

SZÍNHÁZ



HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

Dear Friends,

Here is the first issue of the bi-monthly *Hungarian Letter of News*—our partnership with our good friends at *Színház* Magazine in Budapest.

As we move into this new year/reality, we believe keeping doors open for people and information is critical.

So look for these regular missives from Hungary; the correspondents will rotate between Andrea Tompa, Tamas Jászay, and Noémi Herczog—all well respected critics and journalists in Hungary and abroad.

And each issue will have a dual focus with fresh information on both the performance and the cultural/political scenes.

My best to you for a strong 2017,

Philip Arnoult
founder & director

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Noémi Herczog

REPORTER BIO: Noémi Herczog (1986, Budapest) is a critic, editor, essayist. Editor of theatre magazine, *SZÍNHÁZ* (Theatre), theatre columnist of the weekly *Élet és Irodalom* (Life and Literature), editor of a theatrical book series (*SzínText*). She is a program coordinator at the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives and a former activist of One Million for the Freedom of Speech civ movement. Doctoral student at the University of Theatre and Film, Budapest. Her research field is the history of denouncing theatre criticism in Hungary.

EUROPEAN THEATRE PRIZES:

Viktor Bodó & The Krétakör (Chalk Circle) theatre-makers and community developers



Left to right: Lilla Sárosdi, Annamária Láng, Roland Rába



Viktor Bodó receiving the prize

Hungarian theatre received two international theatre prizes in 2016. The theatre-makers and community developers of Krétakör (Chalk Circle) are among the recipients of the European Cultural Prize (ECF) Princess Margriet Award for Culture laureates, and in Craiova, Romania, Viktor Bodó has been awarded with the European Theatre Prize (ETP) - New Theatrical Realities.

In 2015, both artists announced, almost at the same time, that they cannot survive any longer in the Hungarian independent theatre field. Since then, Viktor Bodó has mostly been working in international co-productions, and Krétakör has reached its third phase, which means working mostly from co-funding and the personal budget of Árpád Schilling. Neither of the theatre directors have their own company in Hungary any more.

At the ceremony, Viktor Bodó talked about the importance of group work in his aesthetics. Philosopher Georges Banu also highlighted the notions of group work and simultaneity as the singular characteristics of Bodó's theatre.

[A discussion with Viktor Bodó and his co-workers.:](#)

While the ECF jury explained their choice of Krétakör with the following: The jury selected Krétakör for their work as a collective that enters direct dialogue with different communities and settings across Hungary. Their work in secondary schools enables them to interact with and evoke the voices of young people especially. Krétakör's artistic work exemplifies a dynamic quest for new methods and theatrical forms capable of engaging with the changing landscape and social urgencies in today's Hungary and Europe."

[Chalk Circle award](#)

TWO NEW SHOWS BY ÁRPÁD SCHILLING

In 2016, Árpád Schilling directed two new shows: one in Budapest at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, and the other one in Wien at Burgtheater. In both shows, he concentrates on recent social issues. Schilling continues to create harsh, political, contemporary theatre.

THE DAY OF FURY, TRAFÓ: *The day of fury*, presented in Trafó, is a thrilling melodrama about the consequences of the free market and capitalism in a state without a safety net, full of corruption and political scapegoating. Schilling's fiction was inspired by the well-known story of a Hungarian nurse who stood up for her rights in the name of her humiliated profession and exposed the unprofessional, inhumane circumstances in Hungarian hospitals. Dressed in black, she called for all the nurses to join her in the streets. Protests such as this are rare in Hungary, and so this case is quite exceptional. Schilling has said that this outspoken nurse was the inspiration for 'The Day of Fury,' and it is quite evident for the Hungarian viewer, but the characters themselves are fictional. The show presents Schilling's newest topic: how we remain alone with our convictions.

The performance has a strong feminist narrative: while in the director's previous show, [the Loser](#), Schilling ridiculed the macho aspects of Hungarian theatre and the exploitation of the woman actor, here we see Lilla Sárosdi, in maybe the most important role of her career, portraying a politically aware woman. The character of this warm-hearted protagonist is the descendent of Brecht's Sen-Te.

[A Link to The Day of Fury](#)

This year, Hungarian theatre offered many examples for direct, realistic references in non-documentary shows, most of them presented in Katona József Theatre by Béla Pintér and Gábor Máté. Another example is the new show by Kornél Mundruczó, a socio-scifi with direct references to a well-known political murder-suspicion that occurred a couple of years ago.

THE 'EISWIND', BURGTHEATER: The *Eiswind* at the Burgtheater is no less political than *The Day of Fury*, yet it addresses a different audience. While *The day of fury* is about a Hungarian-specific topic with direct political references, *Eiswind* (also written by Zabezsinszkij and Schilling) is about the intersection of cultures, the reshaping of Europe, the ethnic Hungarian abroad, and the refugee crises.

