

SZÍNHÁZ



HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

Dear Friends,

In the last week, I've seen 3 season openers: Blanka Zizka's Wilma Theatre production of James Ijames [KILL MOVE PARADISE](#) in Philadelphia; Yury Urnov's take on Lola B. Pierson's [PUTIN ON ICE \(that isn't the real title of this show\)](#) at Single Carrot in Baltimore; and Iron Crow Theatre's [THE LARAMIE PROJECT](#) at my old theatre, Theatre Project.

All talismans, I think (and hope) of a new theatre season truly engaged in the larger issues of our time.

And this edition of [Hungarian Letter of News](#) brings both a new voice (Noémi Herczog) to the table with a laser focus on political / cultural issues in Hungary.

We have worked with Noémi since 2010. She's been a part of multiple conversations around gender issues, immigration/migration, cultural politics and the exciting margins of Hungarian theatre.

In this issue she looks at:

- The strange, homophobic politicization of the BILLY ELLIOT at the Hungarian National Opera—the theatre cancelled the final, sold-out, 15 performances after headlines screamed that the musical would “turn kids gay!”
- Police intervention at the interval of director Andriy Zholdak's ROSMERSHOLD when the director “physically and verbally abused” his leading actor, Ema Imre. Noémi links this to the #MeToo movement in Hungary—and then revisits the issues in: A Showbiz-Answer on #MeToo by Young Female Director Kriszta Székely.
- Hate speech is dissected in her look at the Mohácsi brothers' A MARKET DAY: based on a post-WWII pogrom and mobbing in the market square of a small Hungarian village.
- There is a look at two young directors, András Juhász and Zita Szenteczki and the TÁP Theatre and the DoN't East Group. All continues to cook in the independent scene.
- Finally, Noémi writes about “Performativity, Subversiveness in Hungarian Politics: The Opposition's Answer to Decreasing Democracy.”

And on our side:

- Martin Boross and the StereoAKT gang arrive in Albuquerque in two weeks to begin the second and final work session on [PROMENADE ALBUQUERQUE](#).
- In late October Ms. Herczog will be on the East Coast for a lecture tour, stopping in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and finishing up in Boston at Emerson with a HowlRound TV live-streaming November 1 session.
- Andrea Tompa, critic, journalist, and now award-winning novelist, will be in Albuquerque the first week in November, interviewing the collaborators, and joining me for the opening of PROMENADE ALBUQUERQUE. (I am told I will be the only non-StereoAKT member to have seen PROMENADE BUDAEPST, PROMENADE BALTIMORE and PROMENADE ALBUQUERQUE—multiple times in each city!)

I'm looking forward to a rich Fall travel schedule: traveling with Noémi on her tour and being in Albuquerque with Andrea.

And then a fortnight in Budapest with colleagues Howard Shalwitz and Margaret Lawrence, along with Jarod Hanson, our new CITD Fellow. Howard and Margaret are key advisors as we develop a 3 year “linkage” project between the region and the US... Stay tuned.

Stay strong, my friends,



Philip Arnoult

founder & director

PS: In *WE THE PEOPLE*, Double Edge has never been stronger. Rooted in the land we walk over, six historical and imagined characters tell us important and moving stories. Strong text as well—with some help from Morgan Jenness.

[WE THE PEOPLE runs through the 19th of August.](#)

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Noémi Herczog

REPORTER BIO: Noémi Herczog (1986, Budapest) is a theatre critic and editor. She is an editor of the oldest Hungarian theatre magazine, SZÍNHÁZ (Theatre), theatre columnist of the weekly *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature), editor of a theatrical book series (SzínText), and teaches performance analysis at the University of Theatre and Film, Budapest. She is a former activist of One Million for the Freedom of Speech civic movement (Milla). Her research field is the history of reporting theatre criticism (criticism of denunciation) in Hungary. She defended her doctoral thesis on this topic at the University of Theatre and Film, Budapest in 2018. She was also co-curator of *dunaPart 3 – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts* (2015), *dunaPart 4* (2017) and a member of the Péter Halász Award Curatorial Board for the best innovation in the independent Hungarian performing arts. She is a program-coordinator of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives.

