

Dear Friends,

Here is the latest issue of Hungarian Letter of News, reported by Tamás Jászay.

I'm back from three weeks in Eastern Europe: Budapest for most of the time and then a great week in Timisoara, Romania at the TESZT Festival.

Michael Dove, artistic director of the Forum Theatre outside of Washington, DC, was with me in TESZT, and will be reporting in an upcoming issue of our *Dispatches*. Spoiler alert: TESZT '17 was one of the best international gatherings/festivals I have attended: modest, with three smallish spaces (probably 250 max), and exquisitely curated by artistic director Zoltán Gálovitz, it offered a window into the vibrant work coming from Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, as well as Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

In Budapest and Timisoara I saw 27 performances, had 27 meetings (15 with meals), sat in on 3 rehearsals, and participated in 9 festival post-show discussions. Those statistics were peopled by long-time, dear friends and colleagues—directors, actors, journalist, designers, choreographers, dramaturgs, playwrights. And while the larger cultural / political situation continues to deteriorate in Hungary, I found resilience, focus, imagination, clearheaded analysis, resistance and a hopeful coming together of theatre makers in community.

In Hungary, most hopeful for me, is that the work continues. And what work!

Here are some images and events:



I saw Béla Pintér's *The Champion* my first night in Budapest. Only the second time in his company's long history that Bela has directed at another theatre (this time the Katona József). A scalding, operatic indictment of political (and personal) hypocrisy, it spoke to me immediately as an American.

Andrea Tompa wrote a great piece for *Theater heute* (Germany) that we have included as a coda in this issue of HLN.



I also got to see the 100th performance of Pinter's *Scratched Celluloid*—a stunning, mesmerizing work Róbert Alföldi commissioned during his tenure as director at the National.



I got to sit in on a rehearsal of a new *Hamlet* at the Vig Theatre in Budapest, with Enikő Eszenyi directing young Attila Vindyánszky in the title role. Lots of interest in the theatre community about this one.



I was able to see old friend Géza D. Hegedüs in a scalding performance, *I Wanted to Keep Silent*, directed by his long-time mentor and friend, László Marton, of a piece based on newly found diary entries of writer and journalist Sándor Márai—a prophetic analysis of Europe (and Hungary) between the two World Wars—and eerily fresh for the 150 gathered in the studio space of the Vig.



I also got to see two of Csaba Horváth's productions (*Your Kingdom* and *Rats*) with his company, and a grand collaboration with Marton at the Vig of Molnar's *Paul Street Boys*. (Ten days after I got back to the US, I was with Csaba and Blanka Zizka at the Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia for the final rehearsal of a 10 day work session of *Blood Wedding* —he'll come back for rehearsals in late September for a late October opening).



While I missed saying hello to director **Kornél Munducszó**—he was in Cannes making a great deal of noise with his new film--I got to see his intimate *Frankenstein Project* at the ever vibrant Trafó Theatre.



And, breakfast with **Anikó Szucs** and **Robi Alföldi**, who is planning to work with Andre Serban again—Andre directed *Angels in America* at the Hungarian National Theatre under Robi's leadership. Andre was in town for casting *Richard III*, opening in the Fall at the Radnóti Theatre with Robi as Richard.

So the work continues, as the challenges increase, the cultural politics grow ever darker, and the artists stay strong.

Best,

Philip Arnoult
founder & director

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**Tamás Jászay**

REPORTER BIO: Tamás Jászay (1978, Szeged) is a critic, editor, and university lecturer. He is the editor of the biggest critical webpage in Hungary, Revizor (www.revizoronline.com). Besides that, he publishes reviews, interviews, and reports in all important Hungarian cultural magazines. He teaches at the Szeged University. His PhD dissertation was written about the history of the renowned Hungarian independent performance group, Krétakör ('Chalk Circle'). Co-curator of the Hungarian Showcase (2013), dunaPart 3 – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts (2015) and dunaPart 4 (2017).

