass production will give rise to new heroes, icons and myths, all of which foster thinking in stereotypic categories (see e.g. Barthes 1970, Browne 2005).

As *Spring* has sequels (*Summer* and *Autumn*) in literature, film (where the main characters are played by the same actors who age along with their characters) and theatre, therefore we can provisionally speak of the first Estonian series, the full annual cycle, which remained unfinished by both Luts and the Estonian film-makers. Since the mythic time circle is not closed / finished, people can always return to the beginning, to the childhood of a person and a culture, with the possibility to choose between repetition and a new level within the circle.

¹ Scriptwriters Kaljo Kiisk and Voldemar Panso, directed by Arvo Kruusement.

² Directed by Voldemar Panso.

The film established a particularly strong canon of performing *Spring* in theatre as well, best expressed by recurring and immutable character types, their appearance, voice and intonations, and this holds true even with the deconstruction of literary classics during the past couple of decades. The canon of *Spring* is comprised of lanky and red-haired Kiirs, portly and phlegmatic Tõnissons, fair-haired and snappish Teeles, etc. (Epner 2002:18). Reading the very first page of *Spring*, it probably comes as a surprise for many that the bully Toots has, in the author's vision, a rather repugnant look: a pock-marked face, crooked nose and long, tangled, yellowish hair. The 'proper' Toots (played by Aare Laanemets in the film) is a rather handsome clear-eyed young man with dark curly hair. In the film, in addition, there is a marked visual contrast between the two protagonists, the dark haired Toots and fair-haired Arno. To this is added the unusual-looking red-haired Kiir, representing a third contrast. However, the canon of *Spring* is not limited only to the outward looks, qualities and mannerisms of the characters, but also to the choice of scenes, the structure of a *mise-en-scène*, and much else (See Plate, Photo 3, and Plate 6, Photo 4.).

Perhaps the only exception to this canon is Madis Kõiv's rewriting of *Spring* titled *Winter* and its 1996 production in the Theatre Vanemuine. Kõiv made an attempt to close the annual cycle of Luts by transporting the well-known characters and events to the 1940s, to the point where the Second World War and following events put an end to an orderly and logical world for him and for the next few generations. The play starts with Arno's arrival in his home village where all events of *Spring* are re-performed, even though some of the characters are dead, some deported to Siberia and the rest have grown old. The war has ended the golden age of innocence and divided the people into leavers, adapters and self-preservers (Arno, Toots, Kiir). The latter are anchored in past memories which cause them suffering. The title is ambivalent because it refers both to the last name of Arno as well as to the fading of life – death, which closes the life circle.

Attempts to interpret *Spring* more boldly or to deconstruct it even just a little have met with vigorous resistance from the audiences because the core identity of Estonian-ness is attached to one particular visual representation of this text. The question is no longer what this work directly represents, but what sort of memories it activates in the minds of the performers and spectators, and what sort of emotions it evokes. As I have tried to argue, stereotypical representations, by binding and confirming already stored memories, only deepen the feeling of order, stability, and the undivided unity of the cosmic whole.

Theatre depicts, shows a particular situation, particular people and particular ways of thinking: it tries to capture the general through the individual. But generalization in principle always implies a certain simplification, a disregard for exceptions, ignoring extraneous details, and the amplification of what the typical entails. An artfully created character will find a strong referential field in reality: it turns into a concise portrayal of many different people. Due to the limitations of scope and bodily representations, rough art-form-specific sketches of types dominate in theatre and film. Furthermore, the cultural experience of con-

temporary people is so rich that almost every fictional character reminds us of somebody else – be it another character, another person or at least a different role played by the same actor – and is often reducible to a primal prototype or a type of character.

