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Dear Friends,

Here is the latest edition of our HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS.

It is an "embarrassment of riches" from the pen and perch of **Tamás Jászay**, arguably now one of the most important and ubiquitous critics and theatre-thinkers working in Europe today. And a good friend and trusted colleague.

He leads off this issue talking about the collateral damage the War in Ukraine has brought to the theatre—to the whole cultural and educational scene: the pulse-stopping price of energy to light the lights and heat the auditoriums and classrooms. (I made my first international travel to Hungary and Poland three months ago and was stunned by the depth of the damage these astronomical energy expenses were doing to theatres.) A sobering reflection.

Next, long-time players, observers, and partners of the cultural scene, including **György Szabó** of Trafó and **András Török** (long-time partners of CITD), are joined by **Klára Nagy** and **Edina Schön**, offering new thinking on subsidy for the cultural sector.

Then, a deep dive into the critically important incubator house, Jurányi, home for dozens of independent companies celebrating their first decade. Founder **Viktória Rozgony-Kulcsár** still leads this most admired center. An inspiring story.

Tamás then leaves Budapest for Szeged. Close to the Hungarian-Serbian (and Romanian) border, Szeged has long had a vibrant cultural scene. Tamás gives us an inside look at the 32-year-old THEALTER Festival 22.

Back in Budapest, Tamás digs into **Viktor Bodó's** production of Kafka's *The Castle* at the Vigszínház. I saw this amazing production (a remount of Bodó's 2020 production at the

Schauspielhaus Hamburg in Germany). Here he had both the male stars of the Vig: young **Atila Vidnyánszky Jr** and **Géza Hegedüs**, three or four generations Atilla's senior.

On a personal note, it was good for me to find the new general director of the Vig, **Péter Rudolf** an open and welcoming partner. I've had a 40-year history with that theatre, working with directors **Róbert Alföldi**, **János Szász**, **Enikő Eszenyi**, and **László Marton**, along with actor **Géza Hegedüs**. I felt very welcomed there and used their graceful actor's buffet for multiple meetings.

Tamás then takes a look at what is one of the most successful productions now running in Budapest, young **Bence Biró's** first play, *Hungariansea*, at the private Centrál Theatre with Róbert Alföldi in the main role. Bence was the last Hungarian we brought to New York Theatre Workshop's Dartmouth residency, who then traveled with me down the I-95 corridor. We zoomed last week, and he was still trying to wrap his head around his success (and royalty checks). It opened on my final night in Budapest, and I couldn't see it. But I think it will be around for a good long time.

Tamás finishes his Letter of News with a look at a series at Trafó; *Eastern Bloc* and two new productions looking at Ibsen through women's eyes: **Ildikó Gáspár's** *Solness* at the Örkény and **Drizta Székely's** *Hedda Gabler* at the Katona. All three outings intrigue me. I hope they stick around.

This is our first communication of 2023... a year that looks filled with the continuing War, the unspooling of a cabal of authoritarian national leaders, and theatres, here and abroad, searching for audiences and questioning basic assumptions. An important year.

In the next weeks, we will let you in on what CITD is doing. You'll be hearing from us:

- A report on **Howard Shalwitz** and the LINKAGES: Poland's recent visit to the Divine Comedy Festive in Kraków with CITD project manager, **Brandice Thompson**, **Malgorzata Semil**, **Ronee Penoi**, **Michael Rhod**, **Liesl Tommy**, **Nicole Garneau**, **Jennifer Kidwell**, **Rob Melrose**, **Paige Rogers**, **Scott** and **Evelyn Schreiber**, and Washington Post critic **Peter Marks**.
- An update on our work in Ukraine. Signature projects for the Ukrainian HOPE Initiative include:
 - The Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings with an initial commissioning of 23 new Ukrainian plays at \$1,000 to 23 playwrights

- Support of **Maksym (Max) Kurochkin's** Theatre of the Playwrights in Kyiv
 - Support to **John Freedman** to work with Max and the CITD team
 - We built a sophisticated database for the project
 - And we have raised \$250,000 at close to 60 readings in the US, attended by over 12,000 Americans.
- Finally, we will soon announce a unique new project in Hungary for these dark times.

So, stay tuned.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Arnoult', written in a cursive style.

Philip Arnoult
founder & director

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REPORTER BIO: Tamás Jászay (1978, Szeged) is a critic, editor, university lecturer. Editor-in-chief of the biggest critical webpage in Hungary, Revizor (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) and dunaPart – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts (2015, 2017, 2019), artistic advisor of THEALTER Festival in Szeged, Hungary. He traveled to the US in 2014 on a four-week research expedition to New York, Austin and San Francisco, supported by the Center for International Theatre Development.

Covid-19, war, energy price rise - what next?

It can't get any worse than this, Hungarian theatres must have thought, after Covid-19 closed their venues for months back in 2020. If we look at the statistics, the pandemic has thrown this segment of Hungarian cultural life back in time by a decade and a half: the last time so few spectators (around 4 million) were registered was in the middle of the 2000s. In a nutshell: the first year of the epidemic halved the number of theatre-goers in Hungary.

