

SZÍNHÁZ



CITD

HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

The War: Day 21
16 March 2022

Friends,

This edition, #15 of our HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS, a collaboration with Színház magazine in Budapest, brings Noémi Herzog's keen eye to a broad set of issues.

Noémi highlights new works, women in theatre, Roma initiatives, scenography and design, Hungarian films, and a remembrance of producer, director, activist Anna Lengyel, along with controversial cultural issues: a questionable Theatre Olympics Festival and a government-appointed new rector at the Academy of Drama and Film. And, the War.

The War in Ukraine has the region roiling with the horror of what we see and read about in Lviv, Kyiv, Odessa, and a half-dozen other hot spots. Our partners and friends in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia are stepping up, helping some 3 million refugees (mostly women and children—and growing by the hour). Countless friends are deeply involved in taking time off and helping out: sharing housing, staffing intake centers—one friend drove a family from Poland to Italy!

My heart breaks as we move into this darkness/blackness.

My first visit to Eastern Europe was in 1975 to Poland at the invitation of Jerzy Grotowski for the University of Theatre of Nations. Forty-seven years ago, next June. Over half my life (and close to 80% of my professional life) working with and for theatre in Eastern & Central Europe. Those two lifetimes are filled with seeing magnificent performances, creating and enjoying festivals and gatherings---but primarily the long list of people. Theatre makers yes, but with families, successes, failures, hard times and good, health problems, political problems, and loss.

I've known Noémi for more than a decade. We've traveled together. I've watched her grow as student, a critic and leader... and mother. I care deeply for her and her family. And I am so happy that we continue our work together. We will be supporting our collaboration with Színház and Noémi for the 22-23 season.

And we are engaged in Ukraine.

CITD has just partnered with a Ukrainian playwright and leader of the new THEATRE OF PLAYWRIGHTS in Kyiv, Maksym Kurochkin, and our long-time partner John Freeman in a commissioning project. Through Max and his theatre, we are giving \$1000 each to 15 Ukrainian playwrights. John has over 80 theatres in 7 countries waiting for these plays (20 in the US) for staged readings in the near future. Helping out...writing the first drafts of history...telling their stories.

If you would like more information and be involved—contact John at jfreedman16@gmail.com

While there are many places to donate to the Ukrainian cause, I sent my money to support organizations that help people affected by the war (children, women). It's very easy—you can use PayPal.

<https://voices.org.ua/donat/>

Stay safe, stay healthy, stay sane, stay strong,



Philip Arnoult





°15

March 2022

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REPORTER BIO: Noémi Herczog (1986, Budapest) is a Budapest (Hungary) and Cluj (Romania) -based critic, editor, university lecturer. Editor of the Hungarian theatre magazine, SZÍNHÁZ (www.szinhaz.net), and has a theatre column at the cultural-political weekly Élet és Irodalom (www.es.hu). She is faculty member at Babes-Bolyai University (BBTE), Cluj. Between 2013-2020 she taught at the University of Theatre and Film, Budapest (SZFE). Co-curator of dunaPart – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts (2015, 2017, 2019), artistic advisor of Péter Halász Award for contemporary theatre and experimentation. She is the editor of the collected plays by the "Mohácsi-brothers" (János and István Mohácsi, 2017), co-editor of the essay-collection "Theatre and Society" (2018) and is author of the forthcoming book: "Theatre Criticism of Denunciation in Cold War Hungary" (2022). In 2018, she made a lecture tour of US East Coast with CITD.

On the War

The news about Russia's attack on our neighboring country, Ukraine, came after the deadline of this newsletter. On behalf of our newspaper, we would like to express our solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine and our respect for the brave Russian citizens who, under the burden of sanctions, express their disagreement with their leader.

The Hungarian theatre world is united in its condemnation of the war and – this time – everyone is open to help the refugees. Róbert Alföldi, former director of the National Theatre and theatre director wrote "I never imagined that the experience of a country invading another would be so real and so close to me, in 2022, in the middle of the civilized world."¹

Attila Vidnyánszky, the current director of the National Theatre also described the events of the past few days as a "catastrophe".² Vidnyánszky is originally from Berehove (a Hungarian-populated area in Ukraine). The local troupe of the Transcarpathian Regional Hungarian Drama Theatre was due to perform in the Hungarian National Theatre on the first day of the war, with a play by a twentieth-century Hungarian writer, István Örkény. It seemed they would not get across the border, but finally they succeeded. Since then, the theatre has issued a statement: "In view of the dramatic situation in our neighboring country, the company of the National Theatre will stage several performances of the guest performance by the Hungarian Drama Theatre of Transcarpathia, based on the play by István Örkény (*The Tóth Family*), in the coming period."³ The National supports the company from Berehove with the production.

At the same time, Vidnyánszky believes that everyone has a responsibility in the present situation, both the East and the West: the Ukrainian leadership was incited by the Americans and Russia has wormed its way into an irreversible situation.⁴ On the contrary, Róbert Alföldi took an opposite view in this matter, addressing his words to the Hungarian prime minister, who is on good terms with Putin:

"You cannot be committed in two directions. NOT NOW!

We must be men with balls now, even if we were wrong before!

But we must admit the mistake!