The social psychologist Serge Moscovici argues that all representations (the arts among them) are born from the need to turn the unknown into the known and the familiar, and this may happen in two distinct ways: by anchoring or by reification. In anchoring, new ideas and phenomena are tied to categories, images or contexts that are already familiar, and this is primarily accomplished through naming and grouping. Reification is used primarily for abstract phenomena, for which a spatial or image-based correspondence is found in the form of a thing or a person (Moscovici 1984:24–43). Ritualistic repetition, *Spring*, and the entire literary ‘cycle of the seasons’ in general, has, for Estonians, become one of the key texts (i.e. both the anchor and the thing) both for mapping and understanding social relationships, as well as for a nostalgia-driven return to childhood. Nostalgic childhood memories are often associated with an abstract and undirected feeling of bittersweet loss, as well as several comic occasions that help overcome this pain. As a harrowing representation of emotions associated with long-gone childhood, *Spring* abolishes the boundary between personal and fictional memories by constantly taking the subjects back, both to their own as well as to cultural memories.

“The space of memory is like the space of theatre: there is no separate past and present and future there. Everything is intertwined together. That is because it is carried in a human being, in whom everything is intertwined as well” (Tormis 2006:217).

Yet over time, all beloved human characters and typical situations turn into fixed stereotypes that may seem charming, but also increasingly worn out, simplified or even outdated. For example, what should we make of the rural representation of Estonian-ness in the 21st century? Do these images still speak to anyone? If not, it is a sign of the disintegration of the community or communities that originally surrounded such imagery.

4. Preservation and (re)creation of cultural memory through texts and through performance

In his paper *Some Thoughts on the Typology of Cultures*, Juri Lotman distinguishes between two types of cultures based on their corresponding treatment of past experiences and memory: cultures based on rituals and symbolic signs that value order and continuity; and others, oriented at singular events and writing (Lotman 1992:103). This means that in communities that do not employ writing, there is a constant struggle to pass on what is considered primary: knowledge and truths with a permanent value, the so-called universals, which could perhaps be called stereotypes in the present context. A community that employs writing does

not seemingly have to spend much effort on remembering such universals, as they are based on the belief that everything relevant has already been written down, and if need be, one can always make use of such writings.

In the development of writing-based cultures, two general types of cultures can be distinguished: the so-called classic culture, which focuses on familiar artistic language, familiar topics and characters, and the (post)modern culture type, originating in the late 19th century, which expects novelty from art. The classical culture type operates primarily with stereotypes, and this has been perceived as good or bad in different periods. On the one hand, it represents an attempt to preserve order and coherence: the popularization of socially relevant universal knowledge (e.g. biblical narratives, history) and values (e.g. bravery, honesty or marriage) is employed to preserve them and to propagate the behaviour based on these ideologies. In addition to this so-called didactic purpose, taking its origin from the creator-producer, stereotypes also have a psychological impact: a piece of art that operates with familiar figures creates a feeling of security in an uncertain world constantly in flux, as well as making strange phenomena familiar and comprehensible (but whether into adequate phenomena, is rather doubtful).

Two mediums must be discussed with respect to memory and stereotypes in theatre: on the one hand there is writing, such as a play or any other dramatic text, able to preserve knowledge unchanged and in great detail, and on the other hand there is the corporeal memory of human beings. It is due to writing that theatre has preserved its historic connections with earlier and different theatrical traditions: drama texts link us with distant authors and archetypal characters and situations, sifted from theatre practice; theatre stories and criticism, remembrances, textbooks and scripts link us with earlier acting styles, theatre practices and practitioners. But it is thanks to the primary element of theatre, the unique psychophysics of each individual actor, that every role and hence every performance is always an original interpretation of the literary text. For example, Toots depicted by different actors is distinctive even when the performers are attempting to mimic each other, to say nothing of the variegated nature of each performance of an actor's role. This phenomenon of theatre art seems to exclude the detailed preservation of cultural stereotypes through the ages. If we compare embodied memory with writing, it seems that the body as a data carrier is much less trustworthy, more imprecise and has a much lower capacity than writing with its unlimited capabilities. But the body is capable of preserving more diverse types of information (audiovisual in addition to the verbal), and guarantees the variability, flexibility and vitality of cultural heritage, as well as its capability of adapting to different circumstances and communities. The medium and dynamics of theatre is comparable to folklore; moreover, in Estonia, the number of practitioners and spectators is pushing theatre to the level of folk culture.

