

We and those others

Presentation by Ritva Siikala (11.9.2006)

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In her presentation, Ritva Siikala describes her childhood and the cultural and political situation during this time: *I grew up in the years after World War II in a small town in Northern Finland. Everybody felt forgotten up there because the power of the country was centred far away, in the south. She describes the atmosphere of fear they were living in. Looking back I remember that we feared the Communist Party who had won absolute majority in the first elections in our town. The world was divided into "us and those others". Those others were communists, Bolsheviks, reds, workers, whatever, but they were definitely not like us, who were deeply rooted in the white (conservative, right wing) Finland. We were the true Finns, the good people. There was a total dichotomy: the good and the bad were on opposite sides of the fence, and there was nothing in between.*

When art showed its power, the dualistic way of thinking began to soften. The publication of "Täällä Pohjantähden alla" by Väinö Linna was crucial for the atmosphere in the whole country. *My own progression had started earlier. A theatre performance of Anne Frank's Diary in 1957 had shaken my whole world. Until then, Germans had only been the well-behaving soldiers who filled our town during the war, the officers with whom my father had worked at the local hospital.*

Siikala describes the political and economic change in Finland of the following decades: *The standard of living has grown enormously. The eternal enemy, now called Russia, is not frightening at the moment. Neither are the workers, those reds, Bolsheviks, those others. The Finnish people have moved from the countryside to towns and from small towns into bigger cities - an agrarian society has become an IT society.*

She emphasized that those others nevertheless still exist: *But we have found a new line to draw between true Finns and those others, between the good and the bad. As one of the last countries in Europe, Finland started receiving refugees. Suddenly we were facing people who are not white, nor have blue eyes or blond hair. We were facing "those others".*

The experiences from her childhood, her profession as a theatre director and her own multicultural life have made her aim to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds in her theatre. When Finnish identity was created as late as at the end of the 19th century, the arts were of great importance. *Artists were the leaders and they were giving form to new thoughts. I think that the artist should take the lead today in creating a new Finnish identity and the newcomers "New-Finns" as I like to call them should take part in the recreation as equal partners. With her work she pursues the target of a culturally rich, open-minded and dynamic Finland.*