

SZÍNHÁZ



# HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

## Dear Friends,

Here we are with the 5<sup>th</sup> issue of our *Hungarian Letter of News*. With our partner, Színház Magazine, we chose to have one “voice” for each issue. Tamás Jászay takes on the task for the third time.

Some of you have probably met Tamás in Hungary at one of the cluster of dunaPart showcases beginning in 2013. You’re also likely to have run into him at festivals across Eastern and Western Europe. And you may have met him when he traveled to the US with CITD in 2014—we sponsored a month-long study tour, taking him to New York, San Francisco, Austin and Baltimore.

Tamás is now a major voice in the region, with a deep understanding of both the art and the politics of the moment.

Tamás has also been a critical link to the West for Árpád Schilling and his company, Krétakör—I’m looking for his PhD dissertation on Krétakör to be published in the near future.



In this issue he give us serious looks at two much talked about theatre pieces: *Peer Gynt Underground* and Schilling's *Enemy of the Nation*. A nasty cold sadly kept me from seeing *Peer Gynt* when I was in Budapest earlier in the Fall—but it was clearly the major buzz in town. And while I got reports from multiple friends about the work, Tamás's piece here really fleshes out this unique and compelling theatre event.

There are two other sections in this Letter of News: the results of the Hungarian Theatre Critics awards for 2017 and a report on how the #MeToo movement has reached Hungary. Tamás outlines two high-profile, fresh cases: Gábor Kerényi, director of the Budapest Operetta Theatre, and László Marton, director of the Vig Színház.

I think I've only been to the Operetta once in all my years in Budapest—not my cuppa. I never met Kerényi.

But László Marton has been a good friend for over four decades... we met around ITI events starting in the mid-seventies. We've kept up that friendship over the years. Many of you who have traveled with me to Budapest have met László at his theatre (the Vig) and seen his work. And, he was a regular at the Actors Theatre of Louisville and Chicago's Court Theatre. Much honored in Hungary, he also had an international career in London, Tel Aviv, Helsinki, Dublin, and Toronto. He was a mentor to Róbert Alföldi, Enikő Eszenyi and János Szász.

I was shocked and deeply saddened to learn of my friend's demons and unacceptable behavior, and the widening circles of damage. The scope of this sad and painful story is, as Tamás notes, still playing out.

And, Tamás concludes his reporting: "there is a lot more to surface."

I send my best to each of you, and, hoping again that "each of you will create islands of light in this holiday season."

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip".

**Philip Arnoult**

founder & director

PS: The Russian show-trial around the Gogol Theatre just got [major exposure in a New Yorker article](#) a few days ago—and it's an important and spot-on read.

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**Tamás Jászay**

**REPORTER BIO:** Tamás Jászay (1978, Szeged) is a critic, editor, university lecturer. Editor of the biggest critical webpage in Hungary, Revizor ([www.revizoronline.com](http://www.revizoronline.com)), besides that he publishes reviews, interviews, reports in all important Hungarian cultural magazines. He teaches at the Szeged University. His PhD dissertation was written about the history of the renowned Hungarian independent performance group, Krétakör ('Chalk Circle'). Co-curator of the Hungarian Showcase (2013), dunaPart 3 – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts (2015) and dunaPart 4 (2017). As part of his work on the 2015 Showcase with CITD, he traveled for a month to San Francisco, New York, Austin, and Baltimore.

## Peer Gynt Underground

### A new show by Máté Hegymegi

Máté Hegymegi is one of the most important emerging theatre makers today in Hungary. He is a former student of Csaba Horváth, the founder of Hungarian physical theatre. Hegymegi belongs to those very few from Horváth's former class at the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, who started to build their own careers rapidly after leaving the university. One can find Hegymegi's name on the playbills of independent theatre projects and also at works made at repertory theatres both as an actor and a choreographer. He is the winner of Hungarian Theatre Critics' Award in the category of best independent productions in two consecutive years: in 2016, he won the prestigious award with his touching interpretation, the physical theatre-like retelling of the classical story of Michael Kohlhaas. Telling you the truth, it was no surprise for me that he won again with *Peer Gynt* a year later.



Gábor Nagypál in the title role of *Peer Gynt*



This show was produced by Studio K Theatre, the one and only independent company in Hungary that owns its venue in the heart of Budapest. Studio K has a long history of dealing with the young and emerging creators since the 1970s. With the ensemble of the theatre Hegymegi creates an unforgettable journey, which at some points feels to be more like the new episode of *Survivor* than a regular evening at the theatre. The longest part of the almost 5 hours long show takes place on the outskirts of Budapest district X, down at the tunnel system of the former brewery of Kőbánya, the [largest cellar system in Hungary](#). (We get there by taking a bus ride together with the actors: at some points this kind of unexpected community simply couldn't work, although the actors did their best trying to change us into the wedding guests of Ingrid.)