Hate Campaign Rocks Hungarian National Opera

Szilveszter Ókovács denounced by government for the musical *Billy Elliot*, claimed it will turn kids gay

Negative Press Campaigns in Hungary

Fidesz propaganda has been building on scapegoating long ago via visual posters, whether the target be the Roma minority, refugees, LGBTQ people or others. But only recently has a denouncing campaign appeared in the pro-government press too: instead of visual representation, attacking the government-critical actors of culture via ideology and *hate speech*.

Now, instead of posters in the streets, the government's daily paper, *Magyar Idők* and the pro-government newspaper, *Figyelő* started to attack critical groups and individuals verbally. A journalist claimed that it is only the sphere of culture where Fidesz's politics has not yet succeeded in changing the cultural canon, and he has also pointed out the related responsibility of the literature museum's director (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum – PIM): [denouncing Gergely Prőhle for inviting liberal intellectuals and artists with a liberal world view into the institution](#). As *Magyar Idők* is the daily of the Hungarian government, many interpreted the article to be the message of the governing party Fidesz. Announcing the new Fidesz-policy of discarding everyone whose acts do not 100% overlap with the government's political aims. So it happened to József Pálkás, the former head of the Innovatory Administrative Unit, who articulated his criticism against Fidesz's policy in not more than one issue and soon he was dismissed from his former position. The interesting thing is that Gergely Prőhle has also been appointed by Fidesz as the head of the museum, and now he is attacked by the paper of his very own appointer. He has not been dismissed yet, but for some reason he instantly felt a need to publicly answer the attacks; asking for excuse, instead of claiming independence as the head of an artistic institution.

Since then the press campaigns of the pro-government papers have not stopped: the equally pro-government *Figyelő* has joined in, writing lists about critical intellectuals. [Certain reporting articles](#) of *Magyar Idők* have also [denounced Andrea Tompa](#), the chief editor of *Színház* magazine. There is a general belief in Hungary that these press-campaigns might auspice a real attack against critical groups and individuals in the future.

Homophobic campaign and the musical Billy Elliot

The good old custom of reporting press seems to come back to Hungary. The theme of anti-gay propaganda has been present in Hungarian politics but became the part of Fidesz-propaganda only after the pro-government paper accused the National Opera's director, Szilveszter Ókovács. The first night of the Elton John musical, *Billy Elliot* in the Hungarian National Opera was in 2016, yet nobody cared about the piece until June 2018. This was the time, when *Magyar Idők* unexpectedly denounced the director of the National Opera for not censoring the *Billy Elliot*'s director, Tamás Szirtes, for creating a show which [“promotes deviant identity for innocent kids](#)



Elton John – Lee Hall: Billy Elliot, directed by Tamás Szirtes, National Hungarian

[transforming them gay.”](#) Quote: “The propagation of homosexuality cannot be a national goal when the population is getting older and smaller and our country is threatened by invasion,” the article stated. “Our government is trying to ... help family prosperity with a lot of tools and money, so it's inexplicable and intolerable that a leading state institution is going against this intention and that it makes quite a few youngsters miserable, who would have not gone this direction by themselves.” [Read more here.](#)

The former attacks are even more surprising considering that the director of the show has completely omitted everything from the original version related to the LGBTQ-topic. For instance when the protagonist and his friend (Gabriel) put on women's clothes in the original version, Szirtes makes the kid-actors put on clown dresses, completely blurring the political significance of the scene. When Ókovács answered the accusations, just like Pröhle, neither did he claim artistic autonomy, only highlighted that the production did not include the problematic scene in the Hungarian adaptation in the first place, so [the National Opera is in accordance with Fidesz's politics.](#)

At the end of June, the Opera announced that they had to cancel 15 performances of the musical



Billy & Gabriel: the 'clown-scene'

and there was [a general belief of political pressure](#) in the background. Others said the reason is commercial: the tickets did not sell out well; that is why it came in handy for the National Opera to blame the government for a market-driven issue. The announcement of the National Opera indeed claimed to cancel the 15 performances as a result of the press campaign, but only indirectly, as they reported this must have been the reason behind *the loosening audience*

interest, the institution explained. There is a general belief among Fidesz-critics that there is a direct cooperation between the paper and the government – that is why the paper is echoing Fidesz's policy.

