

SZÍNHÁZ



# HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

## Dear Friends,

I'm very pleased to introduce **Andrea Rádai**, our reporter for this edition of Hungarian Letter of News. I've long been an admirer of her keen insights into the Hungarian theatre landscape. She rarely publishes in English, but we always find time to get together when I'm in Budapest for good talks. And now, we can share her take on the recent national elections, and on four unique manifestations of the roiling performance scene.

There are real surprises in Andrea's choices:

- director **Veronika Szabó's** *Queendom* exploration of the male observations of the female body
- a portrait of **Adám Fekete**, whose work as a playwright, director, actor and dramaturg is commanding much attention
- director **Csabá Polgár's** production of Molnar's *The Swan*—breathing new life into the classic canon the Hungarians do so well
- and finally, choreographer **Adrienn Hód's** company, Hodworks, in their new dance theatre production, *Sunday*. I've seen earlier work of the company—and see them, as does Andrea, on an exciting international trajectory

We are keeping a close eye on all things Hungarian over the summer.

And look for three new issues coming to you from us just after Labor Day:

- In the next issue of **Hungarian Letter of News**, Noemi Herczog reports on multiple political issues imbedded in the Hungarian theatre scene—homophobic press, propaganda, hate speech, official “reforms” in the theatre laws, and her recent article on *The Politician as an Artist – Subversive Humor and Performativity in Hungarian Politics*.
- Yury Urnov's **Russian Notebook** focuses on Christina Matvienko & Electrotheatre Stanislavsky. Led by artistic director Boris Yukhananov, the theatre has made a stunning ascent to the top tier of Moscow's theatres,

Christina offers an incisive take on the art, the trajectory of the theatre and the current cultural/political realities in Russia today.

- The Varna International Theatre Festival is featured in our next **DISPATCHES**, with Susan Stroupe reporting on this major Bulgarian festival, focusing on their always interesting Bulgarian Showcase.

I'll have some time here in the US with old friend **Laszlo Upor**, dramaturg, translator, newly appointed Vice-Rector of the Academy of Drama and Film.

Laszlo will be spending a week with New York Theatre Workshop's Lab at Dartmouth, and then we are bringing him to visit Double Edge Theatre at their Farm Center in Western Mass. We will see their new summer spectacle, *WE THE PEOPLE*; some time in Baltimore and Washington, and then Laszlo and I will head to Milwaukee Fringe Festival (a creation of Theatre X co-founder, *John Schneider*).

Bulgarian director **Vaselina Radeva** will also have a week with NYTW, and then join me in Stockbridge to be with **Karen Allen** for a reading of a new play by Sarah Schultze, *Until Death*, with Karen and **Jeffrey DeMunn**. Vasi and I will then go to Double Edge for *WE THE PEOPLE*.

So a full August for me. And the best news of all, my Charlotte-based granddaughter, Mary Margaret Van Pelt, will enter St. John's College in Annapolis at the end of the month. Carol and I are very much looking forward to her time near us.

Stay strong, my friends,



**Philip Arnoult**

founder & director

PS: In *WE THE PEOPLE*, Double Edge has never been stronger. Rooted in the land we walk over, six historical and imagined characters tell us important and moving stories. Strong text as well—with some help from Morgan Jenness.

[\*WE THE PEOPLE\* runs through the 19th of August.](#)

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**Andrea Rádai**

**REPORTER BIO:** Andrea Rádai is a theatre critic, editor and translator. She was born in 1979 in Budapest. She studied English, Dutch and Hungarian Language and Literature at ELTE and started to write theatre criticism for Színház in 2005. Since that time she has been writing for several Hungarian (online) periodicals about theatre and culture and recently has a theatre column in Magyar Narancs, a weekly political-cultural magazine. She translates children and youth books from Dutch and English.