It is shocking that both this performance and the latest show of Kornél Mundruczó, "*The Imitation of Life*," draw influence from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Both shows address striking social problems yet neither of them is a documentary: both productions use the language of Armageddon and of the thriller-horror genre. *Eiswind* takes place in a derelict hut in the middle of the Austrian woods. There, a couple meets a woman trying to escape from an abusive relationship, but her husband is following them. They are attacked by a mystical wolf, but they are unsure whether this

occurred or if it was a dream. This is a parable about the refugee-crisis, and how a radicalized Hungary influences Europe in a more hostile direction.



Left to right: Zsolt Nagy, Falk Rockstroh, Lilla Sárosdi, Alexandra Henkel

THEATRE CRITIC'S AWARD, HUNGARY 2016

The Theatre Critic's Award dates to 1979. Today it is given in 15 different categories by the members of the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association.



In 2016, Béla Pintér earned the prize of 'best Hungarian drama. This is the second time Pintér has been recognized after a long period of neglect. This recognition indicates his classicization and canonization.

The prize for the best performance was awarded to a show with a Romanian director in an ethnic Hungarian area of Transylvania: *Calmness*, a novel adaptation, directed by Radu Afrim.

***The Champion* by Béla Pintér (best Hungarian drama text, 2016) Photo: Ervin Nagy, Katona József Theatre**

been awarded with the prize for "the best direction"

for his production of Brecht's *Galileo*. Sándor Zsótér, aka 'the Hungarian director for Brecht,' who, like Pintér, has not been understood by the critics for a long time, has

The prize for best independent performance was given to Máté Hegymegi - freshly out of the university - for his *Kohlhaas*. *Kohlhaas* is a "physical theatre" piece, a theatre movement introduced in Hungary by Csaba Horváth, using the term similarly to the DV8.

Last but not least, a special award has been given to the Symphoms, an independent theatre group, for their Holocaust documentary show about a young dancer and a 99-year-old former ballet dancer and Holocaust survivor living together.

YOUNG DIRECTORS I:

Children of Dollar Daddy – A New Approach to the Role of the “Director”



Left to right: Annamária Láng, Krisztina Urbanovits, Roland Rába

The new show by young theatre group The Children of Dollar Daddy is based on a work by Arthur Schnitzler (*Eyes Wide Open*). This “meta-play” is about a rehearsal which is frequently interrupted by the personal lives of the actors. These two levels are of course within the real performance-situation itself. The director of the piece, Tamás Ördög is a performer at the show, but the role of the director is played by another actor. We can contemplate their power games with the character of The Actress. The actress is both the lover of the fictive director and his work mate, and their relationship is harshly ridiculed from a feminist perspective. The show hints that this young theatre group, by ridiculing the egocentric, macho director-character-type, offers a new kind role for the theatre director: a role that is less masculine, less egocentric and tyrannical, and more open to compromise. With this, the group

offers a new concept of Hungarian theatre in direct opposition to the classic directorial model, one which is less the result of a single mind, but the product of collective work.

The Children of Dollar Daddy is a small ensemble of Emőke Kiss-Végh and Tamás Ördög, a pair of young Hungarian actors. They often work with former Krétakör-actors (Lilla Sárosdi, Sándor Terhes, Annamária Láng), and mostly present North-European dramas. Their theatrical language has been greatly affected by the films of the Dogme 95. They are simultaneously performers, directors and playwrights, treating their materials with great freedom and verbally improvising on the plays of Strindberg, Ibsen or Schnitzler.

YOUNG DIRECTORS II:

Andrea Pass & Kristóf Kelemen – Two Young Answers to the Question of Talent and Starting a Career

The two young directors I am about to introduce are not only special because of their significance among young talents, but because both address the question of how to start a career as a young person in the hierarchical society of Hungary. The two shows explore the prospects for talents in this country, and portray a dark picture.



