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Roland Kelemen (1997, Târgu Mureș, Romania) is a theatrologist, dramaturg, theatre-maker from Transylvania. He is the editorial assistant of the Hungarian theatre magazine, *SZÍNHÁZ*; and works as project manager of the *Linkages: Hungary* at the Center for International Theatre Development (CITD). After studying theatre studies and playwriting at the University of Arts Târgu Mureș, Romania he started working as a freelance dramaturg and playwright.

Is Hungarian Theatre Still (A)Live During Pandemics?

It's been well over a year and a half since the theatres closed in Hungary on 13th March 2020. The pandemic quickly made it impossible for theatres to continue to exist in physical presence, and many of the Hungarian theatre-makers began to use the internet as a channel for their productions. This new phenomenon has resulted in two opposing opinions among theatre professionals. Some say online theatre experiments cannot be called theatre, but rather a kind of "theatre substitute." According to others, it is important to note that the physical presence does not apply for some productions since theatrical presence could be created via a different medium – like film, live-streaming, virtual reality, etc. And in the last decades of Hungarian theatre, there have appeared several performing-artistic concepts in which the false illusion overcame the audience's presence.

“ **The pandemic stimulated experimentations in the field of performing arts in Hungary...**

While some theatres put online a grainy, single- or multi-camera recording of a play from 2000 just to give the impression of their existence, digital productions have shown interesting formal originality– such as Örkény Theatre's *Andromache (Orestes Loves Hermione, Who Loves Pyrrhus, Who Loves Andromache, Who Loves Hector, Who is Dead)* directed by Ildikó Gáspár; the Independent Theater Hungary's streamed performance, *Kosovo mon Amour*; the online video chat performance, *Closer* by Panna Adorjáni & Dániel Láng; Szkéné Theatre's online theatre in education project, *It Stays Between Us*; and Trafó House's *e-Audience* program. I strongly believe that the pandemic stimulated experimentations in the field of performing arts in Hungary and helped theatre-makers realize that there is no need to take out of the productions anything that is part of our everyday life – like the internet. It is also important to mention that the community theatre forms seemed to have received more attention during the quarantine because the theatrical experience was somewhat noticeable during these productions.

Closer by Panna Adorjáni & Dániel Láng

Theater-maker Panna Adorjáni and musician Dániel Láng (both based in Cluj, Romania) have also tried to make up for the missing theatre experience in the form of online, ["musical, video chat performance for one user or users sitting in front of the same device"](#) entitled: *Closer*. The performance tries to bring three (sometimes more) people closer to each other through a flat monitor screen. The performance had three versions: "#1: The virus is us. For those nights when



Dániel Láng and Panna Adorjáni in the production *Closer*

you want to reflect on our responsibility in this situation. #2: I don't want to hear any more about the coronavirus. If you need eight minutes when we're together like you can't think about what's going on in the world. #3: After the coronavirus. If you dream about being heroes who build the new world." Every single spectator had the opportunity to choose among these three options, and the artists had already highlighted something very important from nowadays

even before the ten-minutes video chat performance: what people require in quarantine and during pandemics. The performance uses exactly what we have suffered and sometimes still suffer from: isolation and loneliness. At the same time, the two performers provide each spectator a theatrical experience playing with the possibilities of the camera and objects in their home. And if you choose the 3rd option – but certainly not only – you could forget what is going on around you for these 10 minutes.

***It Stays Between Us* produced by Szkéné Theatre, Budapest, directed by Viktór Szivák-Tóth**

Szkéné Theatre's community program for youths, *Rakpart 3* was also forced into online spaces last year, so they produced an online community game for a little over ten people. The story of *It Stays Between Us* was entirely created by a few participants; the two actors (Zoltán Szabó and Nóra Rainer-Micsinyei) improvised along the lines of the participants' ideas and thoughts. The number of participants was barely more than ten – if there were more of us, the feeling of togetherness could have been fragmented in the virtual space. The participants had to figure out the characters' names and relationships between them; we wrote

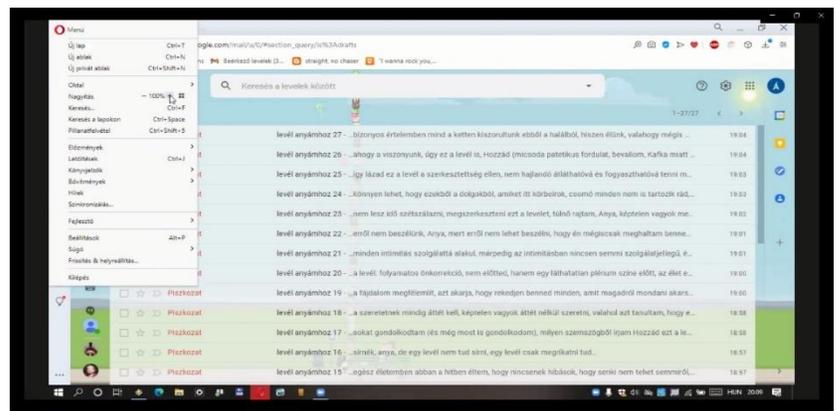


It Stays Between Us. Szkéné Theatre

the two character's CVs for a job advertisement and could also write their chat conversation in real-time. Although Zoom could not eliminate the lack of live presence, I could sense the unpredictability and the excitement of theatre in this play more than in some "stalking" theatre performances. The production directed by Viktor Szivák-Tóth also highlighted the importance of social presence and thinking together of which we have been largely deprived by measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. All the requirements of democracy – which is the essential part of a community theatre production – were also fulfilled in this community game; everyone was with a microphone and camera on for the whole performance. The story we created together really stayed between us, the unrepeatable nature of theatre was emphasized, a different pair of actors improvised based on the thoughts and ideas of participants each time.