## *Elections in Hungary*

### **Unclear Policies of the New Government, Continuing Devaluation of the Cultural Sphere**

On 8 April 2018, Hungary held parliamentary elections. In that event, the ruling FIDESZ – KDNP coalition obtained 133 seats out of 199 in the Parliament, thus regaining the right to change the constitution or any laws requiring a two-thirds majority of the MPs. Despite the deteriorating political conditions, most analysts agreed that the election was still reasonably free and transparent, but international election observers of the [OSCE/ODIHR](#) also noted that the campaign was characterized by an “intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric,” and “media bias and opaque campaign financing constricted the space for genuine political debate, hindering voters’ ability to make a fully-informed choice.”



*A typical billboard in the campaign of Fidesz*

Indeed, the only really tangible campaign topic prior to these elections was the fight against illegal migration, which overshadowed all other issues that Hungary traditionally discussed in electoral campaigns, such as the state of the economy, health care or fight against corruption. Prime minister Viktor Orbán openly called for a “liberation fight” against international organizations, primarily the European Union and the United Nations, and philanthropist George Soros’ alleged “plans” to repopulate Europe with masses of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. This campaign strategy worked well: for the first time in its modern history, Hungary, one of the most ethnically homogenous countries of Europe with essentially no Muslim population, was united in the fear of illegal migration, an issue that most of its inhabitants have never actually experienced

within the country's borders.

While after the elections PM Orbán reshuffled his administration, few seem to believe that this renewed composition is going to put forward a radical change in government policies. It is still unclear, among others, whether Central European University (CEU), an institution founded by George Soros will be allowed to continue its operations in Hungary, and it is not known if the new era will bring further restrictions on civil society. Since the inauguration of the new government, some PR was done to make the political system look more compatible with traditional democratic values: the new buzzword, "Christian democracy", serves to replace "illiberal democracy," Orbán's infamous trademark, heavily criticized by actors in the US and Western Europe. Devaluation of the cultural sphere continues: the new minister of Human Capacities, Miklós Kásler, also responsible for cultural issues, is a medical doctor known for his radical, sometimes obsolete views on history, human nature and lifestyles. Péter Fekete, the new state secretary for culture, comes from the world of circus, having previously been the director general of the Capital Circus of Budapest. It is yet to be seen how, and if, these new political nominations will impact cultural and theatrical life in Hungary.

## ***Liberation from the Male Gaze*** **Queendom by Veronika Szabó**

*Queendom* was first presented in the framework of Arcchal a halnak, a programme initiated and managed by the collective Artus for new generation theatre makers and performers. Since its November premiere in the Artus Studio, it has been shown several times in MU Theatre and more recently in the TESZT Festival of Timisoara, where *Queendom* was met with a standing ovation. The show has undoubtedly been one of the most exciting events of the season.

*Queendom* is based on the idea of Veronika Szabó, who is also the director of the show. [Szabó is a theatre maker, performer and director](#), who is interested in participatory performances that "invite audiences to reconsider their relationships to social issues, spaces, themselves and the others in a playful and witty way." She is especially inspired by cultural and social-political context.



*Queendom. Photos: László Halász*

In *Queendom* she worked with seven young women of very different backgrounds and bodies. This latter is important to note because the piece is about the female body being watched by the male gaze and femininity forced into different roles. Thus, at the beginning, just before the show, the girls are simply “themselves” preparing for the performance in training clothes and then dress down so that they can pose in a Renaissance painting pure naked. To see their imperfect bodies – small breasts, thick thighs, cellulite, hair growth where it is not supposed to be, is the first liberating experience in the show. After posturing for several minutes, they shake themselves and start to act in a way that is the opposite of stereotypical feminine behaviour.

In the following scene, the women dress up in evening gowns as if preparing for their prom and look and smile nicely to the members of the audience. They are now cute, innocent, virgin girls, and the way this role uniforms their very different bodies and aura is simply hilarious. The girls will also show the stereotypical gestures of being a sex goddess or porn actress, of participating in a catfight or of a supportive, modest housewife.



Actually, they do not do anything that has not been seen in film scenes before; I would say they do not even exaggerate (OK, maybe a little bit) and yet the audience cries with laughter while their civil and not so perfect bodies and glints of personalities come into light from under the camouflage of the roles forced on themselves by themselves.