Yet we neither understand what forces and interests are behind these negative campaigns, nor do we know so far why the Opera has to cancel a show which has been already running for two years (to tell the truth, not with full houses). But consequences are possible: when two years ago the two pro-government papers attacked Béla Pintér's *The Champion* for political reasons, [the subsidy of the theatre \(Katona József Theatre\) was cut](#): of course what is cause and what effect could not have been proven in that case either.

An Abusive Director's Piece Wins Three Awards at the VIII Hungarian National Theatre Festival in Pécs

POSZT 2018

Andriy Zholdak's Rosmersholm won the prize for best performance, best actress (Éva Imre) and also for best scene setting (Daniel and Andriy Zholdak).

Andriy Zholdak's *Rosmersholm* has been shown in Cluj-Napoca at the Hungarian Theatre Cluj, in 2007 May. During the interval of the first night the police appeared in the theatre because the director, Zholdak, has been 'physically and verbally' abusing the protagonist, Éva Imre. While the director is infamous for his uncanny working methods, this particular event overlapped with

the international campaign of #metoo and the debates on the inherent anti-democratic attitudes of director-theatre, with its hierarchies and the potential for abuse of power. The members of the company declared their solidarity with the actress, who did not publically state anything, claiming she considers everything to be part of the artistic creation. The director of the theatre, Gábor Tompa, was not present during the incident, yet judged aggressively that no abuse had happened as the violence itself has been luckily interfered. For the abuser himself used the euphemism 'passionate' director. The theatre remained silent in the theatre-related side of #metoo, judging violence in general but claiming to be a fully democratic community itself, without any need for making regulations against potential violence.

Rosmersholm is also a success-story in Hungary, which vividly shows how the #metoo campaign ran through this society without any particular impact. When the Comedy Theatre, Budapest invited the piece in May 2018, as a return, the Hungarian Theatre Cluj invited a musical piece by László Marton. The almost one and only director in Hungary who has been uncloaked by #metoo: the former actress of Chalk Circle, Lilla Sárosdi has come out with her story how, as a young woman, at the beginning of her career Marton asked her to kiss his penis at a derelict place of Budapest while his companion was jerking off. Later many other women came out with similar stories without telling their names, and it also turned out that a theatre in Canada stopped working with Marton for the very same reasons – for the details please check *Hungarian Letter of News, Volume2, Issue1*). Yet Marton soon returned to Hungarian theatre life: two theatres have already invited him signing that they consider his work to be more important than what he has committed. Meanwhile [Lilla Sárosdi has left Hungary](#) with her husband, Árpád Schilling: Their moving to France was basically responseless in Hungary. While the victim got basically no sympathy from Hungarian society, the perpetrator Marton received a standing protest and ovation by the Comedy Theatre's audience.



Éva Imre in Henrik Ibsen: Rosmersholm – directed by Andriy Zholdak, Hungarian Theatre, Cluj



Can art be more important than anything else? – No lasting impact of #metoo in Hungary

There also have been voices claiming *Rosmersholm*'s presence at the most important Hungarian national theatre festival to be problematic. Yet no debate so far has been organized on the inherent violent nature of directors' theatre, or on the problematic nature of this particular case of *Rosmersholm*. Finally the show has won three important prizes at POSZT2018, among them the one for the best woman protagonist, Éva Imre, whom has been personally abused by the director, and also went through a difficult rehearsal period that she stated to be her advantage. At least the prizes without any former or accompanying debate raise the question whether the professional jury of the festival considers the show they like worth the violence of the director.

Since powerful Hungarian cultural institutions such as the festival POSZT2018 or the Comedy Theatre have made it apparent that aesthetic questions are above everything, no debate could have started about questions, such as how important it would be to democratize the process of artistic creation. Hungarian institutions from the Theatre Academy to Katona József and Örkény Theatre have all emphasized that they are not affected by the above problems. By giving three prizes to *Rosmersholm* at the one and only national theatre festival, the supremacy of aestheticism over morality has gained legitimization in Hungary.

