

Nr. 20

October 2023

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Reporter Bio and Farewell



Andrea Rádai (born in 1979, Budapest) is a Budapest-based former critic and translator. She served as the editor of the Hungarian theatre journal, SZÍNHÁZ (<u>www.szinhaz.net</u>), from 2015 to 2021 and maintained a theatre column in the culturalpolitical weekly, Magyar Narancs. She also works as a translator, particularly in the field of children's literature, where she translates Dutch and English works into Hungarian for publishing houses like Pagony, Scolar, and Kolibri. She is an author of children's books herself, with "Tündérek a tajgán" ('Fairies on the Taiga') published in 2022, followed by "Rókazsolt a Margitszigeten" ('Fox on Margaret Island') in 2023.

This letter marks a significant transition, as she recently announced that she would no longer be contributing to Magyar Narancs and would relinquish her title as a theatre critic. Several factors have contributed to this decision, including the unique challenges presented by her family circumstances, the complex cultural-political climate in Hungary, and the broader global crisis affecting journalism and criticism. The journey thus far has been an enduring struggle that she can no longer sustain. Her other responsibilities limited her capacity to frequent the theatre as extensively as she once did or as she aspired to. However, she has expressed the possibility of continuing to write about theatre in the future, albeit not on a regular basis. She envisions herself as an "ex-critic" who still shares her insights on theatre or certain performances.

Her farewell echoes the sentiments of numerous independent theatre companies that have also announced their closures.

Independent Companies Closing Down or Slowly Dying

As you were informed in the March newsletter, the independent theatre sector in Hungary faces a grave and imminent threat. The state subsidies earmarked to support independent groups in 2023 have been reduced by a staggering 41% in comparison to the preceding year when the subsidy was barely sufficient for survival. The government attributes these cuts to the Ukrainian war and rising inflation, often deploying populist rhetoric that ascribes blame to the European Union's supposed missteps. Paradoxically, significant financial resources are being funneled into sports and the specific type of performing arts that align with the government's preferences. In June it also came to light, and as you were informed about it in the July letter, that the majority of performing arts organizations, regardless of their professionalism, longevity, or international acclaim, would receive no financial support from the budget created a few years ago following the dissolution of the so-called TAO (corporate income tax relief system). This system, once funded by corporate taxes, was based on ticket revenues. Thus, despite their qualifications and prestige, these organizations have been left unsupported.

Numerous open letters, petitions, and protests have been staged to draw attention to these pressing issues, addressing the public, the wider performing arts sector, and the ministry and the government directly. Regrettably, these actions have yielded no tangible results. The situation remains marked by a lack of transparency, as the decision-makers behind the budget allocation and the criteria for disbursement remain in secret.

In our newsletters from both March and July, we sounded the alarm bells, reporting on the dire situation facing the independent performing arts community. We provided coverage on The Symptoms, an independent company that has ceased operations, and we presented an interview with their leader, Réka Szabó. Regrettably, we are yet to report any positive developments. Companies within this sector continue to grapple with substantial challenges. The number of new productions has visibly decreased, many talented theatre makers and dancers are being compelled to seek alternative professions, numerous projects and workshops have been shelved. While it remains premature to draw final conclusions and quantify the immediate losses and devastation within the field, one undeniable trend is emerging: the number of companies contemplating or openly discussing ceasing their activities is on the rise.

Átrium – The Season of the Endgame

Átrium is a venue under the management of the Kultúrbrigád company committed to presenting both entertaining and thought-provoking theatre productions that have the ability to captivate broad and diverse audiences. The venue holds a significant association with the theatre director Róbert Alföldi.

The profile of Átrium can be characterized by a repertoire that includes theatre performances such as the widely acclaimed "Őrült nők ketrece" (La Cage aux Folles) and Robert Icke's "The Doctor," both under the direction of Róbert Alföldi (the latter is discussed in this issue). In addition, the venue produced "Trianoni Csata" (The Battle of Trianon) directed by the renowned Hungarian director based in Serbia, András Urbán, with Róbert Alföldi in the lead role and delving into a subject matter of Hungarian history, which is highly politicized and suppressed and the same time. The Kultúrbrigád company faced a challenging last season, having to rely on public donations for its survival. In August, they issued an open letter in which they declared that the forthcoming 2023-24 season would mark "the season of the endgame." Regrettably, this season is anticipated to be their final one, and their last premiere, "Dead Poets' Society" directed by György Vidovszky would take place in October.