ANDREA PASS, is a rare example of a woman director in Hungarian theatre, and an accomplished playwright. In 2016 she tried herself out in non-TIE (Theatre in Education) productions, and created her first show, *The Sunflower* as writer and director. As a former TIE teacher, Andrea has worked a lot with children, and so her first tow drama is about a child while her second show, '*Pokolra kell annak menni*' (*You have to Experience Hell*), is a piece performed and written collectively by students. The title refers to a well-known Hungarian folk song, articulating a romantic Hungarian notion that good art can only be created via suffering, cruelty, sorrow, and even depression. The show explores the truth of this belief according the children participating in the piece. The students performing the piece have recently finished high school, and the show is circling the problem of talent via this young perspective: what is talent really, can we be nice people and still reach high goals in our lives? And what is the perspective for

someone talented inside Hungary? The show is a non-documentary, written together with the students: Andrea Pass, instead of imposing her own will on her actors, created a collective work that her performers can stand by. This new concept of community-work on theatre is a new tendency in Hungarian theatre, and is mostly practiced by younger artists. [Watch a trailer here](#)



The other young director I would like to introduce in this newsletter is **KRISTÓF KELEMEN**. Having studied dramaturgy, Kelemen, like Pass, also merges the role of the playwright, director, and dramaturge. His newest and, so far, his most interesting work is a documentary comparing the lives of theatre students fifty years ago and now. His performers are current and former students of the Theatre Academy, Budapest, and they tell the stories of their own experiences at the academy during the show.

[Watch a trailer here](#)

To understand the context, you need to understand that Hungary has only one theatre academy. The second one, Kaposvár (at the south of Hungary) only has training for actors, but not for any other roles in theatre. Since 2013, Kaposvár became extremely marginalized for political reasons. Since then, the Theatre Academy of Budapest owns a monopoly, and because of this unhealthy situation it is still quite hierarchical.

This fact gave the possibility for these young theatre artists just after finishing university or in their final years, to speak out their mind, addressing their teachers with their full names, and tell them – tell us – what they liked and what they didn't. Via this method, the piece shows an example for Hungarian society,

where it is very rare for the vulnerable, naked, or dependent people to confront those in power. This production of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts is a parable: a model from theatre life, for the hierarchical model of Hungarian society.

CULTURAL POLICY ISSUES

Appointing A Director: A New Ideology

One cannot say that nothing has changed in Hungary in the past 5 years. In 2011 György Dörner, known for his sympathy for Jobbik and extremist views, was appointed as an artistic director in Budapest New Theater with an alarming gesture of the local government and an administrative trick. The evaluation and recommendation of the professional board, preparing the final decision, was not taken into consideration. This fall, the same director was re-appointed with 5 out of 7 votes from the professional board. What might have been an accident in 2011 now looks a conscious program.

A huge scandal followed his appointment in 2011, and the expectations this year were high: there were 10 applicants for the position. Many believed that following such a scandal, there was no chance he would be reappointed. There was now another political favorite, an actress often playing the role of the hostess in Budapest local government's parties and ceremonies.

The city council's call for application wanted a theater of Hungarian classical and modern drama; exactly what Dörner proposed and realized since 2011; thus the leadership of city expressed its satisfaction with Dörner's work.

Dörner's new proposal reflects the new era's ideology: it is anti-Islamist, alarming about the terror in Europe caused by the Islam, it is anti-West, looking at the big Hungarian glories of the past; the Christian Theater Festival, created in New Theater in the past 3 years concludes that Hungary and Europe should follow the way of Christianity.

Viktor Bodó was one of the applicants, stating when making his proposal publicly available that he was applying even though he was unlikely to be chosen. Bodó had never tried to become an artistic director in Hungary. His generation is not present on the artistic directors' landscape with the average age of artistic directors in Budapest being 62 years. The "big directors' generation," now in their mid 40's, never got the chance (including Árpád Schilling) to take such positions. Bodó dreamed of a kind of "European *théâtre populaire*". Also there were some other strong independent groups and teams of artists, with thoughtful applications, who gained zero support from the so called professional advisory board.

It appears that Hungary's leadership prefers extremists: the journalist Zsolt Bayer, known for his racist views and aggressive tone, recently received a high state award. This event was followed by a wave of protests: more than 100 scientists, artists, and intellectuals sent back their awards to the Hungarian state.

[See Bayer's story in the Guardian here](#)

SZINHAZ Magazine: From the Brink



The year 2016 was the most difficult year in the past 50 years for our Theater monthly SZINHAZ, founded in 1968 as a critical and analytical theatre magazine.



The magazine has operated on yearly funding from the National Cultural fund, but in for 2016 funding was slashed to some 44% from the previous year.

In June, our board took the decision to close down. In the Fall, a small grant from the Budapest City Council made further operations possible—SZINHAZ has been back in print since October.



2017 will be decisive in our lives.

FROM OUR SIDE

Bela Pinter Our Secrets in Boston, Hanover NH, and New York City – January 2017

This January, *Our Secrets* went on a three-week tour to the **Hopkins Center for the Arts** (Dartmouth College), **ArtsEmerson** (Boston), and the **Baryshnikov Arts Center** (New York City).

They performed to full houses with discussions around the “surveillance culture” explored in the production. [Here is a review from Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*.](#)



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