The country recovered relatively quickly from the epidemic, but it is now clear that the full rehabilitation will be slow and painful. Many players of the cultural world, including the government, saw the months of Covid-19 as a prolonged intermezzo and did not prepare alternative scenarios for another crisis. Yet the crisis was not long in coming: Russian aggression against Ukraine is having a direct impact on the gas and electricity bills of theatres and other institutions. As we approached the autumn of 2022, there were reports of surreal, unpayable bills: gas and electricity bills eight or ten times higher than the previous ones were leaving institutions - and of course audiences - with an insurmountable task.

First, some figures on the theatre scene recovering from Covid-19: although in 2021 there were 700 more performances (nearly 19,000 in total) in Hungary than in 2020, the year most affected by the pandemic, the number of performances in 2021 was still far below the number before the epidemic (36,000 performances). The number of spectators was also below the pre-Covid level, and was even less than 4 million (3,6 million tickets sold). This is where we should be building from when conditions seem even more difficult than before.

The 2022/2023 theatre season has barely begun and dozens of theatres – subsidized by the municipalities, the state, or maintained by different associations - have already announced that they will be forced to close their venues for a shorter or longer period or to cut performances significantly for reasons of (energy) saving.

First, one of the largest performing arts institutions in Hungary, the Hungarian State Opera House, announced that it would significantly reduce the number of performances due to the increase in energy bills. "*We are flying blind, without instruments, at night, in the fog*" - this is how the General Director of the Hungarian State Opera House summed up the situation caused by the unexpected rise in energy costs.

Szilveszter Ókovács, who is notoriously linked to Viktor Orbán and the right-wing government, said that they had received an "unaffordable" bid for gas heating for the Opera House and the Erkel Theatre, which was around HUF 1 billion (USD 2,7 million at today's exchange rate), an eight to ten-fold increase compared to the previous price. They should expect a similar increase for electricity. The 2,000-seat Erkel Theatre has been closed until the end of the heating season and the programmes held at the recently renovated and opened Eiffel Art Studios has been significantly reduced, while the Opera House remains open.

Other theatres have been preparing for the gigantic energy bills by installing LED lights, temporary shutdowns and lowering the temperature inside the building (this latter one is a direct order from the government: in public institutions the highest temperature can be only 18 Celsius degrees, which is 64,4 Fahrenheit). **András Cser-Palkovics**, the pro-government mayor of Székesfehérvár announced last autumn that the city's theatre, the Vörösmarty Theatre, would close for two months in winter. The figures show that there is no other solution: the theatre's electricity bill was HUF 9 million (USD 24,000) in 2021, HUF 54 million (USD 147,000) in 2022 and HUF 215 million (USD 585,000) in 2023. In Szeged, all cultural and sports institutions of the city is closed from the beginning of January to the beginning of March, including both venues of the Szeged National Theatre, the Béla Kővér Puppet Theatre, all the buildings of the city museum and the city library, the cinema and the concert hall. The sad list goes on: during the winter months, culture in Hungarian countryside practically disappears. In some cases, alternative solutions are found: the Győr Ballet gives an example of a constructive co-operation between industry and culture.



Vörösmarty Theatre in Székesfehérvár is closed for two months during the winter

In the Katona József Theatre and the Miskolc National Theatre, where building maintenance costs 100-120 million HUF (270-325 thousand USD) per year, a three- to four-fold increase in costs was expected. At the Vígszínház, energy bills will increase by HUF 300-400 million (USD 815,000-1,1 million) a year, which means an increase in annual expenditure of 10-15 percent. The Jászai Mari Theatre in Tatabánya is lucky: the municipality has agreed to make up the difference between the old and the new overheads. Müpa Budapest is only indirectly affected by the increase because it

operates under a PPP (public-private partnership) scheme. The Atrium has already been able to survive due to the lack of public support. The management of the receptive venue tried to solve the absurdity of the situation with humour: they asked their spectators to warm the auditorium with their breathe...

Previously, the Jurányi Incubator House spent 5 million HUF (USD 13,000) a month on utilities and other running costs - a sum contributed by more than sixty organisations working in the building. But under a new contract with the utility companies, gas prices here quadrupled from October last year, and electricity has increased sixfold since January this year, which, according to **Viktória Rozgonyi-Kulcsár**, the incubator's manager, "*will produce staggering figures.*"

"*A theatre can save money by not playing. But if it's not playing, it's hard to call it theatre,*" says the Radnóti Theatre's economic director. She adds that you can read by candlelight if you really want to, but it's not a good idea to hold a theatre performance without lighting - although that may come.

If all this were not enough, the uncertainty could be compounded by another wave of Covid-19, which could also force theatres to close, and the question of how much inflation and the rise in their own overheads will hit the public purse. Theatres are therefore wary of raising ticket prices. In Miskolc, they have only dared to increase the price by 7% for fear of alienating audiences. The Örkény Theatre also took the decision to raise ticket prices: as the theatre's audience includes many teachers and students, they have tried to take them into account, but the unpredictable economic situation makes it impossible to predict whether they will be able to afford the ticket price.

When asked about the situation, **Anette Bösz**, deputy mayor of Budapest in charge of humanities, pointed out that when we talk about theatres, "*we are really talking about the livelihoods of people and families in Budapest*", who in the crisis are the first to give up their demand for cultural programmes, leading to a drop in ticket revenues. At the same time, the capital must also think about the livelihoods of the thousands of people who work in theatres when it decides on the level of subsidies after seeing the concrete figures.