Bartók: String Quartet no. 5 / Concerto

A new show by Csaba Horváth



String Quartet No. 5



Concerto

In the past years the profile of the [Forte Company](#) and the thinking of its leader - the former dancer [Csaba Horváth](#) - has changed a lot. We are accustomed to calling the successful director-choreographer the founder and creator of Hungarian physical theatre, although watching his recent works, it would be much more helpful to leave the enigmatic word *physical* behind. What he makes is *pure* theatre (think about his highly acclaimed adaptation of Agota Kristof's [The Notebook](#), which became a milestone in the career of his company), with a very elaborate and determined thinking about the body of his actors and with a great emphasis on the special, 'Forte-style' unity of text, dance and (usually live) music. On this path, Horváth reached different stations that were received with more or less enthusiastic reactions from the audience and from the critics, but his premiere of two Bartók-pieces remains unique in many ways.

The most well-known (and I would add, the most significant) Hungarian composer of the 20th century, Béla Bartók and his oeuvre are

still a challenge for dramatists to discover and conquer. The common path of Horváth and Bartók started decades ago and is one of the biggest scandals of the Hungarian theatre after the change of regime in 1989. In 2001, Horváth staged Bartók's work, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, presenting dense, hardly forgettable pictures of brutality. The owner of the rights of Bartók's oeuvre (the cousin of the son of Bartók's widow) decided to immediately stop the playing of the performance, as he felt it 'falsified the intentions of the composer'. 2015 was the 70th anniversary of Bartók's death, so according to the EU and Hungarian law, the composer's work passed into the public domain.

I suppose that was one strong motivation for Horváth to work on this special evening, which can be interpreted broadly as a summary of his aesthetic over the last 20 years. Over a two-part evening, he speaks about crucial questions to all Hungarians, but in a universal language – the

language of pure dance. The Forte's Bartók-evening makes us think about questions of patriotism, fate, past, history, tradition and the ways of being Hungarian. There is no ideological message in the movements, but only the joy of music, the celebration of this very Hungarian music.

In the first part, Bartók's *String Quartet no. 5*, Horváth invites five dancers to his stage. Half-naked, buff guys wearing greenish-brownish soldier trousers dancing in the empty space with full of energy and masculine power. What we see, is not an adoration of Bartók's music, but a fruitful dialogue with it. There is no linear narrative to share, but the elementary strength of male power, remaining abstract and concrete at the same time. The director puts elements of humour, of tenderness, even of femininity to his choreography based on folkdance.

The second part, *Concerto* is an even more heroic mission, a bigger challenge. Twelve dancers are on stage, actors of Forte Company and Horváth's former students too. We see the different phases of physical work, members of an archaic (or contemporary?) community sharing the joys and sorrows of similar everyday with each other. There are only a few props on the empty stage, the huge tractor wheels can easily transform into a tank or a children's toy, even strange constructions can be built with their help. If you want, you can create a storyline to this piece, but there is no need for that: rationalism is swept away by the force of the experience.

A festival for young and emerging artists

Nextfeszt 2017

In January 2015, [Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts](#), the most important hub for Budapest independent performing arts scene, decided to make a sort of a showcase of young and emerging Hungarian artists. A platform like this is extremely important for today's performing arts in the state of transition. It is the core of Trafó's mission to create a friendly and supporting environment for the coming generations of artists and of spectators as well. The hidden agenda behind an event like this is to educate the audiences to new forms and new methods of performing arts. There is a stake for the artists too: they can test an open and curious audience and they can present those experimental works of theirs that are not warmly received in the traditional structure of Hungarian theatres.



Sociopoly

In 2015, for more than two weeks young dancers, musicians and acting companies took all the stages of Trafó, proving the point of the whole series of programs: “The future is theirs and, as we can see from the queue in front of the cashier, the future is now! They’re doing something entirely different than the legendary veterans: they have different views on you, themselves and everything else that surrounds us.” Exactly two years later the management of Trafó decided to give place again to the youth and they invited their audiences to think about the crucial question whether the new aesthetics is closely connected with generational issues or it is ‘just’ the spirit of the ages.