Because we cannot, again and again, take the worst possible side in a conflict in which, there can be no question about which side we should take."⁵

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/alfoldirobert/posts/492990122196951>

² <https://index.hu/kultur/2022/02/24/vidnyanszky-attila-ukrajna-beregszasz/>

³ <https://nemzetiszinhaz.hu/hirek/2022/02/a-nemzeti-szinhaz-kozlemenye-8>

⁴ <https://index.hu/kultur/2022/02/24/vidnyanszky-attila-ukrajna-beregszasz/>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/alfoldirobert/posts/492990122196951>

Theatre Olympics in Hungary – Coming soon... But who Needs it?

The Theatre Olympics2023 is to be organized in Hungary. The festival, started by the Greek director, Theodoros Terzopoulos exists for more than 30 years. Great names have been presented at the event from Tadeusz Kantor to Bob Wilson and – evidently – it is expensive. In 2019, 20 countries and 100 productions were invited. However, the *The New York Times*⁶ does not list the Theatre Olympics among the most respected festivals internationally.

ELŐFIZETÉS

MAGYAR NARANCS

HETILAP VÁLASZTÁS VÉLEMÉNY POLITIKA KULTÚRA

Theodórosz Terzopoulos, Valerij Fokin és Vidnyánszky Attila a Nemzeti Színházban (Fotó: Eori Szabó Zsolt, forrás: facebook.com/mitembudapest)

It has been announced that 7 milliard forints (about 21763123 US dollars) are separated for the next Theatre Olympics in 2023 which is to be organized in Hungary.⁷ This is half of what the

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/theater/theater-olympics-st-petersburg-russia.html>

⁷ <https://magyarnarancs.hu/publicisztika/vidnyanszky-megalmodta-orban-kifizeti-de-kinek-kell-a-szinhazi-olimpia-244145>

whole theatre field gets in a year in Hungary today. The independent sector shares fragments of this sum, about one milliard forints (3109017 US dollars) split among some hundreds of theatre and dance companies. The problem is not that this festival costs money but that – instead of a democratically elected board – only one man, as a matter of fact the extremely controversial Attila Vidnyánszky distributes it (to read about his centralized position and cumulated roles, check: *The Hungarian Letter of News, 2021/November*). The other part of the problem is how disproportionate this amount is compared the other sectors of Hungarian theatre and performing arts.

Concerning the distribution, Vidnyánszky, who is in a monopolistic position to distribute this huge amount, claimed to have addressed all theatre professionals in Hungary and offered a share for each institution to present anything from their program in the frame of the Olympics. The tempting offer is a two-sided one, as those who accept the unspecified amount, can soon find themselves in a dependent relationship financially towards Vidnyánszky.

“ The problem is not that the festival costs money but that... the extremely controversial Attila Vidnyánszky distributes it.

Olympics will cost two times more than the one in St. Petersburg which lasted for 6 months.

The infrastructure of Hungarian theatre lacks the same support. This is why we can say that it is a bit cynical to talk about the popularization of Hungarian theatre values internationally, as these values are constantly abused at home. The main (and only) national festival, also known as 'POSZT' has been closed down in 2020 after 20 years by the very same government. Most recently Attila Vidnyánszky's foundation has also swallowed the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, the number 1 public museum in Hungary specialized in documenting Hungarian theatre life. Both theatre professionals and active civilians suppose that a real estate business is in the background. The 'einstand' of the Theatre University SZFE which is now owned by a private foundation (*for more information please check the Hungarian Letter of News, 2021/November or Nachtkritik⁸*), the underfinanced independent sector kept in existential insecurity during the pandemic are all signs that the fundaments of Hungarian theatre infrastructure do not exist anymore. While the total control over the theatrical sector by Attila Vidnyánszky has recently reached a new level.

Concerning the 7 milliard forints to be spent on the event: the most expensive Theatre Olympics so far according to the quoted article in *Times* was the one organized in St. Petersburg, which cost 10 million dollars. This means that the planned Hungarian

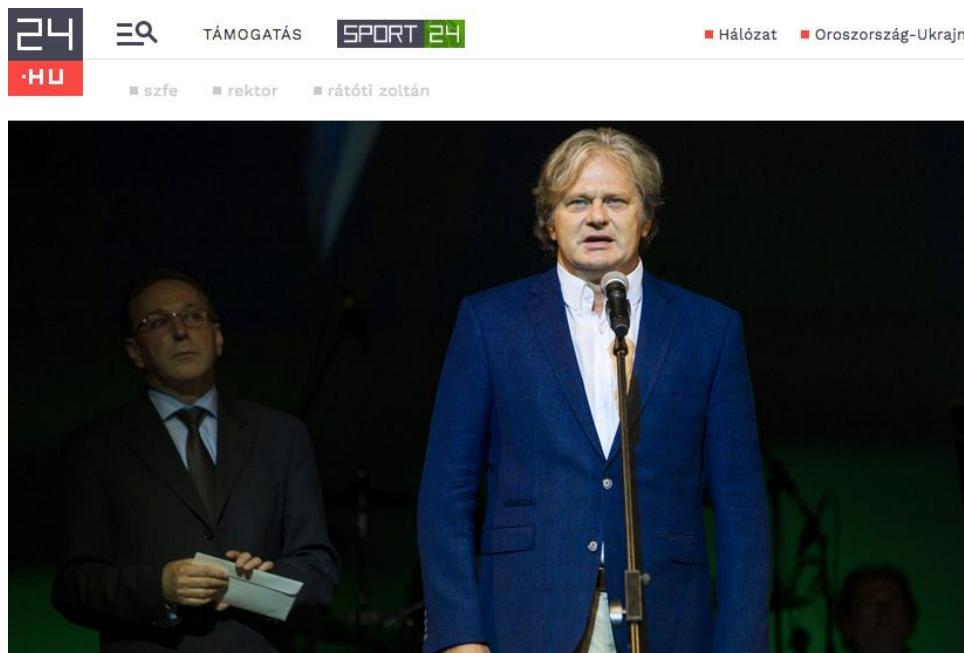
⁸https://nachtkritik.de/images/stories/artikelbilder/Theaterbriefe/Ungarn/Noe%CC%81mi_Herczog_The_Bigger_Picture.pdf