What does the theatre cost us? Notes on subsidizing theatre life in Hungary

If we were to sum up the essence of theatre subsidies in Hungary, a picture of an impenetrable jungle or a labyrinth with no way out would sum it up effectively. Cultural institutions are supported by the state, local governments, the Ministry of Culture (which has an ever-changing name), and other state-owned bodies (e.g. the National Cultural Fund, the Hungarian Academy of Arts, etc.). There is, of course, ticket revenue, but with a few exceptions it is negligible in the system as a whole. (For a good introduction to the basic concepts and current events, see the relevant chapters in the collections *Hungary Turns Its Back to Europe* vol. 1. and vol. 2.)

The right-wing government is really into prestige investments: mega-projects such as the renovation of the Opera House spectacularly hide the fact that independent theatre artists, for example, are forced to prepare their productions on pennies, but we also know that more and more repertory theatres are forced to cut the costs of preparing a production. Even so, the main beneficiaries of the system are the stone theatres, but even more so those whose directors openly swear an oath of allegiance to the government. We cannot talk about a well thought-out reform, instead there are loopholes, detours and personal connections that are working.

In terms of subsidies, the state ownership of Hungarian theatres in 1949 is directly or indirectly responsible for the current situation: the stone theatres with permanent buildings, a fixed company and a repertoire are the first beneficiaries of the subsidy system. The independent, alternative experiments that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s remained on the periphery for a long time, both in terms of recognition and funding. It was only after the regime change in 1989-90 that the resources from which independent theatre groups still receive some support from the Hungarian state were opened up: whether a left- or right-wing government is in power, the money the independents get is always a fraction of what is paid to the stone theatres that are forced to maintain their own infrastructure. (Compared to my essay written ten years ago, there has been no significant change in their situation.)

In the October 2022 issue of the magazine *Színház (Theatre)*, an exciting collection of short essays was published, in which experts gave their views on how theatre funding in Hungary could and should be changed. Here is a selection of their views on how they think the future should be changed. They were asked to answer three questions. Should the state participate in theatre funding, and if so, how much? Should the state support the different theatre sectors (entertaining theatres, private theatres, independent theatre, etc.) equally or differently? Is it right for some state subsidies to be automatic and for others to be subject to a strict system of tendering?

Klára Nagy, sociologist, anthropologist and theatre critic, draws attention to an important aspect when she asks the question: *"Who is supported by state-subsidised culture, who is it for? In this respect, the state does not treat its citizens equally, as it gives financial and symbolic recognition to certain cultural products and practices and not to others. According to a survey made in 2012, 13% of the Hungarian population goes to theatre, mostly women of higher status. With rising ticket prices and stagnating wages, it is reasonable to suspect that ten years after the survey, even fewer people are going to the theatre. In other words, the theatres, although funded by every citizen's taxes, do not really reach everyone."* She sees the solution in a radical democratisation of the funding system: *"It is an inevitable step to rethink the current cultural status quo and its role in the re-creation of an unjust social order."*

Cultural manager **Edina Schön**, who has previously worked with the Krétakör Theatre too, defines the main categories of theatre in Hungary (stone theatre, independent theatre, theatre education companies, private theatres) and comes to a similar conclusion as Klára Nagy: *"decision-makers must assess the contribution of each of the above categories to the accessibility of culture, including theatre, to the widest sections of society, and whether the organisation has access to other sources of funding (ticket sales, income from economic activities, real estate exploitation,*

product sales, other tenders, etc.) than State aid. I think it is important to have a clear, transparent and fair system that allows mid-term planning at least."

György Szabó, cultural manager, former director of Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts, writes about the general framework of the theatre funding system: "*The funding of theatres in Hungary is currently handled at the government and the municipality level. How the actors on the spectrum are financed, where the emphasis is placed, is a matter of cultural policy. Everyone is able to make better or worse arguments as to why they should get the money. But the funding is about the proportion of areas in relation to each other. The internal structure of the budget shows the truth, the real intention and will. Cultural policy is reflected and betrayed by the numbers... In my view, the internal balance of the theatre system is based on political detachment, realistic understanding and respect for professional contexts, and transparent and predictable funding.*"

András Török, former state secretary for culture, begins his essay with a 2011 *bon mot* by **Béla Pintér**: "*The previous government gave me money, the current one gives the subject.*" Towards the end of his analysis, Török offers a radical proposal, utopian in today's Hungarian public context: "*The entertainment theatres should all be privatised gradually, say over ten years, with decreasing but predictable funding. They should be taken out of the public sector. The valuable productions of the private theatres should be subsidised by means of tenders, with substantial sums of money. Change is a fundamental characteristic of the independent sector. A grant scheme with a structural three-year funding sub-scheme, as we have seen well before 2010, may be appropriate here. To ensure that the total support for the independent sector reaches the necessary amount, a quota could be an appropriate solution.*"

And the award goes to... Theatrical awards and the price of independence

The Hungarian public discourse, divided to the extreme, over-politicised and hysterical, is capable of interpreting even serious artistic achievements on purely political-ideological grounds. Nothing could be more important than scandal: in the autumn of 2022, two unusual events shook the mood of the Hungarian cultural pundits. First, **Benett Vilmányi**, an actor, did not accept the Junior Prima Award dedicated for performing artists under 30. The other scandal is connected with the Theatre Critics' Award. It has been awarded by the Guild of Theatre Critics for more than four decades and is called the last non-political prize among theatre professionals. At last year's gala ceremony the Katona József Theatre won ten prizes in eight of the fifteen categories awarded each year. Some in the press (and among the theatre professionals) immediately suspected a conspiracy. But surely independent thinking must live up to expectations?