I will not give you a proper answer to this question, but with naming a few productions I’d rather trying to give an impression about the topics of this year’s festival. The focus was on the relationship between the artist and his/her audience. Imre Vass in his walking tour in and around the building of the Trafó was dealing with the terms of space and place. A series of performance lectures took place in the small studio of Trafó: the almost unknown genre in Hungarian theatres was introduced and celebrated here, managing to show different viewpoints and methodologies.



Eszter Kálmán: The Lake

The very popular theatrical board game of [Lifeboat Unit](#) (of former Sputnik Shipping Company) entitled [Sociopoly](#) is dealing with the issue of poverty in Hungary. The important contemporary dance and theatre groups were also invited. One could see the exciting works from companies dealing with different aesthetics. The [Groundfloor Group](#) based in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) speaks about gender issues in a witty and touching way, Budapest-based [k2 Theatre](#) intertwines football hooliganism and human relationships, the well-renowned set and costume designer Eszter Kálmán gives a strongly visual interpretation of the classical tale of *Swan Lake*, Kristóf Kelemen works after Handke's *Offending the Audience* and creates a self-ironic tabloid of contemporary Hungarian theatre life. Young dancers getting more and more popular were also part of the main programme of the Nextfeszt: Csaba Molnár, László Fülöp, Zsófia Tamara Vadas or Valencia James proved again that the next generation of Hungarian dancers is already at the gates and we'll have really good times watching their new works.

[A trailer for the Nextfeszt can be watched here.](#)

A festival in preparation: dunaPart 4

November 29-December 2, 2017

A wide selection of independent Hungarian theatre and dance works will be presented under the organization of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts, with the participation of some other venues and institutions. The programme is being selected by a group of six well-known critics from the fields of dance and theatre (Orsolya Bálint, Livia Fuchs, Noémi Herczog, Tamás Jászay, László Százados And Anikó Varga). The curators' goal is to present what is hot today in contemporary performing arts scene in Hungary.



A scene from one of the biggest successes of the previous edition of dunaPart, Béla Pintér's *Our Secrets*, which later toured to Boston, NYC, and Hanover NH

During the previous editions of [dunaPart](#) (and in 2013 and 2015, the [Hungarian Showcase](#) in partnership with CITD) well-renowned artists got the chance to present their works for international professional audiences. Our aim is to help Hungarian artists to integrate their pieces to international contexts, we encourage them to build an international supporting network and help them to find new opportunities to present their works. A few names from the previous editions: Béla Pintér, Kornél Mundruczó, Árpád Schilling, Viktor Bodó, Csaba Horváth.

The selection process will be finished early June and the list of selected shows and the final programme will be announced until the end of summer 2017.

[More information about previous editions is available here.](#)

Controversial issue

Writers protest against the state subsidy of Carpathian Basin Talent Support Nonprofit Corporation

In January 2016 an online literary magazine published the news that one and a half years earlier the Hungarian government decided to „freshen up the Hungarian literature life” with the help of a newly founded Corporation, called Kárpát-medencei Tehetségondozó Nonprofit Kft. (KMTG, Carpathian Basin Talent Support Nonprofit Corporation). Prestigious literary organizations, literary magazines and workshops already helping young talents started to protest against the working of the KMTG, when it became clear that the government gave it a way too generous starting capital of 150 million HUF (appr. 522,000 USD).



In the middle: János Dénes Orbán

In December 2016 a new government decree was published with another subsidy of 400 million HUF (appr. 1,39 million USD). The head of the KMTG is János Dénes Orbán (43), a poet from Transylvania, who is an openly loyal supporter of the FIDESZ government, and who is cynical enough not to reply to any requests from the writers protesting. A short quotation from him

uncovers his intentions: „For the taxpayers’ money it is worth making a literature that gives joy to the taxpayer. This is the base of our concept instead of the literature enjoyable for a small circle.”