Letter to My Mother by Ádám Fekete, produced by Trafó's e-Audience programme

Trafó House has always been a place of contemporary theatre trends and authenticity. So it is not surprising that they have responded to the new situation by launching their *e-Audience* series, which features [21 episodes from November 2020 until June 2021](#). All of them were



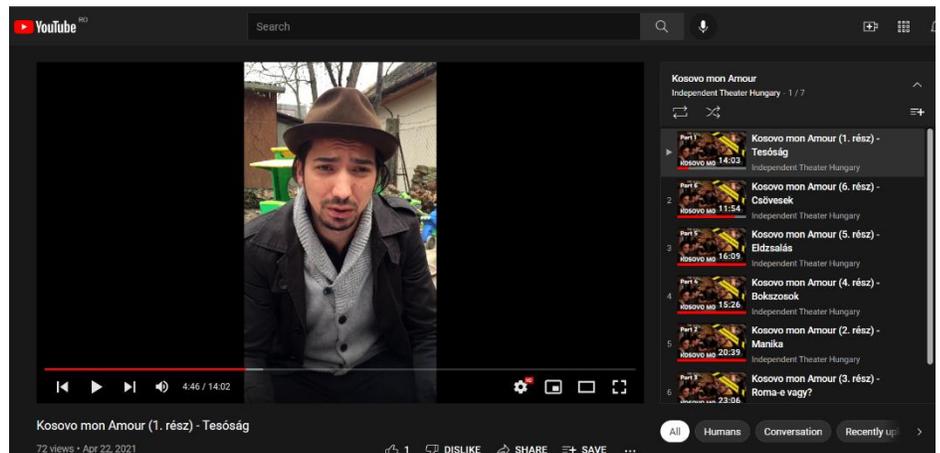
Letter to My Mother by Ádám Fekete. Trafó House.

performances not produced for the Trafó's theatre spaces but for our small screens and bedrooms, so they presented productions created specifically for the online space. From this series, I would like to highlight one live-streamed production: *Letter to My Mother* by Ádám Fekete. The performance lasted for about an hour, we didn't even see a performer, we didn't hear his voice, and not much happened, but he brought up a relevant and thought-provoking topic and form. We watched Ádám's computer screen as he logged into his Gmail account and opened the drafts full of unsent emails to his mother. He opened all of them one by one, edited them, wrote in, and pasted them into another. He deleted the draft at the end of each editing process, slowly getting rid of every single unsent letter to his mother. I had the feeling that these were my letters, which I had not sent and will never send. Day by day, we pile up the unspoken and unsent things to avoid conflicts, but all these hidden thoughts remain somewhere inside us as a draft. The only moment I realized that these letters are not mine was when Ádám wrote about his disability (he was born with oxygen deprivation) and about the society that finds it difficult to accept something different like this.

***Kosovo mon Amour*, produced by Independent Theatre Hungary, directed by Rodrigó Balogh**

The Independent Theatre Hungary, a Roma company based in Budapest, [has released the second volume of *Roma Heroes: Five European Dramas in September 2021*](#). The volume features five plays by Romani writers focusing on the social phenomena of the past eighty years affecting "Roma heroes" from five different countries.

One of the plays featured in this volume, *Kosovo mon Amour* (written by Jovan Nikolić and Ruždija Russo Sejdovič), reveals the circumstances of the war in Kosovo, in which local Roma community members were victims in a war between Albanians and Serbians. This play was scheduled to present on March 27th, on World Theatre Day, as a reader's theatre production by Independent Theatre at the RS9 Theatre, Budapest. But this could not happen because of the well-known situation, so they had to use the online medium to present the drama. Because of the quarantine, the actors (Rozália Farkas, Emilia Lovas, Tamás Szegedi, József Budai, Norbert Varga, András Kazári, Cristopher Pászik, Dániel Lakatos and Gellért Csiki) performed the scenes separately in their own homes or in the RS9 Theatre's buffet, since the central location of the drama is a pub called *mon Amour*. Rodrigó Balogh (director of the play), Márton Illés, Péter Illés, and Alina Vincze recorded and edited the so-called "wartime trash in six parts", then [they published an episode of the play every week on their YouTube-channel](#). Even though the production seems to be somewhat awkward, some visual illustrations are ridiculous (one of the characters says, "As long as the fridge is full, you won't starve." Then we see a few seconds long footage of a fridge). Over time the humor becomes clearer, the story and the social issues – especially the question of identity – unfold profoundly.