Benett Vilmányi

On 20 September 2022, the news exploded like a bombshell: an unexpected event took place at the Junior Prima Award gala. These awards offer substantial cash prizes to theatre, film and dance artists under 30. Benett Vilmányi, a leading actor of his generation, formerly a member of the Radnóti Theatre's ensemble and now a freelance actor, mostly in independent productions, took to the stage to thank the award and then declined to accept it for personal reasons.

The *Telex* news portal contacted the actor right after the incident. Vilmányi said that he was so upset, when he was asked not to make a political speech before the ceremony that he refused to accept the award. The actor said that he had originally wanted to say two sentences on stage, which were not free of politics, as it is difficult to talk about art without politics. On stage, he ended up speaking angrily about the fact that politics and culture are intertwined, and then announced that he would not accept the award, despite the fact that he works for very little money as a freelance youth.

A few days later, an unusual theatrical collaboration was born: twenty-five of the approximately one hundred young artists who had previously been awarded the Junior Prima Award wrote an open letter to Benett Vilmányi. They stated: "*The request made by the organisers before the ceremony, that the winners should respect the independence of the prize in their acceptance speeches, was made purely in order to preserve the professional credibility and dignity of the prize. To draw the sword in this context is unjustified and unnecessary... We believe that, in making this decision, [Benett Vilmányi] has not waved a wink at the real censors of the present or the system, but at the actors who voted for him, the jury members who lobbied for him and the young artists who could have also received this prize and would have been happy to accept it.*"

After the case many people spoke out, here we quote the opinion of **Andrea Tompa**, theatre critic and novelist: "*Benett Vilmányi did what he did very well, beautifully, cleverly. It is called civil courage... They told him he couldn't be political. An independent prize cannot afford to do that - it*

cannot tell the laureate what to talk about. His gesture pointed to the invisible but present power structures behind the award... The laureate can say what he wants. And the prize endures because it is independent. The independence of the prize is not respected by the speech of the laureate (as colleagues who criticise Vilmányi's gesture wrongly write), but by a consensus that surrounds the prize. An independent prize must be able to withstand anything. And its independence must be scrupulously guarded..."



Scene from Jakab Tarnóczy's award winning performance, *Melancholy Rooms*

Little did the author of the above lines know that in a month's time, the Guild of Theatre Critics, the organisation she had previously led for six years, would come under similar, but much smaller-scale attack: after the Theatre Critics' Award gala in October 2022, many people complained about the one-sidedness of the awards. The prize has been awarded every year since 1979 by the theatre journalists' organisation. The award recognises outstanding achievements of the previous season in fifteen permanent and a few occasional categories. The author of these pages has voted every year for nearly two decades and is therefore directly judging these achievements.

The fact that the Katona József Theatre, which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in autumn 2022 and has been considered for decades as the most important Hungarian artistic theatre, has won a total of ten awards in eight of the fifteen categories is a fact that can be read from many directions. Those members of the Guild of Theatre Critics who have seen at least ninety new productions in the previous season, can vote in all the categories. In 2022, only sixteen theatre critics voted (out of the more than fifty members of the guild): an alarmingly low number and a spectacular sign of a

decades-long trend of declining weight for the cultural press. We don't have the money or the opportunity to see enough and diverse enough performances in the Hungarian-speaking region (which, outside Hungary, includes Hungarian-language theatres mostly in Romania and Serbia). Many of our voting colleagues are opting for the lesser resistance, preferring a show in the capital's art theatres to a difficult-to-reach premiere in the countryside or across the border.

But there is something that those who highlight the one-sidedness of the awards and cry conspiracy are forgetting: the 2021/22 season at the Katona József Theatre was exceptionally strong. The Katona's productions won the Best New Hungarian Play, Best Production, Best Direction, Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Best Set Design and Best Music for the Theatre. Critics' favourites are a spectacular testimony to the change of generation. **Jakab Tarnóczy's** (for his short portrait, see [January 2022 issue of HLN](#)) staging of *God, Home, Family*, an ironic contemporary family tragedy based on ancient Greek dramas, and *Melancholy Rooms*, a work that communicates without words, with images, music and movement, were awarded, just as the production of *The Dead of Kali*, based on the monumental novel by **János Térey**, a performance directed by **András Dömötör**, a young Hungarian director living in Berlin.



Demerung (Chekhov's Cherry Orchard): the best independent show

The independents received two awards: the Best Independent Theatre Performance is Narratíva Kollektíva's (see the [March 2022 issue of HLN](#)) production of *Demerung (Chekhov's Cherry Orchard)*, directed by **Máté Hegymegi** and **Dániel D. Kovács**. The Best Actress in a Leading Role

was **Melitta Pallagi** for the main role of the *Katie of Heilbronn*, presented at the Stúdió K Theatre. Two of the oldest theatre education companies in Hungary received their first critics' awards: the Round Table Theatre Education Centre, celebrating its 30th anniversary, and the Káva Cultural Workshop, celebrating its 25th anniversary, received the critics' Future Award.

