

SZÍNHÁZ



HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

9 November 2021

Dear Friends,

We welcome back our long-time collaboration with Hungary's premier theatre magazine, *Színház*, in our latest edition of the HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS.

In this first edition since covid, Tamás Jászay reports from his perch in Szeged (only some 200km south of Budapest, nestled near both Hungarian borders with Serbia and Romania), on major issues that continue to face the Hungarian Theatre.

- A deep look at the takeover of the Academy of Drama and Film by Orban's government and the almost universal but failed protest
- The impact of the pandemic (I just got news today that a slew of closing and postponements are now happening because of sick performers and technicians)
- A good look at Orban's culture steamroller, Atilla Vidnyánszky
- The long, complicated response to the #MeToo movement in the country
- The pushback of gay people on Hungarian stages
- An interview with Róbert Alföldi around the new pedophile law
- Finally, a remembrance of Anna Lengyel, a major force in bringing other voices to the Hungarian theatre.

This edition is indeed, an embarrassment of riches.

Dig in.

And stay strong,

Philip

You'll be hearing from us regularly in the coming weeks. Look out for: DISPATCHES: The Dialog Festival, Wrocław, reported by Rob Melrose and Paige Rogers

- DISPATCHES: The New Drama Festival, Slovakia, reported by David White
- And a special interview with Alisa Solomon, done by László Upor, originally published by Színház Magazine in Hungarian for Hungarians—we have the original interview to share in English

And, I want to urge you to check out a most enlightening 50-minute conversation with Blair Ruble, author of *Performing Presence from the Washington Stage*. He is joined by Georgetown history professor Maurice Jackson and Georgetown University dean Soyica Diggs, moderated by Howard Shalwitz, associate director of the Center for International Theatre Development (CITD) and artistic director emeritus at Washington's Woolly Mammoth. Check it out at HowlRoundTV:

<https://howlround.com/happenings/proclaiming-presence-washington-stage>

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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.

The Death and Rebirth of a University: From SZFE to Freeszfe

In Hungary, the [higher education model is changing](#): institutions that were previously exclusively state-run are becoming foundation universities. The story is far more complicated than that, but what the education and economic experts alike have found problematic, a major financial and legal manoeuvre has seen the vast majority of Hungarian universities fall into the hands of a foundation or its Board of Trustees (the so called curatorium) with a single stroke of the pen during the past two years. It's all up to the members of the curatorium: as well as a lifetime appointment (!) and an extremely high salary, the few trustees at each university can decide, for example, who to employ, what courses to start, and so on.

The model change at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, SZFE) is worthy of attention in a much broader, societal context. Although there was some opposition to forced endowment at most universities, it was the students and teachers of the SZFE who took a



On the 46th day of the blockade at the entrance of the main building of SZFE

strong and, in a sense, effective stand against the authoritarian approach to their alma mater. The months-long struggle has now come to an end: within a few months, the new owner has moulded the institution, which had been in existence since 1865, in his own image, and the resistant students and lecturers have created an independent school under the name of [Freeszfe](#).

The multi-act drama surrounding the SZFE took place in less than a year and a half, largely during the same period as the first three waves of the pandemic in Hungary. The reconstruction of the events is facilitated by the fact that the Hungarian (and for a while the [international](#)) media followed the events from the very beginning, and the people involved in it documented their actions continuously. The significance of all this is only really understood when we remember that this is Hungary's smallest (!) university, both in terms of the number of teachers and students. Despite this (or perhaps because of it?), it has quickly and effectively managed to generate national and

international media attention and to impress upon the memory of an entire country that not every decision taken over our heads should be accepted with resignation.

What was the problem with SZFE? Like so much that has happened in Hungarian theatre, this (among many other things) can be traced back to the frustrations of Attila Vidnyánszky, the director of the National Theatre. It is now clear that when he acquired the Theatre Department of Kaposvár University, the second centre of actor training in Hungary, in 2013 without proper qualifications and experience, and with a clear political backwind, he was in fact conducting a rehearsal. The ultimate goal was to occupy the SZFE, where he claimed he had never been allowed to teach, never been invited (both claims refuted by facts), and where he believed the same people had been teaching the same things for decades.

