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Disproportionate Parade and Show of Force

On The 10th International Theatre Olympics in Hungary

As the 10th International Theatre Olympics took place across Hungary between April 1 and July 1, the country became the epicenter of world theatre. The three-month-long extravaganza brought together 7.500 artists from 58 countries, offering 750 performances throughout Hungary. The massive event aimed to showcase the diversity and richness of theatre from all over the world, displaying performances by internationally renowned artists and companies such as Theodoros Terzopoulos, Suzuki Tadashi, Romeo Castellucci, Eugenio Barba, Heiner Goebbels, Krytian Lupa, Silviu Purcărete, Christoph Marthaler, Complicité, Cheek by Jowl, and several Hungarian companies.



Screenshot from the short film [The Journey of the Mask: a road movie](#).

Of course, the Hungarian audience would have been thrilled to finally see these artists in Hungary, but one question arises: at what cost? The Hungarian government gave 6.8 billion HUF (at the current exchange rate of about 20 million USD) to support the Olympics. For comparison, this year, the Ministry of Culture and Innovation gave 6 billion HUF (cca 17 million USD) to support performing art organizations, up from 37 billion HUF (cca. 109.6 million USD) a few years ago. As Noémi Herczog highlighted in the March 2022 issue of the Hungarian Letter of News, the Hungarian Theatre Olympics' budget amounted to twice as much as the St Petersburg Olympics in 2019.¹

¹ Noémi HERCZOG: „Theatre Olympics in Hungary – Coming soon... But Who Need It?“, *Hungarian Letter of News*. March 2022.

https://www.citd.us/files/ugd/40a24c_2d9ec624e82f4f5b82af1c522acbb59c.pdf



Romeo Castellucci: *Bros*. Guest performance at the National Theatre in Budapest within the program of the 9th MITEM Festival and 10th Theatre Olympics.
Photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó. Source: Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre Budapest)

The problem is not how much money this festival cost the taxpayers but how many independent artists and media outlets could have been supported with that money. It's concerning that the artistic director of the Olympics, Attila Vidnyánszky, holds so many leading positions that he effectively has a monopoly over the allocation of these funds. The other issue is that while bringing and showing aesthetically valuable foreign performances to Hungarian audiences is crucial, even for millions of forints, it is not the right time. Independent companies essential to Hungarian culture face financial ruin, becoming penniless, shutting down, and preparing to starve. A piece of financial information that makes it easier to see the disproportionate way in which independent theatre subsidies are cut: Béla Pintér and Company cover about 90% of their operating expenses from ticket sales; however, for the remaining 10% (50 million HUF, cca. 145,000 USD), they have submitted several grant applications, but the government 'awarded' them with just 14.4 million forints (cca. 42,000 USD) for this year. This leaves a little over a million forints (cca. 3,000 USD) per month for actors' salaries, bills, accountants, and everything else. They still lack 35 million HUF in their budget for their upcoming 25th jubilee season. They are trying to make up for this amount with the community's support because they cannot raise this amount from other sources.

Furthermore, one of the most prominent young companies, the *dollardaddy's*, received only 4.9 million forints (cca. 14,000 USD) for annual operation. In contrast, the National Theatre paid more than 75 million forints (cca. 220,000 USD) for two

guest performances of Heiner Goebbels' production of [*Everything That Happened and Would Happen*](#).²

Another issue of the Olympics was the organizers' lack of emphasis on effective communication and audience engagement. According to the reports, the performance of *Das Weinen (Das Wähnen)*, directed by Christoph Marthaler, did not attract much attention from the public at The National Theatre of Miskolc. A noticeable lack of spectators in the auditorium marked the show's second night.³ When I went to see the performance *Bros* by Romeo Castellucci, I met or saw more people I knew before the performance than I usually do in a week anywhere in Budapest. So that evening, it was primarily professionals who attended the performance or people who, by some miracle, could see through the program of over 700 performances. The audience organization and communication strategies failed to reach the intended audience.