Happy birthday, Jurányi!

The Jurányi Incubator House was opened on 29 October 2012 on the Buda side of the Hungarian capital. Anyone who knows a little bit about the cultural map of Budapest, knows well that most of the stone theatre life takes place on the Pest side of the Danube. The independent theatres, however, seem to be more at home in Buda: the Szkéné Theatre, which has been operating continuously for more than fifty years, the MU Theatre, which was born during the democratic transition after socialism, and the Atrium, which is almost the same age as the Jurányi, are the most important receptive venues, and all of them are located in Buda. (Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts is the exception that makes the rule.)



Inside the Jurányi House

When the Jurányi House opened, perhaps no one suspected that it will be a place of special significance by international standards. As well as theatre and dance groups rehearsing and performing here and running their offices, civic associations and small businesses have also found

space here. The Jurányi is an incubator house where the residents can work without disturbance, but also find each other within the walls of the building to support each other's work through occasional collaborations.

The FÜGE Association was founded in 2006 and since 2010 it has been creating its own theatre productions, meanwhile coordinating and initiating theatre projects and talent management. At first, like most independent theatre groups, they had no space of their own, but then they found a huge 6,700 square metre building at Jurányi utca 1, in the 2nd district of Budapest, formerly home to two secondary schools. The original aim was to find a permanent rehearsal and performance space for the eight to ten theatre companies coordinated by FÜGE. However, the property was much larger than was needed. The plan has changed: from the start, not only theatre and dance groups were accepted, but anyone who wanted to come. So there were costume designers, photographers, designers, visual artists, NGOs working on social problems and of course other independent theatre companies.



Viktória Rozgonyi-Kulcsár. Photo by Sándor Csudai

The free space at the Jurányi was not put out to tender: the tenants themselves applied as word of mouth spread. In general, each tenant brought someone else with them who had worked with them on various projects and was looking for a space for themselves. The Jurányi quickly filled up and a strong, cohesive, good community was born within its walls. Today there are sixty-four different

associations, societies and businesses in the building. There is also a waiting list of over two-hundred names...

It is up to the management of the FÜGE to decide which productions will appear in the house. They have to be selective because there are too many requests and they can't say yes to everything. The board looks at the submissions and makes a decision after personal interviews. They give preference to those productions that they feel best fit the spirit of the venue.

The perception of the Jurányi among theatre-loving audiences is overwhelmingly positive. The institution celebrated its tenth anniversary in the autumn of 2022, and the lease on the building has been extended for another five years by the Municipality of Budapest. The Jurányi has become a well-known brand, not only in the Hungarian capital or in the independent theatre scene, but also in the cultural world in general.

In addition, the Jurányi House can boast something that other host institutions cannot. In 2022, the 200th performance of *A Madman's Diary* (see the [February 2017 issue of HLN](#)), directed by **Viktor Bodó** and starring **Tamás Keresztes**, which premiered in 2017, was celebrated, which is important because such a high number is not usually reached by independent productions in Hungary. The fact that Jurányi House was included in the social studies section of the school-leaving examinations in two secondary schools is an even better indication of the importance of venue: What is a community centre, how is it built and how does it work? The history and functioning of the Jurányi is the perfect choice to answer these questions in detail.

Viktória Rozgonyi-Kulcsár, the cultural manager and producer who has led the institution since its foundation, answers the question of what she would like to see Jurányi House on its tenth birthday: "My wish is that the next five years will be different from the previous ones in that we will have a stable, balanced, predictable operation, because that would help us to finally move from one to two, and not to constantly have to produce survival strategies and apply crisis management, but to be able to build professionally. Of course, in the current situation, I see the least chance of this, but one can only wish..."

Survive at all costs - that was the 32nd THEALTER Festival

Szeged, Hungary's fourth largest city, is located close to the Serbian (and Romanian) border. It is no exaggeration to say that the city has a uniquely vibrant cultural life. We cannot think of another rural town in Hungary where there is a theatre of every kind and type, from a 20-seat indoor theatre to a huge open-air theatre that can entertain over 4,000 spectators. At the same time, the city has a strong independent theatre tradition, with some of the iconic artists and performances of the history of independent theatre in Hungary. One such example is *Petőfi Rock*, presented in 1973 by the Szeged University Theatre, which read the poems of the best-known Hungarian poet and revolutionary, Sándor Petőfi, who fought and fell in the Hungarian Civic Revolution and War of

Independence of 1848/49 against the Austrians, with the sense of life of the rebellious youth of the 1970s, in the spirit of Jerzy Grotowski's revolutionary theatre ideal.

As a late successor of the former university theatre, the MASZK Association of Szeged was founded during the regime change in 1990 and in 2022 it organised the 30th edition of THEALTER - International Meeting of Free Theatres. The main venue of the festival is the 19th century building of the Old Synagogue used by the Association in the city centre. (It is interesting to note that in 2014, this stage was the venue for the highly successful *Kaddis for an Unborn Child*, directed by **Barbara Lanciers** and acted by **Jake Goodman**, based on the work of the Nobel Prize-winning Hungarian writer **Imre Kertész**.)