What does the cited figures mean? It is a bigger amount of money than what was provided for all similar initiatives by the National Cultural Fund’s Literature Board in the last few years, and it is five times (!) more than the complete subsidy of the three big literary associations in Hungary (József Attila Circle, Young Writers Association and Hungarian Society of Writers, Critics and Literary Translators). Putting from above this huge amount of money to the system simply means a violent intervention into the literary life and a destruction of its delicate balance.

Young authors started a petition against the exceptional and unexplainable subsidy, there were some small demonstrations against it as well, but as usually in affairs like this, nothing has changed. A much more promising initiative was the foundation of the Independent Mentoring Network. The growing number of volunteering writers, critics, university lecturers taking part in the network agreed to mentor young talents for free, tutoring them and helping their way to the professional literary life.

According to the renowned poet and critic, Dénes Krusovszky, who protested against the state subsidy of the KMTG in more of his articles, stated: „The state support of the KMTG does not mean it is an error in the system, but it *is* the system itself. We cannot wait any longer, that it will be corrected or that it will change its direction, as all parts of it was planned and envisioned just like this. KMTG works properly, it does not care about those who criticize it and about those young literary people who turned away from it as soon it grows bigger, than the whole Hungarian literary life.” The KMTG is another tool to create conflicts in the already strongly divided Hungarian cultural sector.

From Our Side



Martin Boross and Single Carrot Theatre's *Promenade: Baltimore*

Hungarian director Martin Boross of STEREOAkt spent over a month in Baltimore adapting his Budapest production *Promenade*, which took the audience on a bus to see site-specific scenes all around the city, into a Baltimore-based version in the U.S. The show dazzled both critics and audiences for a sold-out run, so much so that Single Carrot Theatre extended the show for additional performances. *DC Metro Theater Arts* praised the production: "You have the opportunity to participate in something really special: to see Baltimore through fresh eyes. *Promenade: Baltimore* is a funny, poignant, slice-of-lives production that grants the audience permission to really look at what's going on outside the window."

CITD was able to bring two perspective collaborators to see the work. Artistic directors from Albuquerque, New Mexico and Oakland, California are beginning conversation with Boross and his team.

Philadelphia workshops mark return of Horváth

Hungarian director Csaba Horváth returned to the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia in order to begin work with the Wilma HotHouse Company of actors for his production of *Blood Wedding* in the fall. This new adaptation of the Federico García Lorca play is translated by Nahuel Telleria and will play from October 25th through November 19th.



Bonus: “You called me, dear Führer!”

Andrea Tompa’s article about Béla Pintér’s *The Champion*, published in German magazine *Theater heute*, June 2016

Good old times come back: Hungarian newspapers and magazines denounce performances with political content and call for dismissing the artistic director of the theater, to close the show or at least discredit personally the artist. When Thomas Ostermeier performed the Suisse *The Seagull* in Budapest on the stage of the National Theater (in the frame of the MITEM festival), he included in a scene of improvisation, some references to the Hungarian borders closed in front of the refugees, criticism of the Hungarian refugee politics, and of Viktor Orbán. A story of a Syrian doctor was originally part of the performance, but the Hungarian references were invented for Budapest tour. The conservative *Magyar Idők* (*Hungarian times*) considered it a “liberal agitprop” and accuses Attila Vidnyánszky for the affair, saying Fidesz party did not appoint Vidnyánszky for doing such things in the National.



***The Champion*: Adél Jordán and Judit Rezes**

The new premiere of Béla Pintér was for the first time working outside his independent company, now in the repertory theater Katona József. Pinter created a musical performance with a small cast. Based on Puccini’s *Il tabarro*, a love triangle gives the plot. Put into the Hungarian provinces the Italian owner of the barge becomes a mayor of a town, now winning for the 4th time the local elections. It is the eve of this triumph, which he celebrates at home with his wife and a female kickboxing champion who both supported the mayor and is being patronized by him. The media visits the tired mayor at home, and posits fake, propaganda-like questions to him – perhaps, an inspiration source for Pintér was not only the actual public media, but a legendary interview with president Pál Schmitt in 2012 concerning his plagiarized doctorate degree.