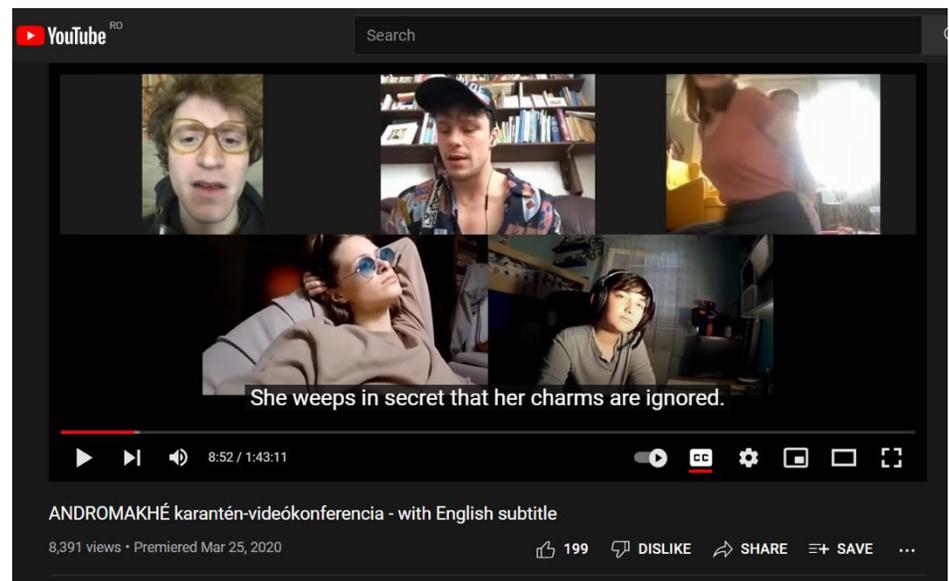
Kosovo mon Amour. Independent Theatre Hungary

Andromache (Orestes Loves Hermione, Who Loves Pyrrus, Who Loves Andromache, Who Loves Hector, Who is Dead) produced by Örkény Theatre, Budapest, directed by Ildikó Gáspár.

The Örkény Theatre's rehearsals of *Andromache* were canceled ten days before the opening night due to the coronavirus outbreak last March, so they recorded what they had come up with and made [a "documentary-online-rehearsal-videoconference"](#) as a theatrical credo. This streamed making-of movie was a rehearsal on Zoom that gave insight into the actors' private lives in the first weeks of the pandemic and also prepared us for the real-life production, which incidentally was performed in front of an audience last October.

In 2020, Hungarian theatres could perform in front of an audience for just a few

months during the summer. Hungarian theatres could again operate between November 2020 and May 2021, but without the audience's presence. Since May, they have been able to perform in front of the audience – without any other special regulations other than social distancing and wearing masks – but the pandemic makes the theatres' operations still unstable, as some performances are getting canceled "due to illness." But it is important to note that the productions (both online on eszinhaz.hu or szinhaztv.com and offline) problematize theatre structure and human relationships, which have undoubtedly changed during pandemics.



Andromache. Örkény Theatre

Dreaming of Being on Stage and Forgetting the Lines

33 Dreams, produced by Örkény Theatre Budapest, directed by Viktor Bodó

Viktor Bodó rarely appears with a new performance in Hungarian theaters nowadays, after *Diary of a Madman* (2016), *The Krakken Operation* (2018), and *The Kertész Street Shaxpeare Washer* (2019) he returned this year with a new play based on the company's and the invited artists' improvisations



33 Dreams. Örkény Theatre. Photo: Judit Horváth

in Örkény Theatre. In addition, Bodó was also seen on the big screen starring in a Hungarian film, [*Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time*](#) directed by Lili Horvát in 2020.

“ **The intense and hectic scenes follow one after another unpredictably.**

The performance, with surreal and absurd dream sketches and music (composed by Gábor Keresztes), is not easy to interpret, but perhaps this was not Bodó's intention because there is no concrete story. The artists vigorously tried to reflect on uninterpretable, incomprehensible things that surround and define us in

everyday life. In the beginning, an actor (István Znamenák) – who looks a bit like Bodó – enters looking for a piece to play in Örkény. A collective dream begins, with literal or distorted quotations from several plays, including *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, *Liliom*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Peasant Opera* (Béla Pintér Theater Company), *The Cats*, *The Csárdás Princess*, and there are also some references to the Krétakör Theatre's production of *BLACKland* (2004). The set's

(Zita Schnábel & Fruzsina Radványi) many doors seem to resemble the set of the legendary production directed by Árpád Schilling – of course, these doors have a much deeper metaphorical meaning, for instance, in Turkish culture, it is a stroke of bad luck to leave the house through a door other than the one you came in through. At one moment, these doors open, and [actors start singing the title song of *BLACKland*](#). Then Máté Borsi-Balogh unexpectedly appears as a savior and pushes the script into the hands of the actor playing the director. After that, come the dreams that have no end, nightmares flow into each other, there is no storyline, just some recurring motifs that have no coherent logic, and we can only see actors opening doors. The intense and hectic scenes follow one after another unpredictably; there is not a slight possibility to decode or contemplate anything during the hour and a half-long performance.