The above mentioned dates are important: THEALTER is the oldest independent (international) theatre festival in Hungary, and has been running continuously since its foundation. The word 'international' has been forced into brackets in recent years, with productions occasionally from Serbia or Romania. The reason is not surprising: the THEALTER, which is a banner for independent theatre thinking and the MASZK association, that has not been silent in the face of the cuts in the artistic and cultural sector, is not a preferred event in the eyes of the right-wing government that has been in power since 2010. Nevertheless, the festival is created every year by a handful of teams of which I am a member as artistic advisor.

The year 2021 marked a turning point in the festival's history. Whereas in previous years the Ministry of Culture had provided the MASZK Association, with an operating grant of around 20 million HUF (at today's exchange rate 55,000 USD), in 2020 the amount was cut by a third without justification, and in 2021 the anonymous curators (!) gave the association zero HUF ([for details, see this article](#)). Then an unprecedented solidarity action was launched to save THEALTER: in the summer of 2021, the artists of the 31st THEALTER came to Szeged for free or for less fee than usual, and the audience from all over the country visited the city to greet every performance with a full house.



Mikolt Tózsza in *God, Home, Kitchen*

Keeping all this in mind, it is understandable that we started the organisation of the 32nd THEALTER Festival 2022 in complete uncertainty. We were aware that we could not count on solidarity action year after year: independent theatre companies, already in serious trouble, would be unable to perform for free again. However, the cultural government "surprised" us with an operating grant of HUF 7 million (USD 19,000) for 2022. It is too much to die, too little to live - but the 2022 festival was a success.

The numbers are impressive: thirty-one performances in seven venues over nine days. During the festival, we launched *THEALTER30(+1)*, an electronic collection of studies I edited, covering three decades of the festival's history. **Katalin Martinkovics**, Vice-President of the MASZK Association, said: "*We owe a debt of gratitude to all those involved in the preparation and running of the*

festival, to our performers, partners, supporters and of course to our audiences for sticking with us again this year."

Zita Rihay-Kovács, former Executive Secretary of the Független Előadó-művészeti Szövetség (FESZ, Independent Performing Arts Association), the advocacy organisation for independent theatre-makers in Hungary, added: "*Every year this festival shows what independent theatre-makers are most concerned about. This year was the Festival of Bold Things for me. It is brave to talk about ourselves, our artistic and civic insecurities, our fears. The disappointment in those we have respected, those we have trusted. It is brave to talk about the past and, well, the present. Each year THEALTER draws heavily from the productions presented during the season, but one of the criteria for selection is undoubtedly what it can invite, what it can support.*"

As artistic advisor to the festival and one of the curators of the programme, it may not be elegant to comment on the productions invited, but my imaginary, subjective "best of" list included the following productions at the 32nd THEALTER. The Narratíva Kollektíva's vision of *Demerung* (*Chekhov's Cherry Garden*), which inaugurates Chekhov as a contemporary author. *The Rebels*, a production by k2 Theatre – a group of young theatre-makers, who stopped working together in summer 2022 – tells the story of Sophie Scholl, a rebel against the Nazi regime in the 1930s, and in a parallel way looks at the hopeless situation of Hungarian actors who are now starting out in their careers. The performance department of Freeszfe (see the [November 2021](#) and [January 2022](#) issues of HLN), which was born alongside the University of Theatre and Film Arts, was represented by two remarkable productions - it was a pleasure to welcome **Mikolt Tózsa** and **Noémi Szántusz**, young female artists, who created high-quality, thought-provoking productions. From Târgu Mures in Romania, *I Wanted to Rebel with You* was another favorite of mine: a poignant story of teens rebelling against the Ceausescu dictatorship that would be familiar to today's anti-establishment protesters. The festival closed with an important one-man show by **László Göndör**: *Living in Dream with Grandma*, a clever, witty and disturbing account of the relationship between a young man and his grandmother, who survived the Holocaust (for more, see the [March 2022](#) issue of HLN).

Under construction - Viktor Bodó's *The Castle* at Vígszínház

First of all, let's be clear: this is a remake. **Viktor Bodó** has already presented his monumental production of Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* at the Schauspielhaus Hamburg, Germany's largest prose theatre, in February 2020. The Vígszínház's production in the autumn of 2022 is a (near) perfect replica, one of a kind which was never seen before in Bodó's career.

The soul of the whole production is **Zita Schnábel**'s stunning stage design, which back then won a set design award in Hamburg. The set is in fact a huge, multi-storey scaffolding system built in a whimsical order, which begins and ends nowhere. It grows and evolves as a living organism that simply devours and obliterates anyone who comes near it.

The gigantic set is the perfect metaphor for the Count Westwest's castle, as described by Kafka: we know from our everyday experience that there is usually a building behind the scaffolding, but here we must quickly abandon similar expectations. The vertical labyrinth that takes up the entire stage of the Vígszínház reminds us of classics in art history such as Vladimir Tatlin's constructivist *Monument to the Third International* or the *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Brueghel: the point is an awareness of the smallness and fragility of man.



