

Dear Friends,

In this latest Letter of News, critic Tamás Jásay looks at four fascinating productions now playing in Budapest:

- Andrei Serban's *Richard III*
- Viktor Bodó's *The Krakken-mission*
- Martin Boross' *The Garden of the Protected Men*
- Csaba Horváth's *Vaterland*

I've just returned from 20 days in Budapest, where I got to see 3 of the 4 productions reported here (I missed Bodo's piece) along with 16 additional performances, 4 rehearsals, and 30 coffees, lunches and meetings with friends and colleagues.

I purposely scheduled my visit after both the Russian and Hungarian elections. No news here—V. Putin elected for another 6 years and Viktor Orban for another 4.

The realities of these two elections were settling in.

- Árpád Schilling is leaving Hungary: he announced he was moving to France with his family.
- *The Budapest Observer*, an almost 20 year invaluable window into the evolving cultural policy, published its final post. Founder/editor Péter Inkei wrote:
 - "So this is the last memo. Not because of direct coercion or threat, and not due to running out of money. No-one ever paid for making the memos, it was done pro bono, as BO's public relations medium. No physical breakdown either, the undersigned is holding fit and keeps working. The spirit is gone, driven out by other, toxic spirits."

I got that post the day I landed in Budapest, and it set a tone that was repeated again and again in my many conversations.

- Yuri Urnov joined me for the second half of my visit, bringing the evolving post-election Russian realities to the table.

But still, the theatre work continues...and continues to amaze and inspire me.

No festivals going on during my visit—I just missed the large international festival at the National Theatre. But in that magical Budapest springtime, I got to see additional work of directors Róbert Alföldi, Daniel Kovacs, Béla Pintér, Sándor Zsótér, Enikő Eszenyi,

Támas Ördög, and Attila Vidyánszky.



Before I Die

Martin Boross and his partners, including actor/dramaturg Julia Jakubowska and composer/sound designer Márk Bartha, created a mini-festival, celebrating their company, STEREO AKT's 5th anniversary, performing productions still in their repertoire.

In addition to *The Garden of Protected Men*, I also got to see the original version of the *Promenade* piece, later done in Baltimore, and soon to be in Albuquerque; a wonder-filled two-hander, *Before I Die*, and their homeless piece, *Addressless*. The breadth and depth of their work was truly stunning.



Addressless



Probably the most talked about production in the past two years has been Tamás Keresztes' performance in Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*. I'd heard only superlatives about both the performance and the production, but nothing could prepare me for the depth and power of the event. Tamás, a member of the Katona József company, is for sure one of the finest (and busiest) actors in the country. This work is a unique partnership between independent producer Tibor Orlai, director Viktor Bodó, and the Katona. It is now a top-tier European festival production.

I got to see Béla Pinter's much anticipated *Tamás Ascher in Háromszék*—a production spurred by the controversy over Béla's *The Champion* produced at the Katona (Ascher's theatre). And Keresztes creates a quirky doppelganger of Ascher in this look back at the independent theatre world of the 1970's in Hungary. Béla wrote, directed, and plays a small chorus role. There is a very young Béla Pinter character, and it was great fun to watch them interact on stage.



Pinter had an earlier work running, *Children of the Demon*—I saw it a decade ago, I think. I went back. A deeply satisfying creation, with strong music and strange, oriental threads, and Béla playing a lead female character that has now morphed into a very vocal supporter of the current government! Amazing how his work holds up—and how he continues to fill whatever theatre his company is playing in.



Three days after I headed home, Sam Mungo, the artistic director of the Opera at Peabody Institute in Baltimore, was in Budapest meeting with Béla, and his actor/dramaturg Eva Enyedi—CITD is working with Sam and Béla on an English language production of *The Champion*, to be directed by Béla at Peabody in 2020!

I spent a good bit of time with Csaba Horvath this visit, sitting in on both a rehearsal and then a run-through of his new production of Nikolay Erdman's *The Suicide* (Yuri was with me for the run). It now has opened, and early responses in the press agree with my delight in his near-commedia take on this Russian classic. (Our long-time Russian partner, John Freeman, wrote the book on Erdman—and was kind enough to send me his translation to freshen my memory before the run.) I also got to see Csaba and the company's work with a tangle of Thomas Bernhard's texts in a piece, *Vaterland*, played against a huge moving sculpture (pictured above).