The Battle of Trianon in Átrium. Photo: Csaba Mészáros

"We maintain an institution where one person works instead of three, where you can't give an effort less than one hundred and twenty percent, where everything hangs by a thread. We want to finish before it starts to show on our artistic work, and on the mental and physical health of our colleagues. The current situation is unsustainable, both humanly and professionally. We are tired, because this struggle, which has now been going on for five years, is taking away the very energy of curiosity and desire to create that makes theatre worthwhile and enjoyable. The final season will be one of farewells." – they wrote in their open letter.

In response to this announcement and demonstrating their support, Örkény Theatre offered to host one of Átrium's shows in the future. Örkény has a track record of hosting productions by small, independent companies including freeSzFE. To the best of the reporter's knowledge, there have been no other apparent manifestations of solidarity or practical assistance from non-independent theatres in this challenging situation.

Proton Theatre

Proton Theatre was founded in 2009, primarily to organise and manage independent theatre productions by film and theatre director Kornél Mundruczó. Proton stands as one of Hungary's most internationally renowned theatre companies; their performances, like Frankenstein Plan (2007), Hard to Be a God (2010), Disgrace (2013), Imitation of life (2016), etc. have been invited to prestigious international festivals.

Kornél Mundruczó has labeled this season as "the Olympics of survival," drawing an ironic parallel to the extensively subsidized Theatre Olympics organized by Attila Vidnyánszky and the National Theatre. This label also underscores the stark reality that even with meager financial support, they are bound by certain obligations, including premiering a production and staging a minimum of 15 shows in front of



2000 people altogether. Those interested can track their progress via updates on Facebook.

Ziggurat

The Ziggurat Project Collective, a small contemporary dance company with a primary focus on site-specific and interdisciplinary art forms, has recently made the difficult decision to discontinue its operations. Their Facebook cover photo features a leg kicking into the air, accompanied by the script: "Game over." In September, the collective organized an exhibition at an art gallery titled "re-maradék" (re-remnants), where they repurposed the remnants from their past projects and installations, intertwining their personal reflections on the act of letting go.

FAQ

FAQ, a young and small company known for its unique and progressive theatrical language and the spirit of experimentation, has likewise declared the cessation of its activities. In August they presented a special edition of their ever-evolving event titled



"Bálvány" (Idol), a concert performance at the festival Thealter, where they thoughtfully contemplated their circumstances. Following this performance, they symbolically laid their company to rest by conducting a burial ceremony in a garden, signifying the end of an artistic journey.

Narratíva

The establishment of Narratíva was met with widespread enthusiasm in the theatrical community a few years ago, where many were supportive, albeit perhaps slightly skeptical, of the aspirations of these young artists who sought to revolutionize the entire theatrical creative process, striving to make it as collaborative as possible. Over time, the contributors embarked on an extensive series of productions, among them "Demerung," based on Chekov's "The Cherry Orchard," which is set to be showcased at dunaPart. Their most recent premiere was "Medea's Children," but regrettably, there will be no new performances, as the scarcity of financial resources has made it impossible to continue.

Others

Several other theater companies, including TÁP Theatre, Pintér Béla, Studio K, and Stereo Akt, have resorted to crowdfunding as a means of financial support. The uncertainty surrounding their survival remains a pressing concern. Even the well-established and highly professional Theatre in Education (TIE) companies, Kerekasztal and Káva, are grappling with significant challenges. Both companies are making earnest efforts to secure financial support through crowdfunding campaigns. Kerekasztal devised an event where patrons could purchase high-priced tickets to attend one of their shows available for adults. Káva, on the other hand, has pledged to persevere until January, by which time they hope to formulate a viable plan for their future, if such a path forward is indeed feasible:

