

**HUNGARIAN  
THEATRE  
BULLETIN**

**2009**



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## Introduction

International meetings, guest performances, theatre festivals and projects of various types can function as bridges between different theatrical cultures, helping them to become acquainted with each other's thoughts and artistic achievements. The Hungarian Centre of ITI tries to facilitate this orientation by organizing visitors' programmes, roundtable discussions and by publishing Hungarian- and English-language newsletters like this booklet.

We hereby present our readers with the second issue of the Hungarian Theatre Bulletin. In the first one, we mainly featured companies which, breaking with the tradition of repertory theatres with a stable company, were functioning as receiving venues for Hungarian and foreign performances. These include Trafó, MU, Thália Theatre and some of the festivals (Budapest Autumn Festival, Contemporary Drama Festival in Budapest and the Shakespeare Festival). These institutions have brought significant contributions to the mobility, change and enrichment of Hungarian theatre. In the present issue, we have laid emphasis on theatres in Budapest and some provincial towns where intensive atelier work is being carried out, yet within the framework of the traditional structure. These workshops make full use of the potentials inherent in their companies and usually carry out true artistic dialogue with their audiences, while constantly looking for new means of artistic expression. We know that some of the important workshops had to be left out of our survey because of size constraints. One such theatre, led by Csaba Tasnádi, is in Nyíregyháza, an important town in Eastern Hungary. It performs consistently high quality work without much ado, its principal aim being to forge and cultivate its own particular audience. As a token of their open attitude, they not only host dance performances by Andrea Ladányi, an outstanding figure of contemporary dance, and the productions of KoMa, a young company which will be mentioned several times in the following texts, but also give space to Central Europe's largest free world music festival. There is also no account here of some workshops which have been, until now, little more than interesting yet promising initiatives, like the company in the Western Hungarian town of Szombathely. They own no permanent venue so far; however, the main ambition of its founder, Tamás Jordán – who was the former manager of the National Theatre in Budapest – is to define the theatre as a spot for urban encounters, a new kind of 'market place'.

In the past several years – perhaps partly due to the flourishing of the above-mentioned receiving venues – young independent companies have kept springing up like mushrooms. In this process, however, an apparent contradiction could also play a role. Considering its population, there is an enormous

number of theatres in Hungary that produces hundreds of new premieres every season; yet, for the young theatre artists just launching their careers, there are not enough job opportunities within the traditional establishment. This might be one of the reasons why many young artists today decide to set up their own troupes, for a shorter or longer time, to produce the kind of shows they want. Among these independent companies, there are some, of course, which can already look back to an impressive past, like Studio K led by Tamás Fodor. Still, the majority of them are the products of the past couple of years. Despite the very different artistic paths they follow, their performances share an overt and deep interest in the world around them and could be understood as in-depth reflections on our reality. Another similarity is that they usually play for 100-150 spectators a night and, with a few exceptions, perform in different venues and sites, especially in places preferred by young people – coffee shops, 'dive' pubs – in other words, in spaces not designed specifically for theatrical purposes.

While designing this publication, beyond the presentation of individual workshops (and in the interests of better orientation), we also found it important to present the background which enables the functioning of Hungarian theatres. Hence, several texts were included which give an overview of some of the Hungarian theatres abroad, living in great symbiosis and mutual influence with 'mainland' Hungarian theatre life. Other texts present the situation of theatre financing and education. Throughout most of the booklet, our general ambition and aim was to give an objective account, which is why we find the chapter written in cooperation with the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association of special importance, since we give way in part to a subjective evaluation. Critics who belong to different generations, with different tastes and mentality, answered the same questions, hopefully giving the readers a clear outline of their theatrical preferences: which performances they like and for what reasons, what they think of contemporary Hungarian drama.

The Hungarian Theatre Bulletin/2009 was realized within the framework of and for the purpose of the international roundtable discussion and visitors' programme for theatre professionals, titled 'National Theatres in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', with the collaboration of the Hungarian Centre of ITI, the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, and the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association, with the kind support and help of the Visegrád Fund, the Hungarian Cultural Fund (NKA), the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM), the General Assembly of the City of Budapest, Cultural Committee and the ITI centres working in the Visegrád countries and Germany.

Anna Lakos,  
President of the Hungarian Centre of ITI

## The Context of Hungarian Theatre-making

### István Szabó: The New Subsidy System

In autumn 2008, the Hungarian parliament passed a new law concerning 'the subsidy of the performing arts organizations and the special employment rules applying to the performing arts'. The law clears up the questions of three artistic branches: theatre, music and dance; but since in the following I will only deal with theatrical issues, let me narrow down the case, referring simply to the Theatre Law. My short account mostly regards financial matters; however, I must emphasize that the legal formalization of employment rules could only be made due to substantial support from the state – in other words, due to the support of public funds. The amount of the subsidies, no matter how beneficial it would be, can not be regulated by the new law. Nonetheless, it articulates the importance of the state's commitment to supporting theatres and lays down transparent rules of fund division.

In Hungary, theatres were nationalized in 1949. Without mention of this historical fact, the situation today could hardly be understood. The nationalization of the industry was an attempt to overcome the capitalist organization of the economy, the "exploitation" of workers, while the gesture of taking cultural institutions into state custody was rather a desire to put into practice the beautiful ideal of the people's cultural uprising. After forty years of experience, we can state that in this field – unlike the results in the case of industry – the attempts were not without success. In 1990, however, the world took yet another great turn, which we must also remember. Hungary, too, returned to mainstream Europe, to civil democracy, preferring an economic structure which centred on private profit and which, in the meantime, had become global. Therefore, the economic slogan of 90s was privatization and the maximization of profit to be achieved in competition on the market. With regard to the cultural goods owned by the state and the guarantee of the state for them, the situation becomes more complicated. The continuity of the state commitment was not, yet its extent was a question of debate. The privatization of theatres would not have been feasible from the prospect of profit maximization, and if so, then not at the required level of quality. 'We want the state support to stay,' demanded the intellectual elite. 'All right, let it stay,' nodded the political elite indifferently.

The next twenty years of bitter experiences were consequences of the dramatic contradictions of this situation. Theatre wants more, but will not get more. The politics would like to get out, but cannot. Formalized rules were born, but the repartition of the sources has always fallen back to being

a matter of conscience for the bureau officials and their councillors. It has also become a field of hazy political bargains. In 2006, the Ministry of Education and Culture, with a mandate to compile the Theatre Law, promised to finally create rules which would be transparent and enforceable. The codification of the law bore yet another promise – to put it bluntly, more money – that the state would finally pay off something of the shortfall which had accumulated over the years. That way, there would be enough state support for the introduction of the new system, for the period of transition. With these funds, the state would comprehensively reorganize the whole theatre system, including the so-far unkindly handled private theatre field. Today we already know that these hopes were only partly realized.

The Theatre Law ties the title of state subsidy to a process of registration and classification into one of the categories. Only governmental institutions and organizations of public use are entitled to the state subsidy. The state support of different artistic workshops, companies and ensembles will vary greatly, of course, since a part of them will receive a guaranteed contribution, while others will only be offered the chance to hand in an application. Following the classification, the managers and artistic organizations will see their positions and perspectives much more clearly, and with the reclassification of some institutions, the changes in the system can be better tracked.

In Hungary, since 1949, the repertory theatre system with a permanent company has been the most widespread form of theatrical activity. The urban self-governments maintaining the theatres can still count on central state support, but the sum of this subsidy will be strongly dependent on the extent of their undertakings and how they fulfil them. Financial support does not dampen the responsibility of managers and owners, which appears in the clear definition of professional expectations: the assurance of infrastructural background and compliance with the special regulations of labour law. The Theatre Law lays special emphasis on the application-based process of theatre manager appointment and the observance of professional competences. Respecting the legal provisions is a condition of receiving state subsidies.

The classification into one of the categories from 1 to 6 is done partly on the basis of the theatre's profile and partly on the basis of quantity indicators. At the same time, the categories determine the manner and extent of an institution's share. The norm-based guaranteed subsidy assures the most security, while support of companies competing with other applicants will always depend on the qualifications of the professional board. The norm-based financing technique does not require individual decisions. The greater the support from local governments or the more tickets sold, the higher the state subsidy for the maintainer and finally for the theatre itself. When



calculating the figures, though, some preferences do appear. At present, those who perform in smaller venues and studio theatres, as well as providers of children's plays and opera performances are entitled to extra support. The fixing of preferences and norms are, of course, matters of professional debate, and it is the responsibility of the Performing Arts Council, working within the framework of the Theatre Law, to make propositions for these.

An important change affecting the Hungarian tax system is that the registered theatres can accept grants from commercial companies up to a certain percentage of their ticket income (in a way that will decrease the tax base of these companies), but they cannot require any other counterpart for their grants. Theatres are also motivated to increase their ticket revenue, not just audience attendance, due to an EU regulation approved in November 2009.

As set out in the new law, the new financing system will come into effect for the first time in the budgetary year of 2010. Due to the financial crisis, the forced measures did not make it possible for the planned percentage of subsidy increase to appear in the national budget. This unexpected situation could cause a crisis in the life of some theatres if the maintaining local government cannot compensate with its subsidy, or if the theatre does not manage to increase its income significantly. The allowed method of sponsorship, although there is no established practice for this, seems a hopeful method for survival. Some other attacks against some provisions of the new law are also motivated by the urgent lack of money – for example, the one stating that 10 per cent of all existing theatre-directed state subsidies must be set aside for the application-based support of private theatres listed in the 6th category.

The future of the Theatre Law in its entirety is uncertain. After the parliamentary elections, the new government will have to decide its fate. The initiative for an amendment is the most likely event. In support of this, there are already a considerable number of professional remarks available. If politicians should decide to revoke the law, of which there have been several hints lately, then we will return to the earlier practice, which was characterized by secret bargains and wrangling, and in that case, the compilation of a new Theatre Law will again be listed among the most remote of goals.

Translated by Attila Szabó



## István Nánay: Hungarian Theatres Beyond the Fronter

When a professional Hungarian-language theatre came into being at the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries a fair number of the more important stages were in places like Pozsony (Bratislava), Kassa (Košice) and Kolozsvár (Cluj), which are no longer in Hungary as a result of the frontier changes that followed the First World War. Nevertheless, a Hungarian-language theatre has continued to exist in the territories detached by international agreement in 1920 and 1945. Nowadays a third of the professional theatres that perform in Hungarian are in Budapest, with its two million people, another third are in the provinces, where there are eight million, and the remaining third are in areas of neighbouring countries where there are Hungarian populations – a total of more than four million. The number of these that are supported by the state or by county or municipal authorities is roughly proportionate to the size of the Hungarian minority; thus there are two in Slovakia, one in Ukraine, ten in Romania and three in Serbia. At least as numerous in continuous existence are independent ensembles and private and puppet theatres, which survive on local government grants, sums won in competition, sponsorships and ticket sales. The Hungarian State too assists the majority of theatres abroad through a variety of channels.

The theatres of the four regions differ greatly in social function and in level of artistic attainment. The conditions in which they work in Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine and Romania differ, the expectations of their audiences differ, and the degrees of mutual influence between the artists of the majority states and of their minorities vary enormously. Since a widespread network of theatres has grown up in Romania the functional and artistic differentiation of establishments there has likewise been achieved, as may be detected in Hungary too.

One task of the theatres in these regions – not only in the past, under the dictatorships, but also today – is the protection and encouragement of the language and identity of the minority, but in judging their work the prime concern is naturally the aesthetics and quality that they represent as theatres. In Slovakia especially a considerable task devolves upon the theatres, as recently enacted language legislation places severe limitations on the use of minority languages – and therefore of Hungarian – and for this reason the role of actors in caring for the language will grow, as will that of the clergy. This applies in particular to the Thália Theatre of Košice, in the eastern half of the country, which plays not only in its home town but also in many smaller locations where pockets of Hungarian population remain. In the western part of the country, more densely populated by Hungarians, the Jókai Theatre of

Komárom is able to function as a standard artistic, popular theatre. The producers working in these two theatres are in the main from Hungary, but in Komárom it happens that a Slovak artist will put on a play or two. In Slovakia there is no Hungarian-language training for actors and producers, and students at the High School in Pozsony study in Slovak.

In the Hungarian theatres of Serbia, on the other hand, it is very common for artists of Serbian, Bosnian or other nationality to be invited to produce, as they have their own professional body, and on occasion producers come from Hungary as well. The Hungarian theatre in Újvidék (Novi Sad) came into being in 1973; its continuous renewal is guaranteed, as every two years the drama academy in the city opens a Hungarian class, and the theatre is its most important place of study. The other important town in the Hungarian-populated region, the Vajdaság (Vojvodina), is Szabadka (Subotica), where there are actually three Hungarian theatres. The oldest is the Népszínház ('People's Theatre'), whose splendid classical building was demolished some years ago so that the company now performs in temporary venues, but it maintains unbroken its activity in search of a contemporary theatrical voice. The Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre is a somewhat more radically experimental workshop, which tries, with its frequently startling performances, to grasp the contradictory nature of the influence brought upon them by Serbian reality. In Szabadka there is also the Gyerekszínház (Children's Theatre), which entertains Serbian and Hungarian children alike with its bilingual productions.

Thirty years ago the Tanyaszínház ('Farmstead Theatre') was founded, and in summer goes in a covered wagon around the farmstead world, the little villages where otherwise no theatre would go at all. The company, recruited in the main from young drama school students, gives entertaining performances in the style of farce and adaptations of the classics, but also presents contemporary pieces. One of the main cultural centres of the Vajdaság (Vojvodina) is the tiny township of Zenta (Senta), where a new theatre was recently started, while in another town, Magyarkanizsa (Kanjiža), the principal of the world-famous Jel Színház ('Sign Theatre'), Josef Nadj, has built up his own special theatrical centre which offers teaching, workshop activity and performance alike.

A special place on the Hungarian theatrical palette is occupied by the Illyés Gyula Magyar Nemzeti Színház ('Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre') of Beregszász (Berehove) in Ukraine. It was founded fifteen years ago and even since then has endured difficult circumstances, but graduates of drama schools in Kiev and Budapest work there. Their principal, Attila Vidnyánszky, is at the same time director-chief producer of the Debrecen theatre in Hungary, and in 2009 received in Moscow one of Europe's most

prized awards, the Meyerhold Prize, for his work *Three Sisters and Others* (Három nővér és mások). The company stages his productions, which are developing into a communal achievement, in Kárpátalja (Ukraine), Hungary, and numerous towns and festivals elsewhere.

In Romania the Hungarian language theatre has a history of more than 200 years, and today more than twenty-five professional, independent or private companies are at the service of the community in eleven towns and cities. Theatrical arts may be studied in two places. The Babes-Bolyai University in Kolozsvár (Cluj) trains actors and students of the theatre, while in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş) the institute named after the great actor and teacher István Szentgyörgyi has for almost sixty years trained actors, puppeteers, producers, students of the theatre and other theatre experts, and it has started its doctoral programme. There are permanent professional companies in nine towns (Szatmárnémeti / Satu Mare, Nagyvárad / Oradea, Temesvár / Timişoara, Kolozsvár / Cluj, Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureş, Sepsiszentgyörgy / Sfântu Gheorghe, Csíkszereda / Miercurea Ciuc, Székelyudvarhely / Odorheiu Secuiesc and Gyergyószentmiklós / Gheorgheni) and in Kolozsvár (Cluj) there is also an independent operatic company. Seven puppet theatres, either independent or attached to non-musical theatres, play to children. In Marosvásárhely, in addition to the repertory theatre and the Ariel puppet, children's and youth theatre, the University has a theatre, and there are a number of ensembles that perform (Yorick Studio, Academic Workshop, Pajta ('Barn') Theatre) and a cabaret company.

Romanian guest directors frequently and gladly work in every theatre, but several Hungarian directors are regularly invited to Romanian ensembles too, and so in this region the mutually fertilising artistic influence of the cultures of those that live side by side is most clearly felt. Two directors of international standing are the best known representatives not only of the Hungarian theatre but of the Romanian too. In Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe), László Bocsárdi is the director of the most easterly Hungarian theatre, and his performances bear the marks of an individual style that cannot be mistaken for anyone else's. Gábor Tompa teaches and produces in several European countries and in America, and also directs the State Hungarian Theatre in Kolozsvár (Cluj). Its company is one of the best not only in Romania but in the whole of Europe. In addition to the most celebrated Romanians, directors from numerous countries of the world come to Kolozsvár (Cluj), and the ensemble has taken their outstanding productions on tour.

In Romania an extraordinarily large number of festivals are held, to which mainly the two theatres mentioned are regularly invited, as are other



Hungarian ensembles. The minority theatres (in addition to the Hungarian there are German and Yiddish theatres) have their own annual festival, which is organised by the company of Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni). The Hungarian theatres in Serbia too are regular participants in local Serbian- and Hungarian-language festivals. Every June for more than twenty years a festival for Hungarian theatres abroad has been held in Kisvárd, in the extreme eastern tip of Hungary. In Budapest, performances by ensembles from Romania, Serbia and Slovakia can be seen every month, as can those of the Beregszász theatre, and productions from abroad are invited to all important festivals in Hungary.

The exchange of artistes between the region has made a gentle start. This was for a long time a one-way process, with directors, designers, musicians and actors going from Hungary to theatres beyond the frontier. Now, however, the flow is multidirectional, and this is a sure sign that the intellectual boundaries between the neighbouring countries – at least as far as the theatre is concerned – will sooner or later actually vanish.