Ghosts



I was quite taken by Alföldi's direction of *Ghosts* at the new Central Theatre. Robi's work on his *King Lear* two seasons ago at the Radnoti Theatre used a single, huge, round table as the only set piece. In this new production of *Ghosts*, a single center door with multiple frames serves as a fascinating and evolving visual puzzle, but also surprisingly fine-focuses the slow march to the climax of the play.



Berlin Alexanderplatz

I got to see the work of a young director, Danial D. Kovacs's adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the 1929 novel by Alfred Döblin (and the 15 hour Fassbinder 1980 film) in the modest main stage of the Katona József. As usual, this strong company of actors delivered, and Kovacs's use of cropping the stage image again and again to film screen ratios, along with a lighting design that offered "close-ups" made for a fascinating filmic production.



Tamas Ördög's DollarDaddy has also been making some noise of late, and I got to two of their performances at the ever-important Trafó House of Contemporary Arts: *Home* and *Chekhov*. They continue to develop work that focuses on the actor and the text—and the design of each space encourages an audience complicity I always find genuine.

Director Sándor Zsótér offered a delightful afternoon performance in the garden of the film school at the Academy of Drama and Film with the very talented class of László Marton and Géza D. Hegedüs, working with Calderon's *Life is a Dream*. Actors in trees, buried underground, hanging from beams in an abandoned shed, made for a vivid animation of the larger themes of Calderon's work.





Zsóter and János Szász are both directing now at the National Theatre. I visited János in his rehearsal at the National after seeing Attila Vidyánszky's production of *Bánk Bán*. Vidyánszky took over the directorship of the National six years ago from Robert Alföldi, and his tenure has been controversial. The fact that both Zsóter and Szász are now working at the theatre has not gone unnoticed. Vidyánszky's *Bánk Bán*, performed in the smaller stage at the National, was

highly recommended to me by our reporter for this issue of HLN, Tamas Jászay. There was an immediacy and raw power in this strong ensemble's work.

It was good to be back in Zoltán Balázs' Maladype Base (an apartment of Mikszáth Kálmán ter), and to see his production of *Csongor és Tünde*, a fully sung operatic ride of this Hungarian classic. I missed seeing Zoltán—he was directing outside of the country.

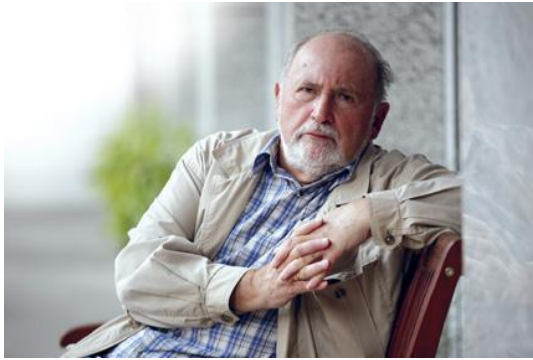


Finally, I revisited Enikő Eszenyi's *Hamlet* at the Vig. Enikő and the Vig were hosting the Union of the Theatres of Europe that weekend—with representatives from the 19 member theatres. This weekend was a very big event, and this performance had English supertitles. The Vig seems in good shape, and this *Hamlet* draws young, full houses. Attila Vidyánszky (Jr.) is a wonderfully physical Hamlet, and Géza D. Hegedüs' Claudius continues his claim as one of the finest

actors now working in the country.

So even in the darkest of times, the work continues to inspire.

And two long-time Hungarian friends and colleagues also recently were recognized in very substantial awards:



György (George) Lengyel (1936 -) won the Kossuth Prize in 2018. A huge honor: sometimes referred to as the Hungarian Nobel. George and I have worked together for over 4 decades. He was a close confidant of Martha Coigney, and played a major role with the International Theatre Institute during the years of the Cold War.



Andrea Tompa won the prestigious Libri Literary Prize for her latest novel, *Omerta*. Our partner in developing and delivering this Hungarian Letter of News, she is also the editor of Színház magazine, and president of the Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association.