Political Decisions

Zoltán Rátóti is the New Rector at SZFE (University of Theatre and Film Arts)

After the political ‘Einstand’ of the University of Theatre and Film Arts – SZFE in 2021 the University is not the property of the Hungarian state anymore. The owner is a private foundation (no matter the foundation receives its expenses from the Hungarian state). The Board of the foundation has the duty to appoint the new rector of SZFE. There has been only one applicant, as it was quite evident that such a position is for the government loyal. It has to be added, that rectors and artistic directors have always been political nominees in Hungary, a country of state theatres since 1949. Yet in 2021 a new border was crossed by the ruling Fidesz government with blackmails and threats about the withdrawal of funds if the nominee of the opposition is appointed at theatres in cities with an oppositional leadership. An earlier law has been activated in this case: talking about theatres that are financed both by the state and the local government, the appointment of the manager is bound to agreement. When the municipality of the city at the north of Hungary, Eger intended to appoint Artur Szőcs instead of the former managing director, appointed by the (Fidesz) mayor, the ministry (EMMI) prospected the withdrawal of funds. This is why the appointment of the former artistic director, Balázs Blaskó has been extended: even though the municipality considers him a ‘ministry-appointee’. Thus, it was publicly illustrated, what happens to leaders that are not supported by Fidesz: they don’t get money. So,

it is not a surprise that the number of applicants was not high for the rector position of a ‘stolen’ University. The only applicant, the actor Zoltán Rátóti was also the member of the Board of Trustees with the duty to appoint the rector: himself.



Zoltán Rátóti – source: 24.hu

The actor-director Zoltán Rátóti was the artistic director of the public theatre in Kaposvár between 2010-2016. Kaposvár is a relatively small city in the Hungarian – Serbian borders, today its university (of agriculture) also offers education in acting. The city used to be famous about its theatre before the regime shift in 1989. But this theatre gradually lost its particularity after 1989, and it was not so well-known during Rátóti’s directorship. After his resignation as a managing director for an unknown reason, now he is the member of the foundation which owns the University of Theatre and Film Arts. Rátóti has no doctoral degree, he also lacks the necessary language certificate. Recently, an open letter

has been written to Rátóti by a former teacher of SZFE, wondering about his necessary legal qualifications for the position, no answer has come yet from Rátóti.⁹

Two years ago in 2020, when Rátóti became a member at the Board of Trustees at the SZFE Foundation, another open letter addressed him. The author of that mail was the former director of the National Theatre, Róbert Alföldi. The actor, theatre director referred to their collegiality with Rátóti, as they worked together many times.¹⁰ He described Rátóti as the only member at the board of trustees who was brought up in the same theatre culture as the former teachers of the university. He also stated that personally he had no interest in the “SZFE matter”, as he had not been and is not a teacher at SZFE. However, he suggested, it would be Rátóti’s duty, to initiate a dialogue with former teachers and students, as he is in the power position:

“...it is not a dialogue – he wrote – if it is not two completely equal parties sitting down together at a time when the rules of the game have not yet been decided, written down and signed. Because in a new situation, the rules that are acceptable to both parties must be worked out jointly, in agreement, through discussion, so that they can really start to work together, together, respecting each other’s arguments. It is not reconciliation if the management tells you what you can and cannot do, like it or not. It is a humiliating display of power and authority. (...) My friend, I’m sorry, but I worked with you quite a lot, we discussed everything honestly, and never, under any circumstances, did it become clear to me, because you didn’t say, that your Christian, bourgeois worldview, your taste, your culture could not be represented in the theatre. Why did you not say so? I think – I could be wrong – you didn’t say it because the theatre doesn’t have these qualities. In theatre, our existence is presented in its full and incredibly varied and colorful way.”

The letter also touched on the role of the SZFE as the future of the profession:

“Children are educated there for the profession, whether you personally teach there or not. It is our future, the future of our national culture. And this cannot be about anything other than full and genuine consensus and acceptance of each other, of the profession. Not about world views, not about ideologies, not about success or failure, but about our future. About young people”

- wrote Alföldi, who believed that it is not too late for Rátóti (whose intention to improve the situation he did not doubt) to show the other members of the Board that they are not on the right track, putting aside their desire for revenge. In his answer Rátóti stated he intends to pluralize the University’s curriculum, adding national, Christian world view to the formerly monopolistic set of values. He also said there was no desire for revenge, neither in him, nor in any members of the board.¹¹

⁹ <https://szinhaz.online/gabor-gyorgy-kerdem-ratoti-zoltantol-mely-felteteknek-meltoztatott-megfelelni/?fbclid=IwAR04EN85dhGIINuWdK3fu4YkxCnMEAMO2CkOhXJN14zVPe59Pt0OyrMkf0s>

¹⁰ <https://24.hu/kultura/2020/09/02/alfoldi-robert-ratoti-zoltan-nyilt-level-szfe-kuratorium/>

¹¹ https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20200903_pontosan_tudom_hogy_miben_vagyok_benne

Young Companies – Separate Directions. k2 and Narratíva

Recently has been announced that the members of two young theatre collectives in Budapest, the k2 and the Narrativa Company will follow different paths in the future. The ‘k2’ brand will be cancelled while ‘Narrativa’ will be kept, but the close cooperation of the theatre directors is about to end.