The labyrinth-like cellar system, the former industrial space proves to be a perfect choice as it immediately becomes more than only background. We realize early that we are on a journey together with Peer and his companions. After a while one can feel the effects of the performance on his/her own skin, the staging becomes primarily a sensory experience: we get lost together in the caves of the Mountain King, we chase also the shadow of Solveig, we get frightened by the Bøyg, and so on. The text is cut and told in an unusually sensitive way (dramaturg: Judit Garai). The performance calls our attention to tiny details of the play.



A scene from *Peer Gynt*, on the right Niké Kurta as Solveig. Photos by Studio K

Hegymegi does not care about how actual the story is or could be: he helps us to get close to the fairytale-like characters, to understand their motivations through strong images, striking visually and original ideas. In the leading role, there is Gábor Nagypál (nominated to Hungarian Theatre Critics' Award as best actor), who plays a childish, smart and funny Peer Gynt, who is getting older and older in front of our eyes as he understands he cannot escape from his fate. For the closing scene we have to take another bus ride back to the city centre. We are invited to the crypt of a church, where Peer (and we) meet the old Solveig who was waiting for Peer for a whole life. The image of the two people who are not able to reach out for each other is simply unforgettable.

## Hungarian Theatre Critics' Award 2017

At the end of September, the traditional award gala to present the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Award for the best productions of the season 2016/2017 took place at the Budapest Puppet Theatre. The gala was made possible with the help of donors exclusively from the private sector. Those members of the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association who attended a minimum of 90 premieres in the previous season in the Hungarian speaking theatres are entitled to vote. There are 15 different categories including the best performance, best commercial performance, best independent performance, best actor/actress in a leading/supporting role, best set/costume design, etc. It was the seventh year when the critics presented a lifetime achievement award after secret ballot: in 2017 Zsuzsa Radnóti, dramaturg of Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre) won the award, whose merits in staging contemporary Hungarian drama in and outside Vígszínház are unquestionable.



The best show: *Kivilágos kiveradtig* (*Until the Break of Dawn*). Photo by Miskolc National Theatre

The award for the best production went to an adaptation of a quite well-known Hungarian novel. *Kivilágos kivilradtig* (*Until the Break of Dawn*) by Zsigmond Móricz offers a sharp diagnosis of anti-semitism and speaks generally about the phenomenon of growing social intolerance. The stage adaptation, written and directed by Gábor Rusznyák was an outstanding theatrical event of the past season, underlined also by the fact that it was staged in Miskolc, the best theatre in the provinces at this time. It is a true celebration for the company, in which the period subject, the Hungarian village at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is molded into a plotline which is, if not universal, still relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Hungary. There is no hope for the new generation either, struggling against inherited prejudice and stale thoughts: the Hungarian swamp swallows and suffocates everyone.

All the other awards went to companies from Budapest. Artists connected to Katona József Theatre won 6 awards altogether out of the 15, including the best directing (Kriszta Székely for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*), the best newcomer (Kriszta Székely), best actress in a leading role (Eszter Ónodi in the title role of [\*Nora - Christmas with the Helmers\*](#), Kriszta Székely's staging of Ibsen's *Doll House*), best costume (Fruzsina Nagy for *Nora - Christmas with the Helmers*), best set design (Anna Fekete for *The Tin Drum*), best actor in a leading role (Tamás Keresztes for the *Diary of a Mad Man*, about the show see the previous edition of Hungarian Letter of News).



A scene from *Nora – Christmas with the Helmers*. Photo by Katona József Theatre



Vígszínház is the winner of 3 awards (besides the lifetime achievement award of Zsuzsa Radnóti). The award for the best commercial production and for the best stage music went to [The Paul Street Boys](#). The original novel was written by Ferenc Molnár in 1906, and it is still one of the most popular youth novels in Hungarian literature. The extremely successful production was directed by László Marton, the previous managing director of Vígszínház, its award-winning music was composed by László Dés and choreographed by Csaba Horváth. (Editor's note: the gala award took place one month before the shocking news arrived about Marton as a sexual harasser - see the *#metoo in Hungary* in this letter of news). The special award went to a monodrama played by Géza D. Hegedűs, the renowned actor of Vígszínház, after the memoirs of Sándor Márai, entitled *Hallgatni akartam* ([I wanted to remain silent](#)).

Two awards went to independent companies: Zoltán Friedenthal won as the best actor in a supporting role (Béla Pintér and Company's *Szívszakadtig*). Studio K won the award for the best independent production (see the *Peer Gynt underground* section in this letter of news).