One thing is worth noting: that the SZFE was in need of reform in many ways is not disputed by anyone, but at the same time the university, which has never been overfunded, has been under constant attack from the right-wing government over the last decade. And, as in many other cases, those who have been critical of the government have been subjected to financial cutbacks: the dilapidated infrastructure, the poor salaries of the teachers and dozens of other problems were magically solved with the establishment of the new Board of Trustees in September 2020.



Protest in Budapest on 23 October 2020 for the SZFE

The SZFE was destroyed as part of the Hungarian *ulturkampf*: its declared aim is to completely replace the cultural elite. The university is headed by a five-man economic-cultural interest group close to the

Prime Minister, who are managing ever-increasing funding and real estate assets, thus working on the "proper" cultural preparation of the next generations.

When the events of the model change accelerated in the summer of 2020, students took the lead by organising and coordinating a wide variety of performative actions. In addition to using actively what they had learned during their theatre and film studies, they also created something radically new. [A few examples](#): the clear and consistent use of symbols (the black hand raised in protest on a yellow background with the word Freeszfe, the red and white cordons, the Secret University folk

song adaptation, etc.), the organisation of large-scale civic events (torchlight processions, the delivery of memoranda to university towns with the participation of hundreds of runners, etc.), organising, documenting and professionally communicating solidarity actions in Hungary and internationally (leading institutions and artists from all over the world have expressed their [solidarity](#) to students, etc.). All of this on a strictly grassroot democratic basis, taking on internal debates and conflicts, and of course being branded as traitors, paid by George Soros, etc. by the pro-government media.

In the autumn of 2020, brave students spontaneously [occupied the university](#): students moved into the buildings of the SZFE, preventing the new management from entering the institution. The traditional academic year was disrupted: collective workshops and creative public actions took place during this period. On 23 October 2020, the march where tens of thousands of people stood up for the SZFE (and the basic values of democracy) was tacitly turned into an unofficial demonstration of the government's opposition. The 71-day blockade was ended by the worsening epidemic situation on 10 November 2020, when universities were forced to switch to online education.

The Freeszfe Association was founded by teachers who had been fired from the SZFE and/or had left voluntarily, as well as by students who had succeeded their masters. A major action of the association was the Emergency Exit programme, in the framework of which 6-8 European universities undertook to recognise the studies of the graduates of the classes that left the SZFE with their own diploma, even if they completed their last semesters outside the institution. Nearly half of the active student population and a third of the teaching staff left the university. In autumn 2021, the Freeszfe Association started adult education courses at a fee. These are new and exciting courses (e.g. personal theatre, all-round theatre assistant, theatre and performance, etc.), which are offered at a rather high price, as the institution cannot rely on any level of public funding.



Acting Students receive their diplomas at the Mozarteum in Salzburg on 12 October 2021

Over the past year and a half, the Freeszfe community has received numerous [awards](#) from many organisations and institutions for its outspoken opposition to the authorities. The Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association awarded the community with the Courage Award. An excerpt of its

laudation: „The members of the university citizens who organised the blockade of the University of Theatre and Film Arts and then the Freeszfe movement, which defended the values of the institution... are true patriots who, regardless of current political trends, have had nothing else in mind but to ensure the undisturbed future of the arts in Hungary... The SZFE citizens set an example for an entire country."

Theatre in the Shadow of the Pandemic: the Battle of the Independents and the Stone Theatres Against the Pandemic

In December 2019, the government's plans to put cultural funding on a completely new footing, caused a major alarm among theatre professionals. The starting point here, too, is centralisation: the newly formed National Cultural Council (Nemzeti Kulturális Tanács) will now include the leaders of the largest cultural institutions, who, as originally planned, would also take over the budget and powers of the National Cultural Fund (Nemzeti Kulturális Alap, NKA), which (co-)finances artistic projects. The leaked draft law would have abolished (!) all the support for independent theatres and made the appointment of directors of repertory theatres dependent on the Minister for Human Resources.