Performativity, Subversiveness in Hungarian Politics

The Opposition's Answer to Decreasing Democracy

While space for democratic values in Hungary is severely narrowing and the Parliament merely became a place of simulation – a theatrical venue instead of a real place for debate – the opposition decided as an answer to turn political life as such into theatre. To turn attention in a subversive way to the fact that politicians of the opposition have no other option but to pretend doing the real political work. As the governing party Fidesz has a two third majority, according to Hungarian law the opposition has no real power to obstruct any law proposals which are all accepted automatically. Thus the 'politician-artists' of the opposition decided to call attention to the fact that Hungarian political life as such is merely acting as if the democratic processes still existed among the walls of the biggest Hungarian theatrical venue: the House of Parliament.

Some examples of theatrical answers by the opposition

- Alternative billboards appeared on the streets hacking the government's anti-migrant poster-campaign; the posters also mock the theatricality of political campaigns by promising eternal life and free beer to everybody. [You can check the posters here.](#)
- The Hungarian public television restricted for propaganda has also been occupied: while normally it exclusively invites pro-government voices, before the 2018 general elections it allowed five minutes for every party of the opposition.
- One of these politicians simply walked out of the studio after permanently blaming the government for four minutes. To the shock of the anchor, he was not willing to use his remaining time. [You can see the event here.](#)
- Another politician of the Hungarian satirical party, called Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party, dressed in a chicken costume and mocked the functioning of the public media as such by saying cluck cluck for five minutes in live stream while he also gave the floor to the anchor to present the program of his party to the viewers, instead of him doing it. [A chicken invited to Hungarian state television's political program.](#)

This openly performative new tendency in Hungarian politics is very subversive as it calls the attention to what we less and less realize in Hungary: how theatrical – non-real – our democratic processes have become.

The general characteristics of the new trend are the following:

- This new tendency often uses the tool of over-identification: that is, exaggeration and irony, saying the opposite of what you think. This is particularly the tool of the Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party, which satirical party has collected the necessary number of signatures to run in the 2018 general elections. With the help of this special kind of criticism, which ironizes and over-identifies with the criticized thoughts and principles, the party can make certain hidden presuppositions of the government's propaganda become evident. So it happens in the so-called 'Peace-marches' which is an answer from the Dog's part to the pro-government rallies with fake

civilians: these are crowds sponsored and directed by the government. During these counter-Peace marches one could hear the head of the Dogs, Gergely Kovács admitting and announcing proudly the allegations that they are often accused of on the part of the government: about being founded by George Soros. Claiming that Hungary is on the right track, so the prime minister has pointed out the good direction – we just have to be even more radical; for example, there are still some independent media; dictatorship is not yet ready; the Dog Party ironically claims that they would like to fulfill what the governing party Fidesz has started.

- This new tendency is the movement of politicians and activists. They all act like artists. But the place for subversive humor is not theatre or cabaret, but rallies, media and the streets – the stage of politics as such. This change of context is exactly the reason this political trend can be so subversive, critical, questioning and effective: parties (unlike artists) can have a more direct and intensified impact on society.
- This tendency is carnivalesque, using humor that is always an effective and liberating tool. Rigidity leads to mistake, mistake leads to laughter, Bergson says. It bursts out unavoidably. Tímea Szabó, president of the opposition party, Párbeszéd (Dialogue), has been playing with a marionette version of the president János Áder during his inauguration speech – indicating she considers him to be the puppet of the prime minister.

Why is all this?

Hungarian politics have reached a point of seriousness when laughter has to burst out. We all laugh not in the separated institutions for artistic purposes, but in the occupied spaces of life and politics. Like during the rites and the carnivals in the ancient times and in the middle ages. Giving laughter's healing power to everyone.