"So are we supposed to accept the reality that if we want to make theatre, we must do so without state assistance? So, what the state provided us with so far, was it 'assistance'? Is that the correct word? Were we considered as the needy, the underprivileged, those who required help? This was not our perspective. It was our belief that our activities (that is creating complex theatre in education performances for children and young people discussing age-related, ethical, social problems and phenomena) held value for our nation, particularly due to the quality and social relevance. (...) Should we repeatedly explain that what we do is vital for our collective future? Twenty-six years of dedicated work, involving the participation of one hundred thousand children and young individuals, thousands of performances, professional recognitions, research projects, publications, and films, as well as numerous courses – does all of this count for nothing? Are we the only ones who believe that our absence would represent a loss? That if we were to vanish, it would equate to a form of amputation? It is now time to outline our plans for the upcoming season:

- We'll try to hold on till January and then we'll see

- We were planning to have three premieres, we would be happy with one

- We should prepare for the winter, because our venue and our office will be closed as well because of the heating expenses.

- According to our most optimistic scenario, we start the next season with a severely reduced operation, with few performances, while constantly exploiting ourselves, trying to figure out what to do, whether to continue (and if so, how)."



dunaPart – Edition 6

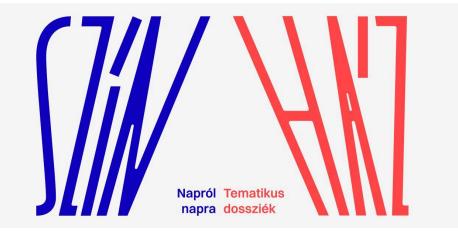
The organizers are pleased to announce that, after overcoming numerous challenges, the sixth edition of dunaPart is finally approaching between 22 and 26 November.

DunaPart is a platform presenting the works of Hungarian and local makers for an international audience of professionals in order to sustain existing networks and create new connections, to grant visibility to the Hungarian independent performing arts scene by offering an intense programme.

The artistic programme is composed of around two dozen performances and events selected by a curatorial team from theater, dance, puppetry, circus and hybrid works that have premiered since the last platform. Curators of the 2023 edition are Orsolya BÁLINT (dance writer, curator), Zsuzsa BERECZ (dramaturge, curator), Tamás JÁSZAY (theater critic, university lecturer, editor-in-chief of Revizor - the critical portal), Beatrix KRICSFALUSI (theater theorist, university lecturer), Levente LUKÁCS (arts manager, dance artist) and Júlia SÁNDOR (dramaturge). Discussions, site visits and diverse informal networking opportunities form an integral part of the platform programme.

This edition is a continuation of a successful series of platforms starting in 2008 but it is out of the ordinary as we had to wait twice as long for it to happen, since dunaPart5 in 2019, due to the pandemic. The previous editions brought important collaborations and partnerships to the Hungarian independent field – amongst others to Béla Pintér Company, Proton Theatre, STEREO Akt, Forte Company, HODWORKS, Rita Góbi, Kristóf Kelemen and to projects such as Tropical Escape or Hungarian Acacia. We hope once again to facilitate not only invitations but also much needed long term collaborations. Based on turnout for previous editions we count on 150-200 international guests.

The registration to the platform is now <u>OPEN</u>, you find the full artistic programme <u>HERE</u>, and you can also <u>READ</u> the foreword of the curators.



Színház – The New Website

As you were informed in the March edition of this newsletter, Színház, a monthly publication about performing arts established in 1968, ceased its printed publication. Both the online and printed versions coexisted for over 15 years, with the last printed issue being published in December 2022. The primary reasons for discontinuing the printed version were financial, although it might have been sustained if the prevailing cultural-political climate in Hungary had been different.

The editorial board had planned to launch a new website that would cater to both online content, featuring shorter articles and prompt reactions to events or premieres, and an online version of the traditional printed magazine, which includes thematic issues with in-depth analyses. They also aimed to create a website with an appealing, state-of-the-art design.

This new website was officially launched in September. While there are still a few minor errors and bugs to iron out, the website, on the whole, is functioning well, with new content regularly being published.