The set of *The Castle*

And the performance does this well, but that is not surprising for the greatest Kafka expert in the Central-Eastern-European region: just think of *Rattled and disappeared*, which was produced at the Katona József Theatre in the wake of Kafka's *The Trial* and immediately catapulted Viktor Bodó into the Hungarian and international theatre scene, or his production of Kafka's *Amerika* in Schauspielhaus Graz. *The Castle* is in fact a two-hour puzzle: how to prevent the surveyor K., who has only one initial in his name, from reaching his destination, the lord of the castle. Remember, where everything is (or at least looks like) a castle, nothing is.

Impressive, as **Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.** tries with great force to find and generate order in the gigantic chaos. The young actor's serious athletic performance is effective this time too: he runs,

crawls, climbs, falls, rises, and in the process defies the laws of physics. The K. he plays wants to see, to know, to understand, he believes passionately in rationality: he pretends that it all makes sense, and he has been given the chance to explore it. **Ákos Orosz, Géza Hegedűs D.**, or the particularly strong female line in the performance, **Csilla Radnay, Patrícia Kovács, Kata Bach**, form the pillars of the mysterious system. They are the holders of tiny powers, and as soon as they can, they use them unscrupulously.

A Little Hungarian Pornography - *hungariansea* by Róbert Alföldi at the Centrál Theatre

The drama called *hungariansea* is the first play by dramaturg and translator **Bence Bíró**. Despite all the rumours, contemporary Hungarian drama does exist, and the Guild of Theatre Dramaturgs plays a major role in its existence, working with authors and eminent theatre professionals to develop six to eight new Hungarian texts for the stage every year in their Open Forum competition. Each play is read, analysed, edited, eventually published in a volume, and the best of them are finally brought to the stage - as was the case with the *hungariansea*, which was staged by **Róbert Alföldi** in the studio of one of Budapest's most popular private theatres, the Central Theatre.



Scene from the *hungariansea*

The informed theatre lover will be reminded of many things by this recent play: Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration (Festen)* is evoked as much as Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, but before anyone misunderstands, it is not a copy. Bence Bíró has selected motifs, situations and characters from the Hungarian and Western dramatic tradition he knows so well, which fill the audience with a pleasant sense of home. I think most of all the contemporary Hungarian viewer: middle-class, well-off but not elite characters make up the characters of this cleverly woven story - and in the Central

Theatre, the audience as well. It's a clever trick, not for the first time in the history of theatre, and not for the last - we sit in the theatre and, while trying to pretend that we are watching the fate of strangers, we are actually laughing at ourselves.

If we feel like laughing at all, of course. It's true that Bence Bíró and Róbert Alföldi and the actors do their best to make us laugh, but if we scratch the surface a little, misery and darkness emerge. An ordinary family is ordinary in every way, because its members, who want to live and survive and know how to do so, come together on the shores of the Hungarian sea, Lake Balaton. Family gatherings are like that: frustrations and repressions immediately surface, and hitherto unspoken accusations and desires are quickly voiced. And since this is Hungary today, the constant refill of wine, beer and pálinka relieves, or rather increases, the tension.

A series of embarrassing situations is inevitable, as the drama gives us a complete inventory of what we are really like behind the mask we wear in our everyday. Everything is on display here - homophobia and racism, opinions on government parties and the opposition, livelihood games and inheritance hunting - but don't think you're watching a sociological drama, or a documentary play. No, Bence Bíró's play stylizes and analyzes with a natural verve, to which Róbert Alföldi's direction adds a few spades. The nights and days of an ordinary Hungarian family, which grows sadder and sadder as time goes by, are preserved by the kitschy, grotesque garden gnomes set in the scenery. This is our home, this is where we will live.

East is East – *Eastern Bloc* at the Trafó

The joint projects of costume designer **Fruzsina Nagy** and choral conductor and composer **Dóra Halas** were among the most refreshing phenomena of Hungarian theatre in recent years. The occasional collaboration has now become a brand: the large-scale, multi-cast performances of Catwalk Concert Productions and the Soharóza community choir are among Trafó's most successful productions. The extravagant costumes and witty, thought-provoking choral texts offer a unique theatrical experience, where delicate visual and acoustic stimuli bombard the audience without a break.

A few years ago, their first joint project, the *Taboo Collection*, explored taboo subjects that surround us with uninhibited humour and sophisticated visuality, such as death, disease, sexuality and the workings of the human body. The much-anticipated sequel, *The Issue*, told the story of Everyman wandering through the labyrinth of contemporary Hungarian bureaucracy and administration, in songs and associated costumes. The new show, *Eastern Bloc*, also features Polish, Czech and Slovak artists alongside Hungarian artists. The theme was a given for the artists from the V4 countries: how do we live, how did we live here behind the Iron Curtain?

According to the fiction we are in an imaginary country - yet very familiar to people living in Eastern Europe - where we can follow the preparations for a national holiday on public television. The language barriers between the participating countries are broken down by singing in a common, fictitious language: Hungarian, Slavic or English words appear in the lyrics. In addition to the catwalk, which the creators have become accustomed to using for a parade of extreme costumes

and bold characters, there is also space for an occasional television studio. Kata Pető, who plays a presenter loyal to the regime to the end, evokes an emblematic figure from the golden age of Hungarian television. Just as television alternates between programmes of different genres, themes and tones, so too do the costume compositions, each carrying a different mood and message. A bedtime story, a news bulletin or even a report on a space launch go hand in hand. Just like the otherwise hopeless episodes of the past and present.