## Árpád Schilling, enemy of the nation

It was mid-September 2017, when the National Security Committee vice-president and Fidesz VP Szilárd Németh identified three opposition activists by name during a closed-door session of the committee. According to him, the three activists – former Politics Can Be Different MP Gábor Vágó, stage director Árpád Schilling, and civil activist and video blog host Márton Gulyás, former managing director of Krétakör – could each be expected to engage in subversive activities this autumn with the intention of “participating in the disruption of Hungary’s internal order.”



Árpád Schilling

Vágó, who recently [initiated a referendum on extending the statute of limitations for corruption crimes](#), wrote on his blog: “What was my crime that I became a subversive? I initiated a referendum, and they got so embarrassed about the extension of the statute of limitations for corruption crimes? I organized a protest in [Viktor Orbán’s hometown of] Felcsút and I disrupted the peace of the main village? I spoke out at different demonstrations and spread the word everywhere that the government must be replaced in an organized manner, but that anger and rage should not direct us?”

Gulyás, who indeed [called for peaceful acts of civil disobedience](#) if the National Assembly doesn’t pass election reform by October 23, told the news portal 444.hu that he would organize a public discussion in front of the Hungarian Parliament, called “Background Power.” According to Gulyás, both Vágó and Schilling would participate in the discussion. “My state has never decorated me like this before,” Gulyás said of his being singled out by the committee.

Theater director and activist Árpád Schilling, founder and director of Krétakör said that what was happening to him and the other two activists was “at once comical and angering.” “We see here that they are selling the country by the kilo to the Russians, but I am the national security risk?” Schilling told 444. “There is no kind of organization behind me, and I regularly speak my mind at protests. That’s why I must be named a danger to national security today in Hungary, they’ve got to deal with me in this kind of committee, and not with, say, [the extremists who beat up public workers with police assistance?](#)” Schilling wrote on his [Facebook page](#) that “the big day has finally arrived, I was given the most prestigious award of the Fidesz-government: the Medal of Traitors!”

After the announcement of Szilárd Németh, a few reactions arrived from Hungarian theatre professionals standing against the charges against Schilling. The Hungarian Theatre Critics’ Association published a statement condemning Hungarian political leaders for vilifying critics of the government “simply because [those individuals] exercise their constitutional right to freedom of expression.” The critics also pointed out that film and stage director Kirill Semyonovich Serebrennikov – who like Schilling is one of the most renowned stage directors of his country – was recently detained in Russia “in a manner reminiscent of the Soviet-era show trials.” The critics reminded us that Serebrennikov’s arrest comes after years of the government treating the director as a public enemy. “We find it terrifying that such similarities exist between these Hungarian and Russian cases, but as the citizens of a democratic state we believe that an artist in Hungary should never fear reprisals simply because of their political views,” the critics wrote.

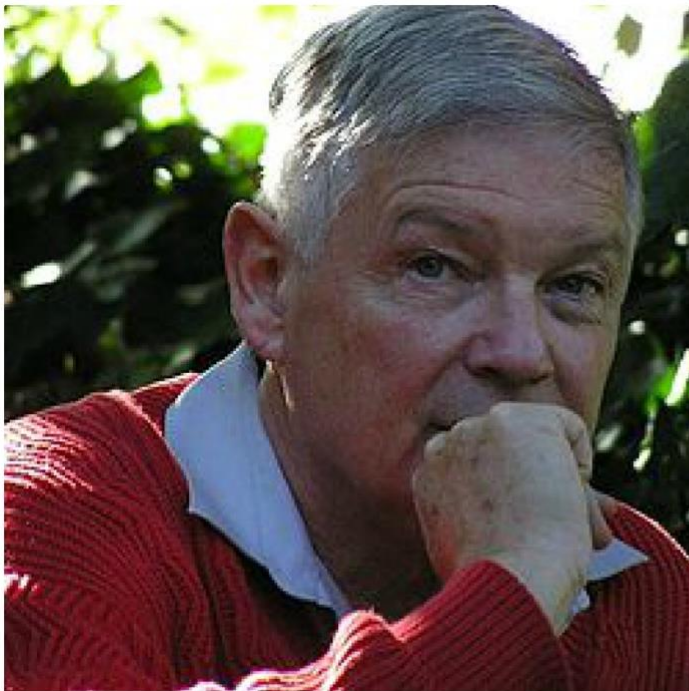


A scene from Árpád Schilling's *Eiswind* (*Cold Winds*) at Burgtheater, Vienna. Photo by Burgtheater