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Translated by Bernard Adams



## Anita Rákóczy : Higher Education for Theatre Artists in Hungary

Since the eternal drive that compels people to become theatre practitioners every year is as strong as ever, there is a relevant demand for high-quality training for new generations of artists. The monopoly of the only institution for theatre artist training in higher education, the College of Theatre and Film, gradually collapsed after the change of regime. Since then, several opportunities have opened up for student to earn some kind of theatre artist certification – ranging from studios, state and private secondary schools, to newly-founded, prestigious places of higher education. In this essay, a short account of the most prominent Hungarian universities that offer BA and MA courses in the art of theatre will follow.

The School of Acting, predecessor of the College of Theatre and Film, which at present is called the University of Theatre, Film and Television, was founded in 1865. It was the first institution in Hungary for training actors. The education of opera singers and dramatic actors took place within these walls. Later, the National Royal Hungarian Academy of Music and Drama split up in 1893, and the Academy of Music continued carrying out the complete training of opera singers. The Academy of Drama moved into its permanent home on Rákóczi út, in the heart of Budapest, only at the beginning of the 20th century. The training of actors still takes place there today. After the Second World War, the school was raised to the status of college under the name College of Theatre and Film. Ferenc Hont, a key figure of the left-wing Hungarian avant-garde between the wars, was commissioned to draft its broad principles. Consequently, in addition to the training of professional actors, there began the education of stage and film directors, cinematographers, choreographers, dramaturges and drama theoreticians. In 1989-90, because of the change of regime, ideological courses were abolished, and significant reforms were introduced in the college. The training of drama educators began, and new opportunities emerged in film training for producers, TV programme editors, reporters and TV presenters. In January 2000, the institution was granted the title of university.

The University of Theatre, Film and Television is the most prominent and comprehensive place of higher education for theatre artists in Hungary, offering full-time courses in accordance with the Bologna Process, leading to a Master's Degree in acting (at times, also in puppetry and musical theatre), stage directing, stage design, choreography for physical theatre, theatre studies and dramaturgy. Although the training of opera singers takes place at the Academy of Music, there is constant professional cooperation between the two institutions, since acting has become a crucial part of an opera singer's

education. Training in choreography for physical theatre is a new concept in the curriculum of the University of Theatre, Film and Television. This reflects a viewpoint change, focusing on the significance of motion in theatre. Education in choreography used to be carried out primarily at the Hungarian Dance Academy in the last six decades, based on classical ballet and folk dance as a speciality. Students who display sufficient talent and interest in their chosen field have the opportunity to continue their studies up to the doctorate level. It is a unique tradition of the university that all members of the academic staff are practising artists or theatre theoreticians, leading personalities of Hungarian theatre. As they pass on the essence of their professional experience to the students in a 'master-disciple' relationship, both continuity between generations and the constant renewal of artistic expression are achieved. At present, the University of Theatre, Film and Television, which is entirely state-financed, is among the highest-quality educational institutions in Europe. It has succeeded in keeping its appeal and value-centred approach, even at a time when market forces have left their mark on artistic life and education as well. The number of applicants has not fallen. Every year the number of applications that the institution receives is twenty times the number of students it can accept.

The founding of Kaposvár University, on the 1st of January 2000, coincided with the great challenge of restructuring the Hungarian higher education system along the lines of the Bologna Process. In 2004, the creation of the Faculty of Arts added a totally new element to the profile of the university. Launching programmes in design, visual communication education, acting, applied scenery design and photography has contributed to the formation of a new provincial centre for arts education. The Faculty of Arts offers a full-time MA programme in acting every year, which means that Kaposvár University is the only place in the country (other than the University of Theatre, Film and Television in Budapest) where actors and actresses can obtain accredited MA degrees. Furthermore, the high-standard education provides a BA course for general set designers with two areas of specialization: set and costume design. Set and costume design for theatre has traditionally been taught at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, so the introduction of these courses at Kaposvár (and at the University of Theatre, Film and Television from the year 2010/2011) is a relatively new concept. Overall, Kaposvár University is a dynamically developing institution, constantly expanding its activities and several academic fields.

The Hungarian University of Fine Arts, founded in 1871, is traditionally the most prestigious institution for students who are eager to do a five-year course resulting in an MA degree in stage and costume design. After the first

four semesters, students can join the visual education programme, where they can obtain an additional secondary school teacher degree. In case there is a demand, they can continue their studies to the doctorate level. The quality of openness is peculiar to this university. Besides the high level of theatre and drama history education, the academic staff provides the possibility for students to actively participate in international master courses and festivals. The Faculty of Modern Philology and Social Sciences at the University of Pannonia in Veszprém offers an MA in theatre studies. The programme produces professionals capable of reflection on the essence of the theatrical event, from both theoretical and historical perspectives. It must be stressed that the prominent theatre studies course at Veszprém differs significantly from that at the University of Theatre, Film and Television, as the former is based primarily on theatre history and theory, whereas the latter combines theoretical knowledge with practical dramaturgy.

The current situation of the theatre artist training in Hungary is quite paradoxical. It is also expressed by the theatres, which need a constant supply of talented young actors, directors and set designers, but cannot offer nearly as many positions or contracts as the number of fresh graduates would justify. At the same time, lecturers are eager to expand the field of theatre education, as every new institution creates further teaching positions, which is essential for teachers and professors in the present economic crisis. However, this phenomenon is part of a global problem that needs to be addressed all over the world. Generally speaking, there is a distinct overproduction of actors (and in all the other fields of theatre art) in both secondary and higher state education. Given the present and projected economic situation, theatres are and will be able to absorb a far smaller number of newcomers than the output of the educational system would require. In 2009, forty-two students received their actor's degrees in the two accredited Hungarian actor-training universities: the University of Theatre, Film and Television and Kaposvár University. Of those forty-two, only fourteen succeeded in obtaining one-year contracts at a professional theatre. However, according to a survey carried out by MASZK (the Association of Hungarian Actors) this year, there are eleven accredited actor-training schools in operation, not to mention all the studios and alternative educational units. All of them lure in students with the brightest chances of becoming actors, but then they have to face unemployment or career change. Although a scholarship for those embarking on a career has been set up to ease the tension between overproduction and employment opportunities, further amendments have been initiated in the field of higher education in order to improve the prospects of future theatre artists.



## Different Ways

### Without a Safety Net

#### Beáta Borda: There is Life and Independent Theatre Beyond the Chalk Circle

If we take a look at the independent theatre workshops of the past couple of years (or we could also call it the scene of Hungarian alternative theatre), the elements of change, of constant transition, almost circumvolution are the most striking impressions. This was not always the case and has not always captivated Hungarian audiences. They loved the Krétakör (or Chalk Circle), the Hungarian company which, besides the Katona József Theatre, was the only theatre group to receive well-deserved international recognition. Then, suddenly, the audience could not clearly understand what had happened. They saw that a theatrical era had come to an end, that their favourite actors had been released. They needed time to experience that there is life beyond the chalk circle...

The Krétakör (<http://kretakor.blog.hu/>), when it still had its permanent membership, used to work almost like a repertory theatre, in spite of the fact that it had no permanent venue. They were 'guests' everywhere, both at home and abroad. Then, slowly the transformations began. They found a permanent site, the multifunctional Krétakör base, which today is less a performing arts centre than a spiritual one (in all the senses of the term). This is not by chance, as the company has changed its functions (into a project agency?), the focus of which is something different than traditional theatre-making. The base operates more like a community building. (It is enough to note their theatrical-educational programme realized together with the Káva Cultural Workshop.) Up until December 2012, the plans of the renewed or transformed Krétakör include laying the theoretical foundations of a school specialized in researching the relationship between the performing arts and social sciences, as well as realising a prototype for a site-specific travelling festival. By 2009, in the Krétakör, a new operating mechanism had taken shape. A professional team was born that works not in a hierarchical way, but on a project basis, assigning to each project a given leader who bears all financial and moral responsibility for all the phases of design and realisation. The previous company was laid off, while operating costs for the years 2009-2010 are provided by a **contract of public service** with the Ministry of Culture (unprecedented in Hungary), which confers greater transparency and

a possibility for more effective long-time planning (as opposed to the habitual application system in Hungary for subsidies). However, it also makes the theatre more exposed to any eventual changes and fluctuations in the national budget.

During the autumn of 2009, **Árpád Schilling**, the intellectual father and (artistic) leader of Krétakör, set out to work and think together for three months with the graduating students of the French Circus Academy (CNAC). As a result of this intensive work, the performance *Urban Rabbits was born*. According to plans, at least, it is scheduled to arrive in Hungary – visiting Pécs, Debrecen and Budapest – in June 2010, after a tour in South-Eastern Europe.

The (one-time) intellectual halo and artistic commitment of the Krétakör still lives on, however, in the work of other young groups and companies, as we shall see later. Before that, though, allow me a couple of words in honour of the "great old men", the giants of the independent theatre.

The most highly-ranked and well-known Hungarian trademark of independent theatre on the international theatrical "exchange" is the group bearing the name of its founding writer-director-performer, Béla Pintér, who launched **Pintér Béla and Co.** (<http://pbest.hu/>) in 1998, in order to realize a unique theatrical style. In his own words: 'When I feel a twinge of guilt from time to time because of the name of the company, I always console myself with the thought that it is basically me who determines the profile of the work, since I write and direct the plays myself. I work the most, and I "die the most" in these undertakings.' In the chamber theatre of the Budapest University of Technology – the Székéné, which seats 160 – the company has found its permanent home, from where it incessantly embarks on tours of the world with its ironic, socio-critical and (in a way still) nationally-inspired works of contemporary theatre. The surreal world so characteristic of Pintér's works is built up of a mixture of reality and dreams, authenticity and kitsch, supplemented by some elements of Hungarian folk culture, erected on the framework of musical dramaturgy. Due to their successes, the company is today considered one of the most important and inventive theatre workshops, both within and outside the country. The company premieres a minimum of one performance a year, with already 13 shows in repertory. Their newest play, *The Parallel Hour* (A párhuzamos óra), premiered in autumn 2009. It evokes a strange, futuristic vision: the images of the future (projected in the past?) collide with archaic elements. One story, with one foot in science fiction, about the diverging ritual of an imaginary sect, mingles with ironic and realist fragments and sketches of our present times – and as always, the performance is richly garnished with music.

Founded in 2002 by actor/director **Zoltán Balázs**, the **Maladype Theatre** ([www.maladype.hu](http://www.maladype.hu)) became and has since remained a company which is always able to reinterpret itself. They dispose of a permanent company built up of amateur and professional actors, supplemented with permanent fellow artists like scenic designer Judit Gombár or guest director **Sándor Zsótér**. The company works with means pulled from different theatrical traditions and theatre forms. After a few years of relative security – they belonged to the **Bárka Theatre** – they reckoned that a state of permanent change was one of the natural prerequisites of theatre-making. According to the self-definition of the company, the Maladype is consciously looking for the unexpected possibilities afforded by the usage of theatrical and non-theatrical spaces, irregular acting solutions and direct reactions from the audience. Based upon these, they have crafted a unique and clear-cut ritual theatre. Their newest performance, *Jarry's King Ubu*, is performed in a private flat with a capacity of only 35, in Mikszáth Kálmán Square, in the heart of Budapest. After a series of tempests (at the **Bárka Theatre** and the **Thália Old Studio**), this could prove to be their permanent site. Perhaps. The performance was produced in a curious way. Interested audience members could take part in the rehearsals as active observers. They could follow the workshop's progress step by step, witnessing the very birth of a performance.

From a certain aspect, the **TÁP Theatre** (<http://tapszinhaz.hu>) is one of the oldest independent theatrical initiatives. Its founders, Vilmos Vajdai and Győző Szabó, started their improvisational performance art series in the legendary Tilos az Á Club. By now, this "formation" has become the most influential company without a company. They do have a very broad circle of actors and dancers (both professional and amateur) from which the performers are conjured up each night; but, actually, TÁP is more an after-theatre theatre (or before-theatre). For the programmes that always begin after 10 p.m., the team arrives each time in a different setup: to evoke the atmosphere of variety shows around the turn of the century *All Bad Variety* (Minden Rossz Varieté), or the world of the people making vital decisions about cultural matters *Curators* (Kurátorok), or just to show what the rap version of *The Odyssey* would look like (Odisszeisz). The company presents performances at various venues in Budapest (Sirály, Tűzraktér, Trafó) on a regular basis – and their aficionados (a lot of people, actually) follow them everywhere.

Looking at Studio 'K', the past seems just as weighty as the present. At the beginning of the 70s, not only their vision about art was virtually unparalleled, but the studio even offered its members an alternative way of life – freedom and an artistic community – for which sometimes they had to give up the security assured by a traditional artistic career. The legendary first

generation was closely followed by newer ones, and today the Studio K works as a professional foundation-owned theatre with a wide contemporary and classical repertory. With their atelier working methods, they constantly experiment with new genres and creative means, organising open seminars and series presenting the oeuvre of different poets.

The members of the **HOPPart Company** ([www.hoppart.hu](http://www.hoppart.hu)) are all 2007 graduates of the Budapest University of Theatre, Film and Television, and they all attended Tamás Ascher and Eszter Novák's musical acting class. Their two exam performances, the *Magic Flute* and a collage of István Örkény's one-minute stories were such box-office hits at the Merlin Theatre that the idea was born. They should remain together and form a permanent company. They stayed together more or less, since some of them were contracted to the influential established theatres (the Örkény Theatre, the National Theatre, etc.). Others who lacked a stable contract remained exclusively HOPPart members. Still, they keep coming up with productions in which (almost) all of them take part.

Their first "independent" performance was a fairy-tale play entitled *There's still more to go* (Tovább is van...) assembled from the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Wilhelm Hauff. This show was hosted by the National Theatre. Yet, their real breakthrough was a performance that premiered in February 2009, with the title *Surprise Party* (Szörprájpárti). By the end of the year, this performance had already run 40 times in Budapest and the provinces at different festivals (the POSZT-off programme at the National Theatre Festival in Pécs, the Volt Festival, and Alternatív Színházi Szemle – a forum for independent theatre where they received the Secret Apartment Prize). This is an impressive number of performances for an independent theatre production and implies a serious interest. **Péter Kárpáti** is not only the writer of the play, but also signs on as the director of the performance, together with the other members of the company. The show differs from what is habitual both in its structure and intellect, since its site is a "secret apartment". The excuse for the performance is that a surprise birthday party is being organized for one of the protagonists, during which the more important characters in his life are lined-up just like the audience members. The play is collective. The spectators are sometimes viewers, sometimes observers and sometimes participants in the events, depending on the situation. The main role is played by **Zsolt Nagy**, a former leading actor of Krétakör, as a "guest".

In an interview, **Zrínyi Gál Vince**, the leader of the already three-year-old **KoMa Company** ([www.komatarsulat.hu](http://www.komatarsulat.hu)), declared, 'We had already come up with the idea of once founding a company at university; yet, we did not want it to be just another independent company from the lot. We definitely



wanted to find some kind of guideline. Gábor Máté, our master teacher, suggested that we could put on contemporary Hungarian plays – there was no such a group in Hungary.’ The founders of KoMA (short for contemporary Hungarian or kortárs magyar) are young actors who have graduated in Budapest or Kaposvár (the only university outside Budapest where accredited acting training takes place) and who, after receiving their degrees, could not (or did not want to) find posts in the traditional theatre structure. Yet, instead of being lost over it, desperately striving or whining, they decided to set up their own company with members in alliance for the presentation of contemporary Hungarian plays. This was not out of some lofty people’s education programme, but with the aim to reflect on the contemporary Hungarian reality, to think about the problems of our days (those tied to a moment in time or space, or those having a more general relevance). Their creative method is simple; it builds on the classical triad of text-actor-spectator. Their first production manager was Balázs Erős, who used to work for Krétakör. KoMa achieved great success already with their first premiere (László Garaczi’s *Plasma*) at the Theatre Festival in Pécs. The members of KoMa at that time – András Ötvös, Bálint Jaskó, Zrínyi Gál Vince, Katalin Jelinek, and Bea Lass – collectively received the prize for best actor under 30. The members of KoMa work a great deal, in Budapest and in the provinces, too (for example, in Nyíregyháza), making great efforts to “bring up” an audience (for themselves). They often go to schools to perform in gyms or other community spaces, and they insist on having a talk with the audience after each performance.

The team spirit and theatrical spirit of the Krétakör has not been lost in the mist of the past. In 2009, writer István Tasnádi, formerly a resident author of Krétakör and also a director “in spite of himself”, founded ALKA.T (ALKAlmi Társulás or Occasional Association) with former actors and co-workers from Krétakör. This open group is a company of people sharing an artistic taste and a strong desire for theatrical work. In the past 8-10 years, they have brought to life dozens of performances, and after the termination of the company framework, they still feel that they have things to say to each other and to their audience. ALKA.T, in partnership with KoMa, staged Tasnádi’s *Phaedra Fitness* (Fédra Fitnessz) in a fitness club. Tasnádi had previously written a paraphrase of the Phaedra story for Schilling and the Krétakör in 2005. Yet, in 2009, he was not only the writer, but also the director of the performance. *Phaedra Fitness* is an expressly contemporary work of art. It presents the antique legend in the form of a contemporary life story, in a way that simultaneously links it with its mythical roots – classical form and a contemporary language, archetypal human relationships and characters familiar

from our present time, myth and today’s reality. Mythological heroes pump iron on the fitness machines. The time of the heroes and heroines has gone, there is no more heroic fall, no more destiny even – so the performance claims.