The production refers to the situation of the theatre and the world today, as there is nothing like *BLACKland*, *Peasant Opera*, or *Three Sisters* these days. It is difficult to find a theatrical form of expression that can comprehensively interpret our political and social reality and reflect on these crises since it is challenging to cope with all these events happening around us that are like nightmares flooding from news and social media.

Theatre of Death

The Dead of Kál, produced by Örkény Theatre Budapest, directed by András Dömötör, adapted from János Térey's novel by András Dömötör and Bence Bíró



Dead of Kál. Katona József Theatre. Photo: Dániel Dömölky

János Térey's name is certainly not unfamiliar to Hungarian and perhaps to foreign professionals too. The successful production *Nibelung Residency* (2004) linked to Térey's name was a subcultural show directed by Kornél Mundruczó with the company of Krétakör, performed at the then out-of-use Sziklakórház (Cave

Hospital) on the hillside at the Buda Castle. János Térey was a Hungarian writer, poet, playwright, and translator who died at 49 in 2019 due to a sudden health problem. Many of his plays have

been performed at the prestigious Hungarian theatres: Katona József Theatre Budapest, the National Theatre Budapest, Radnóti Theatre, Örkény Theatre, etc.

András Dömötör, director, and Bence Bíró, dramaturg, adapted Térey's novel, *The Dead of Kál*, which was premiered in September 2021 at the Katona József Theatre's Kamra Studio. *The Dead of Kál* can be considered "a satirical and ruthlessly critical" theatre-novel because the main character is the fictional Füst Milán Theatre's young and increasingly popular actor. His career-building journey is revealed during the story from filming the zombie-apocalypse movie in Kál Basin (a hilly area to the north of the Balaton Lake), through the success of *Trianon Hamlet* production, to the rehearsal and failure of the interpretation of *The Robbers* by Friedrich Schiller. However, the protagonist's real tragedy is not the theatre nor even the "undead" life. The problem is his weak relationships, professional and personal failures, which is the main thread of the performance. While Térey used Katona Theatre, Radnóti Theatre, and Örkény Theatre as the basis for the novel's Füst Milán Theatre, the performance is a self-critical reflection only on the Katona Theatre.

“ **One actor switches between multiple roles, which makes the performance stunningly vibrant and chaotic at the same time.** ”

The whole set (András Dömötör, Eszter Kálmán, Géza Szöllősi) is a red, velvety double-cross that gives the feeling of an upscale art theatre, the audience sits around that, and most of the shooting scenes are set up on the head of the cross, in front of a green screen, in a miniature diorama of Kál Basin. The result of these scenes, the ridiculous, poor-quality part of the zombie apocalypse, a trashy horror movie is projected for the audience (video: Marcell Török, Réka Nagy, Bálint Kovács).

Only eight actors (Vivien Rujder, Andrea Fullajtár, János Bán, Ferenc Elek, Péter Takátsy, István Dankó, Béla Mészáros and Dávid Vizi) play the many characters from the novel who are all related to the protagonist, Csáky Alex (Bence Tasnádi). One actor switches between multiple roles, which makes the performance stunningly vibrant and chaotic at the same time. The horror movie shooting, the theatre rehearsals, and Csáky's life run parallel, the performance lasts almost four hours, and it constantly shifts from realistic situations to abstract storytelling.

Theatre for Adults? – Two New Shows by Róbert Alföldi

Joy and Happiness by Csaba Székely produced by Latinovits Theatre Budaörs, directed by Róbert Alföldi. *Friivol*, produced by Átrium, directed by Róbert Alföldi and choreographed by Bertalan Vári

In June, the Hungarian government passed a law banning the showing of "any content portraying or promoting sex reassignment or homosexuality" to minors in Hungary.

Tamás Jászay wrote about the major impact this law had on theatres and how it affected the Hungarian LGBTQ+ community [in the previous issue of the Hungarian Letter of News](#).



Joy and Happiness. Latinovits Theatre Budaörs. Photo: Dániel Borovi

Csaba Székely is a Hungarian playwright from Transylvania (Romania), 2009 BBC's & British Council's International Playwriting

Competition with his English-language radio play *Do You Like Banana, Comrades?*. He has written an award-winning trilogy of plays – *Mineflowers*, *Mineblindness* and *Mindewater* – which have been produced at several Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, Italian, Mari, and US theatres. These plays examine the village life and issues such as unemployment, alcoholism, corruption, and high rate of suicide among the Hungarian population in Transylvania. He was the author of the musical *Passio XXI* too, a contemporary tale of Jesus' last days, which was also directed by Róbert Alföldi at the László Papp Budapest Sports Arena in 2017.