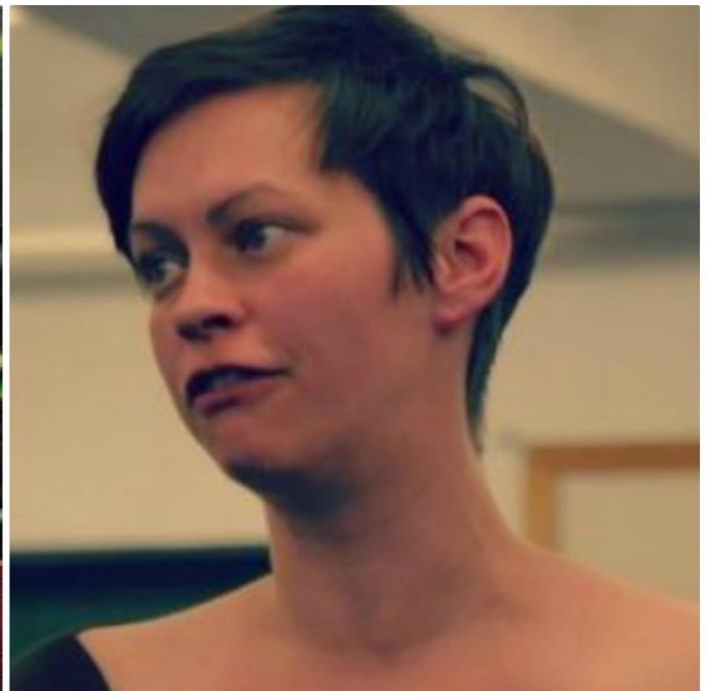
A reaction from abroad: Karin Bergmann and Vienna's Burgtheater published a statement on their website defending Schilling. "This action is another painful case when people or acts which are against the Orbán-regime become stigmatised in Hungary. Principles of the rule of law are massively violated in order to eradicate and mute the cultural and intellectual scene. We think that the idea of free civil society in Hungary is seriously in danger... In his performance currently in repertoire, entitled '*Eiswind / Hideg szelek*', Árpád Schilling examines how Viktor Orbán's policy arising from the right edge of Europe has penetrated into his heart, how radicalisation and nationalism are politically validated in the background of the refugee crisis."

## #metoo in Hungary: Scandal at the theatre

The two most talked #metoo stories which surfaced in the past two months were both related to the theater environment, although more abuse stories came out in the academic and publishing sector. The “theatrical” ones became a social shock. There are many angles from which these stories could be told: how public (“official”, party) media and the national news agency dealt with the Hungarian #metoo stories (with complete ignorance, never reporting on it); how other theater institutes reacted when names of the harassers were said (by refusing the idea of abuse of power in their institutes), what kind of discourses surrounded the unfolding stories (from empathy and solidarity to a more general and aggressive blaming of the victims, blaming the theater environment and rejection of contemporary art); what institutions reacted with the urge of opening up long distance strategies and protocol for healing (only independent, civil organisations and artists).



László MARTON



Lilla SÁROSDI

It is important to note that those two artists who personally came out saying their stories and the names of those who sexually assaulted, abused them, both independent ones. First it was the independent actress Lilla Sárosdi, former member of Krétakör (and wife of Árpád Schilling) who published on her Facebook page her 20-year-old story; and it was a former male dancer, Ákos Maros, living now in the US and breaking with his artistic career who named the other theater



director. Especially Sárosdi was (and still is) under pressure, being accused of “destroying” a human life and a career, although there were many women (at least ten altogether), who presented their stories in the independent media, saying that in a legal process they will use her as a witness. But a small video spot from the theater production by Árpád Schilling, *Loser* is circulated, where Sárosdi can be seen naked; boundaries of art and private are blurred, Sárosdi being accused of pornography.



Gábor Miklós Kerényi



Akos Maros

The two named harassers were both male, very powerful, influential in the theater field, general directors (intendants) of big, Budapest-based state theaters, both are directors, working for decades with big companies, and also both teaching. They were surrounded with respect, and a lot of visibility. László Marton (b. 1943) and Miklós Gábor Kerényi (b. 1950) were responsible for Vígszínház, and afterwards Operetta Theater. And the two reactions were also similar: both directors first refusing the accusations and announcing legal action, but then (probably advised from the same legal representative) apologizing. Both victims were young, inexperienced, and trying to begin an artistic career. Both directors were instantly fired from all positions or they resigned themselves, not always clear. Marton finally asked for forgiveness in a grotesque manner:

“I apologize if I did something or behaved like offending somebody”.

At the end of October [Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre Company has revealed](#) it severed ties with longtime guest artist László Marton after allegations of sexual harassment surfaced against him in late 2015.

Consequences of these stories – and there is a lot more to surface – are far from visible yet. But in a country of male power how would credit be given to the young, powerless, and often female?



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