We will be watching the cultural scene closely as we move into the summer; historically a time of cultural meddling.

Peace,

Philip Arnoult

founder & director

PS: A mini-Hungarian Festival is coming to New York and Washington this month. I've seen János Mohácsi's *Ghetto Sheriff* and highly recommend it to you. It will be:

- In DC at Woolly Mammoth for one performance on Monday, 18 June at 8 pm
- in New York at the Abrons Arts Center for one performance on Wednesday 27 June at 7:30.

[Here is a link to the whole festival.](#)

SZÍNHÁZ



HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

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Tamás Jászay

REPORTER BIO: Tamás Jászay (1978, Szeged) is a critic, editor, university lecturer. Editor of the largest critical webpage in Hungary, Revizor (www.revizoronline.com). Also, he publishes reviews, interviews, and reports in 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'). He served as co-curator of the Hungarian Showcase (2013), dunaPart 3 – Hungarian Showcase of Contemporary Performing Arts (2015) and dunaPart 4 (2017). As part of his work on the 2015 Showcase with CITD, he traveled for a month to San Francisco, New York, Austin, and Baltimore.

Vaterland

Csaba Horváth facing the hidden past

Csaba Horváth, founder and so far the only representative of physical theatre in Hungary (and director of the highly acclaimed production of [Blood Wedding](#) at Chicago's Wilma Theater), regularly turned his attention to the poor and the miserable. In the last years his choice of plays clearly shows his interest in the lives and fates of those in need. Just a few examples: in Forte Company's biggest success, [The Notebook](#) by Agota Kristof, two children learn how to survive the war times; in *The Clearing*, by Helen Edmundson, the people of a divided country try to understand and adopt the new rules made up by a new government; or in the [Rats](#), by Gerhart Hauptmann, he studied the different ways and methods of mental and physical misery through characters that are easier to deny or hate, than to accept their truth. To sum it up: it might have been a surprise for the audiences that for his new premiere, Horváth chose the works of one of the most important German-speaking authors, Thomas Bernhard. In my opinion, Horváth's close look at Bernhard's texts is not a sudden turn, but the continuation of a long journey.

Thomas Bernhard was and still is a very disturbing and annoying author. (In line with Elfriede Jelinek.) Although he won major awards during his career, in his 'Vaterland', Austria he was never fully accepted, mainly because of his harsh criticism of the Nazi past and the petite bourgeoisie. He is a serious and pessimistic writer, whose works, written in different genres, are full of funny observations, which take them close to the realm of absurd and grotesque. His texts are full of attacks against the so-called intellectuals, the state and its well-renowned institutions (like Vienna's Burgtheater, etc.) or the Catholic church. If I am right, one cannot find a single work called 'Vaterland' in Bernhard's oeuvre, although the chosen title of Horváth's performance is a perfect choice: Bernhard always wrote about his wholeheartedly hated country.



Scene from *Vaterland*, dir. by Csaba Horváth

Anyone dealing with the texts of Bernhard on stage has to face the problem of his unique style and embarrassing language: multi-layered monologues, maniac repeating, extremely long sentences, the dominance of indirect speech, exaggerations and superlatives etc. create and suggest a special world, strictly based on language. A special footnote for the reception of Bernhard in Hungary: although most of his works were translated to Hungarian, there were not too many significant stage premieres of his works in the last decades. The tradition of psychological realist acting lies far, far away from the world of Bernhard.

Horváth's *Vaterland* has an exhausting and long introduction, which presents the narrowmindedness of the Austrian countryside. Its people are full of hate, anger and indifference and we need time to understand that all the grotesque figures are hiding their real sentiments concerning their present and past. We are listening to a puzzle of confusing memories, from which we can construct the image of a frightening community. The actors play with dozens of scapulae (shoulder blades) on stage: they transform easily from huge fans to white bones, plus they serve as instruments too. There is no linear narrative in this performance, the spectator needs to be patient to understand all the 'episodes'. In the final scenes, the terrible secret of the little Austrian village is uncovered, giving way to a cathartic ending.