The reasons for this failure could be various, such as inadequate marketing efforts or simply a lack of interest. Performances by some world-renowned directors came to Hungary, but for whom? Theatre professionals? Or an audience for whom the name of Romeo Castellucci or Christoph Marthaler probably means nothing? Why is seeing these foreign performances with aesthetics important to them?



Das Weinen (Das Wähnen), directed by Christoph Marthaler at the Schauspielhaus Zürich. Photo by Gina Folly.

² Cf. <https://www.tumblr.com/sleimshow/721364747675729920/%C3%A9rthet%C5%91bb%C3%A9v%C3%A1lik-a-f%C3%BCggetlen-sz%C3%ADnh%C3%A1zi-t%C3%A1mogat%C3%A1sok>

³ Otilia CSEICSNER: „A megváltó humora patikamérlegen” (The Savior’s Humor in Pharmacy Scale), *Színház.NET*, May 2023. <https://szinhaz.net/2023/05/22/cseicsner-otilia-a-megvalto-humora-patikamerlegen/>

Vidnyánszky had a vision of bringing together Hungarian theatres inside and outside the country's borders. However, some prominent theaters in Budapest declined to participate in the event. The four City-funded theatres, the Katona József Theatre, Örkény István Theatre, Radnóti Miklós Theatre, Trafó House, and a private theater, Átrium all refused to join the Olympics, citing ideological differences with Vidnyánszky's approach.

Two of these theatres' directors have spoken publicly about the refusal of the invitation: "I called a meeting of the Arts Council, and after much deliberation, we rejected the invitation with the following justification: given the current state of the theater industry, the losses suffered by theatres that are not favored by those in power, the ditch between the two sides is so deep, the situation fraught with unspokenness and defamation has been so aggravated that we consider it inconceivable to resolve it by participating in the large-scale Theater Olympics."⁴ – stated Gábor Máté, director of the Katona József Theatre.

Pál Mácsai, director of the Örkény István Theatre, also responded to a request from the *Index.hu*, drawing attention to the current cultural problems in Hungary, highlighting the situation of the independent theatre sphere. "The Örkény István Theatre received an invitation to the Theatre Olympics but decided not to participate. The reason for my decision is that by participating, we would be endorsing the content and creation method of the Performing Arts Law, as well as the content and methodology of the transformation of the University of Theatre and Film Arts. It is also not insignificant that this available fund in our field is so exceptional that even part of it could be used in the long term to solve fundamental problems in our profession, such as the situation of independent theatres and companies, whose smooth operation is one of the guarantees for the future of the Hungarian performing arts, alongside the practice of stone theatres. I made this decision with the consent of our company."⁵

The Ivan Franko Theatre in Kyiv initially also accepted but later refused its participation in productions of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and *Caligula* due to the presence of Russian participants, despite assurances from the organizers.

According to the theatre's statement on their Facebook page⁶, they were assured by the organizers four months ago that there would be no Russians at the meeting. Despite this, the Theatre Olympics program still included the production of *REX* and the film *Persepolis*, both directed by Valery Fokin, the artistic director of the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. The theatre stated, "The Olympics also

⁴ Noémi SÜREGI: „Mácsai Pál és Máté Gábor is nemet mondott a Vidnyánszky-féle Színházi Olimpiára” (Pál Mácsai and Gábor Máté also said no to Vidnyánszky's Theatre Olympics), *Index.hu*, 08. 05. 2022. <https://index.hu/kultur/2022/05/08/szinhazi-olimpia-vidnyanszky-attila-mate-gabor-macsai-pal/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/05/1/7400148/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/frankotheatre/posts/pfbid02p1gWWeLJsPrQD8f24rtMmXrubbyLR5EqZLzoEMSaQox9qC6LpyCoD4Aogn2FtqHnFI>

featured a screening of his film *Petropolis*, starring Anton Shagin, a Russian actor who actively supports the war against Ukraine.”