Victor Bodó has achieved important professional acknowledgements in traditional established theatres in Hungary and abroad (the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, the Móricz Zsigmond Theatre in Nyíregyháza, and the Schauspielhaus in Graz) with *Rattledanddisappeared* (Ledarálnakeltűntem) and Alice. Then, one sunny day in 2008, he came up with the bold idea to found his own independent company with the awkwardly named **Sputnik Shipping Company – Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute – Laboratory** ([www.szputnyik.blog.hu](http://www.szputnyik.blog.hu)) and moved into the side wing of the MU Theatre to put up new and even newer performances alongside constant professional training. ‘What is the thing that we want actually? We want to learn, this many of us, in a place of this size, to spend this much time, so that the other can get as much from us as we do from him. To open ourselves up. To open up plays, novels, roles; to write, dissect, read and reread; to paint things, edit, stage things; to build up sets around, under, on the top of it; to cross out everything and recreate; to make music, play music, argue, clash, develop our skills, pose questions and more questions and not to let each other sleep or fall asleep.’ In *Council House Stories 1.0* (Bérháztörténetek 1.0), former Krétakör members appeared beside regular members of the company. István Tasnádi, Eszter Csákányi, József Gyabronka (who won the best main actor prize for this role at POSZT, or the National Theatre Festival in Pécs) and the company were rewarded with the special prize for the most promising theatre endeavour. In the spring of 2009, Bodó’s cooperation with the Schauspielhaus in Graz continued. Together, the two companies presented Peter Handke’s *The Hour When We Didn’t Know Anything About Each Other*, and Bodó was nominated for the Nestroy prize, the Austrian award for best director. Then the next station was Köln and its Schauspielhaus, where the new play *Transit* by none other than István Tasnádi was premiered, with the cooperation of Köln actors, Hungarian actors, Sputnik members and non-Sputnik members, directed by Viktor Bodó. The team of Sputnik moved back to Budapest on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2009, and has since begun their new season.

There is life and (alternative?) theatre beyond the chalk circle.

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Translated by Attila Szabó

## Theatre Workshop in the Countryside

### Tamás Koltai: A New Theatre Model in the Country: Debrecen

The Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen is the product of the personality of the director-producer Attila Vidnyánszky and the arts theatre movement. A risk factor is to be found in this kind of theatre. The belief that a provincial company has to satisfy the requirements of its multifarious audiences by presenting a range of repertoire, provide at the same time both entertainment and high culture, is still current today. Most theatres in the countryside are of a definitely commercial bent. This is evident not necessarily in choice of repertoire but rather in ways and means, in the gradual decay of style, mental attitude and artistic quality. The type of provincial arts theatre that took shape in Kaposvár in the mid-1970s was radically new because it did not exclude the art forms categorised as entertainment – operetta, musical, popular theatre generally – but made sense of them, interpreted them. The Debrecen theatre of today reminds us of this, partly because it offers broad scope to a variety of artistic forms including even opera (of which there is a tradition here), and partly because, despite the idiosyncratic manager, it is not a 'one-man band' but multifaceted and complex.

Vidnyánszky's policy is openness. He brings in festivals (DESZKA, Symbol Festival, Alternative Observer), invites foreign directors, takes his company to play elsewhere. This purpose is likewise served by close cooperation with the Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre of Beregszász (Berehove, Ukraine) which he founded, engaging individual actors and putting on the performances of the company in Debrecen. The new building – named after the famous actor Latinovits, who at one time played in Debrecen – to be opened in 2010 will facilitate international exchanges; it will have three stages, several flexible spaces, a rehearsal stage and an area for public meetings. This is the first Hungarian theatre in the countryside that will be able to keep regularly and continuously in touch with what is happening in Europe. Vidnyánszky's connections and international reputation – in 2009 he was awarded the Meyerhold prize – offer a sound basis for this expectation.

In the present economic and social climate, which is not favourable for cultural activity of quality, the significance of the Debrecen Arts Theatre can scarcely be exaggerated. The fact that it does not dabble in commerce makes it stand out among provincial theatres. Its recent premiäres have included Johann Strauss the younger's operetta *A night in Venice*, the musical *Three nights of love* (Egy szerelem három éjszakája), the well-known Hungarian piece based on the life of the ill-fated poet Miklós Radnóti, and for a come-

dy Držić's classic *Dundo Maroje*. The most recent operatic performances are similarly significant: *Bánk bán* (the masterpiece of the nineteenth-century Hungarian composer Ferenc Erkel), *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rusalka*, *Turandot* and *Aida*. The programme has included a Liszt oratorio, an adaptation of a novel, contemporary Russian and modern Hungarian plays, a monodrama, several children's performances and guest performances. Two of the directors are foreigners, and productions by the Beregszász company are constantly to be seen. The courage of the artistic intention, the desire to create things of value, is striking. Such a programme cannot be put into effect nowadays without powerful support. What political conditions and other pulling power are needed to achieve this – and to overcome the opposition of an officialdom and a conservative audience with a preference for light entertainment – might make the subject of a special study. In any case, local government support can only be obtained if the programme itself actually exists. If the theatre does not set itself a cultural target and only concentrates on making a living (or surviving), references to politics, lack of finance, crises and undemanding audiences are nothing but a transparent affirmation of surrender. In Debrecen this practice, nowadays much in vogue elsewhere, is rejected.

As a director, Vidnyánszky is a seminal personality. Their sensual and visual counterpoint give his performances a unique quality. The blending of the indications of his language and pictorial symbolism on stage simplifies the task of neither audience nor analyst. His wealth of ideas is less intellectual than sensory, and his handling of scenic concepts, his system of poetic-musical associations and the way in which as actor-director he demands evocative presence are capable of giving expression to complex material.

The performance titled *Halotti pompa* (Funeral Ceremony) is one of the most impressive pieces of theatre of recent years. The mystery-ceremony based on Szilárd Borbély's poems (books) endeavours to combine everyday depravity with the myth of the murder of God in Judaeo-Christian culture. It fleshes out by ritual theatrical means what is left to the reader in the poetic language. To the basic combination – a robbery with murder committed at Christmas 2000 and the Passion of Christ – the writer further adds a range of associative sequences, the 'histories' of Cain and Abel and Cupid and Psyche, places them in literary settings (medieval hymnody, a Nativity play) and constructs contiguous verse-cycles. Though in terms of content there is a common strand running through them – the irrationality of murderous acts – in terms of form it is unclear how they are to become a unified scenic structure. Vidnyánszky solves this problem by the device of synchronicity. He synchronises not only events that are played in different times but also overlaps the roles. The elderly people's Christmas preparations and their murder moves in



parallel with the registering of the murder and the exoneration of those responsible (partly on stage, partly in a sound-document), the Nativity scene, the Crucifixion and the folkloric-ritual funeral. The actors in the Nativity play change into scythe-bearing symbols of death, then become everyday murderers and finally the robbers in the Crucifixion, while the murdered mother becomes Mary. The rite itself clashes with itself. Death on the cross becomes blasphemy, mourning suddenly becomes cursing, and the enormous corpse-doll which is either made up from parts or torn apart is now a sacrificial body, now an Antichrist bathed in red light. The place of sacrifice itself, however, the scene of the Crucifixion is an illuminated podium that can be rotated around an axis: it is an altar, a dissection-table and a cattle-truck from which rails lead to Auschwitz. The rites menacingly and constantly approach the murder scene, a realistic domestic interior constructed in the narrow strip of foreground – in fact, approach us as we sit on the stage within touching distance of the room where the action takes place. The common ground reinforces the sense of menace, and live music, mime and visual effects slowly heighten the metaphysical horror, the constantly intermingling depravity and dread of damnation, which despite its bleak, harsh nature appears as a pure form of stylised artistry.

If we believe that experiences that affect us all immediately, mundane realities, are not to be staged with (or not only with) the immediacy of publicist or political theatre, *yet nevertheless be staged they must* because the theatre is still (almost the only) forum for the experiences of human social life, then the performance is revelatory, inescapable and of exemplary value.

An example of Vidnyánszky's contrapuntal editing technique that focuses on the actor is *Three Sisters*, continuously revised with the Beregszász company. (This is what won him the Meyerhold prize.) The first version (2003) was made for the open air, and the video recording of this is shown on a screen in the corner of the set, by which means the performance establishes a reflexive relationship with its earlier self. The duality of situations is otherwise heightened too, and the two-hour-long play, unbroken by intervals, sets up a multilayered system of associations of image and action. The most striking structural element in this is that it begins with the third act – the fire – and when that is over jumps in flashbacks to the beginning and then continues in linear fashion, ending with the final quarter. By this means emphasis is given to fragmentation as a state of existence, which reference back nourishes by false illusions into hope, only to make the final outcome even more dramatic by sudden collapse. That which in *Funeral Ceremony* gave rise to the monumental quality of stylised forms through the medium of a big space here is miniaturised but realised as a similarly complex system of indicators. The individual psychologies of the characters and their mutual relationships are modelled in the physical variations of enforced synchronous actions.

Natasha is constantly dusting books and putting flowerpots in place. Andrey is constantly putting them back and nailing them to shelf and floor. Just as Masha does Vershinin, who wants to get away. The fantasy-image of Moscow is the Kremlin made of sugar-cubes and stuck on the wall, which can be smashed down. The dining-table top which has been dragged around and the tea-service are ironic intensifications of the nostalgic idyll. The network of matched images in the performance is expressive and rich. In conclusion, the characters break out of the confines of the set and go away into the 'world outside' through a window opened where the dismantled screen ('the destroyed past') had been. Only Natasha and Anfisa are left – on the instructions of the former, the latter sets about *cleaning up*.

As an opera director too Vidnyánszky naturally builds on musical counterpoint. In his *Turandot* he works with a wide range of Far-eastern symbols and indicators, from scenery reminiscent of the Great Wall of China through blood-red ribbons dangling from severed heads to dancers alluding to the choreography of the Peking Opera who, for example, dance across the stage to the rhythmical strokes of a gong indicating the torture. He tries to set in motion a piece which has become frozen in a scenically static tradition. Instead of a rigid monumental quality he brings out the narrative immediacy and human mystery of the plot. In the very first act he brings down the 'heavenly duchess' to a human level, to spy on Liu, and in the torture scene he places Turandot and Kalaf on two ladder-like scaffoldings of equal height, as if they were opponents with identical chances.

The French writer and director Valère Novarina himself staged the post-dramatic collage titled *Opérette imaginaire*. Disparate texts indicating certain situations, stereotypes and modes of behaviour, and which are often not to be linked to situations or characters but merely to a kind of abstract, poetic verbalising, accompany the surreal and the ridiculous with their lapidary phrasing. Music serves as a solvent: the musicians (harmonica, clarinet and violin) play catchy tunes which sometimes give the impression of stylistic imitations or pastiches. The scheme of reference of thought is a special Franco-Magyar hybrid. The company achieve what they want from it not only by enthusiasm but by exuberant talent, and this euphoria spreads to that minority in the auditorium that is disposed to be seen as open and empathic. Although this is a *workshop* kind of production – a studio piece – it is a solo performance deserving of support alongside the principal stage. A hundred times more a risky, demanding artistic curiosity than a wide avenue to safety!

If I were looking for a motto, I would write this last above the door of the Debrecen Theatre!

Translated by Bernard Adams

## Balázs Urbán: The Real People's Theatre: Eger

In the Hungarian theatre life of the last few decades, it is certainly without precedent what has happened in Eger in the last ten years. Important theatrical workshops in the provinces are usually born as a result of a spectacular turn, often accompanied by big explosions, so generally in a very short time. Then, they either manage to stay alive for a longer period or perish with the same haste with which they were born. The profile of the theatre is either defined by a very influential director or a collective of artists who have very similar ideas about theatre. The Gárdonyi Géza Theatre in Eger, following the appointment of Tibor Csizmadia to the directorial seat in the years after the millennium, has continued to develop at a steady pace, without spectacular booms; and with these gradual gains, it has become one of the best and most balanced companies in the country for the past couple of seasons, while the director has been very consistent in preserving the people's theatre profile and making room for artists of different visions, styles and tastes.

Onstage in Eger, Shakespeare and Feydeau, Charlotte Johnes and László Márton, Szabolcs Fényes and Gábor Presser get along perfectly. Tibor Csizmadia stages contemporary Hungarian plays just as musicals, while artists of very different character work together more or less regularly at the theatre – like Radoslav Milenkovic and Menyhárt Szegvári, who favours more traditional text- and actor-based productions, as well as Gábor Máté, who in his stagings uses a different tone, a fresh and modern theatrical language. Máté (who is a leading director and actor at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest) has many apprentices among the actors in the company, but their cooperation is obviously motivated not only by this fact. Alongside the gradual deepening of the relationship between the company and the director, the way has been cleared for productions which do not rely on a traditional dramatic text and make full use of the actors' and director's creativity, being assembled of inventive ideas and improvisation (such is the recent premiere, focusing on the multitude of lifestyle changes caused by mobile phones, entitled *Give me a Ring* (Csörgess meg!). One of Máté's students, András Dömötör – who has also already received a director's degree – staged two important, deliberately provocative productions in the near past, both of which have been the focus of big scandals. *The Pillow Man* and *Aliz!* have been regular guests at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest.

During the last season, Sándor Zsótér also played an important role in the life of the theatre. His productions strongly differ from the dominant Hungarian theatre language. Zsótér, a complex artistic figure who works in

various theatres around the country and whose shows always sharply divide the audience while bringing professional recognition to the theatre, directed two weighty performances in the last season. For the main stage, he put on a crime play, *You are Late, Terry*, in which he told the story of Chandler in a comprehensible form, putting strong emphasis on the experience of the passing friendship between men and the sorrow of loneliness. Meanwhile, he injected density into the story with often very witty theatrical moments, conveying an abstract shade to the action with the set design alluding to Edward Hopper's world. His second production for the theatre, *The Merchant of Venice*, was staged in the studio hall. The Shakespearean opus, cut to an hour and a half, also radiated the most painful impressions of human loneliness and loss. The performance, a densely woven theatrical texture abounding in highly associative metaphors as well as great staging and performance ideas, can proudly boast several professional prizes.

This has not been by far the only performance in Eger to attract country-wide attention. It was also the venue for László Márton's *The Ambitious* (Nagyratörő) trilogy. The literary merits of this work are well acknowledged, but until recently the staging was impeded by the dense, poetic language, the static dramaturgy and the need for a large troupe made up of strong and characteristic actors. (Only the first part of the trilogy had been staged and only one time.) The premiere of contemporary plays has otherwise become a strong habit at the theatre in Eger. Last season the play titled *Drunkards* (Alkoholisták) by András Visky, from Cluj, received its premiere here.

The much stated people's theatre concept, which is elsewhere often an excuse for the commercialization of the repertory, has been truly realized here. The common denominator of these performances is the high standard of quality. Besides this, the spectators regularly attending the performances can become acquainted with an ever broader range of theatrical languages and styles – from the traditional intimate and naturalistic modes, to the more stylized, metaphorical performances, as well as productions that call for serious skills of abstraction and association, using absurd and surrealist elements. Here, too, the principle of progressiveness was realized; these latter performances only appeared on the schedule when both the company and the audience were ready for their reception. This does not mean, however, that all the professionally acclaimed performances have been box-office hits. On the same token, several less inspired, run-down and dull performances also appeared. Yet, these, too, achieved a certain standard. I, at least, have never seen a performance which could be considered entirely unacceptable. I find the constant artistic striving of the theatre, together with the professional potential of the gradually ripening actors' company, a strong guarantee of continued quality.



Tibor Csizmadia did not change the company following his appointment. Instead, he kept refreshing it. From an ensemble with mixed aptitudes, he forged a team which is not only especially strong, but also exquisitely layered in terms of age, sex and temperament. The team was also refreshed with young actors and the career of many a fresh artist was launched here, several of whom have already left for the capital. Still, the majority have stayed members of the company. The growing number of performances in the following years enabled the steady employment of the actors. The majority of the company members work especially hard and, as a consequence, can take part in performances of different genres, languages, styles and atmospheres.

During the last season, the company was again extended, but this time by a whole department. The newly founded dance department plays a complex role in the life of the theatre. Its leader is Dóra Barta, who has already worked with many influential Hungarian and international contemporary dancers. She selected her troupe mostly from among the youngest and most talented dancers in the country. The dancers also perform their share of the musical premieres at the theatre (operettas, musicals), ensuring that the audience will not see a clumsy, stumbling flock of people in the dance corps. In addition, they are also active in creating individual shows, through which they literally make contemporary dance an integral part of local theatre life. What is perhaps most exciting, however, is, together with the prose actors of the company, they create performances in which physical theatre and drama merge in a very fruitful way. This season can already be proud of two such premieres. *Biffidus Essensis...* was composed of short stories by Bret Easton Ellis, followed by *The Lady of the Camellias*, inspired by Dumas. The uniqueness of this genre innovation is not isolated to the town of Eger; similar performances can be seen in the country, but primarily only by Budapest audiences. It is obvious, though, that both actors and dancers can profit from this cooperation, as can be seen in the broadened theatre horizons of Eger since it embraced this trend.

The same holds true for the festivals organized on a regular basis by the theatre. Of these, the studio theatre festival already counts as a tradition, within the frame of which the best studio productions in the country are mounted during one week. Similarly, the monodrama festival is organized every second year and is even attended also by foreign performances. These festivals not only attract the attention of theatre professionals to Eger for a couple of days, but, more importantly, the audience in Eger can encounter high-level, standard-setting performances on a regular basis.