The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party on Hungarian Public Television before the General Elections 2018

A New Show on the Effects of Scapegoating

A *Market-Day* by the Mohácsi-brothers in Radnóti Theatre

The process of scapegoating is a beloved topic of the Mohácsi-brothers, whose works may be familiar to the visitors of the dunaPart3 Hungarian Showcase of Performing Arts, 2015 and also to the audience of [the Hungarian Live Festival, New York, 2018](#). In *Just a nail*, the brothers focused on the relationship between the Roma and non-Roma communities in Hungary, and how the Roma has become an excluded and marginalized ethnic group at many places in the world- and also in Hungarian history. It is even more typical for the couple to approach the process of scapegoating in more general models: they have a famous *The Witches of Salem*. But it is particularly the Jewish community – the group they introduce in *The Market Day* as well – that they have examined most often in their works. We are confronted with their Jewish representations from the question of anti-Semitism via Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to their auteurs theatre pieces: *We Live Once* or *the Sea Disappears* in Nothingness or Thereafter; *A Place for You* (the title is a reference to a representative and patriotic Hungarian poem from the age of nationalization); or the *Ghetto Sheriff* – a documentary piece using – among others – lines by Lanzmann's *Shoah* and played in complete darkness.



Dorina Martinovics & Ádám Porogi in János Mohácsi – István Mohácsi – Pál – Závada: The Market Day, Radnóti Miklós Theatre

The Market Day was originally written for the stage by the famous Hungarian novelist, Pál Závada, who later also wrote a novel based on the play. This is the material that the Mohácsi brothers (István Mohácsi and János Mohácsi) used when they created their own version of the piece. The brothers are famous for always re-writing and re-interpreting the classics' texts too, so basically all of their plays are auteur theatre pieces whether they take a classical piece as a starting

point or not. *The Market Day* is about a pogrom and a mobbing in the market of a small Hungarian village after the Second World War. Right after the survivors return to their native homes, they are mobbed again – since they are confronted with their local fellows living in their former homes

and they are not happy to move out of their newly formed homes. (The mobbing is not portrayed in a naturalistic manner in the Mohácsi theatre, which never shows violence in a direct way). In both the original novel and the theatrical piece, the mobbing is the direct effect of political propaganda. Hatred and fear are evoked for political reasons and the hate speech used by politicians results in physical violence.

This story is based on real events in Hungarian history: the novelist used sociological research in his work. But for the Mohácsi brothers, it was less important to talk about the particular event than to show the general pattern of scapegoating as such – with an evident reference to the hate campaigns by the Hungarian government against various marginalized groups. And to show what kind of direct and cruel results hate speech can have.



Theatre and Intermediality

Two experimental pieces based on Hungarian cult novels by TÁP Theatre and the DoN't Eat Group: András Juhász and the young and talented woman director, Zita Szenteczki

The independent sphere in Hungary is still the driving force of experimentation. Generally speaking, visuality as such is not the strongest side of the Hungarian theatre, which is – as a post-socialist culture – still somewhat under the influence of the Stanislavski method and the variability of theatrical approaches is growing only slowly. Yet it has to be pointed out that there is a new generation in theatre that realizes intermediality as an effective tool to work with in a theatrical context as well. Both pieces in this section have been presented at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts – a place for experimentation. Both TÁP theatre and the DoN't Eat Group (the András Juhász - Zita Szenteczki collaboration) chose Hungarian novels as a starting point – which are cult pieces for the young generation in Hungary today. And in their stage adaptation, they build on intermediality more than anything else.

[The Journey by Moonlight is a 1937 novel](#) by Antal Szerb, a literary theoretician and an author who died in the Holocaust. His works, whether they are theoretical or artistic, are always written with the aim of entertainment. His *Introduction to the History of Literature* and his *Intro to the History of Hungarian Literature* can be maybe mostly compared to *A Little History of the World*, by Ernst

Gombrich. Szerb's novels are also beloved by the young generations, and this is the piece TÁP Theatre has chosen also.

This adaptation, directed by Vilmos Vajdai, uses the cinematic technique of 'dubbing' as all the lines are heard from tape and the actors are only doing lip-synch. This is particularly interesting because none of the characters seem real. We are constantly confronted with their theatricality, which also happens in a funny way. The visual projections created by the students of the applied art faculty in Budapest juxtapose the real events. These shots can add a different context to the sketches, e.g., making apparent the hidden thoughts of the characters. Or portraying them according to their inner selves instead of the inadvertent acting they do in life, trying to hide their actual characters.