Vidnyánszky responded, "The truth is that I made a promise that there would be no Russian company at the Theatre Olympics, and indeed, there is no Russian company. The *REX*, mentioned by the company from Kyiv, is a production of the National Theatre, directed by Valery Fokin based on the text by Kirill Fokin. Valery Fokin is also a prominent member of the committee organizing the International Theatre Olympics. There have been no new developments in recent weeks that the Ukrainian side could not have known when they signed the contract because we have a valid contract. [...] I truly believe that culture is about communication, curiosity, and respect for one another. The other controversial piece, *Persepolis*, directed by Fokin, is an excellent film that was made before the war and carries a distinctly pacifist message. It expresses strong pacifist ideas, just like the vision realized in the performance of *Rex* which is anything but supportive of the war. The *Persepolis* was actually removed from the official program at the request of the Ukrainians and became part of the program of the University of Theatre and Film Arts."⁷

Independent Artists as Endangered Species: The End is Nearer than Ever.

The current cultural politics in Hungary systematically started wiping Hungarian independent theatre off the face of the Earth years ago. Independents are increasingly deprived of support, rendering their operations impossible, which results in local experimental theater-making being pushed down into the basements. Although independent theater faces an extinction-level event, a few may survive as outcasts.

This year, the Ministry of Culture and Innovation has given 6 billion HUF to support performing art organizations. The support of performing arts organizations is the form of funding that the government introduced after abolishing the cultural institutions' so-called 'corporate income tax relief system (TAO).' The TAO system was based on ticket revenues for the respective organizations and was financed from corporate taxes. Some organizations abused this funding form, but instead of investigating these cases, the government decided to eliminate the entire system. They replaced TAO with a funding form that does not specify who determines the allocation of funds or how an organization obtains government funding.

In early June, a [decision list](#) that stated how much funding each organization received was made public. The list showed an illogical distribution of funds, the only

⁷ Miklós CSEJK: "Vidnyánszky Attila: Azt az ígéretet tettem, hogy nem lesz orosz társulat a színházi olimpián, mint ahogy nincs is" [Attila Vidnyánszky: "I made a promise that there will be no Russian company at the Theatre Olympics, as there will not be"], *Magyar Nemzet*, 1st May, 2023. <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kultura/2023/05/vidnyanszky-attila-azt-az-igeretet-tettem-hogy-nem-lesz-orosz-tarsulat-a-szinhazi-olimpian-mint-ahogy-nincs-is>

decipherable criteria being loyalty to the government. No matter how prestigious, non-loyal companies were condemned with little to no subsidies. As a whole, artistically and professionally important artists received barely a few million. In contrast, unknown organizations with no significant professional achievements received amounts exceeding the annual operating budget of several independent companies.

Of approximately 1400 applications, 929 were awarded 0 HUF by the unknown board of trustees. Internationally renowned companies and theatres, including the Béla Pintér and Company, dollardaddy's, Éva Duda's Company, Hodworks, Proton Theatre, StereoAKT, TÁP Theatre, and many others, were awarded zero forints for funding. The [Káva Drama / Theatre in Education Association \(Káva Kulturális Műhely\)](#), with a 26-year history of providing theater and drama programs for youngsters and disadvantaged individuals, received a mere 2.5 million HUF (cca. 7,300 USD) for one out of five applications. Their remaining four applications were rejected with zero funding. Similarly, the Roundtable Theatre in Education Company, the pioneering TIE Company in Eastern and Central Europe with 31 years of operation and a mission similar to Káva's, received nothing for its four submitted applications.

In contrast, Attila Vidnyánszky, the aforementioned director of the Theatre Olympics and longtime Orbán supporter, submitted eight applications, all winning 46.5 million HUF (cca. 137,800 USD).