*Queendom* is simply liberating. It really gives you a floating feeling that comes from the change that is happening to your own body perception. Though the mood gets even more euphoric when the girls take up the roles of male characters. They walk on the stage one by one in the role and the costumes of the western macho, the cool hippie, the basketball guy, the dirty, ugly old man, etc. And although it is true that male bodies are less occupied by the female gaze, now everybody in the audience shares the experience of seeing those gender-forced body stereotypes getting ridiculed.

## The Poetry of the Absurd

### A portrait of **Ádám Fekete**, young playwright, director, actor and dramaturg

Ádám Fekete has recently appeared as a young titan in the Hungarian theatre scene. Although Hungarian society is far from being integrated enough to give equal rights to disabled people in education and on stage, he graduated from the Theatre and Film Academy as a dramaturg and also worked as an actor in Theatre TÁP, a group led by Vilmos Vajdai and maybe most famous for their shows presenting bad theatre and actors who are failing. Recently he also acted in *Tomfairy*, a piece by Péter Kárpáti and staged by the Secret Company that [could also be seen in Festival dunaPart](#). *Tomfairy* is based on Hungarian folk tradition, folk tales and legends, and Fekete plays the role of God in such a remarkable way that perfectly fits the rituals, the shabby sacredness of the show.



*Tomfairy with Ádám Fekete on the right. Photo: Krisztina Csányi*

Ádám Fekete has also been active as a playwright and the director of his own pieces. His plays are about the absurd poetry of existence. His characters are placed in situations which are boringly everyday and metaphysically symbolical at the same time. If there is a plot at all, it is unfolded very, very slowly (the impatience caused by this is what makes some people stand up and walk out on his performances), but this is the rhythm of life itself, a life which is so unbearably lead by pointless actions instead of meaningful (heroic) deeds that can change our lives.



*Group Photo without Lions. Photo: Miklós Toldi*

*Group Photo without Lions* (available light) was his first play realized on stage in the framework of TITÁNium. It shows scenes from the life of people living in one block of flats. Fekete said that he was inspired by the poetry of Richard Brautigan (the title is also his), whose poems express a kind of rootlessness that echoes in the characters of the play. There is a woman, who has a nice and neat restaurant but no guests at all; a man, who slowly becomes invisible and whose wife is pregnant and has dropped a box full of marbles she has to collect now; a boy, who, for some reason, wants to listen to the same piece of music again and again; a man, who cannot find the key of the meeting room; and a woman, who has a date where nobody appears. Our audience expectations do not work anymore, because we have to watch someone warm up their food, clean their shoes, photocopy some pages. None of these stage happenings are hurried, they take the time they would need in real life. You really need another kind of watching, and if one can go with it, it is like immersing in life itself.



The Jedi Council Conference. Photo: Orsolya Véner

His more recent play is *The Jedi Council Conference* that was premiered in Trafó and directed by Fekete, too. It is a “tragicomic dreaming about why we are doing that we don’t want and we are not doing that we do want,” and somehow catches time in the middle of flowing away. According to the situation, the main and only character wakes up in a flowerbed Sunday morning with a hangover and then decides to go home. And whatever happens or echoes in his head is brought out, into a theatrical situation played by an actor. There are seven “voices” who quarrel, argue, scold each other, recall memories, philosophize, invite each other for drinks and try to find out

what happened last night. Sometimes the actors seem to play another, real character, for example a passersby or a teacher from high school whom the main character bumps into in the street -- God knows where these happen if at all -- actually we are always within our own minds, never outside. With the theatrical representation of the chaos in our head, some kind of order is created, with the constant repetitions and variations, a system is built up: this is poetry.

## Our Choreographed Life

### ***The Swan* by Ferenc Molnár in Örkény Theatre, directed by Csaba Polgár**

*The Swan* is a less played piece by the world famous Molnár, although it is as well written and wrought for theatre as his other dramas. It might be the topic that does not seem to be relevant any more. *The Swan* is about a once royal aristocratic family who hopes to get closer to the throne again by marriage. The crown prince is staying with the family. Marrying their daughter, Amalia (Réka Tenki) would be a logical and profitable decision for everyone, but the prince does not show any interest. The mother (Eszter Csákányi) tries to flare him up by convincing her daughter that she should be very kind to the teacher for under her rank, so that the prince becomes jealous. However, the young people fall in love with each other and it is only Jacint, the witty and wise uncle, and a monk, who save them from an (un)happy end.