"Culture is a national fund" –Protest in front of Örkény Theatre on 9

The bill that was finally submitted to Parliament and passed was softer than the original, but the thrust of the thinking was unchanged. The culture government may have changed its position on the independents because the Independent Performing Arts Association (Független Előadóművészeti Szövetség, FESZ) launched an [international petition](#) to protect Hungarian cultural life: under the slogan "Culture is a national fund" (a pun with the Hungarian name of NKA),

55,000 signatures were collected in Hungary and globally in a few days. On 9 December 2019, a crowd of tens of thousands of people stood up for the independence of Hungarian culture in front of the Örkény Theatre, alongside important creators of independent and repertory theatres. As it is

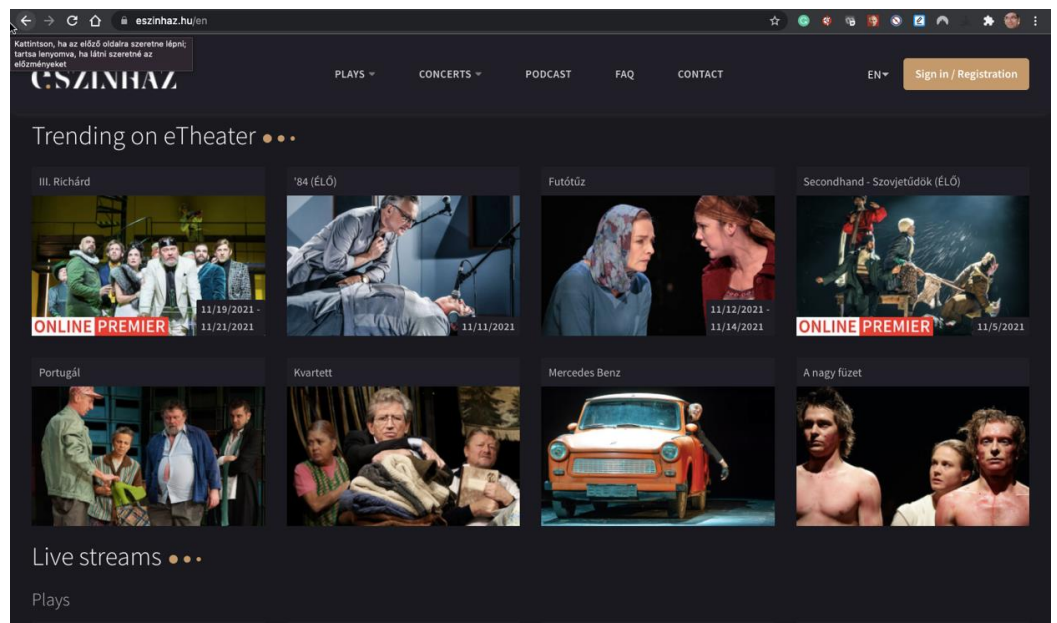
known, [independent theatres in Hungary](#) receive the majority of their operating costs from state funds. In 2020, the ministry dissolved the system, which had been working relatively well for a few years, without any special notification. We have reached another stage in the government's Budapest vs. countryside war, with separate boards of trustees judging applications from independent theatres in the capital and the countryside. It was a petty revenge: prestigious groups in opposition-led rural towns received little or no funding, while right-wing municipalities were handsomely rewarded by the board of trustees. In 2021, the same thing happened again, with some differences: e.g. the MASZK Association in Szeged, South Hungary, which has been openly taking a stand on the SZFE case and has been organising the THEALTER international theatre festival for 31 years, [received zero funding for the first time since its establishment](#). There is a suspicious silence around the independents at the moment of sending out this letter of news: according to rumours, a radically new funding system will come into force before the spring 2022 parliamentary elections, which "of course" will not be discussed with the stakeholders by the cultural government.