The ironic and sophisticated play *Joy and Happiness* is also based on the Transylvanian-Hungarian reality and analyzes the life and problems of minorities living within a minority: the Transylvanian Hungarian gays. We can see the turning points in the social relationships of two homosexual men and two lesbian women, their everyday life, and conflicts.

In the first minutes, Zita (Andrea Spolarics) steps up to the microphone and explains to the audience that Transylvania's "wonderful inferior species, the gays, is the human's closest living relative, so it looks exactly like us." Then Zita becomes the headmistress of a school and fires the literature teacher, Ádám (Gábor Chován), whom she accuses of showing the students the film *Total Eclipse*, which is about "faggots." She also finds it unacceptable for a teacher to be gay. Spolarics will also switch to a neighbor and a nurse as events unfold. In the following scenes, we meet two



Frivol. Átrium. Photo by: Csaba Mészáros

women, Judit (Kata Pető) and Tekla (Petra Hertai), before and after a break-up, who love each other. Then the father, Elek (Tibor Mertz) chases his son Dénes (Kristóf Fröhlich) away because he comes out of the closet. Dénes flees to a village, where a local pubkeeper, Béla (Róbert Ilyés) houses him. The villagers don't look at this act without raising eyebrows, they also mention that Dénes is "different." The web of relationships within this

Transylvanian-Hungarian gay community are intertwined, everyone's problems are personal, but also collective – some of them manage to break out of it, others do not escape the shackles of this ignorant society.

The production *Frivol*, choreographed by Bertalan Vári, directed by Róbert Alföldi, and produced in collaboration with Varidance Company, shows Hungary's present in a distorted way, making the audience simultaneously laugh and feel anxious, and is not suitable for children under the age of 18. The performance is filled with Hungarian "contemporary folk dance," authentic music, and obscenity. In the beginning, figures dressed in folk costumes move grotesquely and sing a song of blessing under a cross, then the priest lifts a book, which is solemnly grounded in a large grinder

that reminds us of Dóra Dúró book shredding.¹ The play continues to build on traditions enriched with “lewd” elements, and the obsolete social order is accompanied by the males choosing males and the females choosing females. There is an episode, for instance, when a struggling man is dressed in women’s clothes. They choreographed nowadays’ taboos, love, having children, gender reassignment, victim-blaming, the suffering of violence into folk dance, and Alföldi pushes them to the limits.

Hungarian Directors as Guests in Their Homeland – Panni Néder and Árpád Schilling at the Budapest Autumn Festival

At the beginning of the year, it was revealed that the Hungarian government would not renew its contract with the capital, which expired in December last year. It means the government would no longer support Budapest's well-known spring and autumn festivals. Thus, for the first time in a long time, the 30th edition of the *Budapest Autumn Festival* was organized without the government's support, while the government-funded MÜPA-organized *Liszt International Cultural Festival* started a few days later. This contemporary festival – which has the former head of the Institute of Theory and Art Mediation at SZFE, Máté Gáspár, as head of programming – has therefore focused on small innovations to get contemporary artists to occupy the public spaces of Budapest, while they tried to find answers to the question of how elite culture can be for everyone, brought close to the people, and yet remain a part of high culture. Productions by “exiled” directors such as Árpád Schilling's piece in Zagreb, Croatia, and Panni Néder's production in Berlin, Germany have been invited to the festival. In recent years, Hungarian audiences have rarely seen the work of these two directors, [Schilling will return to Hungary in the next year with production in collaboration with Dollardaddies’ company.](#)

¹ Dóra Dúró – a Hungarian politician and the vice-president of the far-right nationalist party, Our Home Movement – said that the book, *A Fairy Tale for Everyone (Meseország mindenkié)* is a “homosexual propaganda” and she shredded it in a paper shredder. (<https://hungarytoday.hu/mi-hazank-duro-homosexual-propaganda-childrens-book-nazi-burning/>)



Pansion Eden. Zagreb Youth Theatre

Árpád Schilling and his family moved to France because of Fidesz's election victory in 2018. In the same year, he directed the production *Pansion Eden* at the Zagreb Youth Theatre, which is based on an actual event: [71 refugees lost their lives trapped in human traffickers' refrigerator trucks](#). The director and co-creators of this performance tried to investigate whether the criminals and people involved felt responsible or guilty based on the actor's improvisation (text by: Juli Jakab, Árpád Schilling, and Éva Zabezsinszkij). The victims don't appear

at the stage, nor do the traffickers. The artists were more interested in the people in the background of these events, who do not want to see the consequences of their businesses.

At a place called the Pansion Eden, they celebrate a marriage ceremony, which results in the two influential families uniting. At first, the good mood is disturbed only by minor personal problems, but the questions from the journalist attending this event make the atmosphere increasingly uncomfortable, especially when it turns out that the family is somehow involved in the recent terrible news. As the story unfolds, their lies are revealed, the masks of the characters disappear, and their true faces are uncovered. And the next morning, they have breakfast as if nothing had been discovered, as if nothing had happened during the previous night.