*The Swan. Photos: Orsolya Véner*

Csaba Polgár, the director was able to create an atmosphere that can tear away the play from the reality of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It is mainly done by the stage design and the costumes (the work of Lili Izsáki), which are highly above the average level of quality and spectacle of

Hungarian theatre. The walls are painted a peeling, but very intense blue and there is an inscription that is from time to time (partly) lit during the show: We are more than beautiful. The costumes are also very extravagant, expressing an unnatural dignity that is almost ridiculous.



It is not only Molnár's text which builds up tension and characterizes the people in the play in a very careful and witty way. It is also the choreography that is interwoven into these characters' lives. They sit, breathe, stand up, talk and look at each other in a carefully-planned and choreographed manner that leaves no space for spontaneity. The actors' gestures are usually not exaggerated, there is a very fine humour to them. Sometimes they put together a song and a dance looking very seriously into the void. The actors are able to show this surface, this wall of manners that is actually their true self, as if there is nothing beyond it. There are only two characters who still have some emotions they are not supposed show in this aristocratic context. It is the teacher (Zsolt Nagy) and Amalia, whose love – and this is what the direction emphasizes, too – can rather be seen on their faces. There is a scene where they are not able to find the words (probably there are not any left for them anymore) and they just stay silent with lips pressed together.

Paradoxically, this is the most telling scene of the performance about the loss of spontaneity, naturalness and life that is led by ourselves and not the etiquette and claims established by our class.

At the same time, nobody seems to be a really negative character, not even the mother whose strong will designates the path that Amalia should step on. Everybody acts according to a

choreography, in a way they are supposed to, in a way that is determined for them through birth, class, and human nature.

## **Beyond All Boundaries**

### ***Sunday* by Hodworks in Trafó**

Adrienn Hód's new choreography is an important event for theatre in general as it creates a stage presence that leaves one without words.

Hodworks, founded in 2007 is one of the most significant and progressive contemporary dance companies in Hungary. In the origin of their work is the body that has got rid of everything else: props, costumes or any other kind of medium. Their pieces and the body language used in them are the result of a long process of improvisation and experimentation. The carefully structured choreographies do not reflect only on the body, but also on the performer's body and the performing situation, too. The freelance dancers Hód works with take part in other dance formations – thus the different backgrounds guarantee an intense creative force.



*Sunday. Photo: Márton Mónus*

*Sunday* reflects on all the questions that surround contemporary dance or the theatrical situation. Its pure and brutal physicality creates a new experience of the body and through that, finally, of ourselves. The piece starts in a Sunday mood, the five dancers chatting in a slow, broken English and sometimes illustrating the text with some reckless movements. They talk about themselves as dancers, their relation to the choreographer, what their mother thinks about their art, how they got used to being naked on stage, and why people are so defiled that they are ready to pay to see such a piece in Trafó. In this self-ironical situation, the atmosphere is as sleepy as if they woke up on a Sunday morning, though the dancers do talk about crucial questions relating to contemporary dance and performing art in general.

And then they start to dance and it is a punch in our stomach. The pictures change so fast it is impossible to get a grip on them or to create any meaning out of them. The dancers are present with their full body that is brutal, ugly, dirty, sweaty and crude in an almost superhuman choreography that is physically extremely challenging: fast and sometimes repetitive and monotone. Together they make up monsters that crawl on stage without any resemblance to humanity. In other scenes they are sexual without eroticism. They do everything they are not supposed to do on stage, that is not *comme il faut*.

The audience feels slammed and shocked with surfeit. This is what we expect from art, right? To be shaken up, to feel that there is something at stake. And *Sunday* goes very far to show there is such art indeed but then you are in real danger. There is a scene where the dancers start to run across the stage and stop just in front of the walls, but you feel every moment that they are on the verge of crashing into it – or even crashing into the audience. *Sunday* is just about this moment when you still do not know whether there will be a crash or not.

You defile, this is what you are paid for and what you pay for.

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