Scene from *Vaterland*, dir. by Csaba Horváth

The Krakken-mission

Viktor Bodó returns to the Hungarian stages

The theatre director Viktor Bodó, receiver of many prestigious Hungarian and international awards, the founder of the Europe-wide renowned Sputnik Shipping Company, has returned to Hungary. One and a half years after the premiere of *The Diary of a Madman*, he works in Budapest again. Besides the directing, he is the co-author of *The Krakken-mission* (together with Imre Mózsik), which is – according to the subtitle – a “psycho-thriller-crime-comedy.” Why do I emphasize the fact that *Krakken* is a piece of the homecoming? Just because watching this completely crazy show, it is obvious to recognize all the experiences Bodó collected in the last decade, mostly abroad, mostly in German speaking countries.

Actually, the situation of a theatre director regularly working abroad and *not* speaking the language of his hosts served as the basic idea for this play. The plot takes place at a small town, up north, called Sarutröll. The inhabitants speak a very funny language, somewhere between English, German, French, Russian and Romanian. We cannot understand their words, but after a few minutes, the spectator (especially with a good sense of language) starts to play a sort of a game: some phrases are familiar, others not, but all sounds so weird and original. The impossibility of understanding each other is a recurring theme in Bodó’s works, but this might be the first time during his career, when it becomes the major topic of a play.



Scene from *The Krakken-mission*, dir. by Viktor Bodó

According to the frame story, the citizens and the mayor of the town prepare for the world exhibition. The representatives of 'Indigenous Country' ('Honoshország') speak Hungarian and they do remind us of the politicians or people working at the administration of a post-socialist country. The serious statesman does not understand a single word from what happens around him, which makes him angry and impatient, even with his translator. The complex story turns out to be a narrative full of cheating, corruption, lies and unexpected turns. Why? Because the money saved for the project of 'Indigenous Country' was completely stolen by its initiators. The aim of the Krakken-mission is to save the honour, and finally the life of the minister visiting Sarntörl.

We have sixteen actors on stage who play at least two dozen characters: Bodó creates a full panorama of Sarntörl society. The young set designer, Zita Schnábel, created a huge abandoned space with many surprises: it looks like a former factory hall covered with sand. The costumes made by Ildi Tihanyi help to create the chaotic atmosphere with huge wigs, moustaches and other accessories. The members of the occasional ensemble work together flawlessly: actors with great experience and younger ones build strongly on each others' skills.



Scene from *The Krakken-mission*, dir. by Viktor Bodó. Photos by Csaba Mészáros

Richard III lives with us

Andrei Serban worked at Radnóti Theatre

It was the third time that the worldwide celebrated Romanian-American director, Andrei Serban worked in Budapest. He directed [Three Sisters](#) in 2010 and two years later [Angels in America](#), both at the National Theater. At that time Róbert Alföldi was the managing director of the National, and without exaggeration we can say that the staging of Tony Kushner's multi-awarded play became an emblematic piece of the last decade's Hungarian theatre history. Alföldi himself played in both pieces: in *Three Sisters* he was Vershinin; then his Prior Walter was praised by the critics and the audiences.

Six years later Serban returned to Budapest to give a special present to Alföldi celebrating his 50th birthday: the chance to play the most well-known villain of drama history, Richard III. Although Shakespeare is among the favorite authors of Serban, this was the first time he worked on *Richard III*. In an interview, the director spoke about the parallel features of the Renaissance and our age: "People lost their orientation, they got confused, didn't find their way. Today exactly the same thing happens: the globalization, the internet, the Facebook, all the new devices. We are lost, confusion became general – perfect timing to welcome someone like Richard. That is why I do not have to add anything to make the play a contemporary one; if you listen carefully to the text, it is more than enough."



Róbert Alföldi and Adél Kovács

This quote reveals the essence of his staging at Radnóti Theater: Serban and his companions created together a very harsh, spectacular, noisy and almost unbearable world, where there is a place for Gloucester/Richard. According to the performance we are stuck in a very long moment, between two different eras, when everybody and everything is uncertain and unstable. Gloucester simply realizes that it is the right time to move on, to grab the power out of the hands of the former generation.

