

# World-famous playwright in Viljandi: theater is a sacred place



The creative reach of US playwright, novelist, and screenwriter Jeff Baron is impressive. PHOTO:ELMO RIIG

The creative reach of American playwright, novelist and screenwriter Jeff Baron is impressive. He has written scripts for television series for channels such as NBC , CBS , ABC and Fox , and is the author of a number of bestselling books. Baron's first play "Mr. Green's Guest" is one of the most popular of modern times: it has been produced 600 times in more than 50 countries. Now, to be precise, in 53 countries, as it was recently staged in Estonia: at the Temufi Theatre in Viljandi under the direction of Erki Aule.

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Jeff Baron, who lives in Manhattan, graduated from Harvard University and is a very charismatic, friendly, kind and smiling man.

He arrived in Estonia directly from New York and felt quite at home in snowy Viljandi,

because his hometown was was also experiencing a proper winter storm.

MH: Jeff Baron, 24 hours ago you were still on the other side of the globe. How has your adjustment been going?

JB: It takes time to adjust. The time zone is different, everything is actually different. But it is very important and valuable to visit places you have never been to before and get to know the local life.

We have had a very cold winter in New York. But it's like in Estonia: whatever the weather, life goes on regardless. People don't stay at home or hide because it's snowing.

MH: We here in the north are used to it, but New York seemed to have quite a lot of trouble with the snow, at least that was my impression.

JB: That's true, but the subway kept running the whole time and the airports were only closed for one day. In America, they love to exaggerate, it attracts attention and people watch the news more. So it may seem that the situation is terrible, and sometimes it is, but not now. In fact, there was nothing crazy about it.

MH: Exaggeration is also found in our media. But speaking of Estonia, is this your first time here?

JB: Yes, my first time. But I already feel that I like it here very much. The food is good and the people are friendly. So I'm happy to be here.

MH: When I think about the theater scene in New York, I really don't know what's going on there right now. What do Americans like to watch these days?

JB: There are probably one hundred theaters in New York, maybe even more. So there's everything, absolutely everything. There are big Broadway musicals and very small productions in very intimate theaters. Many theater productions are based on films. For example, a production based on Stranger Things is currently playing on Broadway. There is also a Harry Potter production. So it's a big mix. But I love going to the theater, I go roughly a couple of times a week. And I actually like everything. I like big musicals. I like small productions. I'm happy that there is so much choice.

MH: Broadway musicals involve huge productions, enough money to make a feature film.

JB: Yes, it's really huge. Hundreds of people are involved, both on stage and behind the scenes. It costs millions and millions of dollars to put on a production like that. Of course, one could ask whether it's worth it. I don't know the answer to that, but with theater, it's always the same: some you like more than others. Technically speaking,

there are many excellent singers, dancers, and musicians. Of course, they can be found all over the world, but when you see them on Broadway, you can't help but think how amazing it is how much talent there is.

MH: There is nothing wrong with good entertainment. I am a big fan of good entertainment.

JB: Of course, if people like it and if it makes them happy. The only thing I would like, of course, is that it wasn't so expensive. A ticket to a Broadway musical can cost 200-300 dollars.

MH: There are also many smaller, Off-Broadway and underground theaters in New York.

JB: There are, and they are not that expensive, of course, but still ... I don't know ... how much do theater tickets cost in Estonia?

MH: Our prices also fluctuate quite a bit, but they are around 25-50 euros on average. Of course, there are also more expensive ones, especially the large summer productions, but sometimes it is still difficult to get tickets for them.

Now, to your play, "Mr. Green's Guest." It has been staged in more than 50 countries. What is the secret of its success? How does it speak to people in so many different countries?

JB: I don't know if there's a secret here. People identify with the characters, and I think that's the most important thing. Mr. Green reminds them of their grandfather, their father... and the other character in the play, Ross, does the same: he's like a brother or a cousin, or he's like the viewer himself. The story is very specifically about New York, and these two men are also from there. But if you hear it in your own language, why not, these could be two Estonian men, too. I think it's just the kind of story that everyone can relate to.

MH: So it's something universal?

JB: I think so. I would like to hope that it is successful because it is a good play. Good stories are universal. We watch the same films all over the world.

But if you ask me whether I expected that this play would travel around the world so much, the honest answer is no. It never even occurred to me. It is not at all usual that an American play, especially a contemporary one, is staged in so many places and so often. It was a big surprise. Estonia is the 53rd country.

MH: Aren't you sometimes afraid that people will start to prefer home screens to theaters?