The biggest burden on Hungarian cultural life in the last year and a half has been the pandemic. Although state and municipal theatres were forced to stay close for most of the period (from March 2020 until the end of the 2020/21 season, and then again from November 2020 for more than six months), most of their staff have kept their jobs and have been paid for the most part. The same could not be said of the independents: many creators found themselves in a desperate and hopeless situation. Although the cultural government claimed to have offered them a lifeline, in reality it was imposing difficult, strict conditions to obtain a one-off grant for those who applied for it.

The closed Hungarian theatres wanted to keep in touch with their audiences. In the spring of 2020, most of the theatres opened up their archives, making available free of charge recordings of performances, most of which were no longer shown, in low-quality or better. It was only a matter of time before some people turned the institution of online theatre-viewing into a fruitful business, which quickly and successfully established itself.

Today, in Hungary, it is mainly on the websites [Eszinhaz.hu](#) and [Szinhatv.com](#), where live or live-broadcasted performances, or even previously recorded performances, can be viewed for around the price of an average theatre ticket. Although statistics are closely guarded by the companies, it is known that a very high proportion of rural viewers have bought theatre tickets online, with a smaller proportion of people from neighbouring countries' Hungarian speaking areas and from other parts of the globe.

The Örkény Theatre built its own TV studio during the quarantine period: a small, capable team of professional videographers recorded and/or broadcast live some of their repertoire. Interestingly, although the theatres are open since autumn 2021, the Örkény has retained its online broadcasting system, as it allows to offer a quality theatre experience to more than the number of spectators present in the theatre.



A selection of available shows online on eszinhaz.hu

Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts has chosen a unique strategy in the pandemic period. They did not publish any recordings of their previous performances, but instead asked artists to submit productions specifically optimised for online spaces. The offer was rich and varied from Hungary and abroad, including theatre and dance performances, lecture performances, new circus productions, zoom performances and dance films, rounded off by professional round tables, live recordings of open-air performances and discussions with the creators. The Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association awarded Trafó a special prize for innovation and experimentation during the pandemic.

Attila Vidnyánszky is in Charge of...

The Fidesz government's (cultural) policy was and is always based on centralisation: it wants as many areas as possible to be in the hands of a single, loyal government figure. Apart from the fact that this leads to the accumulation of positions, it has numerous harmful side-effects for the area in question, and leaves professional representation of interests with minimal room for manoeuvre. The tendency can be observed in all areas, from film production to museum management, but the case of theatre deserves special attention.

The internationally renowned director Attila Vidnyánszky, born in Ukraine, long active in Hungary, is a strongman of Hungarian theatre and an extremely controversial figure. While no one disputes his artistic achievements, in interviews and statements given exclusively to friendly media he is fond of visualising an international left-liberal conspiracy against him, which he believes is being led by

a few theatre critics in Hungary (?!). His cultural policy activities began with the 2008 Performing Arts Law, which put independent theatres in an increasingly vulnerable position, but his new positions and posts leave no doubt that what happens in the theatre in Hungary today is practically his decision alone. It is not our intention to list all the phases in this long process, but to give you a brief overview of the most important developments of the last two years.



Actor Áron Molnár in front of the National Theatre, asking for a public debate with Attila Vidnyánszky

An empire is being built around Vidnyánszky, of which he himself is the sole arbiter and in charge. Sometimes it seems as if he has the energy and attention for everything. Even the slightest opposition cannot escape his attention, see for example the case of the Színház (Theatre) magazine in 2019: since then he has refused to

allow the magazine to publish photos of performances at the National Theatre he runs, because he considers their "operation to be subordinate to political aims and manipulative." But the case of actor Áron Molnár is also memorable, who invited Vidnyánszky to a public debate on the affairs of the Hungarian theatre in the summer of 2021, but the director refused. His reasoning was that "I will not give you or your friends any opportunity to allow the ideas and ideologies that are destroying Europe and Hungary to be presented in my theatre in this form. "