During the past couple of seasons, the theatre has also been trying to enliven its relationship with the audience through several other ideas. The

series titled *Newspaper Theatre* (Hírlap Színház) was probably based upon Péter Halász's by now legendary idea to put together performances in the studio of the Katona József Theatre, each day for a month, based on the daily news. This incarnation, led by Gábor Máté and scheduled on a more-or-less regular basis, is run by a steady core staff, along with several occasional guest appearances. Of course, it is realized somewhat differently in Eger. It operates not on a daily basis, but as a separate series, giving the audience a peek into a specific form of theatre-making. At the same time, it necessarily brings audience and actors closer. A more intensive communication with the audience is overall an important element in the theatre's profile. They organize public rehearsals on a regular basis, as well as theatre tours, audience meetings, special literature classes at schools and other interactive events.

This could be the most tell-tale element of the stakes involved in this undertaking. The Gárdonyi Géza Theatre does not try to familiarize its audience with a given theatrical style, formal language or viewpoint, but more than that – a colourful theatrical spectrum, a theatre life, if you like. As the only theatre in Eger, with some exceptions (for example, the Harlequin Puppet Theatre, which has operated successfully for decades), the Gárdonyi Géza endeavours to offer the sort of varied and rich programme often provided by several theatres in other cities. One can feel that for the artists this is just as important as the fact that the theatre is by now an unavoidable part of Hungarian theatre life. Its performances are regularly invited to the national theatre festival in Pécs (POSZT), and several members of the company have won prestigious prizes in the past couple of years. If this process of development, which seems more and more pronounced in the past two or three seasons, does not come to an untimely end; in the long run, it could result in a multi-faceted theatre for the people of the provinces – a theatre which manages to maintain consistently high artistic standards with a very colourful repertory, rated highly both by audience members and in professional circles. That would be an unprecedented phenomenon in the Hungarian theatre history of the past few decades.

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Translated by Attila Szabó



## Zsófia Molnár: The Fate of a Legend: Kaposvár

In Hungary, theatres in the countryside are not in an easy position, because the theatrical life tends to revolve around the capital Budapest. Outside the capital, there is hardly any city where more than one repertory theatre could survive with a permanent company. This means that these institutions are not in the privileged position to decide whether they want to be artistic or entertainment theatres; they must serve all layers of the audience. This aim in Kaposvár in the past nearly four decades – with bigger or smaller flops – was realized at a generally high standard. The so-called 'Kaposvár phenomenon', existed for a relatively long time. The content covered during this period did change, of course, over the decades, due to the historical and political circumstances; yet, the essence remained the same: a high-level, collective will for creation and a strict working discipline. This was grounded by the leading director of the theatre in the seventies, Gábor Zsámbéki, who continued his work with similar principles, from 1978, at the National Theatre, and later at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, from 1982. In Kaposvár, László Babarczy took over the managerial seat and transformed the place into a theatrical workshop. Several legendary performances were born in this period, some abounding in political references – for example, the staging of *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss, directed by János Ács, which courted scandal at its 1982 guest performance in Budapest. (Let's not forget that this production was born during the one-party rule, and the receiving venue, the Vígsház, had to be encircled by police cordons).

János Mohácsi, who has been the leading director since 1983, is still one of the defining personalities of the theatre in Kaposvár. This is precisely why the political attack of his staging of a play which focused on an elaboration of the events during the 1956 revolution, titled *56 06 crazy souls beaten regiments* (*56 06 örült lelkek vert hadak*) caused such a mighty uproar and gave rise to professional sympathy in favour of Mohácsi. This happened in 2007, at the time of Babarczy's withdrawal, and the attacks were aimed at the protection of the historical facts. The debate was followed by the arguments over managerial elections. The 2007/2008 season passed under the transitory leadership of István Znamenák, a director and actor at the theatre. The following season, György Schwajda took over the manager's seat. Schwajda is no novice in the theatrical profession. In addition to his activity as a playwright and dramaturge (his play entitled *Hymn / Himnusz* was translated into several languages, and not so long ago staged in Lebanon), he also led the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok, 1985-1992 and 1995-2000. He was managing director of the short-lived Arts Theatre in Budapest (Művész Színház), along-

side actress Mari Törőcsik. Finally, from 1998 until 2002 (covering the period of government change in the country), he was the ministerial commissioner of the new National Theatre under construction and the first managing director for a short while. Following the general practice of all managerial changes, the composition of the troupe changed in Kaposvár, too, albeit slightly. Besides the guest artists, the leading directors also retained their positions. Overall, the future of the theatre will only be defined by Schwajda's first "true" season this year. Still, a quick survey will tell us if some elements of the transition have already appeared on the level of the repertory, and if so, in what way.

In the 2006/2007 season, there were two children's plays presented and Babarczy directed a classical Hungarian operetta. *Hair* remained in repertory as well as *Countess Lily* (also directed by Babarczy and played with great success since 2004) and a staging by Tamás Ascher, a recast of a classical Hungarian detective film.

The last premiere of the season was undertaken by another director who belongs to the younger generation. László Keszég, who is known to bring novel impulses from the independent field, directed one of Feydeau's vaudevilles. The above-mentioned scandalous performance by Mohácsi concerning the 1956 Revolution was also a premiere of the very same season. As a result of his activity in Kaposvár, Mohácsi has practically created an individual genre with many characters (sometimes used as a kind of modern choir, sometimes used in a musical sense) and with texts shaped partly through collective writing, which gives them their uniqueness and freshness. Last but not least, this kind of performance can only be realized through a very intensive rehearsal process, which is considered to be the core of the 'Kaposvár phenomenon.' Mohácsi likes best to rewrite, paraphrase and work out free adaptations. He characteristically operates with complex systems of allusions and all his performances have a strong social commitment and portray, often with irony and self-irony, as he does for example in *We Have Bombed Kaposvár* (*Megbombáztuk Kaposvárt*) or *Just a nail* (*Csak egy szög*). In all his performances he is really interested in the world surrounding us.

In the next seasons the entertainment genre was represented by a show titled *Csiky Cabaret*, put together by five directors of the theatre, and *Dark Comedy* by Peter Schaffer (directed by Mohácsi). On the main stage, the audience could see Zsigmond Móricz (a classic author of 20th century Hungarian folkish literature), a Kleist performance directed by Péter Gothár and Attila Réthly's work entitled *Szabad az Á.* The latter evokes the age of system change in a somewhat nostalgic atmosphere, complete with a Trabant-inspired set design. The structure of the seasons show that the people's theatre role is fully realized in Kaposvár, and in a balanced manner.



The profile of this season was entirely shaped by Schwajda, and the first premiere justly enthused the whole country. Theatre guru Anatoly Vasiliev staged Marguerite Duras's short novel entitled *Entire Days under the Trees* with Mari Törőcsik in the leading role. This was not Vasiliev's first guest direction in Hungary. He has returned to Hungary several times during Schwajda's management in Szolnok. Even if the Kaposvár audience is relatively well-trained, it seems somewhat contradictory to launch the season of a theatre which announces a popular programme with a director who uses complex theatrical codes that require a more active reception. On the schedule this season, we consequently find a play by Molière (*School for Wives*), Ferenc Lehár (*The Merry Widow*) and Bernstein (*West Side Story*) among Hungarian works by István Örkény *Key Searchers* (Kulcskeresők) or, Ede Tóth *The Scamp of the Village* (A falu rossza) or and a 'half musical, half fairy-tale' titled *The Attic* (A padlás), performed with endless success in Budapest for decades.

The theatres in the countryside are in a difficult position, because they are forced to present twice or three times as many premieres a year as any theatre in the capital to serve their audience, mostly composed of season ticket holders. Also, only those performances which were true box-office hits (to use a fashionable phrase) can be rescheduled from the past season. (In the present case, Schwajda presumably did not even wish to recycle more than one of them.) On the other hand, the variety of genres could play out in favour of the actors, since they can try out their skills in several different styles – not to mention the other positive fact that they can all enjoy an appropriate number of roles. Yet, the tense schedule demands the constant presence of all company members. Kaposvár has a long tradition of training acting apprentices, which is, at present, carried out at the local university in cooperation with the Theatre Department. The directors at the theatre, without exception, are also tutors at the school, and students get the opportunity to perform in the theatre, sometimes even on the main stage. The change in management, which came about after a long time, has not yet caused any significant changes – neither in the repertory, nor in the composition of the troupe. Meanwhile, both theatre-lovers and those in professional circles wait breathlessly to see whether the "Kaposvár phenomenon" will hold out for the following seasons.

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Translated by Attila Szabó

Szabolcs Molnár:

## Bartók + ... Miskolc International Opera Festival

The Miskolc International Opera Festival is one of the newly instituted Hungarian festivals, and was held for the first time in 2001. Despite its relative youth it ranks with audiences and the theatrical and musical professions alike as a series of events to be taken seriously. Since its inception the festival has endeavoured to achieve goals – artistic, economic and socio-political – that are often hard to reconcile with one another. The artistic direction has, so far, been successful in overcoming friction between these: economic considerations have not overloaded the programme with superficial popularism, nor have socio-political aims come to the usual fate of noble intentions, but have produced tangible results. The various points of view have been mutually reinforced, inspired and harmoniously met by a sustained relationship which must ensure the long-term existence and success of the festival.

Miskolc is the centre of the north-east region of Hungary and grew into a big city during the socialist period through the drive to develop heavy industry. Between the 1950s and 1980s the local traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marginalised or vanished completely. The opera festival has quickly done much to revive and redefine these traditions of enlightenment both civic and national. After the change of regime the city became impoverished, lost status and self-awareness, and thanks to the opera festival new associations have sprung up. When the name of Miskolc is spoken it is no longer bleak housing estates and derelict factory buildings that are conjured up but an image of the bustling pedestrian streets of a historic city centre, the atmosphere of café terraces where big names in music and singing regularly appear. A kind of spiritual rehabilitation has therefore begun with which environmental rehabilitation is trying to keep in step. Like the opera festival, University of Miskolc too – by taking in modern technologies and trends in fundamental research that will play a leading role in the future – is seeking points for possible expansion.

With its attractive natural features the region is a favourite with visitors, and Miskolc is the ideal regional centre, a starting point, a gateway. The opera festival, however, has brought attention to a second 'gateway-function'. Producers that think on a European scale, bearing in mind the international character of opera, regard Miskolc as the western gateway to the eastern region – Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Russia etc. The tendency is definitely perceptible, for example, in the move to invite Romanian, Russian and Ukrainian companies and workshops, and indeed, in shaping programmes the East European 'offering' is taken into consideration; we are speaking of a vast

area with, in the main, a little-known operatic tradition. This policy has been justified by the great surprises and developments that have been connected in recent years with performances by companies from the east.

The festival is named 'Bartók + Opera Festival' because every year the name of another composer, style or musical or associated field is placed after the name of Bartók. His theatrical work (the opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (A kékszakállú herceg vára), the ballet *The Wooden Prince* (Fából faragott királyfi) and the pantomime *The Magic Mandarin* (A csodálatos mandarin) and his piano, chamber, choral and orchestral music are core items of the festival repertoire; the name of Bartók is therefore a call to action.

In 2001 the other half of the programme consisted of works by Verdi. Next year came Puccini, followed by Mozart and Tchaikovsky. The choice of the latter enriched the profile of the festival markedly. In addition to familiar items of repertoire such as *Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades* the programme featured rarities too, such as for example *The Maid of Orleans* or *Mazeppa*. The audience had the opportunity of seeing the latter in guest performances by the Ukrainian National Taras Shevchenko Opera and Ballet, the former by the Pozsony (Bratislava) Slovak National Theatre. The venturesome Tchaikovsky programme was warmly received by the media and critics, and the prospect of something special with an imposing list of visiting artistes (such as Galina Gorshakova, Gegam Grigorian, Boyko Zvetanov, Mihail Davidoff, Sergey Leiferkus and the Boris Eifman Ballet Theatre of St Petersburg) was a serious attraction.

In the following year (2005) the idea of a dual theme was changed and in addition to Bartók there appeared a term representative of a period rather than the name of an individual composer. *Bartók + bel canto* featured Italian composers of the first half of the nineteenth century – Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini. This scheme was continued in 2006 with *Bartók and verismo*, and on this occasion too successfully presented works on the fringe of the repertoire. The audience heard three works by Umberto Giordano. The Helikon Theatre of Moscow performed the almost unknown *Siberia*, his most popular work, the Slovak National Theatre presented *Andrea Chénier*, while the Hungarian State Opera House Chorus and Orchestra gave a concert performance of *Fedora*, based on a most interesting libretto and closely connected to verismo.

*Verismo* is the theatrical-natural Italian opera style of the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth centuries, and the work of its most characteristic representatives Pietro Mascagni and Ruggiero Leoncavallo could not be omitted from the programme; the company of the National Theatre of Bucharest performed *Cavalleria rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*. *La Bohème* is considered a real

gem, and it was staged by the Prague National Theatre, not in Puccini's popular version but in Leoncavallo's adaptation of Henri Murger's novel.

The opera festival also presents openings for provincial opera workshops, such as those of Debrecen, Szeged and Miskolc, and promotes helpful co-productions. From this point of view *Bartók + verismo* set the pattern by putting on Puccini's *Tosca* in a joint production by the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen and the Miskolc Opera Festival, directed by the Ukrainian Sergey Masloboychikov. The inventive production featured some distinguished singers – Eszter Sümegi, Alexandru Agache and Mikhail Agafonov.

The 2007 theme *Bartók + Paris* again brought a new colour. The names of Debussy, Poulenc, Gounod and Massenet were prominent in the programme. The greatest impression, which was felt even in Budapest, was made by a concert performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Zoltán Kocsis and a chorus of (mainly French) guest singers gave a brilliant account of Debussy's work.

Poulenc's *La voix humaine* and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, both one-act works, were staged in Balázs Kovalik's revelatory festival production. The other Poulenc opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites* came from Croatia. The company of the Zagreb Opera gave a most convincing and highly artistic performance of Krešimir Dolenčič's mise-en-scène. Another company from the south, the Croat National Theatre of Split, gave Massenet's romantic grand opera *Werther*. The Kassa Opera of Slovakia added Gounod's *Mireille* to the international quality of *Bartók + Paris*.

The last two years of the festival's history brought results that will be hard to surpass. In 2008 *Bartók + Slavs* brought operas by Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich, Smetana, Janacek and Dvorak to the programme.

The Helikon Theatre of Moscow performed Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, to extraordinary acclaim from both profession and audience. The Slovak National Theatre presented Peter Konwitschny's production of *Onegin*. The Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen performed Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* in Andrzej Buben's production and the Kosice State Theatre brought Dvořák's *Rusalka* to the Miskolc stage. These five productions (the smaller part of the whole festival programme) made a very deep impression on Hungarian attitudes to opera and talk of opera in general.

It rarely happens in the world of international festivals that in the course of a single week so many operatic productions of such quality are to be seen in one place. That was followed by the 2009 programme, which – to quote Zoltán Kocsis – 'was certainly unique, for where could one see on three



successive days Alban Berg's *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*, and Arnold Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron*?' Nevertheless, that was what the *Bartók + Vienna* festival undertook, in addition to works by Mozart, Haydn and Richard Strauss. Once more it seemed a daunting programme, but the understanding and enthusiastic reception dispelled anxieties over the alleged unpopularity of the works of the modern Viennese school.

The Helikon Theatre of Moscow, returning as if home to Miskolc, gave a visually powerful interpretation of *Lulu*. Dmitri Bertman's production reinforced the disturbing, expressive world of the opera. From the former East Germany, the Gera State Theatre's *Wozzeck* was a convincing example of modern opera performance, in which the work of the cast and Matthias Oldag's production were of the highest standard. Conditions in Gera are very similar to those in Miskolc, and everyone was shown that opera performance is by no means a theatrical preserve. Andras Scheiber, who sang the principal role, and Franziska Rauch as Marie proved that there are singers of distinction and charisma outside the ranks of international stars.

The National Theatre of Bratislava delighted the audience with a magical performance of Richard Strauss's *Ariadne on Naxos*. The lyric quality of the piece and the thorough analysis of Dieter Kaegi's production were brought out by fantastic individual performances. Zubica Vargicová (Zerbinetta), Maida Hundeling (Ariadne), Jan Vacik (Bacchus) and Denisa Hamarová (the young composer) revealed a lavish vocal culture.

Arnold Schönberg's unfinished musical play *Moses and Aaron* received its world premiäre in Hungary. To perform the work was an extraordinary tour de force. The conductor, Zoltán Kocsis, presented a thorough account of the musical wealth of the score. Giorgio Pressburger's production, balancing the theatrical with the oratorio-like, brought out the theological and ideological features of the work. The consequence of this courageous undertaking is most exciting. Schönberg wrote two movements of a work originally planned as three, and his experience of performing the work in Miskolc has spurred Kocsis to write the missing third movement. The opera thus completed will perhaps return to Miskolc one day.