What's particularly noteworthy is how the website's structure mirrors the dual functions of Színház. The main page prominently displays the Hungarian word for theatre, "SZÍNHÁZ." Here, you can choose to navigate to "SZÍN" (Hungarian word for 'colour'), where you can find the usual, more up-to-date online content, or "HÁZ" (Hungarian word for 'house') where you can access the "thematic dossiers," featuring more analytical, big-picture articles, effectively a new version of the old printed issues. The archive of the printed issues is also available <u>on the website.</u>



The Doctor in Átrium. Photo: Péter Lakatos

Robert Icke' *The Doctor* in Átrium Directed by Róbert Alföldi, Premiered in July 2023

In the Átrium performance Zsolt László, a male actor takes on the role of Dr Wolff, a female character. However, this is solely indicated by his attire: a modest green skirt, flat heels and a pink rayon blouse. The acting creates a completely neutral entity, we cannot say that it is a man playing a woman, we cannot say that it is a man playing a woman playing a man. This conceptual approach transforms Ruth Wolff into a figure that has some gender characteristics but is also like a genderless mannequin upon which different identities are hung. And indeed, she is privileged, Jewish, white, an atheist, pro-choice. (And she is a doctor, this identity being crucial for her, while the people around her could not care less.)

The idea didn't emerge out of nowhere. Robert Icke explicitly requested in the drama instructions that the cast be gender and color blind. In the show he directed, this idea was implemented for the side characters, which is an intriguing twist. In Atrium's production; however, it becomes the central theatrical device that helps delve into the complexities of identity politics. It raises questions about our capacity to view individuals without the influence of various labels or group identities and, naturally, explores how an individual can exist within such a politically charged environment. Exciting, contemporary themes, thought-provoking questions, and controversial issues are thus presented in The Doctor, which is a retelling of a Schnitzler drama, Professor Bernhard. The plot can be summarized in a few sentences: a doctor refuses to let a priest in to see his dying underage patient (whose parents are devout Catholics, that is all he knows about her) because he thinks it would upset her unnecessarily. This becomes the issue: crisis committee in the hospital; audio recordings circulating on the internet out of context and therefore misinterpretable; petitions; threats to withdraw funding; TV show debate; cutting off pet's head; fuck you and die, you Nazi/Jew. So, for most of the show, arguments of different viewpoints, positions, and trolls clash with power interests hidden behind identities. While it is understandable that the author seeks to explore the issue in a multifaceted way and that we need to know something about Ruth Wolff's private life and motivations, satisfying this need probably complicates the performances of the play.

Alföldi's piece is quite focused and capable of creating a sterile backdrop for this thesis drama and the exploration of the above questions. This sterility and concentration can also be observed in Ildikó Tihanyi's stage design, where the same space serves as both the hospital corridors and offices, as well as Wolff's home. This suits her reserved character that primarily defines herself through her profession and only allows her emotions to surface when in solitude.

The rest of the casting is less whimsical and playful, though it's hard not to chuckle when we discover a white male actor portraying a character who is visibly white but identifies as black. Nevertheless, each actor effectively portrays the two-dimensional characters, representing the various elements of Wolff's socio-cultural matrix. The performance skillfully guides us on a journey that allows us to perceive the human being at the heart. We might suspect that the other components of this matrix are also composed of human beings, leaving us on the verge of realizing that, despite all, or perhaps because of it, the doctor could have offered an apology. Perhaps it's in place of her that, at the conclusion of the show, we hear Tracy Chapman's sloppy song, 'Sorry...'

Béla Pintér's New Show: Réka and the Unvaccinated

Béla Pintér's 30th premiere arrived during challenging times when independent performing arts companies are on the brink of extinction. Pintér's company might not be facing the same level of peril as others, but it is still in danger. They are still gathering donations to ensure they can complete the season and, ultimately, survive. As a result, it appears that 'Réka and the Unvaccinated' has been developed under significant economic constraints. First of all, the stage design remains the same as the already modest and understated 'Az Imádkozó' (The Prayer): the background features the Gellért Hill, where the Statue of Liberty can be toppled and erected at any time. There is another building that stands all the time: the so-called MOL Campus, a symbol for the present regime. The costumes partly overlap, too, as do the characters, making this play by Pintér a kind of stand-alone spin-off.