Yet it is the larger scale that is interesting here: the fact that the Pécs National Theatre Festival (Pécsi Országos Színházi Találkozó, POSZT), which for nearly a decade had been in the grip of politics and was considered the number one Hungarian theatre festival by custom rather than professional reasoning, quietly died out in March 2021 surprised few. The reason behind the closure is the departure of the openly right-wing Hungarian Theatre Society (Magyar Teátrumi Társaság, MTT), which is led by Vidnyánszky. The organisation is no longer content to simply admit friendly theatres to the organisation (in October 2021, it had 80 members), MTT is busily building its own infrastructure. In spring 2021, it received 300 million forints (960 000 USD) to buy a building: the former private theatre on the Buda side of the capital, the Karinthy Theatre, is now owned by the organisation, headed by Attila Vidnyánszky's former student, the 28-year-old actor-director Nándor Berettyán.

Since 2019, Vidnyánszky has also been involved in two performing arts programmes, both of which have received significant public support. With its own company and building, offices and a modern venue, the Déryné Programme has a salutary aim: to bring existing and newly produced theatre productions, carefully



Péter Fekete (state secretary for culture), Attila Vidnyánszky (National Theatre), Domonkos Márk Kiss (managing director, Déryné Programme) on the opening press conference of Déryné Programme

selected by Attila Vidnyánszky and his direct collaborators, to small towns and villages under the slogan "culture for all, not just for a narrow elite". The problem is the usual opaque decision-making mechanism and the questionable quality of the performances, often ideologically committed, that can be inferred from the decisions. The company that coordinates the Déryné Programme was given another task in 2020: under the name Thank you, Hungary!, 3,000 artists received a one-time grant of 300,000 forints (appr. 960 USD): the programme allowed artists to receive the money they needed to survive for a while, under strict, not necessarily life-like conditions. Both programmes, coordinated by Vidnyánszky and his colleagues, have a budget of HUF 1 billion per each (3.2 million USD per each).

In the case of Attila Vidnyánszky, the saying „he is wearing many hats” does not capture the essence. In the autumn of 2020, director Árpád Schilling compiled on his Facebook-site a list of the public positions that the director has taken over the last decade: "Attila Vidnyánszky is a Kossuth Prize-winning theatre director, the chief director of the Hungarian Theatre of Transcarpathia, the chairman of the decision-preparatory body of the Ministry of Human Resources, the Theatre Arts Committee, and the chairman of the Hungarian Theatre Society (MTT), which protects the professional interests of theatre arts, Vice Rector for Art at the Rippl-Rónai Faculty of Arts of the University of Kaposvár, Artistic Director of the Madách Imre International Theatre Meeting (MITEM), General Director of the National Theatre, and now Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Foundation of the University of Theatre and Film Arts." Yes, in the autumn of 2020, Attila Vidnyánszky also became the number one decision-maker of the Board of Trustees at the occupied SZFE, which led to the absurd situation that in Hungary today it is impossible to get an acting degree without his signature...

While Vidnyánszky is not known to be a proponent of partner dialogue, only of the word of power, even he sometimes gets surprised: in the autumn of 2021, the world-famous American director Robert Wilson donated half of his honorarium from the MITEM Festival of his *Oedipus* guest play in Budapest to the Freeszfe Association. Wilson made a [statement](#) to the public, which was of course [answered by Vidnyánszky](#). Robert Wilson explained his reasons in an [interview published by the Revizor](#).

A Country of Harassment Theatres?