Panni Néder is a Hungarian director, writer, and performer living in Berlin who studied at the University of Theatre and Film Arts Budapest and The Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin. She directed several independent performances in Hungary and abroad, and she is passionate about devised and autobiographical theatre. The performance produced by nomerMaids group that was seen at the Budapest Autumn Festival, *When was the last time you had sex on top of a mountain?* is also an autobiographical production by three women (Panni Néder, Julia Bihl, and Andrienn Bazsó) from Hungary and Germany. The starting point for the production was a Hungarian director living in Germany who is about to direct a performance but questions whether what she wants to say and show is at all interesting. The three also constantly ask questions about politics, destinies, fears, personal issues, frustrations, priorities, and Eastern-European identity. They sing, dance, shout while telling stories about a Hungarian grandfather who went to Germany by a small cart; and current social issues like emigrants, racism, LMBTQ community, crisis, and dreams. They mix fourteen languages at a time to act as a reminder of the emigration feeling. The performance certainly and organically changes from performance to performance, keeping up with current social conditions and reflecting on current socio-political issues. “When was the last time you had sex on top of a mountain?” – they ask the audience at a point in the performance – “Symbolically, or in fact.” The production is also symbolic and factual, humorous and serious.



When was the last time you had sex on top of a mountain?. Photo: Pietro Jorge / Fenyvesi Lili

Young Directors: Kristóf Kelemen, Zita Szenteczki, Jakab Tarnóczy and Dominik Kabdebon

Kristóf Kelemen dramaturg, playwright, and director has become increasingly well-known in recent years among Hungarian professionals. He has experimented with many theatrical forms, and he is passionate about documentary theatre. After the three performances *While you are reading this title, we are talking about you* (2016), *Hungarian Acacia* (2017), and *Observers* (2019) produced by Trafó House, Kelemen directed *The Savage Detectives*, an adaptation of the novel by the Chilean writer, Roberto Bolaño in Radnóti Theatre where he works as a dramaturg. The three main characters, Arturo Belano (Dániel Baki), Ulises Lima (Ádám Porogi) and Juan García Madero (László Márk Sipos), founders of the Visceral Realism, decide to search for a missing poet, “the mother of Visceral Realism,” Cesárea Tinajero. Finding Cesarea is the key to making sure that art really exists. The director with Júlia Sándor dramaturg tries to point out, through the characters' failure of cognition, man's desire to break out of monotony, out of the familiar. The characters push their lives and goals in front of them, which seem to run out by the end of the story, as [Adél Kováts, the theatre's director, appears on projections pushing a block of ice across Budapest.](#)



Kristóf Kelemen.
Photo: Kriszta Falus

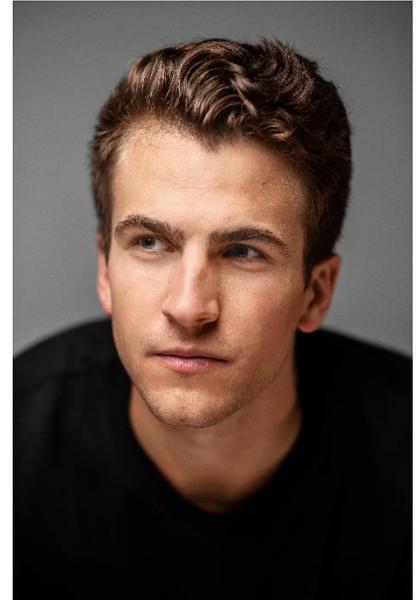
Zita Szenteczki graduated as a puppet theatre director at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2017. Since then, she has worked on several performances and projects, and she was one of the four founders (Andrea Pass, Zita Szenteczki, Máté Hegymegi, and Dániel D. Kovács) of *Narrativa Production*, which Pass and Szenteczki left this year. Most recently, Szenteczki was a performer of the production by three women (Anna Nemes, Lili Raubinek, Zita Szenteczki): *My Drive produced by the support of Füge Production, Jurányi House, Workshop Foundation, SÍN Culture Center, and Trafó House*. The performance has no main topic; they show the audience their own ideas and there is no pre-written drama in the classical sense. They start the performance by telling their dreams and future visions to the audience, and then the production



Zita Szenteczki.
Photo: Szabó R. János

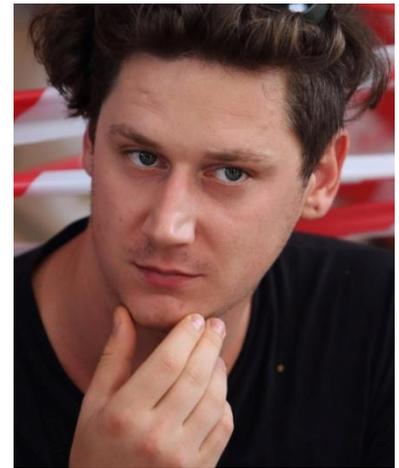
becomes a universal picture of womanhood. The complexities of being a woman and balancing between career and family are at the heart of the performance.