Scene from the *Eastern Bloc*

What the writer of these lines is questioning, however, is the sequel. We look forward to, love and enjoy the performances of Catwalk Concert Productions and Soharóza - but what next? The absurd weekdays of Central Europe are an inexhaustible source of inspiration, the creativity of the costume designer and the composer is guaranteed, but at the same time, signs of fatigue can be identified in the *Eastern Bloc*. This will be the stakes for the next period of joint projects: can the successful collaboration be renewed?

Ibsen through women's eyes - Ildikó Gáspár staged *Solness* at the Örkény, Kriszta Székely directed *Hedda Gabler* at the Katona

There is a strikingly high number of similar circumstances: the two most renowned Budapest art theatres presented two of Henrik Ibsen's many plays at almost the same time, in the autumn of 2022. The Norwegian playwright, who reflected on the general state of society through the institution of the family, is very close to Hungarian theatre: almost every season there is an important Ibsen performance in the capital or in the countryside. Both productions in question have been staged by two female directors and both feature excellent actors. The similarities end there: while I consider **Ildikó Gáspár's** chamber production of *Solness* to be one of the most important productions of the season, I watched **Kriszta Székely's** production of *Hedda Gabler* with some uncertainty.



Barna Bányai Kelemen and Adél Jordán in *Hedda Gabler*

Yet the omens were good: Kriszta Székely's adaptation of Ibsen's *Doll House* (under the title *Christmas at Helmers'*) was a great success at Katona a few years ago. The director, who has achieved success by adapting mainly classical authors (Shakespeare, Brecht, Chekhov, Ibsen, etc.) to contemporary contexts, is equally popular with audiences and critics. The general validity

that emerges in the private tragedies is matched by concentrated acting and a strong, yet not self-promoting directorial presence.

On the main stage of the Katona József Theatre, the title character Hedda Gabler, played by **Adél Jordán**, simply has no secrets. She takes up the offensive position as soon as she enters, and does not let up until the tragic end, which occurs quickly, in less than an hour and a half. This Hedda has had enough of everything and everyone - when a performance starts on such a 'high', the big question is, can she go on, can she escalate the un-escalable?

And yet everything is given: the abstract, stylised space is just reminiscent of the Tesman couple's not very cosy home. Hedda's constant accessory is the silvery, shimmering gun case she always carries. There is a sofa, because that's what you need for an Ibsen performance. At the front of the stage is a record player, on which Hedda plays records according to her mood. From time to time the record sticks, crackles, musical motifs repeat or disappear.

All the actors are on stage almost the whole time: witnesses and participants in Hedda's private tragedy. She is surrounded by three men: the infantile husband who is an in-house scientist, then the maybe-love who is destined for more but has grown tired of it, and of course the cynical and cruel third man who waits for the right moment with the curiosity of a predator. A cold, clear, unambiguous formula - too obvious, perhaps this is my main problem.



Pál Mácsai és Gabriella Hámori in *Solness*

Despite these similarities, *Solness*, performed in front of no more than a hundred people in the studio of the Örkény Theatre, is a very different kind of play, a great one. Ildikó Gáspár, who has gone from being an excellent dramaturg to a notable director, has turned to Ibsen's rarely performed drama. The late Ibsen play has been turned into a sparing, contemporary version of the text, which makes the one hundred and thirty years between its writing and its premiere invisible. It is no coincidence that the term 'master builder' was dropped from the title: it is the private, not the public aspect of Solness that becomes salient and powerful here.

Pál Mácsai is in the title role. The information that he is one of the best known and most popular male actors of his generation and the director of the Örkény Theatre means much more than that: facts that are well known to all the audience are deliberately blurred into Solness' character. Mácsai gives a masterclass in self-irony and self-reflection: in the second act, we watch videos from the family archive of the artist, already popular at a young age and idolised by the audience, which the actor comments on with cruel sarcasm.

It is not only this gesture and the corniness of the text that brings what we see into disturbing proximity, but also the fact that we sit around the almost empty space of the performance, with the actors seated among us. We arrive here at a crucial moment: Solness should be handing over the baton to the next generation, but he has no intention of doing so. The next generation is represented by **Csaba Polgár**, but he is unable to stand on his own in the shadow of his master. And of course, the fact that Solness is surrounded by women of different ages and backgrounds who adore and/or hate him does not help the painless takeover.

Gabriella Hámori as the wife is a real victim who has given up all expectations of her husband. The character of **Emőke Zsigmond** is haunted and seduced by Solness only to make him feel what it was like to be young. **Mária Szaplóczay** becomes the obligatory Ibsen character who throws a stone into the stagnant water: the fairy-tale princess has come to make Solness pay for his offer to her ten years earlier. (A promise made to a twelve-year-old girl by a grown man means something completely different after #metoo. The production plays with it in a gentle and witty way.) This Solness is incapable of aging gracefully: he wants to crush everything and everyone under him, and in his self-importance he fails to notice that the young are already here, banging on the door. Whether the Solnesses like it or not.



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