Pintér (with his great composer Antal Kémenczy, accompanying actors on a piano) goes back to the “original” Pintér style of the *Peasant Opera* and *Dievushka*; a closed musical structure where “high” opera style is confronted with “low”, simple, everyday, obscene and of course funny, naïve and trashy/kitschy moments. The performance mostly follows a musical adaptation of Puccini, then in the big dramatic moments and the finale more and more known Puccini arias are included with funny text and context. The lover of the husband, a journalist in the previous scene, makes her operatic entry with *Vissi d’arte*, saying: “You called my, dear Führer.”

The main conflict is the love affair of the wife and the young kickboxing woman, while the background of the story is a brutal, macho politician and the whole media and sociopolitical context. A politician who would not spare any tools to win over and over again, drinks, uses drugs, and cheats on his wife all the time still talks about his love for family and considers himself a superhuman and a “victim of women.” His wife is also an alcoholic, but also in love with another woman. Pintér’s focus in the story is not the political, but the family and human relationships in the context of politics and competition. The real drama is the lovers’ story, presented with deep concern and humanity. No such love has the least chance in this society. “Family is saint.” Pintér created a great show of human drama which reflects upon how such relations are trampled by political ideas. Love (certainly not same-sex love) has no room here. The Katona actors do great work: good singing, detailed, psychologically grounded acting, good characters, intense show.

Until the premiere, the theater communicated about a Puccini adaptation, and I was completely unaware about any other references. But the media immediately discovered the story resembling a mayor’s family affairs in the provinces (which was discussed in the tabloids). Actually, this man was a conservative, Fidesz-politician. Then the media avalanche started: a political journalist of index, a major internet site published the first the story. Major political sites started to discuss the

show's political references not in the cultural, but in the home affairs section, like in the '70s and '80s, when "problematic" shows were denounced in the newspapers. Conservative *Magyar Idők* (*Hungarian Times*) reminded that Gábor Máté, artistic director was appointed by the Fidesz majority of Budapest city council, but "we will get rid of him again." The conservative, pro-government *Heti Válasz* (*Weekly Response*) first published a review of the show where the critic was "puzzled" by the ethical questions of the show (i.e. telling a story of a concrete family). But three days later the same media makes a "correction" by the deputy editor in chief of the magazine: denounces the private life of the artistic director of the theater, Máté, going into details about abortion, etc. Tamás Ascher, director and member of the Katona, remembered on his Facebook page that previous prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány was also portrayed with his whole family story in a show by a conservative director. And nobody cared.

Vademecum Newsletter

DO YOU HAVE HUNGARIAN: If so, then we recommend the Vademecum Newsletter: a free weekly electronic recommendation from our friend András Török, founder and director of Summa Artium.

It recommends five things every week (in Hungarian, but not only Hungary-related stuff):

- **BRAND NEW** (A new book, a fresh theatre production, a new movie or an art show)
- **STILL CURRENT** (a book still in print, a movie still in the cinemas, a show still accessible)
- **A GREAT DEBT** (A book I have been planning to read for 30 years, and now I really have done)
- **IF I TELL THE OTHERS IN THE CLUB...** (A sort of Talk of the Town section)
- **MISCELLANEA** (Internet, design, architecture, trend from the future...)

Occasionally, there are "special issues": Culture-related Gift Ideas for Christmas, Twelve Items, related to Stairs, In Praise of Literary Translators, Seven Wonders of the World, Twelve Things to Do in Amsterdam, Best Thick Books for the Summer of 2016.

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AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PUBLICATION OF:
Színház Theatre magazine, Budapest
Andrea Tompa, editor

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 3, July 2017

REPORTER:
Tamás Jászay

PUBLISHER:
Center for International Theatre Development
Philip Arnoult, founder & director

Our thanks to:

