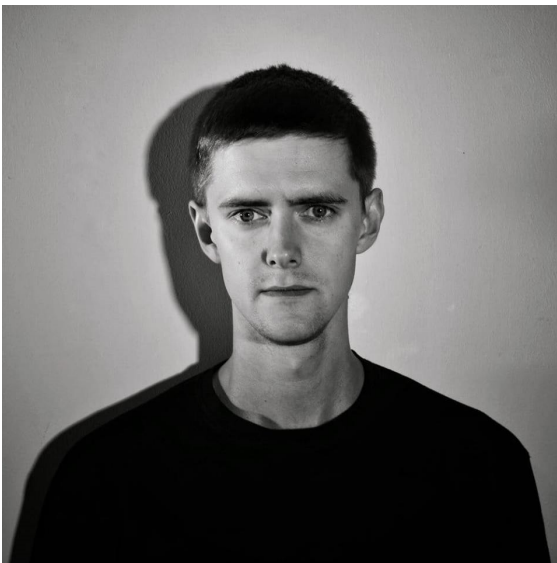


CAREER TIPS

Paide, one of the smallest cities in Europe with its own professional theatre

Harri Ausmaa is a general manager of a professional theatre in a Estonian small city Paide. ENCATC talked with him about establishing a professional theatre, working with a team of four actors and two managers, their philosophy and activities.



ENCATC: What is the story behind Paide Teater (Paide Theatre)? Why did you want to start an independent theatre company in a small city?

Harri Ausmaa: The idea to open a theatre in Paide, a city with only 8,000 inhabitants, came from the Paide city government and Paide Music and Theatre House. In 2017, Paide Theatre was created, followed by an invitation to the troupe from Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (a member of ENCATC) in 2018. This was a very brave decision by the city to create a new theatre in Estonia, when the country is full of theatres. Paide is one of the smallest cities in Europe and since 2018 they have a professional theatre.

But the interesting question is – why did six young people (four actors, director, manager) want to move to a little city in the middle of Estonia without having any previous connections? Paide Theatre has given us an opportunity to do things differently than in bigger and traditional theatres and the possibility to do things like that, motivated us to accept the invitation. We have freedom to decide how we want to run it, what is the content, and how we do it. The goal of our little troupe was not to start *another theatre in Estonia but a new theatre*.

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

Harri Ausmaa: The opportunity to do something new with no precepts gives us freedom to experiment. We are pursuing to understand the role of theatre in society today. The first thing that we did was to lose the fourth wall between the audience and actors. We try to be in contact with our people, our community, our audience. We don't force the audience to interact in our performances, but we are trying to create situations where the audience feels they are a part of this theatre. They are not someone anonymous sitting in the dark, but they are the reason this theatre exists. With every performance we create, we communicate that there are no actors or audience, but there is all of us - a single community.

ENCATC: How are you working on engaging with the audience?

Harri Ausmaa: In our active one and half years, we are experimenting with new alternatives, avant-garde techniques that are meant for engaging with different target groups. The most important part of engaging with the audience is that we communicate that theatre is not only velvet seats at 7 pm in a theatre house, but everyone who wants, can be a part of it. We organize different activities outside the theatre in order to help local cultural events be more professional capacities, be in touch with local schools, social centers and people with disabilities. Every summer Paide city holds a popular "Arvamusfestival" (eng. "Opinion festival"). We were invited to hold a performance in the cultural programme. As it was summer, we didn't want to invite people to a stuffy hall for a play, but instead our performance took place outside as a "Theatre grill party". Everyone was invited to meet with the troupe



Paide Theatre Grill Party

and just enjoy themselves. Every half an hour we had an activity, etude or just a shift of reality, we read the "Ten Commandments of a grill party", made a funny group photo, etc.

ENCATC: What have been some recent innovative theatre projects you have worked on that you are most proud of?