When an actor creates a stage character, he or she is dependant on four main factors: depiction of the character in text, tradition (based on social, psychological or artistic stereotypes) of depiction of the character, psychophysics of the actor, memory bank of the actor. Both Stanislavski's system and method of acting stress

the importance of the personal emotional memory of an actor in the process of performing arts. Emotional memory helps an actor to understand and individualize a character and vitalize the recreation process of the role. But on the other hand, theatre practice indicates that characters created in rehearsals will undergo something that we could perhaps call a purification process during the performance: based on the audience's reactions, the actors emphasize certain qualities in their characters, and omit those aspects that do not elicit a response from the spectators. Theatre is therefore also a test site of a sort, where social nerve and shared mental properties are created and scrutinized. When, among an audience, a realization that something truly distinctive of a particular social or cultural group has been captured on stage, understood and acknowledged by everyone, an intoxicating feeling of belonging appears among the otherwise socially and culturally heterogeneous company. Thus, an actor or director's very personal and distinctive work could be turned into stereotypes during the collective process of rehearsal, or during performance, in collaboration with audiences. And this all happens in the name of establishing communication and mutual understanding.

It cannot thus be argued that theatre merely deals with simple re-presentations, as even when a production makes use of old texts, houses and actors, all elements undergo a complex process of selection and interpretation; and since the artistic outcome is directly dependent on individual components, the precise reproduction of the same work in another time or in another place turns out to be highly difficult. (Producers often attempt to enforce this principle, by dictating the smallest of details of certain works, such as musicals, although even their mechanisms for control are limited.) The attitude of modernist theatre is to make a consciously radical reevaluation and deconstruction of the heritage of the past. Such a style or ideology can be treated as a deconstructive activity – the demolition of old texts, myths and stereotypes in order to escape their domination; although on the other hand it can also be considered as a reconstructive activity, driven by the desire to remember the past and its heritage, to understand it more deeply, to learn from it, to create new connections, to reappraise, to make merry within the limits of the subject.

5. Coda

Compared with other art forms, the distinctive feature of theatre lies in its characteristic medium – the human body. If we compare the bodily memory of human beings with writing or with imagery, it may appear that the body is the most untrustworthy, imprecise and least efficient of all information vehicles. But the body has a capacity for storing much more diverse (emotional in addition to verbal and audiovisual) information, and to assure a more varied, flexible and viable cultural heritage, as well as the capacity to adapt to different circumstances and communities. Artists make an effort to translate their internal experiences into