Gloucester gives a long speech, directly to us, the spectators, about the way he will take the throne of England. He makes it clear that for him it is only acting, the whole process is just theatre. Serban's staging involves a series of allusions about and on theatre. At the end of every show, the actor has to clean off makeup, put down the wig and costumes, and that's what is actually happening at the beginning of Part II. Richard gained the power, he played the protagonist, but now he feels burnt-out, as he does not know what to do. This recognition is a definitive moment of Serban's show.



Scene from *Richard III*, dir. by Andrei Serban

The set by Róbert Menczel is an abstract, almost industrial space with harsh yellow, black and white colours. The costumes by Fruzsina Nagy are very practical and easy to change: eleven actors play almost forty roles. The mostly live music, created by Marcell Dargay, is also essential for the whole performance.

The ensemble of Radnóti is in great condition (especially the female characters, including Zsolt László, who plays Queen Margaret), but what makes the whole show exceptional is Alföldi's

acting. In the land of the blind, one-eyed man is king: sometimes I have the feeling, that even Gloucester is surprised at how easily he gets everything he wants. Alföldi plays a clown or an actor, who enjoys ruling the stage. Such a pity he does not have a strategy for the days after winning.

Garden of the Protected Men

A new show by Martin Boross and Stereo Akt

The Garden of Protected Men, inspired and slightly based on the novel by Robert Merle, *Les hommes protégés* (*The Virility Factor*) was created by the company Stereo Akt. (Merle's text is quite well-known and popular in Hungary. The 1974 novel is about a society where the male-female relationships are distorted and feminism destroys humanism.)

Martin Boross (who last year had the chance to work together with Single Carrot Theatre in Baltimore on a new version of his 'urban tourist project', called [Promenade](#)) this time focuses on sexual abuses in contemporary society. A hot topic, one can say, although a dangerous one after the explosion of #metoo movement: can we say anything new about it after all the scandals that hit our world only a few months ago?



Garden of Protected Men

Boross was always interested exclusively in socially committed performing arts. He had important projects dealing with the situation of homeless people ([Addressless](#) was part of the selection of dunaPart4 platform); the poor in the Hungarian countryside ([Remake Bodony](#) was a participatory documentary film about local microcontexts); members of the LGBT community ([Face to face](#), a flashmob to encourage coming out in Hungary) and more.

The first part of his new show is played literally in a garden: we can walk around a big space containing glass and plastic boxes with a half naked man in each. We use headphones to listen to their stories (collected by the company months before the opening night). The 3 to 5 minute narratives are very different (in length and in quality too), though all of them are connected by their topic: the men share their stories of sexual vulnerability, various kinds of embarrassing situations, where they were humiliated by women. The men become works of art in a special museum, and we all get the chance to observe the details of their stories. Originally all these tales were told by women, but now they take on a humorous perspective through the male voice.

The second part of the show is actually an audition, where three women cast a male dancer and actor for a role. We do not get much information about the role itself. What we get instead is the very disturbing feeling that this man is used and abused by different means by the three females. Boross plays with our prejudices and expectations, as he did in many of his former projects. He presents our world, but it is turned upside down. Sexism, discrimination, abuses – our everyday reality is presented on stage. A hot topic as I mentioned before, but the dramaturgy, characters and storyline itself are unfortunately not strong enough to convince us that radical change can happen.



Garden of Protected Men

The Alföldi-case

Censorship in Hungary?

The whole story starts in 2013, when Róbert Alföldi was invited to direct a show at Zalaegerszeg. The city is very close to the Austrian border, with approximately 60.000 inhabitants. Its theatre was widely known decades ago, but in the last years, simple entertaining became the main focus. Alföldi finally directed Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*: the show proved to be extremely successful, although after the premiere the mayor (!) of the city asked the managing director not to invite Alföldi again.

At the end of 2017, Alföldi was invited again to Zalaegerszeg, but of course not to the theatre: local inhabitants operate a saloon, where popular artists come and talk about their work and career. As Alföldi pointed out, he had serious doubts whether the talk show would happen, but he accepted the invitation. The evening was completely sold out, everything went smoothly, when suddenly, a few days before the session, Alföldi got a short email from the organizer, that they canceled the event. It happened without any explanation.