These independent theaters collectively addressed an open letter to the 'unknown board,' seeking answers regarding the criteria that destined their demise: "As a consequence of your decision, an important and inseparable part of our shared culture, independent performing arts will be annihilated. In this program, you have decided upon the taxpayers' money, therefore, not only us, marginalized organizations, but also the general public have the right to know the reasons behind your decision."⁸

The Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association also expressed its strong disapproval of the Hungarian government's handling of decisions that affect the future of independent theaters in Hungary. They do not only disregard inflation and other financial changes but also ignore the arguments and protests of the entire professional community: "We find it unacceptable that performing arts organizations without accreditation, whose operational grants are intended to ensure their survival, daily functioning, and artistic work, are not only disregarded in terms of inflation and changes in operating costs but also subjected to drastic reductions by the state, ignoring the arguments and protests of the entire profession. Meanwhile, under the name of 'support for performing arts organizations' – previously referred to as additional funding – there was a budget increase of 2 billion HUF (cca. 5 million

⁸ The joint open letter from independent theatres:

<https://www.facebook.com/SzinhaszFolyoirat/posts/pfbid02SJrULiWqkqgRC1tyQLGrqxdPgdf2FqcvPB92fGUvhXkArw9CMAT85n9bdFrFSfRI>

USD) available, a fraction of which would have been sufficient to address the situation of independent theater workshops.”⁹

Színház Magazine indicated with a memento that the end is nearer than ever. While some performances aren't written about due to an internal lack of funding, there are also performances they can't write about because a withdrawal of funding means the performances were never made.

“If something miraculous does not happen, starting in the fall, instead of publishing reviews and professional articles on our website, we will be forced to display statements like this:

At this very place, we would have published a review of an independent theater or dance performance.

But since the production did not take place due to the lack of funding, the article about it could not come into existence.

Let this 'black hole' serve as an eternal memento of the waste of our national treasures.”¹⁰

Stereo Akt Turned Ten

A New Cultural Hub, A Jubilee Festival, and A Hotel for Activists

Over the past ten years, Stereo Akt led by Martin Boross has visited 13 countries and 40 cities, created 21 theatrical productions, a documentary film, and two short films, organized seven flash mobs, and this winter, they will premiere their first feature film.¹¹ Additionally, on March 10th, in the 8th district of Budapest, Stereo Akt opened its own cultural hub and community space called the Stereo Workshop. The venue aims to overcome the general lack of space for performing arts companies by providing a rehearsal room and a community office for theater groups and artists. The venue primarily hosts performing arts creative processes, but it is also open to providing a home for any creation focusing on contemporary culture and community perspective.¹²

Their Facebook page highlighted the importance of solidarity between independent theatre groups, saying that „only a few can afford to sustain a place as a nonprofit organization on their own, and we are living in times when special emphasis should be placed on solidarity and sharing public burdens. That is why we have decided to

⁹ The Communiqué from The Hungarian Theatre Critics' Association: <https://kritikusceh.hu/a-szinhazi-kritikusok-cehenek-kozlemenye-a-szinhaztamogatasokrol/>

¹⁰ *Memento 1. – Editorial Communiqué*: <https://szinhaz.net/2023/06/08/memento-1/>

¹¹ Source: Martin Boross' Facebook page.

¹² Cf. Noémi HERCZOG: „New Venues: Füszi, Stereo-Művház, Gólem”, [Hungarian Letter of News, March 2023](#).

host resident teams, projects, and productions that are independent and contemporary art initiatives like STEREO AKT.”¹³

This spring, Stereo Akt celebrated its 10th anniversary, and as part of the festivities, they organized the STEREO10 Festival at their new venue. With the motto "A New Chapter", the festival featured Stereo Akt's productions and fifteen invited productions, including performances, city walks, installations, concerts, and various artworks that focused on the keywords of openness and community participation.