In the autumn of 2017, a defining moment in the history of the #metoo movement in Hungary was the Facebook post in which Lilla Sárosdi (formerly an actress at the Krétakör Theatre, wife of director Árpád Schilling) [disclosed](#) that twenty years ago she had been sexually harassed by director László Marton, who was the director of the Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre). Sárosdi's announcement did not start an avalanche: the parallel is a bit shaky, but the situation is somewhat reminiscent of the case of the secret service files in Hungary before the change of regime. Just like there, more than thirty years after the end of state socialism, compromising records can still be found about virtually anyone's cooperation with the communist authorities, something similar is happening in the case of harassment cases. Instead of a constructive social dialogue after Sárosdi's announcement, more skeletons are being pulled out of the closet. The process is similar in most cases: the press and the tabloid-susceptible public want the juicy details, but there is no real confrontation and apology, no constructive social dialogue in similar cases.



Enikő Eszenyi and László Marton

As with everything else in Hungary, developments related to #metoo, and how they are communicated, are determined by daily politics. To give just one example, the fact that director Péter Gothár, director of the Katona József Theatre and teacher at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE), made "morally unacceptable advances" to several of his female colleagues was punished by both institutions with immediate termination of employment in December 2019. In the case, the government spokesperson

introduced a new concept into the public discourse when she started talking about "harassment theatres," making it clear that in the government's interpretation, both the SZFE and the Katona,

which they believe presents a play mocking the right-wing (see Béla Pintér's [The Champion](#)), are institutions where sexual harassment and abuse of power are an everyday practice.

The way those accused of harassment treat the public follows a similar pattern. After the initial outcry, the victims do not get an apology from the harassers, either formally or otherwise. After a few months, or even 1-2 years, they return to work to theatre or cinema as if nothing had happened. Péter Gothár's new film *Seven Little Coincidences* (*Hét kis véletlen*) was released in Hungarian cinemas in May 2021. But we could also mention [Gábor Miklós Kerényi](#), the main protagonist of the Operetta Theatre (Operettszínház) scandal that came to light at the same time as the Sárosdi-Marton case: he will be directing again in autumn 2021 and has valid invitations from several Hungarian theatres and the actors working with him do not seem to be bothered by what has come to light about the director's methods.

Back to the Vígszínház: although László Marton, accused of harassment, died in 2019, the tempers around the institution he once directed have not calmed down. In March 2020, 71 members of the Vígszínház made accusations against the actor and director Enikő Eszenyi. Public humiliation, violation of human dignity and abuse of power caused serious trauma to the members of the company. Eszenyi has not responded in any way to the accusations, and has said that those who accuse her of violence and want to destroy what she has built, are "violent" themselves.

After 245 (!) theatre employees asked for an investigation into what had happened, Enikő Eszenyi resigned as director on 19 March 2020, withdrew her application for the post of theatre director and left the institution. She was replaced by Péter Rudolf, actor and director. After half a year of silence, Eszenyi came out in the open: in her home village of Csenger, 300 kilometres from Budapest, close to the Romanian border, she formed a new company with young actors to present Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Seriously accused but showing no signs of remorse, Eszenyi has since been given new opportunities in Hungarian theatres. Péter Cseke, director of the Kecskemét theatre was asked why he had invited Eszenyi to direct, he replied: „As a Christian, I trust in the power of forgiveness, just as I trust in repentance.”

The investigation of the Vígszínház-case was ordered by Erzsébet Gy. Németh, Deputy Mayor of Budapest in March 2020. Six months later, after hearing the parties concerned, the investigations were closed without any information being provided to the victims or the public.

In the summer of 2020, another bombshell exploded: the managing director of the Operetta Theatre, Zsigmond Kriza, was accused of harassment. The inhumane management methods led to more than 30 people resigning in a year, only two of them were men. According to all the accounts, Kriza spoke to all the women as if they were objects: some he asked about their relationships, others about their sexual habits. And the new director of the Operetta Theatre since 2018, the openly right-wing Atila

Kiss-B., did not respond to complaints about his direct colleague, nor did he treat the accusations as significant. The ministry soon announced that it had found everything in order. It emerged that the victims had not been heard by the committee conducting the investigation.