The k2 Company was founded in Kaposvár 12 years ago, where most of the members of the company studied acting at the local university. The members of the k2 spent 12 years together. The founders of the group were Péter Fábián and Bence Benkó, who were both the artistic directors of the company and they also directed most of the shows *together*.

It is symbolic concerning theatre prospects in Hungary today, that the group could never reach – during the 12 years – a stable income for the company members and had to come out with 7-8 first nights each year for a survival. This company has been one of the most vivid examples so far how the independent sphere in Hungary became a trade mill just like public theatres, only supplied with less money. That independent sphere, which used to be a space dedicated to creative and free experimentation without the pressure of the premier, where Árpád Schilling, Viktor Bodó and so many other theatre directors fled the public theatres in order to have the chance to work without constraints. Now it is evident that if the independent theatre company, k2 has to come out with 8 premiers a year, we can no longer call this work method experimentation.



The two directors also tried to apply for public theatres in the recent years. They first applied to Pécs (Southern Hungary) with a group in 2021 but failed for political reasons. Then they applied to a theatre in Budapest (Pincészház) which very much looked like a success for a while, as the theatre was in a district with a mayor from the opposition and the Board of Trustees voted for k2. Finally, they didn't get that theatre either, no matter how the Board voted.

When talking about the details of the dissolution, Fábián and Benkó have explained in various interviews that there have been also personal conflicts between them, and that everyday struggles due to political constraints only made handling these conflicts more difficult. Especially Fábián was very much struggling to receive one of the public theatres as a stable base for the company. They wanted to move forward in order to reach a financial stability for the group. But

now they had to admit, that after 12 years, they still have to live without any vision about how to move forward moneywise. Even though they have some important pieces in their bag, such as their productions for classrooms, and most importantly their 8 hours long *Carnival* which also received the Péter Halász Award for experimentantation in contemporary Hungarian theatre in 2020.

Now on different routes, Fábián will follow his own path, while Benkó goes on working with the company. However, the name of the group will be changed, as k2 is over, without Fábián, the group will be something else. It is still a question if there is a future for emerging theatre groups in Hungary, as long as they do not belong to Vidnyánszky: Benkó and the company will face this problem together. Photo above: Bence Benkó – down: Péter Fábián, photos by Samu Gálós Mihály.

The story of the Narrativa (*narrative*) Company started later, than that of k2, in 2019. This is when the four theatre directors,

Zita Szenteczki, Andrea Pass, Máté Hegymegi and Dániel Kovács D. joined together. They were each at the different stage of their careers and came from different backgrounds (puppet arts, applied theatre, physical and dramatic theatre) but neither of them were beginners (or at least we would not say so under normal circumstances – but in Hungary one is an emerging artist until 40). While they each felt the anomalies of the independent sphere on their skin, they also had plans for a renewal, first and foremost their fellowship was a practical one: it was clear that in the 2019 Hungary, after the dissolution of Viktor Bodó's Sputnik, of which Kovács D. was also a member (coming from Viktor Bodó's director class at the theatre University) it is insane to found new theatre companies. But if somebody wants to try the impossible, at least let's not start 4 new different companies, but only one. This way they can write the tenders - do the logistics-organization - finances together.



Máté Hegymegi – Andrea Pass – Zita Szenteczki – Dániel Kovács D.

Photo by Balázs Iványi-Szabó

“ While they each felt the anomalies of the independent sphere on their skin, they also had plans for a renewal...

The idea was logical, the vision was noble. The artists wanted to travel with a truck to the provinces taking the shows they make to all parts of Hungary, small cities, villages. Though they had to start their first year without this truck just like an ordinary bourgeois theatre company as they did not receive – and they still have not received – the fund for

the truck. Their row of premiers – each director has come out with one piece in their first year – has been cut by the pandemic. But the company succeeded in contracting a couple of actors permanently, which is a huge achievement in today's Hungary: the first pieces were presented with them.

Though recently it has been stated that Szenteczki and Pass, the women leave the company. The artists still cooperate and the good relationship is kept, but artistic differences intervened. **These are symptoms of contemporary Hungary which binds together theatre makers with strikingly different visions in theatre for economic purposes.** While Kovács D. and Hegymegi have synoptic aesthetics, and imagine theatre with a permanent ensemble of actors and drama-adaptations, the women have different visions. These are much more influenced by contemporary tendencies of applied arts (Andrea Pass), or international, collective aesthetics, e.g. applied theatre studies of Giessen (Zita Szenteczki). It turns out these days, that not all artistic differences can be bridged by friendship and collegiality, even if practicality and pragmatism of today's Hungarian independent reality would suggest that.

Theatrical Commemoration of Anna Lengyel – A Cancer-Documentary.

[**PanoDrama: 'Tis a Pity it's Cancer or Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' – Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts**](#)



Photo by Dániel Dömölky

Our Anna Lengyel, dramaturg and founder of PanoDrama Company, the only Hungarian documentary/verbatim theatre group died in 2021 at the age of 51. (*For her obituary, please check: The Hungarian Letter of News, 2021/November.*) Before her death she had been rehearsing a docufiction about her cancer which she wanted to be an optimistic piece full of music and dance. With her death, though, her colleagues felt this concept has to be changed. It was clear for all of them, that they have to finish the performance, they all promised Anna without words to put it on stage finally. Yet, the concept had to be changed: instead of a docufiction about a pregnant woman and her friend who has cancer, only the verbatim-documentary thread was kept from the original concept by the director, Tamás Ördög and the cast. A concept, which is deeply rooted in Anna's oeuvre. Thanks to her, now most of us know in Hungary, what is documentary theatre, even though this genre is almost absent from the Hungarian theatre culture and traditions.