Translated by Bernard Adams



## Theatre Workshops in Budapest

### Zsófia Molnár: It's Still the Katona...

#### History

In the second half of the 1970s, Kaposvár and Szolnok were the most influential theatrical centers in Hungary. From today's perspective, this phenomenon might seem curious, since the giant "blubberhead" of the country is Budapest, and this monopoly in most cases – and in any field you choose – stands up against the tentative conquests of the provinces. Yet, one must note that at the time the two theatres in Szolnok and Kaposvár were managed by two such influential artistic personalities, that the political power would later heartily give them the task of reshaping the profile of the National Theatre. Therefore, in 1978, Gábor Székely from Szolnok and Gábor Zsámbéki from Kaposvár were summoned to the National Theatre (or the Nemzeti) as leading directors, to assure that the performances would reflect the vital questions of societal and personal existence. A couple of years later, however, it became obvious to political leaders that the unquestionable artistic qualities had slowly overstepped the national ones. Therefore, as a kind of compromise, they provided for the core of the company (and this is the keyword!) a new playing site. This is how, in 1982, in the venue of the National's Studio Theatre, the independent Katona József Theatre was born, under the leadership of Gábor Székely.

At present, the theatre comprises two (and a half) venues. Besides the main stage, there is the Kamra (a telling name, literally pantry), Katona's own studio hall, opening in 1991; and an even smaller space in the basement of the main building called Sufni (literally shed), which seats 30-50. Yet, the difference between the two sites can be seen not only in their size, but also in their choice of the plays (which is not, however, independent of the number of seats).

The Katona was, in 1990, a founding member of the Union of the Theatres in Europe (of which Gábor Zsámbéki was the vice president between 1996 and 2002). In 2008, the theatre joined the Mito21 group.

Since 1989, the manager of the theatre has been Gábor Zsámbéki, carrying out his duties with a strong hand and along precise guidelines, both in company politics and artistic policy. His mandate ends in 2010; therefore, reasonable guesses about the future of the Katona can only be ventured when it turns out if Zsámbéki is going to carry on with his work or step aside in favor of a new manager.

## Program

The obvious profile of the theatre is psychological realism. Yet, this category must not be treated too strictly. A remarkable example of this is any of the Chekhov productions, by either Zsámbéki or Tamás Ascher (next to Gábor Máté, he is one of the leading directors of the theatre, presently the rector of the University of Theatre, Film and Television). While the surface layer of these performances comply with mainstream style expectations, at their deeper levels, careful observers can track much more complex interpretations and acting styles.

The program policy of the Katona József Theatre has been shaped, right from the start, by two main tendencies: on the one hand, to attempt to refresh and give a sensitive renderings of well-known or long-forgotten classics – in many cases doing so not only in a theatrical sense, but also on the level of the text, through new translations – and on the other hand, to present the newest achievements of Hungarian and international drama. These twin tendencies can be singled out also by looking at the premieres of the past couple of seasons.

The first premiere of the 2006/2007 season was created by a director in his early thirties, Viktor Bodó, and garnered some international recognition by that time – mostly with his adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*, in a show titled *Rattled and disappeared* (Ledarál nakelt üntem, premiered in the season of 2004/2005), which still receives invitations from abroad. His follow-up, *The Great Sganarelle and Co.* (A Nagy Sganarelle és Tsa), was a personal (and collective) Don Juan paraphrase that proved somewhat more ephemeral, less noteworthy. Nonetheless, the main strength of Bodó is the way he is able to render the legendary classics in a palpably actual and youthful manner – that is, making them accessible for younger generations as well.

The next premiere of the season was Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* directed by Tamás Ascher, who is a grand master of casting and the meticulous elaboration of characters. The biggest discovery of the performance was the actress Katalin Simkó as Hedvig, praised to the skies by Budapest critics. Gábor Zsámbéki complemented the season with a practically unknown, freshly translated Goldoni one-act, *The Last Night of Carnival*. The play abounds in rewarding cameos – a sort of benefit performance for the greatest actors of the theatre, from the youngest players (acting students on their internship at the theatre) to their elderly fellow artists. It seems that this text by Goldoni was unknown in the other parts of Europe as well. The performance has received a great number of international invitations so far, mostly from Italy.

At the Kamra, besides Thomas Bernhard's *Trout Quintet* (*The Power of Habit*) directed by Gábor Máté, *Women of Trachis* by Sophocles was also staged. The latter was directed by Péter Gothár on a set (as always) that he himself designed. Gothár is mostly known as a film director, his theatrical works usually being labeled

as avant-garde, which applies both to his approach to space and text and his choice of plays. This time he staged the Greek tragedy on an impressively abstract set.

The biggest novelty of the season was the last "premiere," *What's this Sound?* (Dzsessztetés), directed by Gábor Máté, which was a true box-office hit. Many of the theatre's young actors grabbed an instrument, proving that several of them are true musical talents. Among them, I must single out Tamás Keresztes by name.

The next season, 2007/2008, also offered quite a few theatrical delicacies. A reason for this was the 25th anniversary of the theatre's existence, celebrated with a smashing series on theatre history titled *Notorious Ones* (Notóriusok). The text of each part was written specifically for this occasion and focused partly on the most notable events, peaks and crises of Hungarian theatre history (theatrical initiatives from mid 19th century to the 1950s), partly on the crucially topical and painful problems of today (for instance, the theatre structure debate from a few years before, which is to some extent going on today). The company members themselves exhibited colossal stamina, since the *Notorious Ones* series – obviously targeting a much smaller and more exclusive audience – could not and did not replace the big premieres of the season. The first of these, *Playground* was directed by choreographer Yvette Bozsik (member of the company since 1993, currently the director of the choreography department at the Hungarian Theatre Academy). A great virtue of her work at the theatre is that she is able to join her trained dancers and the dramatic actors of the company with a perfect sense of dramaturgy.

Tamás Ascher staged Ödön von Horváth's *A Sexual Congress*. It is a strange phenomenon that – while in the theatre history of Western Europe, Ödön von Horváth is, and has usually been a fashionable author – on Hungarian stages, he mostly counts as a curiosity. The present season proved to be an exception to this rule of thumb, as two theatres have already staged his plays.

Other premieres on the main stage included Zsámbéki's *Macbeth*, the topicality of which is arguably due to the fact that the director discovered the two leading characters in two of his company's actors. Andrea Fullajtár played a momentous Lady Macbeth, coupled with Károly Hajduk's typically 21st century, small-format Macbeth, who cowardly devolves all duties upon his wife. The director of the last premiere, Gábor Máté, is probably the artist most sensitive to contemporary texts. *Locusts* by Biljana Sbrljanović touches upon important topics: generations living beside each other, death and recognition.

At the Kamra, the season proved to have a more "experimental" atmosphere. Péter Gothár staged a truly avant-garde play by A. I. Vvedensky, *Christmas at the Ivanovs*, again on his own inventive set. Finally, Sándor Zsótér, as a guest artist, produced out of a hidden drawer a little-known play by Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Black Battles with Dogs*.

Last year's theatrical season opened with Ascher's production of Maxim Gorky's *Barbarians*, set in a quite Chekhovian tone (the influence of Ivanov could



also be felt in the direction). Gábor Máté arguably scored the biggest hit of the season with G. B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (as even the Katona can use a little bit of merriment), which he framed musically with a soundtrack relying heavily on Balkan music. The Kamra again opened with a contemporary author (seen often in Western Europe, but unavailable to Hungarian audiences until now) when Gábor Zsámbéki staged three one-acts by Edward Bond. The somberness of Bond was outbalanced by Yvette Bozsik's new show *Girl in Garden* (Lány, a kertben), only to allow Ascher to see-saw back into the gloomy with an adaptation of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*.

The present season (2009/2010) also attempts to follow the guidelines of past seasons: a classic by Ödön von Horváth (*Tales from the Vienna Wood*) from Zsámbéki, a 20th century Hungarian poet's play from Máté, *The Two-headed Beast* (A kétfejű fenevad) by Sándor Weöres), a Marivaux comedy from Ascher (*The Triumph of Love*, in a new translation), and in the Kamra, Leonid Andreyev's *The Waltz of the Dogs* directed by Gothár, an accomplished interpreter of Russian art from the 20s and 30s. Finally, Calderon's rarely produced *Life is a Dream* will be staged by Dániel Kovács, who will finish his directorial studies at the Theatre University with this performance. Another guest direction is to be provided by Réka Szabó, from the alternative field, with her choreography titled *Grief* (Gyász) on the chamber stage. Another novelty of this season is the Katona's attempt to foster a closer relationship with the audience. Those interested can take a peek at performances in preparation in a casual atmosphere in the form of open rehearsals.

One can justly say that the Katona occupies a privileged position within the Hungarian theatre system, because it is practically the only theatre which is well known in every corner of the world and warmly welcomed anywhere. In the last season Ascher's *Ivanov* had guest performances in numerous places around the globe from America, through Russia (!), and all the way to Australia. Zsámbéki's performances are also acclaimed, just as Bodó's penetrating Kafka adaptation. Explanations for this must be sought, of course, in the reliable artistic standard of the theatre. This is due, on the one hand, to the inventiveness and confidence of the directors and, on the other hand, to the composition of the disciplined ensemble players in the company. An important element of the Katona's troupe policy is the involvement of the youngest talents in the theatrical work – who really cannot complain, since they are constantly granted opportunities for big acting challenges and leading roles. The other important factor of success is the balanced repertoire. Even if the Katona is an artistic theatre in the traditional sense, it is also trying to offer high-quality performances to audiences of all classes and generations.

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Translated by Attila Szabó

## Andrea Tompa: Bourgeoisie and Citizens: Another National

One familiar with the recent and scandalous history of the building of National Theatre in Budapest would be surprised how quickly such discussions can be transported from political frays to real aesthetic disputes. After a long history – starting from 2002, in the case of the new building of the present National – or a much longer one – from the mid 19th century – “a” National Theatre building in Eastern Europe has always been a battlefield of national identity and pride, loaded with politics.

### Looking back without anger

Our neighbors' gardens are always greener, we say, because Hungarians often have such a feeling of inferiority, but it is not true in the case of the National. We have, to the east, a monstrous Stalinist building in Bucharest and a never-ending construction to the northwest, just to speak of our immediate neighbors. This could give us a feeling of ease. After all, we are no exception. Communist power had its own politics of the Nationals: generally a strong control of national identities. In Bucharest – under the dictatorship of Ceaușescu – it resulted in a huge building. In Budapest, however, in 1965, the theater was blown up (in the sense of demolished) in order to build the metro station at Blaha Lujza Square. (Grotesquely, this square bears the name of a *national* actress, who worked at the National.) This was probably not a simple practical gesture – that a metro should be built and an old, dysfunctional, difficult to renovate building should be removed – but an attack on national identity. After that, the National had to find temporary housing at various sites.

A final place, the present National, was built on the bank of the Danube, in an area somewhat outside the city center, and it opened in 2004. Political parties – liberal and conservative – had their own ideas about where it should be built, what kind of building and, of course, by whom, in what style of architecture, in open or closed competition. The project was finally carried out by the conservative party in a record time. No surprise, one would think, since the conservative party leading the country at the time had great ambitions in articulating its ideas about national symbols and leaving those symbols engraved in stone till the end of the time. Or not the even till the end, since, as Hungarian experience shows, there can always be a metro to be built in the very spot of the National Theatre.

So the building stands, proudly or not, in stone and in marble. After the social changes, there were more than a few theatre buildings constructed in

Hungary (most of them were reconstructions), but there was no idea and definitely no public debate about what a public space should be like or what purpose it really serves. Plazas remain the single experience of public spaces in the new social era, so the aesthetics of the new National's building is somewhat plaza-like – or, as a Romanian director Silviu Purcărete puts it, Disneyland-like. Well-known scholar Dragan Klaić has also severely commented on it. We would simply call it a bourgeois, ceremonious public space with huge “public” meeting spaces and rigid, old-fashioned performance spaces.

From a strictly (and, let us say, objective) professional point of view, the building was criticized because of its fixed, immense and immobile stage, which reflects a 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre aesthetic, as well as its poor acoustics. The building lived out its ‘early childhood’ under a constant barrage of such aesthetic, architectural and professional critical remarks. No one could predict when such – already boring – remarks would stop being repeated.

The critical comments lasted so long as there was nothing better to talk about in connection with the National. In 2003, after an open competition, the artistic director's position was awarded to actor and director Tamás Jordán, whose earlier career was connected to independent theatres and the so-called National Theatre Festival (POSZT) held annually in Pécs. The “Jordán-era” did not result in anything very characteristic aesthetically, or anything outspokenly articulated. Neither courageous, nor innovative, nor progressive, Jordán went in the surprising direction of a conservative, somewhat old-fashioned aesthetic, taking no risks and basically articulating no clear vision of what this National Theatre should be about. This was surprising, since one would expect this artist with an independent background to enter into a more open and risky adventure with such a huge opportunity: big building, big company and, of course, big subsidy (1.7 billion HUF or 6.2 million EUR in 2009). Jordán operated a dusty repertoire and did not invite the best directors. Some good directors worked in the studio, which produced some valuable productions. What remained was a large roster of stars, which in artistic sense could never become a company. A bourgeois building gave birth to a bourgeois aesthetic, sort of a Pygmalion effect. The leadership had both populist and elitist ambitions – for example, when special trains and buses transported people (some of whom had never even seen a theatrical performance) from villages, whereas public transportation remained poor. One was supposed to take a car to the National. (Remember Margaret Thatcher saying, “Anyone who takes public transport after 30, is a loser.”)

A “theatre populaire” and a “bourgeois theatre” with rare “arty” exceptions made up the ambiguous face of the National. Still, no arrangements

were made to put the National Theatre on the map of Budapest as a public space, an open institution of the city and its citizens.

Jordán's excuse – if any – was that after the fierce and furious political battle over the National, expectations were too high. Furthermore, because it was the best financed Hungarian theatre, professionals expected something really special. It was not, however, an expectation shared by the whole society, since such issues were not debated.

#### From form to content: a building no matter how it is

It has been less than two theatre seasons since the new artistic director was appointed, and the centuries' long discussion of political wills was slowly dropped. In this sense, Róbert Alföldi's leadership proved to be successful from the beginning. Appointed in open competition and legally (which does not necessarily happen with every single artistic director's position in the country, as we are witnessing plenty of infractions right now), Alföldi adopted a positive discourse toward his theatre – positive, in the sense that it would not endlessly enumerate the defects of the past such as political struggles, problems and deficiencies of the building and the inherited company, etc. (After all, it is an internationally known cliché that Hungarians love to complain.) Alföldi's discourse took a fresh look at the existing opportunities: a building no matter how it is, a company which has its possibilities and a very serious subsidy. He did not trouble much over the form (the form of the building, of course), but focused attention on the content: the theatre's productions.

When appointed, Alföldi already had some experience leading a theatre. He headed the Bärka Theatre for two years. He is an actor-director and media personality whose professional career was controversial. As a theatre director, his aesthetics were not easily accepted. Thus, as an artistic director, he pragmatically began to cook with the ingredients at hand. The only, albeit significant, change he made was bringing in a considerable number of young actors – some of them from the former Krétakör (Chalk Circle) Company, others from the Academy.

His era started with two aesthetically strong statements. He invited into the repertory an independent co-production by the Krétakör Company and Trafó. The show directed by Kornél Mundruczó, called *Ice*, based on the work of postmodern Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin, incorporated radical and provocative theatrical language. Alföldi also invited (for three nights) an *Uncle Vanya* from Cluj (Kolozsvár, Romania) directed by the Romanian-American Andrei Șerban. It was an outstanding performance of acting and



directing. The “new” National had had no new premiers yet. These two guest performances, as an artistic credo, announced the new era. Nevertheless, both shows were designed for a studio space, and there was still the National’s main auditorium including 619 seats.

Whether by constraint or not, Alföldi took on the main stage himself and opened three productions in the first season. (The new artistic director had to start a new season without having the option of preparing contracts beforehand.) He also invited to some directors who had worked there in the previous era as well (like Sándor Zsótér and Péter Valló). In light of the positive discourse he adopted, he did not close down the old repertoire immediately, but slowly and stealthily, he changed the face of the National.

Through the new premieres, and in smaller part through invited shows (in the first season, Lev Dodin, Rimini Protokoll and Ivo van Hove had guest performances there), the National was quickly put (back, one would say, 30 years before) on the country’s theatrical map. Alföldi did not adopt a radical aesthetic change (at least, not as radical as the first two guest performances seemed to promise). Nor did he adopt a confrontational political stance when addressing the audience. Alföldi’s performances tried – to put it simply – to move from a bourgeois theatre to the theatre of citizens. This was not a declared and articulated discussion of the role of theatre, but a dialogue through the performances.

On the one hand, he himself as a director has grown up in an unexpected way and almost immediately, like an artist who gets a “lucky break” and seizes it. All of his performances – and also some other productions at the theatre – display a new thinking about the role of a theatre. No matter what dramatic material he touches – and he works with very different forms from operetta to contemporary plays, balancing with prudence between a “national” repertoire and an artistic one – he uses them as a tool in his critical approach toward reality, or contemporary Hungarian society. Alföldi seems interested in middle-class mentalities, which he seriously criticized in his show *The Park* by the German playwright Botho Strauss. In his production of *Orestes* by Euripides, he was more concerned about the problem of the crowd and the attitude of the elite toward it. With a traditional Hungarian folk play, basically an operetta, he follows the journey of a provincial young man who gets lost in the big capital. Some of the shows touch upon issues critical of capitalistic realism. This new social sensibility – new not only in the National, but in Hungarian theatre in general, with few exceptions – maintains an opposition to the bourgeois view on theatre, which does not tackle social issues, since it considers theatre a manifestation of the middle-class lacking self-reflection. Although the theatre’s shows toured neither interna-

tional festivals, nor Hungarian ones (and critics did not give them any prizes), they demonstrate a consistent artistic program.