JB: Yes, I am. There is so much of everything on television, and so much of it is good. But for me, watching two actors in one room with other people is a very special experience. At home, you can pause the movie, go for a 15-minute snack, go to the bathroom. Or you get a message and you start to respond. The theater is like a sacred place where you watch something for over an hour and everyone is listening. It's very special. And if it's something you like, it feels completely different; different from watching even a great film on television.

MH: You've written plays, novels and TV series. Which do you prefer most?

JB: I don't have a preference. I always tell a story, and I tell it in the best way to tell that story. Sometimes it's a book. I'm currently finishing a novel, which has 24 characters, and couldn't be done on stage - the production would be 80 hours long and very expensive.

In a novel, however, I hope to hold your attention and let you see the characters exactly as you imagine them.

"Mr. Green's Guest" was my first play, and it's a story that can be best done in the theatre. The action takes place in one place with two characters. Each medium has its own rules.

In a film, you may need less dialogue, because the image itself tells the story, but a play still requires action. And even in a two-actor play, you get to know more characters than just those two.

MH: A good story is, of course, the most important thing, but, as you know, it's quite difficult to come up with one. Where do you get your inspiration from?

JB: Yes, a good story is the main thing. I think about stories and new ideas all the time. I believe that behind all of this is a gift. I've been like this since I was a child. I'm interested in people. I talk to lots of people, even complete strangers, I ask questions, I listen to conversations on the train... It all just comes to me.

MH: It's true that if you've been blessed with a gift from nature, you should share it with others.

JB: Yes, I feel that talent is a gift. I hope others appreciate it. I can't control that, but I can do my best and share it. And if people like it, I'm very happy.

MH: Today, all forms of culture are more globally accessible than ever before, but because of this, competition is also very strong.

JB: Some would say that this is not a problem at all, but rather a good thing:

consumers have a wide choice. For filmmakers and playwrights, however, it is difficult. All businesses must adapt to technological changes. Hollywood studios are currently making fewer films than before. Cinemas are quite empty. Is that the case for you too?

MH: Yes, they are often quite empty. I have watched excellent films with just a few people in the theater.

JB: I know the feeling! It's a huge theater with 12 people inside. I still prefer to watch movies in the cinema, but of course I watch them at home too, because it's more convenient and affordable. In America, a handful of companies control everything, everything is concentrated in one place. Apple, Google, Netflix... For artists, this means fewer places to show their work. In the past, 26-30 episodes of a TV series were made each year, now there are 6-10 episodes every two years. All in all, this means less work. And if you can't make a living from it, you go and work in a bank. The changes are noticeable everywhere. If you own a cinema in Estonia, what do you do with it? Do you sell it? Do you turn it into apartments?

MH: Complex. Estonians are drawn to good domestic films. At some point, you probably get tired of superheroes and global franchises – how long can you keep watching them? It seems that way, anyway.

JB: Yesterday evening, I was watching television here and was impressed by how much domestic content there is. For a small country, it's really impressive. Do neighboring countries watch your content and do you watch theirs? Finnish television, for example?

MH: I'm afraid not really. During the Soviet occupation, Finnish television was very important, especially in northern Estonia, but now that you can watch anything you want, it's not as important anymore. But speaking of domestic culture, our theaters have over 300 premieres a year.

JB: Wow! That's really impressive!

MH: Cinemas tend to be empty, but people still like theater. Why do you think that is?

JB: Very simple: theater is alive. This becomes especially important in the age of artificial intelligence. In a movie, you watch something and you don't know if it really happened. In the theater, everything happens right before your eyes. It's magic! Sometimes you don't believe what you've just seen, but at the same time you know that it was all done by people. It's something really special. Being so close to the actors is captivating.

MH: We all breathe the same air in the theater hall and can even smell the actors' perfume...

JB: Exactly.

MH: Our world has become nervous and exceptionally uncertain. Does that make you anxious?

JB: Yes, the world is scary right now. I'm sometimes surprised that we all continue to live our lives calmly. But I think everyone is worried about where the world is headed. In such a situation, it is very difficult to find inner peace. It's complicated. We try to distract ourselves and compartmentalize our thoughts. You can't watch the news all day long: you'll go crazy. Of course, you have to watch it, but you also have to take a break from it. Everyone is trying to take care of themselves and their loved ones, and hoping that the leaders will change, or that we will replace them. I don't see some of the world's leaders ever coming to their senses.

MH: I wouldn't say that the US president is a very stable person, and that makes us here in Estonia quite worried...

JB: You should be worried. I am worried.

MH: You never know what the next day will bring.

JB: He's a bad man.