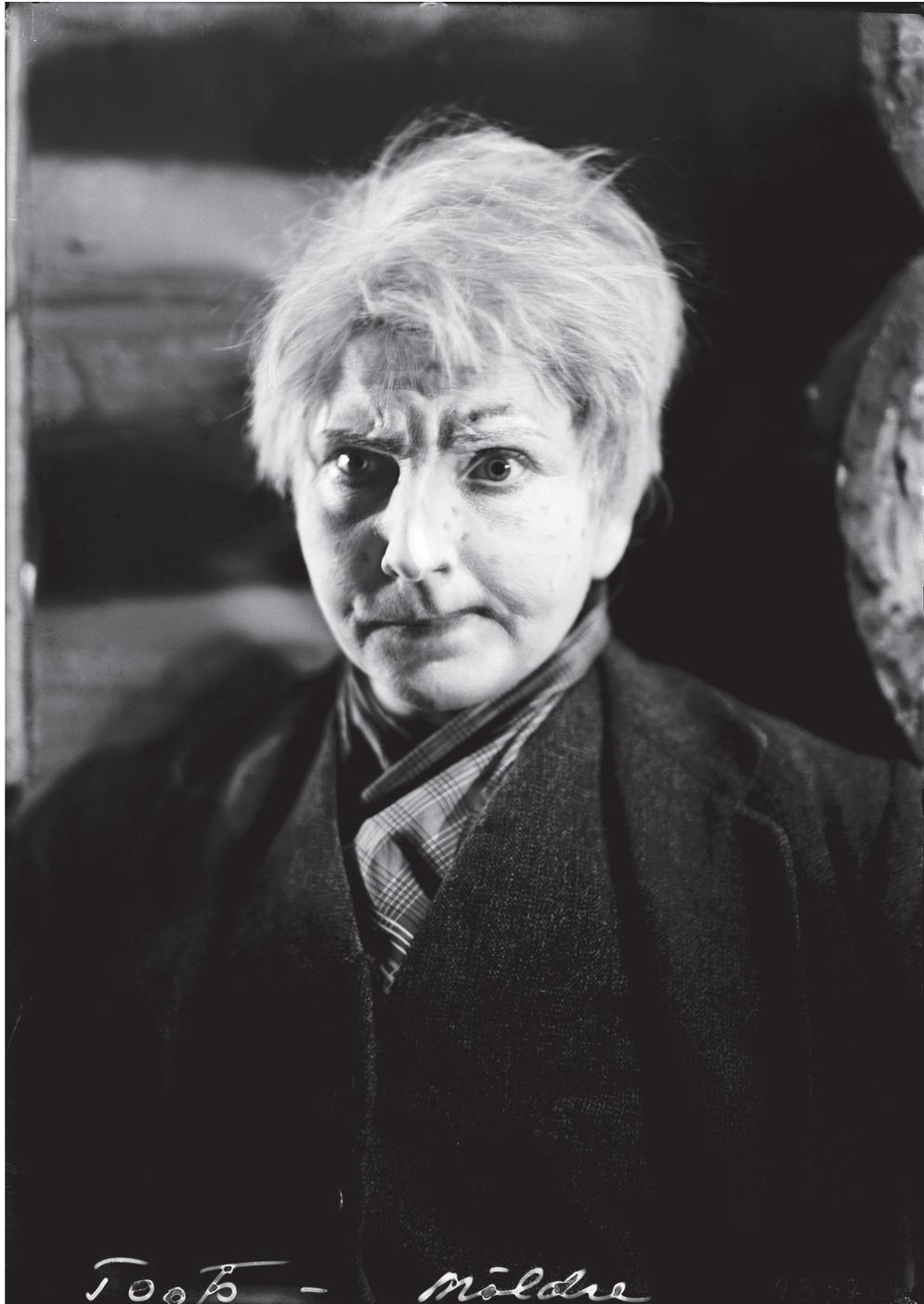
explicit discursive signs of ‘memory that is locked away in each and every one of us like a healed wound’ (Kott 1992:55), at the same time knowing that it is impossible to separate memory from stored bodily experiences or to present a total translation. The body of a performer with its fixed nature and repeated performances remains the same, while at the same time being constantly renewed in new combinations and always challenging the memories of both performers and spectators. Thus performances as communicative acts function as special store-houses and tools for recreating stereotypes and identities, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging personal and collective memories.

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*Photo 1. Toots – Mari Möldre. Spring at the Estonian Drama Theatre
1937. Photo: the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.*



*Photo 2. Toots – Mikk Mikiver (right), Kiir – Lembit Ulfsak (left).
Spring at the Estonian Youth Theatre 1969.
Photo by H. Saarne, the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.*



*Photo 3. Toots – Aare Laanemets. Film Spring
(Tallinnfilm 1969, H. Kruusement).*



*Photo 4. Toots – Tanel Ingi.
Spring at the Ugala Theatre 2002. Photo by E. Loit.*