The show is starring the same actors Anna started to work with: her usual partners in crime Krisztina Urbanovics, Kata Bartsch or Zsófia Szamosi (who was also starring in the Oscar winning short film, 'Sing' by Kristóf Deák, 2016). They play characters from Anna's life, mostly from the end of her life (a doctor, the doctor's wife, relatives, friends), who tell their opinion about Anna. Though Anna remains wordless, as if we took part at a commemoration, as Anna is not with us anymore. It is a show about how others saw Anna. How others, how we try to remember Anna. While the documentary is supplemented with the contemporary dance choreography of Adrienn Hód. At the end of the documentary part, a wordless, poetic scene starts, portraying inner organs or most probably, a tumor. The figures – elements – of the tumor all dance to a contemporary jam / adaptation of Purcell. Then finally we see them imitating the contemporary version of some kind of operetta figurante. Would this be the paraphrase of Anna's vision about an optimistic theatre piece about cancer, full of music and dance?

A Generation "Z" Pandemic-Piece Directed by Andrea Pass.

'I step loudly and the Octagon Echoes'



Photo by Aliz Győri

The theatre director and script writer, **Andrea Pass**, born in 1979, at the west of Hungary started her career as a theatre scholar and an applied theatre professional. Later on, she became a theatre director and dramatist. Most often she directs her own plays. In 2019, she founded Narrativa Theatre Company with three other theatre directors.

Among her the recent directions we have to mention '*Finale*', which is a piece portraying the world as a

capitalist utopia based on the ideas of Mark Fisher. She has also worked recently at Freeszfe (the spin-up University of the former University of Theatre and Film Arts, with students and teachers who left the school after the authoritarian move of the government-loyal theatre personalities lead by Attila Vidnyánszky): '*Here a Girl has Dig Herself (That's how you should look at her)*'.

One of her most recent works is '*I Step Loudly, and the Octagon Square Echoes*'. The 'Octagon' is a major square in Budapest, and also a conjunction where the lines of different forms of public transport cross each other. The heroes and heroines of '*I Step Loudly...*' are those teenagers who cross the square on a daily routine and who have crossed it during the lockdown as well, when they could hear their own steps as no one else was on the streets. This is the unknown generation which rehearsed their graduation online, who talk to their psychologists online, who have lost a relative due to covid. The characters and the authors of the piece are teenagers themselves and they also play in the production with actors. The piece informs us about how generation "Z" experienced the pandemic, what the lockdown has deprived them of. Theatre as a medium is in a weird situation when talking about the pandemic as it is restricted to assembly, but as a topic, the life of these young adults comes in handy for theatre. These young adults are among the real losers of the pandemic, and with this performance they got a platform to express their loss. In the cast one may find professionals and amateurs alike, their acting technique may differ but the credibility of their presence is all given by their life experiences as representatives of a generation. This is not the first time Andrea Pass has worked together with teenagers. And it has long been evident that she has a sense towards the creative work with young adults. But '*If I Step Loudly...*' is a major step among these works.

Snapshots on Women Theatre-makers

Ildikó Gáspár, 1975 is a theatre director based in one of the most prestigious public theatres of Budapest, Örkény Theatre. She has a dramaturg degree and worked as a dramaturg for a long time in the very same theatre. Thanks to the inviting atmosphere of the institution, Gáspár got chances to try herself as a director too. Since the 2010s she has started her director career, first in Örkény, then elsewhere as well. Gradually she stopped to work as a dramaturg and became exclusively a theatre director. Unlike being a dramaturg, Gáspár's works are less specified by text, but mostly characterized by playfulness and intense visuality. She frequently works outside Hungary too, such as in Germany, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Serbia. In the last two years she worked in Riga and Worms and has received the Latvian Theatre Award for Best Visual Design 2021 for the set, the costume and the video with her production of Ionescu's '*The Rhinoceros*'. Also, in July 2021 she worked in the Nibelungenfestspiele in Worms to put on stage the first performance of Lucas Barfuss's original play '*Luther*'.





The former actor **Kata Wéber** (1980) could be seen in the past both in the prestigious Radnóti Theatre, which is a public theatre in Budapest, and also in the works by the theatre and film director Kornél Mundruczó, created with the independent Proton Theatre. Since 2013 she works as a freelancer. In 2016 she switched roles and started to work as a scrip-writer next to Mundruczó. Her first piece as a script-writer was the '*Imitation of Life*' in 2016 which premiered in Trafó, House of Contemporary Arts in Budapest. This piece was also a change in the Mundruczó-oeuvre, which oeuvre has reached a new phase with Wéber as an author-dramaturg: now Mundruczó works together with his partner in life and work, Kata Wéber who is either a dramaturg or a script-writer in Proton. Since then, Wéber has written three performance texts, two of them also have been shot in film, both of them available on Netflix. '*Evolution*' is a piece

based on the Hungarian composer, György Ligeti's *Requiem*, and it is about three generations of a Jewish family where fate repeats itself: the question is raised if traumas create an infinite circle of failures. While '*Motherland*', which premiered in 2020 Freiburg, is a rewritten version of a Brecht-play ('*The Seven Deadly Sins*'), the script is by Kata Wéber.