***Hotel of Change* – an activism documentary performance**

The *Hotel of Change*, presented in Tübingen last fall, opened its doors in Hungary on May 1st with the title *Remény Panzió* (lit. “*Pension of Hope*”), in which four actors (László Göndör, Máté Martinkovics, Emina Messaoudi, Veronika Szabó), disillusioned with the theatre, are looking for a new profession. They established a sanatorium addressing burnout, welcoming six Budapest activists as guests. The activists bring their personal stories to the stage: Jutka Bari fights for access to environmental resources, Rebeka Dóra Kajos for the respect of women's rights, Vera Kovács for housing for all, Csenge Lóczi for a more sustainable lifestyle, Gábor Csaba Márton for a world where one doesn't have to fear or feel anxious for being different from the majority, Katalin Törley – a teacher recently dismissed from Kölcsey Ferenc High School due to civil disobedience, who is also the founder of the 'Tanítanék' [I'd Teach] Movement – for students, teachers, and education. We can boldly declare: these people are heroes in Hungary of 2023. They do not give up, they do not leave the country, but they fight – voluntarily.



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<https://www.facebook.com/stereoakt/posts/pfbid02b6s83B8MExzpWPMTyRYrrgeEBTiDdCk9TgtVzSuKf4PwjRAJuaGbMCd6iJSfEFQZI>

Hotel of Change, directed by Martin Boross, produced by StereoAkt at Trafó House. Photo by Máté Bartha.

The actors introduce themselves by their names and then share their burnout stories. After that, one of the actors, László Göndör announces to the audience during a press conference: it is over; he is quitting acting. While the presence of the six civil activists suggests that the real struggle happens beyond the walls of the theater, the actors who are fictionally leaving their careers are using this production to show that theatre could be an excellent tool to make society better and more livable.

Actors and activists come together in a performance that highlights the relationship between art and activism. Examining these two fields shows that they often go hand in hand in working toward a larger goal. However, this work often leads to burnout. And the Pension's staff (the actors) try to understand through activists what gives them hope nowadays.

In Stereo Akt's new production, Martin Boross creates a fictional space on the stage of Trafó House, where the actors pay special attention to the comfort of the exhausted activists. They share experiences and discuss their issues and causes, reflecting on them, after which they return to the struggles of the outside world with renewed vigor.

War on Hungarian Stages

Contemporary Ukrainian Plays at Átrium

On December 15, 2022, as a joint project of the Átrium Theatre and SzínMűHely Produkció Mária Mayer-Szilágyi organized the translation and public reading of three plays by contemporary Ukrainian playwrights at the Átrium in Budapest. The reading directed by Sardar Tagirovsky, with Tamás Fodor among the performers, was a co-production between SzínMűHely Produkció and Átrium and received support from the Hungarian National Cultural Fund (NKA), Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE), and Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theater Development (CITD).



A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War, reading directed by Sardar Tagirovsky, produced by SzínMűhely Production at the Átrium. Photo by Csaba Mészáros.

The production revolves around the theme of war and people's struggle for survival. Olesia Morhunets-Isaenko's play *Long Walk*, Olena Astaseva's *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War*, and Andriy Bondarenko's *Survivor's Syndrome* all primarily focus on the events surrounding February 24, 2022, the day of the outbreak of Russian-Ukrainian war.

Olesia Morhunets-Isaenko's play, *Long Walk*, captures the feeling of the first days of war through news reports and social media messages. The personal experience is mixed with public information, making the reader/audience feel like they are in the middle of the war. The scenes are structured by hours, times of day, and days, resembling a diary or blog. Rather than reworking the events, the play presents unchanged facts, creating a captivatingly fast-paced rhythm for the text. The main characters, a couple, must leave their home to reach a sheltering village, where they momentarily find peace. However, we soon face new anxieties: a besieged village and the victims of bombings.

Elena Astaseva, a member of Kyiv's Theatre of Playwrights, creates an episodic text titled *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War*. It mixes thoughts, memories, and dialogues, seeking to recreate as accurately as possible the circumstances of terror caused by the war. Initially, the narrator uses humor to cope with the tragedies, such as when she searches on Google for actions to take during the bombings. She reads online answers and decides to simply lie down on the couch, thinking that "nothing's going to help me anyway"¹⁴. Then, she takes inventory of all the things that have happened so far. This inventory of thoughts becomes an encyclopedia, a dictionary of emotions and thoughts during wartime.