In his second season, Róbert Alföldi opened a performance of young actors based on a romantic historical Hungarian play (*Bánk bán*), considered something of a “sacred cow”. The show turned out to be a strong physical performance which discusses otherness, identities, xenophobia and other exigent issues for our society. The play is also aimed at talking to a young audience through a Hungarian classic.

Alföldi – still a prominent media personality – has managed not to lose the audience with his new artistic program, although the composition of the old audience has probably begun to change. The theatre has gained the attention of critics, whereas only isolated extremist voices try to undermine the unquestionable results of this artistic direction as elections approach. What Alföldi has not succeeded in doing is transforming the space into a lively contemporary arts center or an open public space. Efforts in these directions have not been made. Moreover, the location of the building, outside the city center, presents an obstacle, so one can only wonder if these goals will ever be achieved.

As the elections approach and the candidates for the May 2010 political contest become known, one can hear accusations of making theatre for a certain stratum, or of not providing a “national” theatre – whatever would that be. Political discussions about the National Theatre in Budapest are slowly resurging. There is a fear in the air that a legally appointed artistic director can be removed from his position for political reasons, and content and achievements will play no role in the decision. Once again, our attention will be distracted from aesthetic and professional questions by something endlessly boring and mournful.



## Szabolcs Molnár: Changing Perspective in the Opera House

In the 2009-2010 season the Hungarian State Opera House is staging twenty ballets and thirty-seven operas. Fourteen of the operatic repertoire have either been introduced in the past three years or are awaiting their premières. The number of new items kept on the programme means that a few recent productions have, temporarily or permanently, been dropped.

In 2009 the 125-year-old Opera House has been one of the outstandingly highly esteemed State institutions. It is a huge establishment, reckoned to be the single biggest employer in Hungarian cultural life, with an orchestra, corps de ballet, solo dancers, opera chorus, children's choir, full-time singers, coaches, music library, archive, technical section, scenery department, wardrobe and various administrative offices (legal, personnel, marketing etc.). It is no trifling matter that, with the exception of part of the administration, the building in which it functions is an ornate monument, representative of the highest level of nineteenth-century theatre building, but very costly to operate. In the light of all this opinion is divided on whether the outstandingly high esteem means under- or over-financing, and if the latter, how might the operation of the house be rationalised in an economic sense.

The current artistic and economic direction of the Opera House has both to accomplish the ongoing modernisation of the establishment and have regard to traditions that have been built up over 125 years. It has, however, become evident that neither radical alteration nor a drive to bolster existing conditions can be successful. The latter, of course, will preserve not only tradition but also wasteful expenditure and artistically unacceptable compromise, and the former will quickly encounter the opposition of various parties, with or without justification, that seek to defend values. It also has to be borne in mind that the operatic community in Hungary is rather conservative and a substantial proportion of takings (which have a serious effect on artistic policy) comes from debenture-holders, who come primarily from the ranks of those with conservative views on values and taste. It seems that instead of replacing the audience or targeting, wooing strata averse to the genre (a model that has, incidentally, been shown to be unachievable in the case of a number of west-European theatres) the fine-tuning, education of the core audience may prove to be the solution; meanwhile, however, the widening of the audience base also remains a rational goal.

The Budapest Opera House, therefore, is forced to confront the same challenges as similar establishments in Italy, France, Germany and Spain, while it is, of course, easy to display local variations in current situations arising from the economic, political or artistic environment and from the proportion of the various challenges.

Operatic activity in Budapest was for a long time shared by two large establishments, the above mentioned historic palace and a popular theatre with a big auditorium, the Erkel Theatre. The latter also served as a rehearsal venue. Because of the failing technical condition of the Erkel, first public performance ceased, then rehearsal too, and at present the building is scheduled for demolition. From the statistical data given above it is evident that if performances were given every day of the year it would be possible to give an average of five or six stagings to each of the almost sixty items of repertoire in a single building. Although many maintain that breadth of repertoire is a thing to be cherished, all that is not conducive to maturity of performance and maintenance of quality, and productions would quickly deteriorate. A quite special case is *Bohemian Life*, produced in 1937 by Kálmán Nádasdy, and still retained in the repertoire.

It is also evident from the statistics that with the fourteen new productions that are being retained the reshaping of the repertoire has begun. A hundred and nine performances of these fourteen (eighty-two, ignoring performances at outside venues at the Vígsház and the Palace of Arts) will occupy more days than the mathematically feasible number of performances (we saw above that this is five or six annually). New introductions will occupy a third of the season.

The bare figures themselves say a lot, but what do the performances conceived for the present stage reveal about the artistic modernisation of the Opera House?

Premières of two operas meant for children mark the opening phase of audience development. In last year's season György Ránki's *King Pomádé's New Clothes* (Pomádé király új ruhája) and in the present season Benjamin Britten's *The Little Sweep* appeared as forthcoming attractions and both are in the programme. The intention is to give new children's performances every year, and shortly a complete children's season may well be a possibility. In addition to familiarising the genre these performances will also accustom spectators, and novice spectators, to the peculiar language of the theatre and to more contemporary theatrical forms, among other things by singers' performing in unrealistic theatrical spaces.

An event characteristic of the education of the audience was the renewal of András Békés's 1986 production of Rossini, which aroused at the same time serious arguments, critical acclaim and objections from the public. The Opera House treated the 2009 *Barber of Seville* as a première, and the artistic director Balázs Kovalik took upon himself the resurrection of the spirit of the old performance and the task of instructing in the manner of a game-show host. By this he showed what a tradition worthy of continuation meant and demonstrated that what had been a stumbling-block twenty years previously now evoked no indignation even in the most conservative spectator. By putting on *The Barber*, therefore he was calling for patience with regard to new-style productions.



This has not always been forthcoming. *Fidelio*, likewise in Kovalik's production, evoked strong feeling when it was premiered. The devotion attached to the Beethoven opera – or rather based on a misunderstanding of the work – is still strongly maintained in its reception in Hungary, while the statement of the new director of music, Ádám Fischer, who linked *Fidelio* in particular into the work of the Opera House by the musical teaching of the work probably comes very close to reality: in its idealism Kovalik's production resulted in an essentially traditional *Fidelio*. By duplicating the role of Leonora, by the brutality of the stage frontal, by illustrative or precisely contrapuntal mimes and the direct visuality of the story of redemption the production made visual in a profane manner the symbolic content of the opera. The production met with a lively, mainly positive, international reaction.

Ádám Fischer was also conducting the orchestra when the audience showed its displeasure more noisily than usual. On the occasion of the Haydn memorial year the Opera House put on a work titled *The Philosopher's Spirit*, or *Orpheus and Eurydice* – a distinctive work, none too easily approachable. While the public gave a warm reception to the musical performance (those of Andrea Rost and Kenneth Tarver in the leading roles, not to mention that of the conductor) it rejected with equal passion Sándor Zsótér's poetically philosophical mise-en-scène. The audience found difficulty in accepting, or failed to understand, that the interpretation of Haydn's work was by no means straightforward, and, furthermore, it was charged with mystery and contradictions. They were not prepared to consider that perhaps the work was no masterpiece; the production, however – as in the case of Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg* a few years before – treated its shortcomings (in this case what was considered to be its disjointed nature) not as defect but as opportunity. Nor did Zsótér assist the audience by creating a visual world of contemporary pictorial inspiration. Perhaps in the new season, after the hysteria has died down, the production, which has been kept on the programme, will be received by the audience with greater understanding.

Tchaikovsky's *Onegin* now gives the marked impression of having been clarified, with its artistic visual quality and the introduction of scrupulous acting. Kovalik has adapted an earlier conception to the Budapest Opera stage, and the audience has definitely approved, as it subsequently has *Fidelio* too. The production of *Electra*, on the other hand, which distances itself as far as possible from what the subject suggests, is still considered – perhaps also because of the original toughness of the work – a hard nut to crack, while in expert critical opinion the production of Richard Strauss's opera has been Kovalik's most powerful work to date.

The present artistic direction considers it a task of great importance also to keep in the repertoire modern and contemporary works. At present the programme includes Sándor Szokolay's *Blood Wedding* (Várnász) and Emil Petrovics's

C'est la guerre. A few new works that have been staged in the recent past – such as Levente Gyöngyösi's *Gólyakalifa* or János Vajda's *Mrs Karnyó* (Karnyóné) – have not, for the time being, found permanent places in the programme. Both are strongly connected to Hungarian literary tradition, the former being an adaptation from Babits, the latter from Csokonai. This point certainly makes it hard for these compositions to achieve currency outside Hungary. The situation may be different with regard to the Opera's most recent contemporary premiäre, József Sari's *Eclipse of the Sun* (Napfogyatkozás). Based on the motifs of Arthur Koestler's life and his internationally famous novel *Darkness at Noon*, this opera has already been performed in Germany. On the other hand, the reception of the piece is rendered difficult as neither Sari's work nor Kovalik's production attempt to fulfil the demands of classical operatic and theatrical dramaturgy. The creators (as in western opera houses) took part in initiatory conversations with a view to promoting the understanding and acceptability of the piece, and furthermore introductory talks were available before every performance. In future more and more such talks can be expected even before items of the classical repertoire.

We may regard Hartmut Schörghofer's Bartók production as an interesting but dubious experiment. As *Bluebeard's Castle* consists of a single act there is always the problem of what is to be on the programme with it. In Hungary it is mostly accompanied by a Bartók ballet. Ádám Fischer had the idea of performing it twice, in two different productions one after the other. By the use of highly technical methods Schörghofer created a spectacular stage world but failed to make enough of the opportunities offered by duplication. Of course, many – perhaps rightly – dispute the viability of the basic concept, raising the objection that the performance, from both dramaturgical and musical points of view, turned its back on compellingly powerful decisions.

The collaboration of the Opera House with the Vígszínház marks a new initiative. Mozart's *Magic Flute* is to be performed on the Vígszínház stage with both opera singers and actors, and with musicians from the Opera House, in a production by László Marton, former director of the theatre and a leading producer of prose performances. Great expectation has for weeks anticipated the said performance, which is scheduled for the end of December. With the Canadian Michael Levine's set, capable of special transformations, a spectacular and concisely delineated production of *Magic Flute* has been created which focuses on its profound psychological aspects and analyses the crises of personality development.

It is no secret that the purpose of the joint production of the two theatres is the increase of the audience base. A more fitting work than Mozart's *Magic Flute* could scarcely be found.

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Translated by Bernard Adams

## Zsófia Molnár: Halfway towards Becoming an Arts Theatre (Örkény István Theatre)

In 2001, the venue that had been working since the mid-50s as the studio space of the Madách Theatre became a repertory theatre with an independent, permanent company. Leadership was taken over by actor and director Pál Mácsai, who in 2004, named the theatre after István Örkény, who was one of the most characteristic authors and playwrights of 20th century Hungarian literature, under whose pen the Hungarian grotesque came to life. Consequently, the short history of the theatre has two distinct phases: the gradual program change after 2001, and the designation of a more conscious path since 2004.

After 2001, statistical surveys pointed out relatively early the core points of the profile change. Regarding the composition of the audience, of those who had attended the Madách as an entertainment theatre for the previous fifteen years, a relatively open, elderly generation remained, complemented by more and more young theatregoers. The gradually renewing repertory seemed more attractive to active and conscious theatregoers, to those who were interested in novelty. This also meant that frequenters of the two most important arts theatres in the capital, the Katona József and the Radnóti Theatre, slowly began to get into the habit of attending performances at the Örkény. Even these basic figures seem sufficient justification of the appropriateness of Mácsai's programme and company policy.

Even if the changes were carried out at a steady pace, a clear progressive will was displayed in several productions. One example would be the repeated invitations of Balázs Kovalik, the "daredevil" of Hungarian opera. In 2002, as his first prose staging, he mounted Puskin's *Boris Godunov* with the text written by the young János Térey, no less rebellious than the director. In 2005, he staged a performance titled *Odysseus Tours*, a textual collage based on the works of Homer, Sándor Márai and Béla Hamvas, the genre specification being 'associative chat'. Both performances stood in radical opposition to the habitual expectations of the audience. Therefore, this managerial leadership can be rated as expressly radical.

It was also quite obvious in the repertory, right from the beginning, that the aims of the Örkény Theatre were more or less in line with the programme of the Katona József Theatre – namely, addressing classical authors in a way that reflects on present-day problems, following contemporary international trends, premiering high-quality and mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century or contemporary Hungarian plays, as well as commissioning and performing new translations. Tamás Ascher, a permanent guest director from the Katona József Theatre, also scored a great success with his staging of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*. The differences were only in the focal points of the events which realized these principles. This latter fact is to a certain extent the result of a constraint. Even if the Örkény Company

can pride itself on its many good actors, harmonious ensemble acting has not had a long tradition here. This, however, does not amount to a serious flaw in the artistic quality of their shows; it only means that in certain performances, the ac-ting style is not (yet) entirely homogenous.

The Örkény Theatre differs from the Katona in two aspects (besides the fact that they do not necessarily stage the same classics). Firstly, Mácsai is a director and manager with a well-defined literary taste. Secondly, he does not subordinate the repertory of his theatre to the requirement (again a constraint) of having as many actors as possible on the stage in one performance. Instead, he tries to give way to strong individual personalities.

Dealing with the first point, among the 20 (!) performances kept on repertory in 2009/2010, there are four closely literary performances. Two of them are a monument to the memory of István Örkény (*Tell us a Story, Pista!* and *Let's Look Ahead with Confidence*), while one (*Watcher Nightcloud*) commemorates poet Miklós Radnóti. (In 2009, the one-hundred-year anniversary of Radnóti's birth was celebrated.) A fourth performance (*Nyugat 2008-1908*) revolved around the golden age of Hungarian literature and the literary magazine of the same name (*Nyugat* or *West*), founded in 1908.

One of the most successful premieres of the past few seasons has been *The Guardsman* by Ferenc Molnár (directed by István Kolos), which has run since 2001, though still a product of the transition. The plays of Molnár Ferenc and Ernő Szép, who represent the classical melodramatic line in Hungarian drama, are not only easy to make topical, they also offer quality entertainment and contain wonderful characters for the actors to embody.

From among the contemporary Hungarian playwrights, István Tasnádi's *Finito* has brought the biggest success. It is an absurd piece in verse about the poverty of contemporary Hungarian reality, staged by Pál Mácsai. In addition, there have also been two performances of playwright Péter Kárpáti's work: *First Night or Last* (*Első éjszaka avagy az utolsó*), in the spirit of the *Arabian Nights*, and *Scuba Theatre* (*Búvárszínház*). The latter, a memento of the traditional literary cabaret, was directed by Eszter Novák, who, together with Kárpáti, forms a well-known artistic partnership.

Since 2002, it has been the Örkény Theatre where Hungarian audiences could encounter the newest plays by such contemporary playwrights as Howard Barker (*Scenes from an Execution*). Roland Schimmelpfennig was represented by two plays (*The Arabian Night*, directed by László Bagossy, and *Woman from the Past*, directed by Tamás Ascher). Sándor Guelmino staged Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and Nikolai Kolyada's *Siberia Trans – Murlin Murlo* also appeared. Still, audiences here could also enjoy Euripides (*Electra*, directed by László Bocsárdi) or an authentically Russian staging of Chekhov (*Fatherless*, an adaptation of *Platonov*, directed by Yuri Kordonsky).



The last season (2008/2009) was launched again with the arrival of a guest to the theatre. Péter Gothár, also a regular guest director at the Katona, had Molière's *Misanthrope* retranslated, filled with linguistic puns and shortened considerably, then staged it in his usual very stimulating and highly visual formal language. Mácsai put on Feydeau's tempestuous comedy *Le Dindon* while András Dömötör, the theatre's class 'A' young director came up with a reinterpretation of Kleist's classic *The Prince of Homburg*. All three premieres can safely be called 'actor friendly' performances. The big hit of the season was again Tamás Ascher's 'horror variety', based on the music and lyrics of Shockhead Peter by the world-famous London band *The Tiger Lillies* (using again an inventive translation by Lajos Parti Nagy). Ascher, returning to the musical stage decades after his legendary operetta stagings at Kaposvár, titled his new 'variety' *The Picture Book for Good Children* (Jógyereknek képekönyve). Enacting the bloody pranks from a 19<sup>th</sup> century fairy-tale book proved very rewarding for the actors of the Örkény, who collected a variety of countrywide prizes.

In this year's season, the means were sufficient for four premieres plus one. Proof of the theatre's open-mindedness – and, let's admit, its sense of fashion – was the invitation of Sándor Zsótér, who is most likely the best interpreter of Brecht in the Hungarian theatre field. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* treats the Brechtian text in a strict and lean way, presenting the actors once again with a serious challenge to use a different (more psychological, wittier) presentation style.

In October, Pál Mácsai directed István Örkény's *Cat's Play*, which has already had some legendary stagings. Again he emphasized the profile he has chosen to preserve. In December – just after the Katona – Ödön von Horváth knocked at the doors of the Örkény. His work *Kasimir und Karoline*, directed by László Bagossy, resounded with a very positive echo. The last premiere is to be another direction of Ascher's, a stage production of Aki Kaurismäki's 1992 film *La Vie de Bohème*.

Despite its young age, the Örkény Theatre has a pronounced profile. The majority of the scheduled performances show a happy balance of spectacle and reflection, the entertaining and the thought-provoking. This is the result of a series of bold decisions, considering the history of the building. The audience can choose from a wide range of performances the ones that most fit their taste, and without taking much of a risk, since every show comes performed at a high level of quality, rendered in the hands of a very characteristic company, which will soon also be a very uniform team. All things considered, the future looks very promising.