Jakab Tarnóczy is a Hungarian theatre director who is the founder of Zenthe Ferenc Theatre in Salgótarján (75 mi north-east from Budapest)—having studied theatre directing in the class led by Tamás Ascher. In his latest production, he focuses on Greek tragedies, and by adapting the dramas of the three great tragedians, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, he and the dramaturg Zsófia Varga wrote a mystical family story in a “trptych” play with the title: *God, Home, Family* produced by Katona József Theatre Budapest. Tarnóczy constructs a faint atmosphere of the production. The static scenes are filled with tension; events are magnified on large monitors on both sides of a glass box. In this glass box, a retro dining room (set: Botond Devich) is furnished, where a family tragedy takes place over several generations. Tarnóczy has created contemporary Hungarian myths based on Greek tragedies.



Jakab Tarnóczy.
Photo: Áron Süveg

Dominik Kabdebon is a theatre-maker, actor, and drama teacher who studied drama instruction at the University of Theatre And Film Arts Budapest. He is the director and one of the three authors (Kabdebon, Borbála Oláh-Bebesi, and Mihály Csernai) of so-called “theatrical board game” *ProTest – Road to Revolution* produced by Örkény Theatre Budapest. Incredibly, the creators came up with the idea for the performance before the freeSZFE movement, and they were inspired by *Blueprint for Revolution* by Serbian activist Srđa Popović. The book presents some non-violent movements and creative tools that were system-crashing. The authors and the participants together examine whether a dictatorial regime can suppress a movement or a non-violent revolution could triumph. The production’s aim is not to show non-violent tools for a revolution but to deal with the dilemmas of a movement.



Kabdebon Dominik.
Photo: Bea Szokodi

Freeszfe from a (Half-)Insider's Perspective

[In the previous issue of the Hungarian Letter of News](#), Tamás Jászay reported on Freeszfe in a very comprehensive way, which I would not do. Instead, I would like to briefly describe what happened and the movement's current situation from a personal perspective. Because I was studying with [Erasmus Programme](#) at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest between September 2020 and January 2021, I was part of the occupation of the university from the first day to the last, but I was not involved in the founding of the [Freeszfe Society](#) (yet), as I had returned to Transylvania and finished my studies at the University of Arts in Târgu Mures, Romania.

During the first weeks, I had an ambivalent feeling about being part of the occupation because I could not clearly picture myself as a person being part of it. This dilemma was mainly because I was an exchange student from a university abroad, but I had also gotten my student card, I became fully a student of the SZFE.

“**The painful thing, however, is that the career of hundreds of students was also destroyed.**”



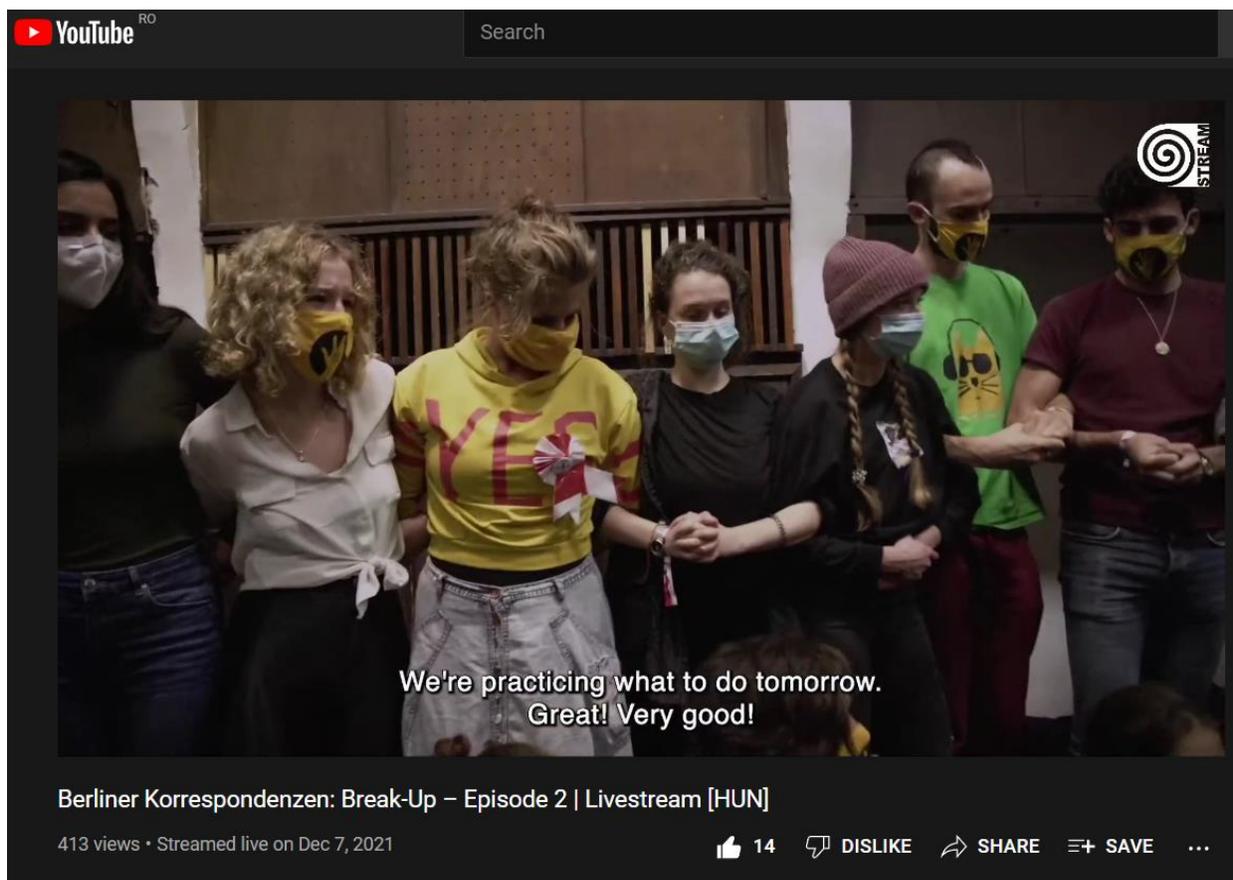
Roland Kelemen. Photo: Ádám Schor.