Because the main character is a social milieu, a melting pot of diverse individuals with varying motives, all attending the same séance hosted by an openly antisemitic shaman (you know, the kind who thinks that Jesus was Hungarian and who has relatives among the QAnon activists). This séance attracts musicians who might not subscribe to all this bullshit but are seeking transcendental experiences as a way to deal with the challenges in their private lives. There are also opposition politicians present, aiming to establish connections. And then there's Réka, who used to work for the government but was dismissed either due to her attendance at a demonstration for teachers or her refusal to be vaccinated. She appears to be the Fidesz voter with a sensible approach. However, we won't delve into her personality, motives, or emotional life, as her role primarily serves as a newcomer, providing an excuse to explore this milieu.

This milieu is filled with the building material of hatred, and this truth is directly presented. It appears that Pintér has placed his own creative energies under economic constraints. *Réka*... lacks the usual twists and is much less multi-layered, which is otherwise characteristic of him. What we see is a low-level political cabaret, and it is so tasteless that one might think Pintér intentionally overstrained it so that he can say to his audience that he is happy to see Fidesz-people and their associates being ridiculed: 'Here, now you get what you expect from me.' There is a performance-like scene where Orbán and his arch-enemy, Gyurcsány, a left-wing political icon who is often blamed for the opposition's failure, are kissing. The awkward uneasiness and the frustration you can feel watching this, and the whole show might hold the key to understanding *Réka and the Unvaccinated*.



Réka and the Unvaccinated. Photo: Gábor Bankó/444

Viktor's Bodó's Two New Premiers in Budapest Focus on Addiction

Viktor Bodó has recently had two premieres in Budapest: "A csoport" ('The Group') at 6szín and "Lidércek, Shaxpeare, Delírium" (LSD, 'Wraiths, Shakespeare, Delirium') at Örkény. These two productions are not only closely related to each other, both dealing with the topic of addiction and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of rehabilitation in Hungary, but "The Group" also serves as a blueprint for "LSD." This doesn't mean that the former is any less elaborate.

"The Group" is based on group therapy as a theatrical form. It immerses the audience in a series of sessions for individuals with various addictions, each at different stages of healing or, more accurately, different durations of abstinence, as addicted individuals often still identify as such, even after an extended period of sobriety. The show draws its material from real stories shared by actual addicts and the improvisation of the actors, who had the freedom to select the type of addiction they wished to represent.



The Group. Photo: Éva Juhász

The atmosphere of the show is highly naturalistic, at times resembling documentary or even community theatre. It starts with group members assembling and fumbling around, followed by their introductions to a newcomer who claims to have his alcohol consumption under control (of course), explaining that he was only sent to the group therapy session by his wife. Then, the participants share their difficulties and problems stemming from their attempts to fill the void left by substance abuse. Up to this point, business is usual. However, there are moments when childhood memories and scenes from their private lives flare up, leading the narrative into a dreamlike, chaotic atmosphere with its own set of rules, which surreal shift is a trademark of Bodó's style.

The group members exhibit a wide range of differences in age, social class, awareness of their substance abuse issues, and willingness to open up about their struggles. Similarly, the actors involved in the production come from diverse backgrounds: some are still in the midst of their studies, while others are veterans of (independent) theatre. Some actors have made appearances in popular TV shows, and there's even a dancer among them. Sándor Zsótér, a renowned Hungarian director increasingly taking the stage as an actor, leads the group. The audience gains insights into the nature of addiction, as well as the sometimes elevating but usually relentless, endless, and often futile battle. It also invites us to reflect on our own substance use, especially considering statistics that suggest a significant portion of Hungarian adults have a problematic relationship with alcohol (with varying estimates, but some indicate that as many as every fifth Hungarian adult may be affected).

In addition to the performance, the creators arranged post-show discussions on the topic with experts. This emphasis on fostering discussion and understanding

indicates a clear intention to serve a socially useful purpose, while Bodó's other production at Örkény is a more atmospheric, theatrical piece of theatre. The setting places us in a state rehab center in the countryside, with the set (designed by Zita Schnábel) strikingly reminiscent of how you imagine a decaying building in the backyard of a rundown hospital in Hungary: rotting neo-baroque is the dominant style.



LSD in Örkény. Photo: Judith Horváth

Once again, there's a newcomer, and once again, we find ourselves in a group therapy session, listening to the personal stories of the addicted patients. However, this time, the focus isn't on delving into the depths and the hell of their psyche, but rather on witnessing their shared psychosis.