Translation by Attila Szabó

## Personal Approaches

### A Critical View of Current Hungarian Theatre by Judit Csáki, Tamás Jászay, Tímea Papp, Andrea Stuber and Tamás Tarján

What are the most significant virtues of Hungarian theatre at present?

Judit Csáki

What I mostly like about theatre is that it has left the theatre buildings. That is, theatre can not only take place today in the "real" theatre venues, but also in a myriad of other spaces – in a museum, a cellar, an attic or a pub. And this sometimes makes the traditional performances themselves somewhat "disentangled." They often seem fresh, daring and dynamic. There are many theatre groups in Hungary today, and several different types. These range from, on one hand, the long-time superlative Katona József Theatre; the Örkény Theatre, bold and creative after finally finding its place in the system; the Radnóti Theatre, serving its stable audience with shows of varied styles and genres; to the National Theatre, under new management with a strong incentive to variety. On the other hand, we have Béla Pintér and Company, stubbornly consequent in their chosen path, along with Maladype, supplemented by the many newly-formed companies: the Symptoms (Tünet Együttes), KoMa, HoppArt and Szputnyik, which already draw regular audiences, to which I also proudly belong. There are many good actors – and I am happy to see that the young people today not only "speak in prose" on a proficient level, but they also have a mastery over their body, and many of them are accomplished musicians, too. And since nowadays they are not likely to get comfortable "pensioner" posts in the big companies, they have to be many-sided, inventive and daring – to the greatest joy of audiences and critics.

Tamás Jászay

The greatest virtue of present-day Hungarian theatre is its mobility. Even if, in the end, the fundamental reform of the institutional theatre structure was not realised – due to the quarrels and conflicts of interest, and because of the rigidity of the establishment, with theatres working like large-scale factories – many of the young talented actors freshly graduating from the universities in Budapest and Kaposvár who are not lucky to have a permanent post in an established theatre decided to set up "guerrilla troupes", exhibiting their ideas about theatre this way. Although it is true that most of these

ventures seem more like bold attempts than captivating theatre; still, the daring breakaway from the fossilized system and the mapping out of individual paths and possibilities make them important factors in Hungarian theatre life. The KoMa Company, which specializes in premiering contemporary Hungarian plays; the AlkalMáté Trupp, which enjoys serious critical recognition with their occasional performances; Sputnik, lead by Victor Bodó, looking ahead to an international career; and the Maladype Company, which was capable of spectacular renewal under the leadership of Zoltán Balázs – all these are groups whose productions are always worthy of attention. The aforementioned mobility is a characteristic of not only the structure, but also of the spaces these performances choose. Good theatre nowadays is often to be found in an attic, a living room, a shop window, a pedestrian crossing, a museum, a gym or simply in the street.

The system of permanent companies, often criticized by the reform-minded, is to my belief also an important virtue. The best example for this is the decades-long international success of the Katona József Theatre. A not-so-well chosen play or a feeble staging can still be an important event, just because the actors onstage know each other's every gesture and thought. It is also true, however, that only a handful of other theatres in the country can line up a similarly strong troupe – in Budapest, there is the Örkény Theatre and the Radnóti (or to some extent the National Theatre under the leadership of Róbert Alföldi, which is heading in the same direction, with a well cut-out profile, but for now with questionable results); in the provinces, the theatres in Nyíregyháza, Eger and sometimes those in Tatabánya or Zalaegerszeg can boast powerful companies.

The disappearance of Krétakör from the ring has had a double-edged effect. True, the group and workshop lead by Árpád Schilling has dispersed; yet, the actors from Krétakör have begun to pop up on different stages, from the National to the Vígyszínház and several small independent companies, bringing a breath of fresh air and usually a measure of remarkable professionalism to these performances.

#### Timea Papp

There are three important features that characterise contemporary Hungarian theatre.

First of all, there is the rich quantity. When opening a programme magazine which covers Budapest, one can choose from at least 25 repertory theatres (some of them having more than one venue) and numerous other places

offering theatrical performances. However, this adjective refers only to the capital. In this country, the provincial theatres have no competitors, and some of these companies – not having competent directors with good taste – have chosen an easy way to cater their audience with commercial hits lacking any artistic challenge.

Secondly, there is a commitment to establishing permanent ensembles. This regards both the established and the newly-formed independent companies. Ideally, this means a delicate repertory system, which offers opportunities to experiment within internal workshops, as well as opportunities to focus on continuous development and training.

Thirdly, we have seen the appearance of a new generation of theatre-makers who try to avoid conventional tools and forms of artistic expression – i.e., the psychologically realistic and text-based theatrical tradition – and, against all odds, they are forming new companies. The important names of this generation are KoMa, which promotes contemporary Hungarian drama, Zoltán Balázs and his Maladype Company, Viktor Bodó and his Sputnik, and Kornél Mundruczó. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the members of the middle generation. They would include Béla Pintér and Co., who have gained an international reputation, as well as the newly-formed Forte Company, under the artistic management of dancer-choreograph Csaba Horváth, experimenting with physical theatre.

#### Andrea Stuber

The theatre is the last existing place where I can sometimes feel that what happens is addressed to me. I myself understand the intellectual who wishes to think, understand, recognize, sense, be challenged and have fun all at the same time. Such a person is by no means a target audience member for the daily press or television, for films or politics. (I am not necessarily thinking here of cultural politics, because such a thing does not even exist under the present circumstances in our country.) The biggest virtue of Hungarian theatre today is that it exists at all, that it was not entirely reduced to a commercial, market-based, entertainment enterprise. The other type of theatre – which owes plenty to art and reality – has also managed to hold on, and also in an institutional framework. (The genre is two thousand years old, so presumably it will never die out. There will always be people who come together with the desire to know themselves and the world better and start to play theatre, and there will also be some who will watch them with interest.)



Theatre art has lost most of its societal weight and importance in the two decades after the regime change. Among the many reasons for this, one definitely must be that theatre has become uninteresting to the political discourse and vice versa. Also evident is the ruinous effect of media, which constantly trims the intellectual pretensions of potential authors. Naturally, the economic difficulties wrought their negative effects as well; but also independent of this, theatre first started to become insecure, then it was cast to the periphery, with its intellectual range entirely shrunken. By today, theatre art had become the 'extreme sport' of a narrow layer of theatre-makers and audience members, while commercial theatre conquers a larger and larger area. (Out of the 1300 productions on schedule in 2008, only little more than 80 had an audience bigger than ten thousand altogether. All of these blockbusters belong to the so-called light genre. Leaders of the pack are the musicals at the Operetta Theatre and the Madách Theatre in Budapest, with 40-50 thousand visitors a year.)

A novel trait of the last few years is that politicians seem to have started putting their hands on the theatres again. Its interest, however, is of a merely ideological nature – in contrast with the period before the regime change – yet all the more dangerous and detrimental. (Party) politics started to spot out a kind of power position, and partly the possibility of building up a clientele by seizing the power of appointing theatre managers. As a sad result, nowadays professional qualifications are least important when it comes to the appointment of theatre managers. (Both political sides have served us with examples of this practice.) In the long run, this will surely have painful consequences on professional standards and quality, with omens to be seen already. Then again, some others will come along to start out from scratch – without money, horses or arms – under bridges, in coffee shops, clubs and gyms, and then we will all go there on pilgrimage to see important theatre.

#### Tamás Tarján

I believe that the most significant factor determining the status of theatre art, its prestige, its attractive force is always principally the actor, without wishing to undermine the importance of the other artists who are involved in the birth of a theatre performance, especially the role of the director. A significant part of the Hungarian Actors' Society is many-sided, talented and endowed with a strong sense of vocation. They are the biggest treasure of contemporary Hungarian theatre. I am especially enthusiastic about the groups of young actors freshly graduating (after 2005) from the various insti-

tutes of dramatic training. They are trying to set up their own independent, though sometimes unstable, companies. The most successful of them so far has proved to be the KoMa, a community that specializes in the staging of contemporary Hungarian plays. Many of the fresh graduates fell into 'good hands' – for instance, under the leadership of Róbert Alföldi, the director of the National Theatre, or Gábor Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, or Pintér Béla and Co. Unfortunately, alongside the praise of (a great part of) our actors, I must also add some critical remarks. Dozens and dozens of talented Hungarian actors seem content with the skills they learned and the successes they achieved during the first decade of their career. From the age of thirty-two or thirty-five, they find it difficult to be touched in an artistic sense by new challenges. They lose stamina, even in exceptional roles, and are unable to cope with a change in or a deepening of style. Often they are more interested in the fading glory of their careers than the changing power of their art. ('This profession is a rugged path, a long-term undertaking,' or 'As a young man I used to act beside such huge sharks as....,' etc.)

From the above-mentioned, one can conclude that the most valuable workshops in present-day Hungarian theatre are those which are able to employ actors, still fresh intellectually or ready to be refreshed anytime, in a manner very different from the usual habit of established institutions (so-called 'stone theatres'). Ideally, they would engage actors in a progressive spirit with modern theatrical language, strong artistic ambitions and diligence – this could also be referred to as morale – with fitting and inventive role distribution. In my opinion, this state has been achieved by the already dispersed Krétakör Theatre (Budapest); the Örkény István Theatre (Budapest), which is consciously and clear-headedly working towards this goal; the Radnóti Miklós Theatre (Budapest); the Maladype Theatre (Budapest), performing at a fluctuating, but many times exemplary level; and at times by the Hevesi Sándor Theatre (Zalaegerszeg) and hopefully also the Gárdonyi Géza Theatre in Eger. The movement theatre groups, so-named for lack of a better term, are also to be remembered. For decades, though, the main reference point of Hungarian theatre in terms of quality has been the Katona József Theatre in Budapest.

One also cannot overlook the importance of provocative director personalities who play a catalyzing role in the system. The emergence of director Sándor Zsótér, impossible to pigeonhole, in virtually all of the Hungarian theatre workshops and training forums (a great number, indeed) brought about serious results and advantageous changes.

## What are the problems with Hungarian theatre, and what is it lacking?

### Judit Csáki

The majority of institutional theatres (that is, the main basis of the theatre system, the so-called "stone theatres" in Budapest and the provinces) work in a predictable and, therefore, boring manner. Sometimes you can already guess with fairly good odds the character of the performance by the choice of the play, which is often stunning in its lack of creativity, and the formal language and artistic quality of the performance by the name of the director, even while the show is still in rehearsal. One is bored to death just by the thought of many theatres, without ever needing to go there. No matter how hard the managers try to find explanations or excuses for this thick boredom and artistic indifference – usually blaming the financial shortage and the conservative pitch of the audience's taste – the outcome is exasperating. More than a half of the theatres are mere entertainment units, rendering services of a moderate quality. It is also not good that the Hungarian theatre structure itself is very inflexible. It does not stimulate, but merely tolerates the birth of new theatrical workshops, the meeting of different artists or the realization of norm-breaking performances.

It is also not good that the actors working in the provincial towns (especially if they have been there for a long time, so they are bound by both home and family) are defenseless. They have to put up with the theatre managers, who are appointed there for political reasons or in an unprofessional manner.

It is also not good that Hungarian theatre is only loosely and arbitrarily connected to the mainstream trends in contemporary European theatre culture. It is still mostly self-enclosed. Some artists and companies feel at home in the outside world, but the others are not even curious.

It is also not good that the whole cultural field – and theatre is part of it – is stricken by different economic disorders. But what is even worse is that the existing money is divided in an irrational way. Therefore, it is unable to stimulate a higher aesthetic level or economic efficiency.

### Tamás Jászay

For some time now, its main problem has been the excess of precaution. Looking at the repertory of the theatres – and in this respect, there is no significant difference between the capital and the provinces – one can note that directors and managers tend to choose from the same bucket of plays. A naïve explanation of this phenomenon goes like this: Shakespeare, Molière

and Chekhov still hide so many secrets to be excavated that directors feel entitled to stay chained to the classics. A somewhat more malicious reasoning would claim that Hungarian theatre prefers to move along a safer track – better five *Hamlets* than one *Cymbeline*, better a few *Three-penny Operas* than a *Baal*.

Contemporary foreign authors seem to be lacking completely from the Hungarian repertory. In this respect, one is more likely to experience certain fashion trends. Not so long ago there was a season with almost half a dozen productions of plays by Roland Schimmelpfennig or Martin McDonagh across the country. The recipe of "one which stood the test once can be brought to success again" prevails here, too. (About contemporary Hungarian authors, see my answer to the following question.)

A provincial theatre must, of course, play all genres (and there is no better lesson for a beginning actor than to try all fields, from tragedies to musicals). Yet, in the last few years, this consideration has led in many cases to a loss of profile towards light entertainment. This seems to correlate strongly with another, more alarming factor, which could seriously maim the near future of Hungarian theatre life: the more and more overt political engagement of theatres. In a country divided to such an extent along political beliefs as Hungary, the party militants do whatever they can to get their hands on forums which enable them to address the masses – and, let me add, stuff them with falsehoods. The tedious work of decades – by which I mean company-building and audience education – can be destroyed with just one professionally reproachable decision. After the legendary seventies and eighties in Kaposvár, dozens of provincial towns were doomed to a similar fate. A few years ago, the theatre in

Szolnok fell, which earlier had important virtues, not to mention the provocative and never boring Kecskemét under the leadership of Géza Bodolay. Most recently, a sad shift was to be seen in the Western regions. In Zalaegerszeg, where exciting new performances were produced on a regular basis, the mayor overtly declared whom he wished to see in the managerial seat – and behold! – his wish came true. If theatre professionals do not wish to, or cannot firmly stand up against this tendency, in a couple of years, we are going to be referred to as the country of the thousand operettas.

### Tímea Papp

The quantity is not directly proportional to the quality of the shows. Moreover, in the countryside, there is usually no alternative to the only state theatre. Theatre should reflect the temper of our times. However, if somebody were to



read the contemporary Hungarian performances as the chronicle of our times, he would not be able to assemble a proper, coherent text. It is impossible to do so. I do not think companies or playwrights are incapable of analysing the tensions in Hungarian society; they are just not engaged in explorations of historical and political ideas, because the public – the majority of ticket buyers and especially those who finance the institutions – sees theatre primarily in terms of customer service. The theatre isn't exactly dull, but safety comes first.

The irony is that usually when these socio-political reflections finally appear onstage, they cause a stir among the audience. Krétakör's *Fatherland, My All* (Hazámházám) and *BLACKland* (Feketeország), which portrayed contemporary Hungary, as well as *Casemates* (Kazamaták) by András Papp and János Térey at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, which dealt with the urban legend of bunkers under the headquarters of the Communist Party – where, according to rumour, revolutionaries were held and tortured in 1956 – are just three examples from previous seasons of performances that were only accepted by the 'core audience' of these theatres.

I see it as a direct consequence of the long-time neglect of audience education, the non-existent tradition of political theatre, and the cowardliness to present and confront them with reality. Still, the same applies to how the 'good old' Hungarian classics are welcomed if they are not performed in a 'good, old, classical' way.

Nevertheless, there is a new generation of theatre-makers who are concerned with technical innovation and who are addressing the questions of our environment, discovering and/or changing the relationship between the artist and the audience. (This is certainly true of Krétakör in the past and even, to some extent, in the present regarding their 'educational' programme.) The vast majority of the establishment will not modify their damp, out-of-date aesthetics, their go-between disciplines. They will neither open their eyes to world theatre, nor move from text-based to movement-based work (as Fortedanse has done), nor use and mix different art media (like the Symptoms or Tünet Együttes and Natural Disasters or Természetes Vészek have done). It is important to stress that these companies' shows usually do not reach the main stage. They perform in studio venues.

#### Andrea Stuber

A discouraging characteristic of theatre today is that it is too set, stiff and industrialized. The established theatres – and sometimes also the independent companies – work with timetables, producing their shows almost in an

industrial manner, because this unbroken, permanent, cyclical way of operation is dictated by the urge of subsistence and functioning, and not in the least by the application-based system of state subsidies. The directors usually do what they are good at (or presume they are good at) over and over again; surprises are as rare as blue diamonds. If a theatre decides to try its luck artistically, the results are often sadly predictable. Let us presume that a big repertory theatre invites an interesting director who was never accepted by the greater audience. After seeing the performance, the reviewers will most likely become enthusiastic, and the production will be invited to festivals. Yet, core audience members who are not accustomed to such things will leave the theatre in flocks, once and for all. The managers wisely foresee such situations right from the onset in their calculations. They cannot afford to take such risks under the season ticket system.

Of course, there are some theatres which set themselves a much higher professional standard right from the start, but even they can sometimes become boring.

#### Tamás Tarján

The number of the Hungarian theatres is too high, and without special reason. There are not enough qualified and efficient managers, not enough directors and artistic leaders, and the number of premieres per year is also too high. (I do not have the precise figures at my disposal because of several overlaps and anomalies, but we can speak of some eight hundred new performances countrywide. To these, one must add the Hungarian-language performances produced outside the present-day boundaries of the country.) Some theatres managed, however, to decrease the number of their premieres – or were forced to do so because of the financial crisis – but still, the theatrical over-production and oversupply is obvious. This condition makes the formation of theatrical workshops with a strikingly clear-cut profile and character patently impossible. While I am no supporter of a monolithic theatre organization – especially in the provincial towns where there is only one operating theatre that must serve several layers of audience members in different ways – I must note that the majority of Hungarian companies serve up their productions in a pig-in-a-poke style, from a painfully incidental repertoire. (There are some exceptions, of course, especially in musical theatres such as the Madách Theatre or the Budapest Operetta Theatre.)