The most recent harassment scandal dates back to August 2021, when János Perjés, the owner of the private theatre Spirit Theatre, was the subject of complaints of verbal abuse, threats and minor physical violence from his employees. They also reported that the institution was regularly late with payments, and that when this was pointed out, the director went into a rage, throwing iron chairs at his staff. Among the accusations was that the director had made sexual advances towards some of the male members of the company. János Perjés declined to comment on the case, and the Spirit Theatre is currently in operation.

Gays on Hungarian Stages - No Space for Them?

In June 2021, in line with the government's family policy, a new law, known in the press as the Pedophile Law or the Homophobic Law, was published, conflating homosexuality with pedophilia. While the original bill was intended to protect children (a situation made all the more poignant by the fact that pedophile cases in politics have so far only come to light around Fidesz), the amendment is more about the Russian-style stigmatisation and disenfranchisement of gays.



Protest in front of the Hungarian Parliament against the "Pedophile Law" on 13 June 2021

The proposal also bans the promotion and display of homosexuality and gender reassignment to minors, and prohibits pornographic content (including advertising) that depicts sexuality for its own sake, depicts a deviation from the identity of the sex of birth or "promotes or displays" homosexuality to minors under 18. Only organisations registered with a public body would be allowed to provide sex education in schools. The

new law has provoked considerable public outcry, with tens of thousands of people demonstrating outside Parliament prior to its adoption. Opposition parties, NGOs, the journalists' association and

the commercial television channel RTL Klub protested, as it is now only possible to show films such as *Friends* or *Harry Potter* late at night.

The law, which follows the Russian model of the judiciary, fits in well with the efforts of the government led by Viktor Orbán to keep the country on constant combat alert. The militant rhetoric, the search for new and new images of the enemy (in the recent past: George Soros, refugees, the homeless, the left-liberals, etc.) is a vital element of the regime. Obviously, there is no party in Hungary today that supports paedophilia, but there are divergent public views on homosexuality. The government has also sought to divide the opposition with this proposal: anyone who does not vote for the law can already be communicated as supporting paedophilia.

Of course, the law has and will have consequences for the programming policy of theatres; although, at the moment, these are not yet known. The only extreme manifestation reported in the press so far is a scene in which two men kissed and were booed by an audience member at a performance of the private theater company called Orlai Production. It happened a few months after the law was passed.

In addition to banning the presentation of homosexuality to under-18s, the law deprives theatres and their audiences of a series of classic dramas, and makes the subject taboo for the very age group that would probably have the most questions about it. The fact that, for example, the production of *Joy and Happiness* in Budaörs, close to Budapest, directed by Róbert Alföldi, about the lives of young gay people, is not being shown to the very people for whom and about whom it is really about, perfectly illustrates the cynicism of the law. In August 2021, we asked director Róbert Alföldi what awaits gay people on Hungarian stages.

An Interview with Róbert Alföldi on the Pedophile Law and its Possible Consequences

Q: Will there be a person at the entrance to *Joy and Happiness* to check the age of the audience?

Róbert Alföldi: This is a very big question. And it's not funny, no matter how much we grin about it now. The performance had a private showing the very day the bill was passed. The theatre director and I had originally thought that this would be a sensitising performance, teaching acceptance of otherness. We invited the teachers of the secondary schools in Budaörs to come and see it and decide whether they would bring their students. Some of them came and said they understood the performance, but they could not bring their pupils. But I'll give you another example: for seven years now, the *La Cage aux Folles*, which is approaching its 300th performance,

has been playing to a full house at the Atrium. I think it's a family theatre, but now do we have to open a day nursery at the venue? Do we stand in front of a 15-year-old and forbid him to go in?

Q: Who, of course, will have no desire other than to get in.

RA: Of course; but if you ask these questions to the ministry, there is no answer, only that they will investigate the matter after the report. Of course, the report is really a denunciation.

Q: Were you surprised by the law?

RA: I admit, a little bit.