As it turns out, the following day, a delegation from the ministry visited to inspect how the funds allocated for drama therapy were utilized. Consequently, the patients find themselves rehearsing "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a scenario quite reminiscent of the one portrayed in Peter Weiss's "The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade." Not much of Shakespeare's original play remains in "LSD," but the plot and characters do reflect those of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." For instance, the institute director takes on the role of Oberon and finds himself on the brink of divorce with his wife. Different levels of reality intertwine with an increasingly surreal world, heightened by the drug that was hidden in the now-damaged attic, pouring out like manna.

The entire play is a lengthy journey to the peak, a frenzied rampage. However, this delirium isn't gradually built up; it's as if this surrealistic world constantly exists just beneath your skin, ready to emerge at any moment, like flashbacks from a bad trip. Bodó is the director of theatrical moments that take only one or two seconds:

sometimes this surrealistic world also flares up for a mere moment. While the audience might find the piece intense, it's far from boring: there's a geg or a pop culture reference for every fraction of a second, and the stage music incorporates even more elements of trash, for which the audience is genuinely appreciative. Theater culture is not exempt from satire in this play; the director in the performance literally burns his degree.

And, naturally, it all comes to an end: the next day brings the hangover, the excruciating disillusionment. Everything returns to square one, with no progress, as if nothing had happened.

Ephemeral Projects by Kristóf Kelemen

Kristóf Kelemen's recent projects focused on commemorations, and their strong connection to specific times and locations aligns well with his artistic profile. Furthermore, both projects are linked by their pursuit of escapism, as they both aim to create an alternative reality.

"Séance (Necromancy)" was part of a series of events titled "Performative Archives: 1970-73," commemorating the closure of an art colony. György Galántai, a Hungarian visual artist, had a studio in Balatonboglár, known as the Blue Chapel, which had served as the backdrop for several neo-avant-garde artistic projects in the 1970s. In just a few years, authorities under Kádár shut down and prohibited the location. "Séance" served as a tribute to the connection between the Blue Chapel and the SQUAT Theatre.

Audience members were required to visit the Blue Chapel itself, where they were provided with VR glasses. The narrator recounted the tumultuous history of the company while displaying documents and photographs. The performance "King Kong," originally created at the site, was also revisited, and videos from the past and present were montaged together. This allowed spectators to immerse themselves in a blend of the past and present, creating a sense of timelessness.

The other project, created by Kristóf Kelemen and Tímea Török, is connected to the events of 1989 and the Blaha Lujza square in Budapest. In November of that year, homeless individuals were compelled to vacate railway stations during the night. Homelessness was a relatively new but rapidly growing problem at the time, and there was no social system in place to support these individuals. In response, homeless people initiated a sit-in protest in the underpass of Blaha Lujza square, and as a result, the municipal authorities provided them with vacant buildings that could serve as shelters.

The demonstration garnered significant support from local residents and the press. Kelemen's and Török's project places the emphasis on this aspect, even though the title, "Életvitelszerű" ('Habitual Residence'), alludes to a less compassionate approach, which is that of the Fidesz government: a few years ago a law was enacted that banned homeless people from having a habitual residence on the streets, without adequately addressing the challenges within the social system and shelter infrastructure.



The Blue chapel in Séance (Necromancy)

The performance took place at the same location where the demonstration occurred 35 years ago: spectators gathered on an artificial grass carpet in the underpass (a far cry from the likely less comfortable circumstances experienced by homeless people at the time). Even pillows were provided, bearing the names of individuals who had participated in the demonstration.

The performance began with an introduction, after which individuals from diverse backgrounds talked about the role of solidarity in their lives: social workers, homeless people, and NGO workers shared their personal stories. This was followed by group activities where spectators could share their own stories about solidarity, and some of these narratives were shared with the entire audience. The creators then presented a scenario based on the backcasting method.

As we sat there on the pavement, beneath the gaze of surprised passers-by, who either stopped to observe or continued on uninterested, we were part of a community that included homeless individuals. Together, we sought to imagine a brighter and more inclusive future.



AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PUBLICATION OF: **Színház Theatre magazine, Budapest**

VOLUME 20, October 2023

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EDITING & PRODUCTION: Brandice Thompson

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

CITD's work in Eastern & Central Europe has major support from The Trust for Mutual Understanding

