

# Musical about Estonia might make it to Broadway

## CULTURE

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A group of enthusiasts has undertaken to bring a musical about Estonian history onto the Broadway stage to mark the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia.

The musical is called *The Innocence*. The group has been working on this surprising and ambitious project for a year in the hope of bringing a musical about the suffering of a small and distant nation with its complicated history to the Broadway stage in New York. One of its two writers, David Austin, said on the current affairs programme *Pealtnägija* that he was certain the musical would make it to Broadway.

Broadway shows are seen by around 13 million people every year. The musical's other writer, Alan Koel, dreams of the Estonian-themed musical enjoying even a tiny fraction of that.

A year since work on the musical began, most of its libretto and songs are ready. The musical is a tale of caring and suffering told through the story of its protagonists – Alma and Toomas – from childhood to death, beginning in Estonia and ending in New York. The tale features elements of myths and fairytales as well as Estonia's bloody history, including the Soviet occupation and deportations. "It opens with two kids fleeing the terrible events of the first world war," Austin explains.

Alma and Toomas are played by 11-year-old Brooklyn XXX and 8-year-old Keaton Tetlow. Singer Keaton has been acting since he was 6 years old. Brooklyn is a true child prodigy on Broadway, having sung in four musicals, including the starring role in *Matilda*. She is currently performing in *Les Misérables* eight times a week.

In *The Innocence*, Alma and Toomas' lives are turned upside down again as adults in the second world war, which leads Toomas to a Siberian prison camp and Alma to Paris and then New York, leaving them separated by the Iron Curtain.



Music video filmed in Tallinn for song in Broadway musical released

"Alma receives news that Toomas has been killed, but it turns out to be false," Austin says, explaining that the news leaves Alma broken. "She has to let go of her feelings, because she can't live without him, but at the same time, Toomas can tell from thousands of miles away that Alma has lost hope." Toomas decides he must escape. "If he doesn't, Alma won't survive," Austin adds.. "The last 20 years of the play are about Toomas looking for Alma."

Both Alari and David's own family stories are weaved into the play. Estonia's song festivals have been a major source of inspiration for David in music – he is constantly watching choral music videos on YouTube. It is surprising that part of the story, which was written for an American audience, will be told in Estonian. "We're trying to respect the choral music tradition while also making it suitable for Broadway," explains Austin, adding that the choir will only be singing in Estonian. "The main cast will be singing in English and the choir will be telling the same story in Estonian, but it won't conflict with the English."

All of the choir are professional musical performers who are involving themselves in the project out of their own good will. On the one hand this all seems like a pipe dream, but on the other, Alari and David have made it further than any other Estonian project ever has on Broadway. Most of the cast has already been chosen, and the writers are currently in discussions with a potential director, but what is most important right now is to find a producer who in turn can find investors.

Bringing the musical to Broadway will cost at least 14 million dollars, plus overheads. The project is to all intents and purposes ready and just needs the money to make it happen. Alari, who has experience working in the financial sector, has been looking for and meeting with potential investors.

Since *Pealtnägija* went to America, many musical stars have agreed to appear in the show. A concert aimed at potential producers will be held in February.

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