Theatres are heading towards an increasingly pronounced *safe* repertory, which is just as abominable as their reluctance to novelty. As conventional

wisdom goes, theatrical experiments are confined to studio venues of sixty to one hundred seats, while the established theatres do not take any chances. They don't "create" new authors, new plays.

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What is Hungarian drama today interested in? What is the playwright's role in Hungarian Theatre?

Judit Csáki

Hungarian drama is mostly preoccupied by language, even when adapting foreign plays. Therefore, many translations into Hungarian actually result in the birth of new "Hungarian" plays. This tendency is particularly characteristic of Parti Nagy Lajos's work. It is also the language, or more precisely the adaptation, which brings to life a new – and "Hungarian" – play of Miller's otherwise overplayed *The Crucible* in the creative hands of the Mohácsi brothers. It is very similar to another new modern Hungarian text by Balázs Szálinger born from three antique plays, *The Children of Oedipus*. Language is also in the focus of the new original Hungarian playwriting, especially if language clashes with form. We are experiencing a new golden age of drama in verse, which we find fully-fledged in the forceful works of János Térey. The newest experience of contemporary reality and the old poetic forms (with a "broken" language abounding in slang) merged in such wonderful pieces as *Table Music* (Asztalizene) or *Casemates* (Kazamaták), a half-historic opus written for the 50th anniversary of the 1856 revolution.

Next to György Spiró, the "reality writer," and János Háy, who is interested in more universal topics, another successful playwright is István Tasnádi, who lately began staging his own plays. There is also a considerable boom in authors composing their own performance texts. These works are usually made for the use of a given company and a concrete production, written specifically for, for example, Viktor Bodó or HoppArt, habitually by the artists themselves. In this trend, Béla Pinter can already look back to an impressive decade-long history, since he is the author of all the texts used by the company. Yet, I would not call any of them a proper play.

The playwright is in most cases an insider in the life of the company, either a dramaturge or director. It is also common for a playwright to be affiliated with a certain company or theatre, working for them most of his time. A total outsider to the company generally brings about a series of controversies before he becomes an insider himself...

Tamás Jászay

Not so long ago, contemporary Hungarian drama had two faces, according to the analysts. One of them was a trend to present the Hungarian petty reality in an over- or under-stylized manner (e.g., György Spiró and Zoltán Egressy). The other trend sprang up from the authors in love with language (e.g., Péter Esterházy and Lajos Parti Nagy). And what is going on now? The Hungarian playwright lives in the language. The author of these lines has the impression that playwrights today are more bewitched by the way language works and is used than the dissection of different problems, which need, however, to be dissected. Therefore, societal, political and economical issues are rare guests in today's Hungarian plays (which, by the way, is my second answer to the previous question about what theatre lacks). This is even more surprising, as Hungarian dramatic literature loves the devices of satire, and it handles them masterfully. The work of István Tasnádi stands out as a superb example in this respect. He has acquired great critical and box-office success – both with his paraphrases (e.g., *Finito*, or *Hungarian Zombie/Magyar Zombi*, loosely based upon Erdmann's *The Suicide*) and his original plays (e.g., *Phaedra Fitness*, which has been subject to a long process of authorial ripening).

From this aspect, especially relevant are the authors like the internationally successful Béla Pintér, who writes, directs, sings, and acts in his own works, which usually also have an autobiographical inspiration. Besides the long-time permanent company members, not long ago, Pintér's group was complemented with fresh graduates from the theatre universities, but there is still no change in the fact that the characters of their plays are moulded to the given actors of the company. I wonder if other directors could ever attempt to stage any of Pintér's plays or if every character can only come to life successfully in the original cast. There is, however, a heartening example to consider. The theatre students in Kaposvár put on Pintér and Co.'s most successful – and to my belief, the best – play, *Peasant Opera* (Parasztopera), to sweeping success last season.

Tímea Papp

While there are Hungarian dramas, there is no such thing as 'Hungarian drama'. There are playwrights who have their own distinctive themes, approaches and languages; however, the emphasis is mostly on verbal expression. Therefore, it is often the stageability of the language that encapsulates and bears the theatricality.

Hungarian contemporary dramas are often ephemeral. They are born – funded by an initiative to promote contemporary Hungarian dramas – have



their premiere, are on rep for the rest of the season, but the outcomes are usually staged in studio venues to avoid the risk of failure. Theatre directors tick it off their to-do lists. Only few can survive to have long runs or to be staged in other theatres. Ironically, most of these successful pieces (such as *Portugal* and *Spinach 'n Chips* (Sóska, sültkrumpli) by Zoltán Egressy, as well as *PRAH* and *Bump / Koccanás*) by György Spiró can now be considered as *Seitstücke*, representing Hungary in the mid- to late-90s.

In Hungary, a playwright often works as a dramaturge or a professional of 'an applied art', making adaptations of novels or new versions of old classics. Over the past few years, it has become apparent that there are theatres and directors who take a special interest in contemporary Hungarian dramas, thus leading to strong collaborations, even to 'created stage texts'. Just a few random examples will follow. Since the first season in 1982/1983, more than 20 contemporary Hungarian dramas have been staged at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest. Lately, the National Theatre has commissioned ten playwrights to write dramas about each of the Ten Commandments. Eszter Novák (director) and Péter Kárpáti (playwright and dramaturge) are bonded together professionally. Finally, István Tasnádi has enjoyed a close and strong relationship with Árpád Schilling and Krétakör.

#### Andrea Stuber

The Hungarian theatre authors today are not really interested in monumental tragedies, global issues, wide reference systems or historical morals. Hungarian drama prefers to confine itself to more intimate, private spaces and prefers to paint genre pictures or life attitudes instead of building up formally strong, methodical dramas or tragedies with a complex system of references. In any case, for the contemporary Hungarian writer, it is a real alternative to consider writing maybe a novel instead of the play. It is a more peaceful one-man activity, and it is presumed to be much better recognized. You can count on one hand the Hungarian playwrights who, like István Tasnádi, deal exclusively with writing plays and – since he has recently taken up directing, too – more generally with theatre-making. His career can easily overlap with those who are writing plays – or let us call them texts for theatrical use – from the position of directors and theatre practitioners. The best of these – in the case of János Mohácsi or Béla Pintér – prove so strong, thrilling and original that we can easily value them as great dramas even if it remains a mystery whether anyone will ever stage them besides their authors. Anyhow, auteur theatre is more and more common, as the fresh,

young players on the theatrical scene – from the late Krétakör, through the KoMa and HoppArt companies, to the productions of Márton Kiss – put on plays based on their own texts, obviously because they feel that this is the only way to talk about what they want in the theatre. This is something the contemporary Hungarian playwrights can freely take as a critical remark.

#### Tamás Tarján

Hungarian drama today is mostly interested in the dramatic language. Of course, this is not something specifically Hungarian. The dramatic cultures I am familiar with – the Russian, German, Irish and others – are also not striving to employ strikingly new dramaturgies. Rather, they are trying to dress up occasionally novel or traditionally customary dramatic constructions in a raw, unusual style, saturated with everyday communication. The dramatic genres take after the lyrical and epic modes out of a distrust of language, in the often entertaining and fruitful irony of a radical language critique.

Thematically, it is not primarily knowledge of the world and society, not an ontological, anthropological or sociological interest which guides the present-day Hungarian drama, but rather a reflection upon the materials accumulated by these phenomena (upon earlier plays, the phenomena of the media, materials covered by newspapers, etc.). At the same time, after the generation of playwrights who managed to realize lasting works in the seventies – namely, István Örkény, Miklós Hubay, János Székely and others – and the newer generation experimenting with modern dramatic forms – Péter Nádas, Géza Bereményi, György Spiró and others – there has emerged an even younger generation with a very broad field of playwrights. They are in their forties and mainly deploy their strengths in dramaturgy: rewriting, adaptation, dramatization and translation. They – namely, Péter Kárpáti, Zsolt Pozsgai, István Tasnádi and others – are maybe working more than they should. It is quite beneficial that almost all of them are also influential creative members of one or more theatre companies. The long-lasting cooperation of a given writer and a given theatre (e.g., László Márton in the town of Eger) can be extremely inspiring.

Playwrights are often also dramaturges. The dramaturges – comprising several philologists, too, who are not writing plays themselves – are more influential personalities in the Hungarian theatre field today than the playwrights themselves. Curiously, at the beginning of the third millennium, the poet-author-playwright who has contributed most to the Hungarian stage is someone who has not written an original play for a very long time (and even

earlier only one, titled *Ibusár*, which is, however, still a favourite of the public). That would be Lajos Parti Nagy. He, as a translator and adaptor, has developed a deliberately disfigured, associative dramatic language.

Opinions vary whether the number of the new Hungarian premieres is too high, just enough or less than ideal. One of the artists involved, Endre Kukorelly, sees the situation as alarming and poor. Truly, the number of the new premieres in Hungary is not small, but the majority of these fade away much too early, sometimes even after the first evening, the first try-out.

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List 3-4 performances from the current repertory which you believe should be internationally acknowledged?

Judit Csáki

Language boundaries are best overcome by non-verbal performances – that is, mostly physical theatre performances. Instead, let me list a few verbal ones. For instance, there is the performance titled *Encounter* (Találkozás) by Krisztián Gergye, a long-awaited valid and notable staging of Péter Nádas's play of the same title.

I would show to international audience the Katona József Theatre's rendering of Ödön von Horváth's *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, directed by Gábor Zsámbéki, and also from the Katona, the etude series by Yvette Bozsik titled *Girl in Garden* (Lány a kertben). From the Örkény Theatre, I would tour *Shockhead Peter*, directed by Tamás Ascher, and John the *Valiant I-II* (János Vitéz I-II) from the National Theatre, directed by Róbert Alföldi.

Tamás Jászay

The contemporary Hungarian dance life, which is experiencing a golden age at present – at least, in terms of the number of premieres – has produced several shows which appeal to theatre-lovers, even from abroad. Dancer Andrea Ladányi and percussionist Gergő Borlai have mounted a two-person, low-budget, internationally successful performance entitled *BL*. The suggestive and charismatic presence of the two players, the flawless and strict dramaturgy and the multiplicity of many possible meanings are supplemented by technical knowledge (of both dance and drum) that could securely occupy a place on any of the greater stages in Europe. Réka Szabó and the Symptoms (Tünet Együttes) distinguish themselves from the average with the

young choreographer's exquisite sense of humour. This team, composed of dancers and dramatic actors working together, stands far apart from the self- and audience-torturing trends of contemporary Hungarian dance. Their show entitled *Alibi* is a light, fresh and invigorating play about our everyday phrases and our body concepts.

With regards to our dramatic output, the international audience has already discovered the compulsory. Tamás Ascher's Russian series from the Katona József Theatre in Budapest (Chekhov's *Ivanov* and Gorky's *Barbarians*), as well as the evergreen *Peasant Opera* (Parasztopera) by Pintér Béla and Co. would be the ones I would most heartily suggest. The name of Balázs Kovalik has melded with the progressive trends of Hungarian opera. As the artistic leader of the Hungarian State Opera House, he can finally showcase at the highest level his opera interpretations, which comply with the highest European standards of the genre. Nevertheless, they extremely divide Hungarian opera lovers. His rendering of *Fidelio*, for example, which has seriously wrought up our audiences, and his hilarious interpretation of Händel's *Xerxes* are crying out for a proficient Western audience.

Andrea Stuber

*Peasant Opera* (Parasztopera) by Béla Pintér is a real curiosity. I am sure it pleasantly surprises audiences everywhere. Attila Vidnyánszky's poetic, visually captivating, artistically often very inspired performances in Debrecen could probably also be very effective in front of a foreign audience. The performances of the Katona József Theatre in Budapest – *Ivanov*, *The Wild Duck*, *Locusts*, *Barbarians*, *Presidential Ladies*, *Top Dogs*, *The Women of Trachis* and *Rattled and disappeared* (Ledarálnakeltüntem) – could arguably hold their own on any stage in the world.

Tamás Tarján

There is barely any space for justifications in this short text for my choice. Among the performances still scheduled in 2010, the play *Barbarians* (by Maxim Gorky, at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, directed by Tamás Ascher), with its finely-tuned and scintillatingly precise portrayal of characters and situations can hold its own in the European field. Also at the same theatre, Anton Chekhov's *Ivanov* (directed again by Tamás Ascher) exhibits the same virtues, and Ödön von Horváth's *Tales from the Vienna Woods* (directed by Gábor Zsámbéki) presents the moral rotting and fermentation within marginal and petty-bourgeois social groups.

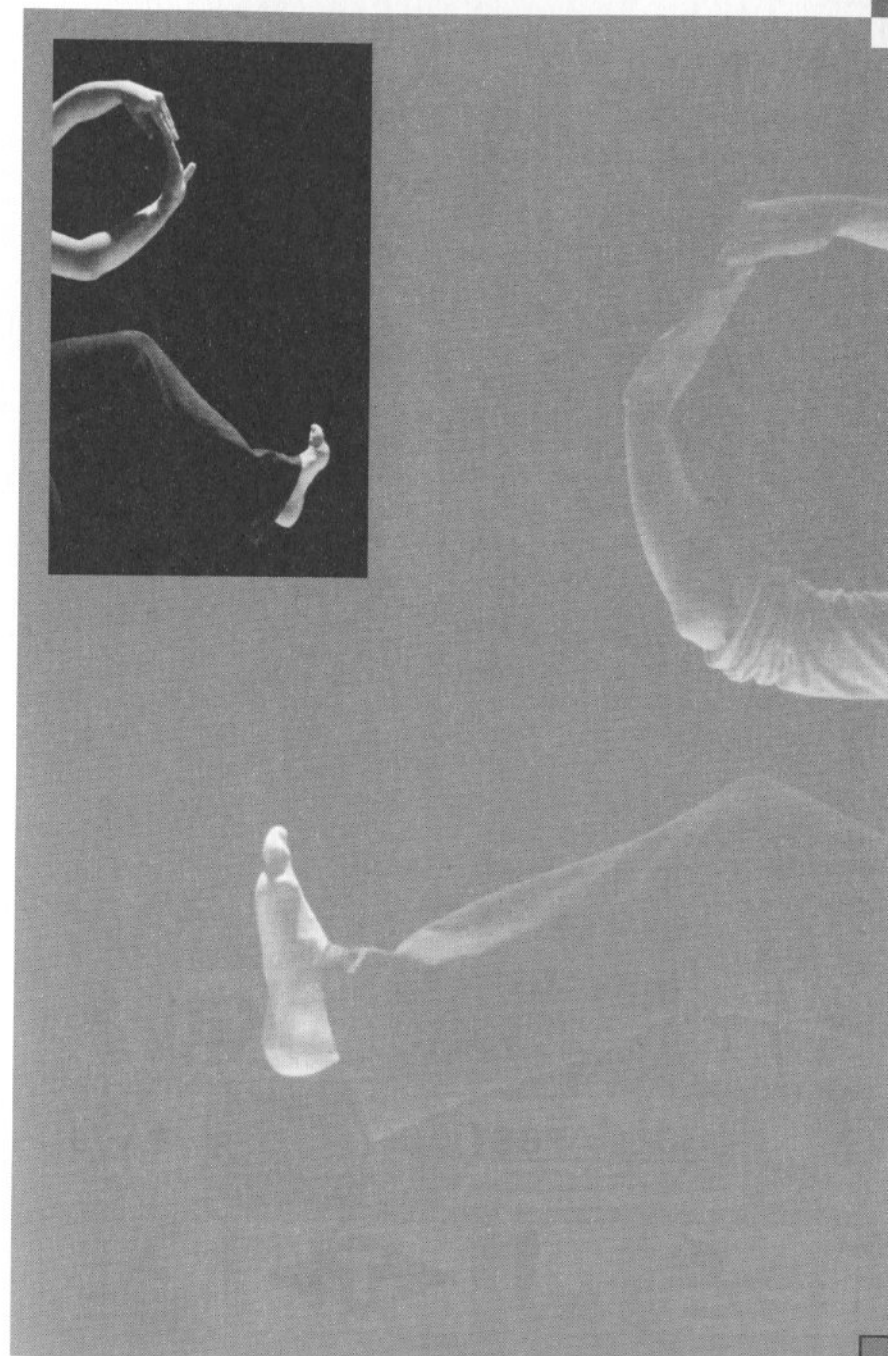


From the line-up of performances at the National Theatre, hallmarked by the name of Róbert Alföldi, I wish to single out the drastically sincere production of *The Park* by Botho Strauss, despite its unevenness. The high-quality and entertaining productions at the István Örkény Theatre, some of the repertory plays at the Vígszínház and the best among the leading musical theatres' mega-productions would have nothing to be ashamed of on the international stage either.

From the latest crop of productions, the writer of these lines finds the play entitled *Lorenzaccio* (by Alfred de Musset, directed by Sándor Zsótér and produced by the Maladype and Thália Theatres) the most notable. It showcases a radical reinterpretation of the play and the text and a sensual suppleness in the actors' physical presence. It also exploits the possibilities of one colour (red) and one form or material (gloves, by the hundreds). These gloves are also used as puppets, giving rise to thousands of associations. All this culminates in a performance of only seventy minutes with an atmosphere of ceremonial loftiness and a bitter view of history.

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Translated by Anikó Szabó



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