

CAREER TIPS

How do establish a new theatre in a nation of 1.3 million people?

ENCATC talked with Reeli Lonks, the director/manager in 2015-2017 and the current project and international relations manager of Must Kast (Black Box), a independent theatre company in Tartu, Estonia founded in 2014 by a theatre course of Tartu University Viljandi Culture Academy, today a member of ENCATC.



Photo: Maris Sarvik

ENCATC: What is the story behind Must Kast? Why did you want to start an independent theatre company?

Reeli Lonks: The story began in Tartu University Viljandi Culture Academy, where a group of young aspiring actors started to study theatre and acting. They found a great synergy and became a remarkable ensemble. Their professor, well-known actor and director, Kalju Komissarov, inspired them to create their own theatre and continue as troupe after graduating. He always said to young actors *"Nobody wants or needs you, build yourself up, be useful and memorable on your own"*. These words inspired the

strong-minded and ambitious students to open a new theatre during their studies in 2014 - Must Kast (Black Box). I joined the team as a producer (Culture Management student) in 2015. We graduated from Viljandi Culture Academy and moved to Tartu to build a theatre. This was a challenge, because every year a new group of young actors and directors graduate, so a new theatre might be too much for our little country with 1.3 million people - even though Estonians are big theatre lovers!

ENCATC: What differentiates you from other theatre companies in Estonia?

Reeli Lonks: Our theatre productions are targeted to different groups, many for children, young people and teenagers. We differentiate from other theatres by having open discussions between the audience and actors after every performance. That gives a space to meet the creative team, become closer to the theatre itself, express feelings and thoughts, ask questions about the topic and performance that everybody just experienced together. It is a bridge between the art, team and audience to reflect and share.

ENCATC: Can you give us some background into your educational and professional experience that has led to where you are today leading Must Kast?

Reeli Lonks: I was studying culture management (specialized in music and theatre) in Tartu University Viljandi Culture Academy for four years. After that I've had few trainings on leading NGOs and I've learned a lot though experience during the first intensive years in Tartu. I also am a board member and festival organizer in ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People) Estonia, being part of a worldwide network of theatre for young audiences.

Actors and directors at the Must Kast studied theatre in Viljandi. Later on, they've participated in workshops and trainings (e.g. physical theatre) and some have graduated or are still studying for a masters' degree. They also educated themselves about management and accounting of NGO before creating Must Kast.

ENCATC: What skills or personal attributes do you think you have had that have helped you to run your theatre company?

Reeli Lonks: One must have a strong will, a sense of mission that gives you motivation and inspiration and makes you work on your goals, even in difficult times, where you must not give up. We have been ambitious, brave, sincere, honest, also naive, determined, with a goal to change something and create something new by yourself. Communication with each other and with the world outside is very important - to understand, to be emphatic, to listen, to learn every day, specially learning from mistakes.



Photo Gabriela Liivamägi



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ENCATC: As you are a part of a bigger founding team, what kind of role have they played in founding and running the theatre?

Reeli Lonks: 14 people out of 17 continued to work with the Must Kast after university. For several years, the main team has been around ten people, today it's four, who have all been from the beginning. It is important to note, they work as freelancers and no one really has a permanent contract. The members of the board have also reduced from five to three. We have worked a lot on getting the administrative part more effective. Now, the main team is smaller, and we work more productively than before. All the members have contributed building up the Must Kast - doing administrative work (social media, webpage, accounting and financials). It has been a collective mission - we have put our hearts in it. The Must Kast is like baby for all of us. Even if things change and everybody are not so active anymore, we always do what's best for the Must Kast.

ENCATC: How did you go about getting start-up funds and how did you use them to get your company up and running?

Reeli Lonks: At first, we had a very small budget, which we had to operate on. We wrote and still continue to write project applications for new productions and events. The first five years we only got project support for every new production from the Estonian Culture Endowment and an annual support from Tartu City. The theatre has been totally project based. Our efforts have paid off, because this year we surprisingly got an annual support for the first time from the Estonian Culture Ministry like most

of the other theatres in Estonia. That will give us more freedom and possibilities to pay salaries and have a bigger support for new productions.

ENCATC: What had you wished you had known before starting the company?

Reeli Lonks: The founding team had a good preparation before opening the theatre. Kaarel Targo, an actor and board member, has been responsible for the finance (and still is) participated in several trainings about management and accounting in an NGO. He has taught it to the others as well. Most important was the courage to take a risk and try, but also to understand that we were ready and prepared as much as we could. Everything after that has come through experiences. So, there was nothing particularly we wished to have known before.

ENCATC: What has been the most difficult challenges you have encountered? How have you been able to overcome them?

Reeli Lonks: People and relationships are the most important value in this field. It has been a challenge to find new team members and motivate them to work in the Must Kast. It is a very risky and unstable field, especially for a young theatre professional. Expectations are fast to establish, but the key is to not lock yourself in them, be open and aware of different personalities, capabilities and ways of working. During hard times it's always challenging to believe in yourself and the theatre, but it is important to keep yourself motivated and overcome the changes.



"Peks Moisaatallis"
"Beating at the Stables of the Manor"

ENCATC: What have been some recent innovative (or multidisciplinary) projects you have worked on that you are most proud of?

Reeli Lonks: We are not focusing on innovation itself. In theatre it's more intuitive, the topics and methods we choose have to be natural for the director and team. I think Must Kast is proud that they can do exactly what they want, work with projects that feel right and necessary for the time being. In the beginning we had up to 10 new productions per year and we did as much as possible. We learned a lot from that. Now we are focused on quality, not quantity and we work on about 2-3 new productions per year. We have found our strengths, settled down and concentrated on the most important. We are also proud of our bigger projects, different from our usual productions, e.g. summer projects, working with young actors and directors from Finland, "Mowgli" is performed in the forest, which is a completely different environment, collaborating with local people etc.

Finding your own audience is crucial. It has been one of our biggest challenges to sell all the tickets for performances. In the beginning our halls were almost empty of halfway empty, but every project created a new audience and eventually we have managed to get the seats filled. It has been a joy and relief to meet the audience of the Must Kast.

ENCATC: What advice would you give to students or early career professionals looking to start their own business or project?

Reeli Lonks: Stay foolish, stay hungry, stay brave (inspired by Steve Jobs). Be proud of what you are creating and believe in it. Do not be too hard with yourself, give yourself space to make mistakes and learn again. Appreciate it.

ENCATC: What keeps you motivated and going?

Reeli Lonks: Self-development and self-belief, new knowledge, skills and experiences, inspiring people and projects, successful productions and collaboration between creative people, belief from the others and positive feedback keeps going. In the end it is all about the beauty of art and endless possibilities in theatre to be creative and innovative.

Must Kast is celebrating their sixth birthday in 2020.



About Must Kast

Must Kast is a theatre operating since 27th of March 2014 at Genialistide Klubi, Tartu, Estonia. The theatre creates spectacles for different age groups and values direct communication with its audience. "Must Kast" is Estonian for "black box", a type of stage that is open to a million possibilities for the theatre miracle to be born.

That is what Must Kast as a theatre believes in – the birth of magic without formal predescriptions. A theatre that does not manifest itself in words, but in actions; a theatre that is growing with its audience; a theatre that without lowering artistic standards can address anyone.



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