Zsófia Geréb (1989) is a Berlin and Budapest-based stage and opera director. She attended the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE), Budapest and studied at the theatre director class of Viktor Bodó and Gábor Székely. She has also worked as an assistant director next to theatre director Róbert Alföldi and opera director Balázs Kovalik. Today she teaches acting for opera singers in Berlin. In 2021 she worked at Oper Dortmund directing Thierry Tidrow's '*Persona*' (concept: Thierry Tidrow, Zsófia Geréb, Franziska vom Heede). In Hungary her most important works have been connected to Péter Závada whose two plays were put on stage by Geréb. '*Je suis Ampitryion*' in 2017 and '*Der Schöngest*' in 2021, her most recent debut in Hungary. She has worked in Budapest (Hungary), Berlin, Cologne, Dortmund (Germany), San Juan (Argentina), Berkeley (California).



Veronika Szabó (1985) is a freelance theatre professional who graduated in the MA Advanced Theatre Practice where she studied physical theatre; at Goldsmith Theatre where she studied applied theatre and at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London where she studied contemporary theatre. Her work as a theatre director is heavily influenced by clowns; from 2019 she is also a member of the Red Nose International Clown Network. Many of her works were influenced by clowns, one of her most emblematic such works was the '*Little Baby*' (2016) where

Szabó plays a bubbling Madonna constantly dropping her baby, and the feminist piece '*Queendom*' (2017) mocking female and male body idols. She has also directed several community

theatre-shows. Her productions have been presented in the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, Czech Republic, Serbia, Romania and Kosovo. Photos by: Ildikó Horváth, Balázs Glódi, János Szita, Emese Altnóder.

Scenography and Performance Design

Hungarian theatre follows a dramatic tradition which might be a reason for why visuality is not one of its strongest sides. Yet in the recent years, a new generation of scenographers has emerged, who consider it important to express themselves via autonomous art on stage, not only in applied art.

Such designers can be found at the Hungarian basis of the global network of scenographers, 'OISTAT' Hungary. The set and costume designer, Júlia Balázs and Fruzsina Nagy, who can be known from several theatre productions by Viktor Bodó, take an active role in organizing events for OISTAT Hungary (e.g. discussion panels).

They have also been one of the dreamers of the '*Infinite Dune*', which has been awarded the Best Exhibition of Countries and Regions section at the 2019 Prague Quadriennal. The designers were: Júlia Balázs – András Juhász – Eszter Kálmán – Fruzsina Nagy – Gábor Keresztes. This immersive installation created a sandy environment into which the visitor could put his/her head and immerse into a different universe. The installation separated the body and the head, creating an impression of an infinite dune, where collective solitude can be observed with other spectators. The installation looks inviting from the outside, yet from the inside it blocks everything from the outside world. 'Like an ostrich, digging its head into the sand, hiding from reality.'¹²



The installation has been one of the important pieces of design that was shown in 2021 at an exposition called '*Not Big Travaille*' – an exhibit on Hungarian theatre costume and

¹² <https://www.pq.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PQ19-catalogue-web.pdf>

design. The purpose of the exhibition was to present the innovative endeavors of Hungarian visual scenography, merging classical artistic disciplines with modern technology. **And to put scenography to a more prestigious shelf in the Hungarian theatre hierarchy.** Among the exhibitors one could find the most important women scenographers and costume designers e.g., **Fruzsina Nagy, Eszter Kálmán** to **Júlia Balázs**. The collective that created the '*Infinite Dune*' has created another piece since then, which was also showcased at the exhibit. This second immersive installation by **Júlia Balázs – András Juhász – Eszter Kálmán – Gábor Keresztes – Ármin Szabó-Székely**, is '*Waterfields*'. The installation draws attention to how our experience can be influenced by our perspective, not only by the environment. Photos by András Juhász, Eszter Kálmán.

Autobiography and Solo Performance of 3rd Generation Holocaust Memory.

László Göndör – Éva Katona and Bíborszalon: 'Living in Dream with Grandma' (Trafó)



The first solo-performance of László Göndör is the 90 min '*Living in Dream with Grandma*' written, directed and played by the performer. The 35 years old actor won the most important independent tender for emerging artists in Hungary called '**Staféta**', a call to realize artists' own concept as a performance. Göndör's concept was to make a piece about his 97 years old granny (Éva Katona): to do so, he needed to move to his granny's place for a month during the lock down. They closed the doors to work on a piece about their unique relationship. The figure of the grandmother also connects Göndör to the figure of the Hungarian Avantgarde, Péter Halász who also had a piece about his Holocaust-survivor grandmother. At the beginning of the performance,

Göndör self-ironically shows us his showreel full of trash. He explains that he turned 35, so he finally felt the need to do something big: this is why he moved to his beloved grandmother to talk through her experiences during the Holocaust and create a performance about it. Göndör keeps himself from telling too much to us from the hard topics. One time we get funny, other times seemingly banal, lyrical scenes about their daily routine together: an association game, how she eats half a banana every day... Until the last minutes we never see her. Sometimes Göndör reads out their dialogues, alienating the documentary, transforming reality into the desired form of theatre piece. Other times we listen to the granny's voice and the performer answers her on stage. We get to know an intellectual in her 97th year, who survived the Holocaust, so did his husband who tried to commit suicide when coming back home. A woman, who could not talk

with her children about what happened to her but finally does that with her favorite grandson. The production is an autobiographical piece of performance art, which is rare in Hungarian theatre. The surrealist dream is not only about the grandmother but it is also *with her*, as they sleep in the same flat in rooms next to each other and finally tell each other about what they dreamed. This dream-like piece full of music, visual images and silences shows us Göndör's dream about his granny. But more than anything it is about how he feels in his 35s, in this coming-of-age performance.