There are so many groups that the government has already dealt with: the Roma, the refugees, I cannot even list who... And then there are the gays, who are still a problem in our society as a whole, let's attack them! There's a group of people for whom this is a very good confirmation: those who really think that all gays are paedophiles are happy at last. But it's also very interesting that 30,000 people come to Gay Pride to



A scene from Róbert Alföldi's *La Cage aux Folles*: László Józán and András Stohl

have a good time, and there were, let's say, 30 counter-protesters. Or there was the case where someone put up a rainbow flag in a block of flats and received a threatening letter to take it down immediately. A few days later, another letter arrived saying that the normal residents of the building wanted the flag to stay and apologised to him. You see, this is how division and hate-mongering succeeds on an atomic level now: within a small community like of a block of flats. We needed another enemy to point the finger at. To say again that there are the normal and the abnormal.

Q: What will be the impact of all this on the theatre? Will directors start to be cautious?

RA: You are asking me if I will be cautious?! (*laughs*) I don't think so. If you want to be careful, you don't deal with this subject in the first place. Look at the repertoire of the right-wing theatres in the countryside: how many performances do you see on this subject?

Q: You're right, but perhaps there will be those who will be made an example of and humiliated in public?

RA: If someone reports the *La Cage aux Folles* for its depiction of homosexuality, it must be investigated by law. I would love it if the Christian Democrat MPs would come and watch the show. They would understand what love, family and acceptance are.

The Theatre Profession in Hungary and Abroad Mourns the Death of Anna Lengyel

Anna Lengyel was born in 1969 in Budapest to Péter Lengyel, writer, and Zsuzsa Takács, poet. She graduated from the Eötvös Loránd University, and in 1997 she received her second degree in dramaturgy from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. Between 1994 and 2002 she worked at the Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár, mainly with István Eörsi, Tamás Ascher, László Keszég, Zoltán Bezerédi and József Kelemen, and between 2004 and 2008 as dramaturg at the internationally renowned Krétakör Theatre, where she edited and directed her own series of international plays as well as production dramaturgy. Anna Lengyel was also a well-known and noted figure in the international theatre scene, having worked as a dramaturg with Robert Wilson, Cate Blanchett, among others.

In 2008, she founded her own independent documentary theatre, PanoDrama, and has continued to work abroad as a dramaturg and translator in German and English, alongside Tamás Ascher, Árpád Schilling and Róbert Alföldi, among others. In 2017, she was diagnosed with fibrosarcoma, and has spoken and written openly about her illness, and has also launched a public discussion series entitled *Rákparák* in Katona, fighting against the taboo of the subject.




Anna Lengyel (1969-2021)

Her colleague, friend and fellow dramaturg Judit Garai recalled Anna's battle with cancer: „Four years ago, when she was diagnosed with fibrosarcoma, her life entered a new phase, and that of those around her. It became a daily topic, something that had been taboo for many of us: cancer, death. She has spoken about it a lot, both in private conversations and in the productions she has staged or assisted, as well as on various platforms. There was a naturalness, a serenity, a calmness about her that could only be looked at with astonishment and, of course, admiration. I believed that Anna would not die from this. Because it didn't seem that way for long. That was then overridden by the last year or so."

In the Hungarian theatre scene, PanoDrama has grown into a unique formation in the last decade. Whatever the difficulties that have plagued and continue to plague the independents, the virtual formation has put itself on the map of Hungarian theatre. It has been intensively present in Hungary and at international festivals, showcases, symposia, conferences and workshops. Thanks mainly to the tireless work of Anna Lengyel. In Hungary, the concept, terminology and working methods of documentary theatre have become known mainly thanks to PanoDrama. Anna Lengyel introduced the concept of verbatim theatre and its functioning to the Hungarian theatre profession. Using the verbatim method, she has created performances on such pressing issues of Hungarian society as the series of murders of Roma (*Word for word*), anomalies in the justice system (*Servants of Justice*), the memory of the 1956 revolution (*Pali*) or the suicide of a gay rights activist (*We must wait for a miracle from ourselves*). All those hot topics that we are not used to, cannot or do not want to talk about in public.

Anna Lengyel was 51 years old.



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