Then, all these feelings went away, as I was unable to accept that the statements of those close to the government hardly covered what I saw and was part of. The occupation of the university was not mindless anarchy – as the government-related media and the new leadership stated, but an energetic, organized, and non-violent movement – like in the *ProTest* production – based on a democratic system against the government's legislation that destroyed the university's autonomy.

From this grew the Freeszfe Society, which aims to perpetuate the university's 155-year tradition and spirit.

An important and memorable moment for me is the moment when Gábor Szarka, the new chancellor appointed by the Foundation for Theatre and Film Arts (the new leadership of the university), arrived, and the students refused to let him into the building. I had never done

anything like this before - to prevent someone from doing something; I had never been involved in that kind of resistance. This moment was shown in the short film that premiered on 7th December at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, where [the second episode of the Berliner Korrespondenzen's Break-Up series](#) took place.



Screenshot of the short movie by Freeszfe

In the opening speech, László Földényi (cultural critic, essayist, former professor of the SZFE) summarized the events of the freeSZFE movement and said: “This system destroyed my career. Not only mine but also that many of my colleagues. The painful thing, however, is that the career of hundreds of students was also destroyed.”

The documentary short film’s premiere was followed by a debate featuring Hungarian Jewish author and historian György Dalos, film and theatre director Kornél Mundruczó (both living in Germany), puppeteer and the president of the Freeszfe Society, Kata Csató, and moderated by the film director Anna Faur.

“In 2010, when the second Orbán-government came to power, there was a meeting shortly before Orbán’s election victory. He spoke of a beginning of a new era. He said it’s more like a change of government, less than a change of system. They call it a system of national cohesion. [...] Speaking of the system in 2010 meant that everything that had happened over the past 20 years that is the dissolution of the old system and the development of democracy. In 2010, something entirely new would start. Orbán also said that we have ended the chaos of the past 20 years which, in fact, was democracy. [...] In culture, something strange happened. The government treated the field of culture with a great deal of respect. It was clear that the government believed that culture had to play a huge role and it kind of expected that cultural activists would take a stand, would take a position. [...] [The head of Petőfi Museum of Literature that 80% of Hungarian literature can be thrown out because it’s decadent, westernized and not national.](#)” – stated György Dalos.



“The identity of a person is not a question of decision making. I feel deeply European, Central European, Eastern European. My roots are in Eastern Europe. This is nothing dynamic or flexible, this is nothing you can decide upon, but still, my European being meant a problem for me in Hungary now. [...] Concerning the situation in Hungary, [...] situations are very difficult for the people because there is no state without arts, but there is no art without a state either. And this kind of symbiosis is dominated by the political sphere.” – said Mundruczó.

“I want to say something of numbers. Currently, Freeszfe has 200 students. 140 of them study under the Emergency Exit program. Twenty of them have already received their diplomas: one class, approximately 10 people have got dramaturg diplomas at Ludwigsburg University, and

other 9 people have got their actor diploma at the Salzburg Mozarteum University this Summer. And we believe that we will again have final exams in the autumn, and more classes will graduate next Summer. There are 60 students in adult education courses. Six staff members are there, four of them are full-time employees, and two of them work part-time for four hours. All others teach free of charge since February. All of the teachers, all members of the leadership and everyone who is carrying this whole association on his back." – stated Kata Csató about Freeszfe's present and future.

Freeszfe's financial situation is not bright. The organization, therefore, organized a charity auction on 12th December, because, [as they wrote](#): "Although many people support our work with donations, buildings and free labor, we need money to make Freeszfe work. Many people think that we have so many supporters, we don't even need anything. The truth is, however, that the money we have in our account at the moment will provide that the work we started last year, and the courses can continue until March. But we can no longer produce graduation films or exam performances."

The auction included items such as the first Freeszfe-mask, photo collections, paintings, photographs signed by celebrities, manuscripts, literature lessons, and the workprint of Béla Tarr's film *Satantango*. The online auction raised 19 million 20 thousand HUF (58 thousand USD). This amount seems large, but it will only cover some of the future expenses, so the [fundraising](#) will continue.

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