Alinda Veiszer and Róbert Alföldi at Zalaszentgrót

Quotation from a text, written by Alföldi, after the incident: “At that point, people of Zalaegerszeg started to protest against this method. It became immediately clear that the local MP vetoed the event, but there was not a single person to stand out and tell the truth... I still do not know what the was power afraid of. There is one thing I understand: the whole case is about a ridiculous and at the same time frightening paranoia.”

To make a long story short: the people of the city tried to organize the event, but they did not find any institution to receive this event. Finally the mayor of a village, only 30 kms from Zalaegerszeg, decided to invite Alföldi. All the 450 tickets were sold in 30 minutes (!), and finally at the end of March the lucky people of Zala county had a chance to meet the director.

New month, new scandal: one of the most successful theatre shows of the last years, *Yes Prime Minister*, is based on the BBC's popular political satire sitcom from the 1980s, *Yes Minister*. It is an independent production that was produced in 2013, and it was played more than a hundred times with full houses. It is about the doubtful career of a British minister, who is served by the cynical Sir Humphrey (in the staging played by Alföldi), who manipulates and influences him. The Hungarian stage version changes with almost every evening as the creators put actual allusions to the contemporary Hungarian political life.



Róbert Alföldi in Szeged

This show was invited to Pécs, the former Cultural Capital of Europe. The 70% of the tickets were sold for the planned performance on 27 May, when suddenly the manager of the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter, cancelled the programme without any explanation. After some investigation it turned out, that the same thing happened as at Zalaegerszeg: an MP from the governing party decided to cancel the performance. (And the continuation of the story is also the same: Szigetvár, a town close to Pécs, immediately invited the *Yes Prime Minister*: all the tickets were sold in a few hours...)

A few days after the cancellation, Alföldi was the guest of a talkshow in Szeged (Hungary's 4th biggest city – the only city with a Socialist mayor), where he talked about these cases. During the communist times in Hungary, cultural products were put into three boxes: aided, rejected or tolerated. When Alföldi was asked in which category he puts himself, he replied: "They do not know what to do with me, which is cool, but not very funny. What happened in Pécs, was clearly an act of censorship. Censorship that revitalizes the dark times."

From Our Side

Albuquerque Gets a PROMENADE

STEREO AKT'S Martin Boross and his partners, including actor/dramaturg Julia Jakubowska and composer/sound designer Márk Bartha were in Albuquerque in March, performing *Etikett* and beginning a workshop with local actors for the Fall 2018 creation of a third version of their bus piece, *Promenade*. First there was the Budapest Promenade, seen by our group at the 2015 dunaPart Hungarian Showcase.

An invitation from Baltimore's Single Carrot Theatre resulted in a second version, *Baltimore Promenade*. CITD was able to bring Rich van Schouwen and Sandy Timmerman from q-Staff to see the work. Rich and Sandy had just finished the long transformation of a commercial space in Albuquerque into a new home for q-Staff.

Both the performance of *Etikett* and the *Albuquerque Promenade* were/are collaborations with Tricklock Company and the Revolutions Festival.

The team will be back in New Mexico for the month of October, with *AP* scheduled to open in November.

"I had a chance to see the Hungarian work in progress last week. Bravo! There is much to love about the project: the live cinematic feel, the European celebration of the poetry of humanity, the chance for real life to participate. I look forward to their NM return next fall."
-John Flax, founder/director, Theatre Grottesko, Santa Fe

László Upor to New York Theatre Workshop's Lab at Dartmouth

László will be coming to the US to be with NYTW's Lab at Dartmouth in August. After the week in New Hampshire, he will travel to NY, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington. A translator and dramaturg, he is now shaking things up as the New Vice Rector for Education at the Academy of Theatre and Film in Budapest.

CITD has had long and fruitful relationship with the Workshop, with theatre artists from Eastern and Central Europe and Russia sharing their unique developmental retreat.

For this year's lab, Bulgarian director Vasilena Radeva will also be coming for a week at Dartmouth, followed by the East Coast gavotte.



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