Photo by Péter Róde, Port.hu

Post-Lock Down Performativity. New Directions

Theatre is the City

When theatres re-opened last fall, in Budapest and its neighboring towns there was a never experienced abundance of theatre-projects that left the theatre building. Before, only very rarely did we stumble upon such artistic projects on the streets of Budapest. Only the **PLACCC festival** used to be a permanent project which had its profile in site-specific/public art projects since 2011. However, in the recent years, the **OFF Biennale** joined the trend of artistic interventions of public spaces. And most recently, even others, mostly independents joined: **kirakART**, the **Budapest Fall Festival**, the **Theatre is the City** project run by **Jurányi House**. The more "mobile" part of Hungarian theatre-professionals started to recognize the new and alternative forms of performance art in public art spaces / open air. Most probably Covid has been a major drive, but we must believe that it is also a credo. As theatrical thinking in the 21st century cannot only build on work in theatre buildings. It is a MUST to step out from between the walls, to intervene. If not for other reasons, to democratize and make theatre available for many. This is what Hungarian independent projects have evidently recognized as there were plenty of such pieces in the two last years.

'The Little Melting Pot' by Judit Böröcz – Bence György Pálinkás (OFF-Biennale)

This piece is an audio walk for the individual listener-walker in the public place. The soundwalk is designed for a solitude-walk in a soundscape, where layers of historical and present-day nationalism unfold through forgotten stories from the 19th century and contemporary texts. The audio walk is a perfect form for the theatre era of the pandemic, when instead of the assembly,

the solitary form – and instead of the theatre building, the outdoor performativity seems to be apt.

'Nike' by Kristóf Kelemen (Trafó)



Unlike public art projects, '*Nike*' by Kristóf Kelemen reflects on the pandemics in another way. It is an online work of experimentation, where the performer is not physically present, but he appears on screen real time – from his hometown –, a city from the south of Hungary, Pécs. Kelemen is known about his witty and political performances, his '*Hungarian Acacia*' (by Kristóf Kelemen – Bence György Pálinskás) has been invited to the Winerfestwochen (Vienna) and shows the absurdity of nationalistic discourses in Hungary via the motif of the acacia. '*The Observes*',

which has won many professional awards in Hungary, shifts between the 2000s and the period before the Hungarian regime shift in 1989, dealing with the problem of secret agents before and after '89, comparing the observing duty of secret agents under the socialist era, to the democratic regimes via the situation of 'peeping' in the classic theatre room.

While '*Nike*' is about a sculpture in the performer-director's hometown. It is an abstract representation of the goddess of victory by the sculptor Agamemnon (Memos) Makris, who came to live in Hungary as a refugee in 1950. The piece can be labelled as a lecture performance commenting on what happened to the statue since 1975 when it was erected to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Hungary by Soviet troops. For instance, how the inscription 'Russans out' appeared on it, and how it remains to be a popular dating place.

'Hamlet' directed by Franciska Éry (Csokonai Theatre – Debrecen)

This is an unusual piece which was made with sensitivity to the post-lock down situation, when it was already allowed to leave our homes but in-door public programs were still not recommended. Late-spring – early summer, at the east of Hungary, in the city of Debrecen, at Csokonai National Theatre Éry has directed her '*Hamlet*'-version in a stadium. The stadium as a venue has a hidden message in Hungary where stadiums are built in a large number (and size) from a significant amount of state support,



Ibolya Mészáros, photo by István Derencsényi

which is a way how the government can get advantage from corruption. Though Éry's '*Hamlet*' is a good example for how the stadium can be deprived of its negative political connotations and how the building itself can get back its l'art pour l'art aesthetics. In this '*Hamlet*' we see the stadium from the outside, while the characters of the piece play inside, behind a huge glass wall. The audience is safe, sitting in a safe distance from each other and separated from the actors by a wall. A wall which blocks the covid virus but through which we can see. But how do we hear them from such a distance? Headsets are given to the members of the audience, this way the giga-production – which takes place at a large venue of a giga stadium – can be played with film-like naturalism, where we hear the dialogues in headsets, just like an intimate conversation at home. Born in Budapest, growing up in Stockholm and Moscow, graduating at Queen Mary University of London and (BA) and Goldsmith University of London (MA), Franziska Éry started as a freelance director. As a stage director, she has already worked in the United Kingdom (Manchester, Doncaster, Sheffield), Germany, France and Hungary.

'Watermelon Republic' – Katalin Erdődi – Orsolya Török-Ilyés – Antje Schiffers/Myvillages

The '*Watermelon Republic*', a collective work / community art piece by **Katalin Erdődi, Orsolya Török-Ilyés and Antje Schiffers**, is a Hungarian – German cooperation where the three women, the Hungarian dramaturg and curator Erdődi, the Hungarian actress Török-Ilyés and the German artist Schiffers worked together with the people of Nagykamarás and Medgyesegyháza, two small cities in the Sud-Eastern Hungary with disadvantaged perspectives, past and present,



and a long tradition in watermelon producing. The project had many parts (artistic, musical, community-based, theatrical), one of which was to create a collaborative theatre piece.