Franciska Törőcsik & Fruzsina Háda in Antal Szerb: The Journey by Moonlight, Trafó – directed by Vilmos VAJDAI, House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest



Péter Hajnóczy: Death Rode out of Persia – directed by Zita Szenteczki & András Juhász – Trafó, House of Contemporary Arts,

Péter Hajnóczy's *Death Rode out of Persia* (1979) is another cult novel from the twentieth century. It is a book about the everyday life of a man suffering from alcoholism. While the original piece is about the loss of control, [DoN't Eat Group's](#) stage adaptation is very much designed and planned. The piece stars the wonderful Nóra Rainer-Micsinyei and the great Péter Jankovics. The show seems to be the shooting of a would-be film, e.g., the actor has to lie in a convoluted posture in real life with a fan blowing on her face in order to look natural on the supposed film. During the show we see in parallel the 'real' events and their immediate projection – showing how normal all the craziness can actually look from a different angle. And while we watch the love scenes and the funnily sad ending of this relationship between a cute, practical and philistine girl and a romantic and self-destructive artist, we see their different viewpoints in parallel with the help of intermedial tools.



András Juhász & Zita Szenteczki

A Showbiz-Answer on #metoo by Young Female Director Kriszta Székely

Jacques Offenbach's *Barbe Blue* in the Operetta & Musical Theatre

Background: #metoo in the Operetta and Musical Theatre Budapest



Kriszta Székely, theatre director

When *Barbe Blue* had its first night, we learned shortly after that Miklós Gábor Kerényi the chief director at the Operetta had been dismissed from the institution because of being an abuser. Thus the choice of material by Kriszta Székely is a responsive one as Offenbach's piece stars a protagonist whom the director shaped into a determinate and snap character, resembling Walt Disney's *Mulan*, with the help of the great dramaturge, Ármin Szabó-Székely. The strong woman character is able to rule the comically evil-

hearted villain who kills all his former wives in order to get new ones. (According to the funny re-written plotline, he is conservative, and wants to have sex only after marriage).

A New Style at the Operetta

The Operetta & Musical Theatre Budapest is also called the 'Budapest Broadway' broadcasting entertainment. Yet by inviting Kriszta Székely, a young woman director from Katona József Theatre, which is a public theatre dedicated to aesthetic quality and social commitment, the Operetta has extended its former, safe borders. It has broadened its profile in many different

senses. It is not only that Kriszta Székely has brought another theatrical language into the walls of the Budapest Broadway that is more contemporary than what many of the shows there represent. It is also that by inviting a young woman director who is sensitive to the topic of #metoo, the Operetta has become the most self-reflexive artistic institution concerning #metoo among all the public theatres in Budapest – reflecting on their own attitudes via Offenbach's story, portraying a woman character whose example can be a model for everyone in the theatre – as much as for the audience.



Jacques Offenbach: Barbe Blue - directed by Kriszta Székely, Operetta & Musical Theatre, Budapest

FROM OUR SIDE:

Noémi Herczog's US Lecture Tour Oct/Nov 2018

Noémi's article, "The Politician as an Artist: Subversive Humor and Theatricality in Hungarian Politics" made quite a stir when it was published this past spring. While the tour schedule is not finalized, we expect her to be in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, New Haven and Boston. HowlRound TV will be live streaming her lecture in Boston at Emerson College on 1 November.



StereoAkt Making Albuquerque *Promenade* Nov/Dec 2018

Directors Martin Boross and Julia Jakubowska, along with composer Márk Bartha begin work in October on PROMENADE ALBUQUERQUE. Partnering with q-Staff Theatre, some 20 Albuquerque theatre makers and countless members of diverse communities in the city, the Hungarian team will be open for boarding the ABQ PROMENADE BUS on 8 November.

The SteroeAkt team was in ABQ last Spring, doing a two week developmental workshop and are returning for a month-long residency to finish the piece.

q-Staff just purchased this beauty, and in the competent hands of q-Staff co-founder Rich Van Schouwen, we expect a long theatre-life for this one.

Andrea Tompa, critic, journalist, editor (and now novelist) will be with the gang that last week and writing about the piece and the project for her magazine, *Színház*.



q-Staff's new bus for PROMENAD ALBUQUERQUE resting alongside their new space on Broadway, Albuquerque.



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