Harri Ausmaa: We always try to be relevant and in the wake of current situations with coronavirus, we acted fast to make something out of nothing. All theatres in Estonia are closed from 13th March until 1st May 2020, which has a huge impact on theatre budgets and their connection with audiences. Instead of sitting still, we decided to use the power of social media. We started to share different performances, music, poem readings to people who are at home without a chance to enjoy culture. We are now shifting from a fully active theatre to a virtual theatre. Our first virtual theatre show event had thousands of spectators on our Facebook. The advantage of a little company like ours is to "turn the boat" quickly and adapt to situations, which might not be that easy for bigger theatres.

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

Harri Ausmaa: My dream was to work in a professional theatre in Tallinn. I got my degree in Recreation Management and continued to collect as much theatre experiences since 2008. I worked in school amateur theatre trying every day to get closer to professional theatre. And two years ago, my dream became my reality. I was surprisingly elected to be the General Manager of Paide Theatre. This proved a



Paide Theatre troupe on 1st August 2018 opening day



"Kaitseala - Safe zone"

well-known thought that, everything is possible if you work hard and believe in yourself.

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

Harri Ausmaa: For me, the most important thing is to have a diverse team of different personalities, educational and professional backgrounds. In a way you have to be a human "Swiss army knife" and think like "MacGyver". My focus can not be on one thing, my every day work consists of producing, being a stage manager, technician, lighting and sound engineer, doing stage crew work, marketing and in the end leading the whole theatre. The most important is to have discipline. Motivation comes and goes, but discipline is what keeps you on track with goals, which for me, is to lead this theatre the best I can.

ENCATC: What do you wish you had known before starting the company?

Harri Ausmaa: There is never enough knowledge and experience about everything, surprises are behind every corner. The two and a half years in Paide Theatre have shown me that every day I learn something new and there is no way to know everything before establishing a new company. I started as a clean sheet, and actually, that has been a positive side of running this theatre. Honestly, there

would be nothing that I would do differently since starting this company.

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

Harri Ausmaa: There is never enough money! Making compromises is an important part of our everyday work. There is a constant search for sponsors and we are working on it every day. Paide theatre is non-profit organization, our focus is on our content and building a community. Having more money would be great of course, but we risk losing our focus and commercialisation, for me this is not sustainable.

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

Harri Ausmaa: We were very lucky. The Paide City Government offered to pay our salaries and gave us rehearsal and production rooms at the Paide Music and Theater House. That was the foundation of our theatre and without their support we could not survive. Funds for our productions (e.g. extra cast, production and marketing expenses) we have to finance by ourselves. We write projects for the Estonia Cultural Endowment, find sponsors from the private sector, and most importantly, plan audience numbers and ticket revenue realistically.



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

Harri Ausmaa: Discipline, discipline, discipline.... and patience! I see that nowadays people give up on projects easily. We are used to seeing the results quickly, but starting a creative project and reaching your goals takes time. It took me 9 years to get where I am today - a general manager of a professional theatre. A lot of patience is needed when productions take a year and a half to create, this is a long time and a lot can happen in that time. Important is to stay on course and work hard.

ENCATC: What keeps you motivated and going?

Harri Ausmaa: My family, friends and my theatre troupe whom I am very grateful for! And people should not underestimate the power of a good word. We all need some recognition to keep us going.



About Paide Theater

Paide Theater is a professional theater in Paide, Estonia. The company started its work on August 1th, 2018. It was founded by the city of Paide and Paide Music and Theater House. The theater troupe consists of actors Kirill Havanski, Johannes Richard Sepping, Ursel Tilk, Joosep Uus, director Jan Teevet and general manager Harri Ausmaa.

Paide Theatre believes that theatre has the opportunity and also obligation to change something. Yes, only theatre will not change the world but meeting with great art helps you to perceive the world more clearly. Great art helps us understand that we are together. We are responsible together, we rejoice together, we grieve together.

Paide Theater sees that every person is a story, is an experience. Meeting with this biodiversity helps us understand the world better. The purpose of Paide Theater is to build a community. Theater is meeting. But meeting is more than coming together in one room. Paide Theatre searches for more!



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