The title '*Watermelon Republic*' is an ironic reference to the present of the territory known about corruption (the title is a reference to the banana republics). The performers of the play are local people who tell their personal stories about producing watermelon and also the history of the two cities in poverty. The first night of the piece was in the summer at an open-air market of Szeged where watermelon was also sold and eaten by the public. Photo by 'Jana' – on the production's facebook-page.

Four Hungarian Films in the Official Program of the Segal Center Film Festival on Theatre and Performance (FTP) – New York

The 2022 program of FTP between 1-15 March 2022 focuses on films and experimentation by performing arts artists and filmmakers created during the Pandemic. The pieces can be watched from all over the world during the festival with English subtitles.

'Home' by the Children of Dollar Daddy (Trafó)



The Children of Dollar Daddy is a group founded by Tamás Ördög and Emőke Kiss-Végh, joined by fellow actors in case of each performance. Most of their pieces are directed by Ördög. Their productions are usually based on classic plays or novels that they rehearse with improvising for the situations of the text without a line-by-line accuracy. 'Home' was a part of their 'family trilogy' started in 2013, and it is the paraphrasis of Strindberg's *The Pelican*. It was first shown in 2014, in a small venue, where actors played extremely close to the audience with radical realism. During the pandemic, 'Home' has been shot also as a short film. Photo from the Facebook-page of the Dollar Daddies.

F*ree Artists – New Year's Eve Tele-Theatre (Pneuma.Szöv. – TV Free Europe)

TV Free Europe is a Tele- Theatre Vision, an international collaboration encompassing the fields of performance and multimedia art, cultural heritage and art education. What happened to the hopes of freedom after the end of the Cold War? What does free Europe mean today? What can liberate you at all in times of a global pandemic? And what's up with the borders? 30 years after Radio Free Europe influenced and transmitted the Fall of the Iron Curtain



TV Free Europe is a medium that asks questions and tries in itself to create worthwhile living and working structures. It includes open process and failure. It sends messages from the future

and broadcasts the past live now in your personal TV. - initiated by the artist group Pneuma Szöv. (HU)¹³

Budapestian Skizo by Máté Sándor Dániel (Freeszfe)

The film is based on a play by the non-conformist Hungarian writer with a particular style and sense of humor, Attila Hazai, who died at the age of 45 in 2012 and who did not fit into the Hungarian literary canons. The play presents a day of 'Feri' (the alterego of the playwright).

The film blurs the nihilist, drug-addict world of the 90s with today's atmosphere about no prospects. It was originally a real-time stream from the director's home, which might also be a reference to the lockdown and 'presents how a bunch of young artists live in Hungary in the 90s, how politicians always tried to control artistic freedom in Hungary. It introduces a 25-year-old boy struggling with the philosophical aspects of existence; the contradictions of 'national art' and how this concept can be balanced.'¹⁴ Máté Sándor Dániel, an emblematic student of Freeszfe is a theatre director from the class of Dániel Kovács D. and László Bagossy. *Photo by Balázs Perényi.*



POSTWEST by Martin Boross (STEREO AKT)



'Postwest' was supposed to be a coproduction with Volksbühne which was delayed due to the pandemic and became a short film instead. Eastern and Western Europe is sat next to the same table in this film. The audience is invited to a blind date where everything is given for the big occasion, with the nice atmosphere and the 'attractive Other' at the other side of the table'.¹⁵ Among the creators we can find the costume designer Fruzsina Nagy, the dramaturge Gábor Tury and the theatre director Martin Boross who's piece 'Addressless' an 'interactive chose-your-own-adventure experience' as advertised in *The New York Times*, has recently been produced in Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre in New York, with the promising New York playwright, Jonathan Payne doing the adaptation.

¹³ <https://tv-free-europe.eu/about/>

¹⁴ https://papageno.hu/intermezzo/2022/02/negy-magyar-film-is-bejutott-a-new-york-i-segal-center-filmfesztivaljara/?fbclid=IwAR2-PgzbC5qkdko3pnFjfNCrUVhyAYI4mlIdhtIJfcmy_K_zJa2SVN23pM

¹⁵ <http://stereoakt.hu/keleteuropai-randevu>

Roma Heroes. European Dramas Book Launch; a Roma Theatre Retrospective on Howlround

At the end of 2021 the Roma Theatre Retrospective could be followed on *Howlround*, where Roma theatre companies were introduced from all over the world. One of them has been the **Independent Theatre Hungary** whose work I follow as a critic for a long time, and I find it to be super-interesting and strong theatre. Not only they create shows, but they work as a small incubator of 'normal' society in Budapest, as in their company the Roma and non-Roma work together¹⁶ which is unfortunately not typical in Hungary.

It is also the news of 2021 that their second volume of Roma dramas has come out. Their first Roma-drama collection, comprising texts of solo-performances – advertised as the first Roma drama-collection in the world – came out in 2019, whereas their second Roma drama volume with multiple number of characters per theatre texts came out in 2021. You may find an English and a Hungarian version as well and there is also an e-book version.

The volumes are based on the material collected from the festivals organized by Independent Theatre Hungary. In 2017 they started to organize the yearly **International Roma Theatre Festival** in an important theatre hub of Budapest, Stúdió K (in certain years it moved elsewhere, e.g. the RS9 Theatre), which is the only such event in the world, and where Roma theatre companies are invited from several countries each year. The material presented at this festival formed the bases of the two published drama volumes, available in two languages from all over the world.



¹⁶ <https://howlround.com/reimagining-segregated-world-roma-heroes-european-dramas>

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