¹⁴ Elena ASTASEVA: *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War*. Translated from the Russian by John Freedman.

Andriy Bondarenko's, also a member of the Kyiv's Theatre of Playwrights, the *Survivor Syndrome* play is essentially a monologue with an emphasis on freeform poetry. The play focuses on denial, highlighting that everything that once existed has changed: "Where are we? Our places and spaces have been replaced, spread out, confused. Train stations function, but they are no longer train stations. Cafes function, but they're not cafes. People sit and drink, but that is no longer drinking."¹⁵ The war carries this sense of denial, and Bondarenko's text draws attention to it.

Sardar Tagirovsky's production works with a reduced toolkit, adapting to the poetic world of the texts. The actors are seated apart, isolated from each other in the audience, symbolizing the separation caused by the war.

These three Ukrainian plays were also published on the website of Színház magazine on 12th May. The plays' Hungarian translations were graced with a foreword penned by John Freedman, the editor of the English-language anthology, *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War: 20 Short Works by Ukrainian Playwrights*: "The three writers represented here exemplify the renaissance that Ukrainian culture has experienced since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Andriy Bondarenko is a philosopher and journalist, but his true calling is as a playwright. Olesia Morhunets-Isaenko is an award-winning filmmaker and a talented author. Olena Astaseva worked as a bookseller and a copy editor in the past but has flourished recently as a playwright and prose writer. Their unique voices join to chronicle the blunt-force trauma that they and their country have endured since that fateful Thursday on 24 February 2022."¹⁶

Blue – Yellow, a Special Theatre Operation – Charity Reading at KuglerArt Gallery

Another reading took place last year, which was an important act of solidarity with Ukrainians in Hungary.

Kamilla Fátyol is an actress who was a member of the Maladype Company for ten years and currently is the artistic director of KuglerArt Gallery, a cultural forum that focuses on the traditions of Roma culture in Central Europe. She began to fear the terror that was happening in Ukraine after the outbreak of the war. Since she is the primary caretaker of her children, she could not travel to the scene. Her



¹⁵ Andriy BONDARENKO: *Survivor's Syndrome*. Translated from the Ukrainian by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus.

¹⁶ "Új e-dráma: kortárs ukrán drámák – John Freedman előszavával" (New E-Drama: Contemporary Ukrainian Dramas - With A Foreword by John Freedman), *Színház.NET*, 12th May, 2023. <https://szinhaz.net/2023/05/12/uj-e-drama-kortars-ukran-dramak-john-freedman-eloszavaval>

colleagues responded to the events by creating a special theater operation called *Kék-Sárga (Blue-Yellow)* at the KuglerArt Szalon in Budapest. "15,000 mothers and children fled to Transcarpathia to escape the bombings. We, mothers, support them." – they wrote in the production's description, and a charitable production was created to support the mothers and children in Transcarpathia, Ukraine.

Fátyol collected and composed numerous Facebook posts, reports, news, articles, subjective reflections, and literary texts (including excerpts from *Night Shelter* and two poems), supplemented by texts written by János Vági specifically for this production. The production aimed to highlight the horrors that Russia inflicted upon innocent Ukrainians.

The act's primary aim was not to create theatre, but to donate and help. This was reflected in the performance's subtitle, "special theatre operation," and in references to "special military operation," a term Putin and his country use to hide bloody massacres.

The production grew into a countrywide event, and on The International Day of Peace in September of 2022, it was simultaneously staged at the National Theatre of Győr, Weöres Sándor Theatre in Szombathely, House of Arts and Literature in Pécs, Katona József Theatre in Budapest, BATÁR – Józsi Balog Company in Szeged, and National Theatre of Szeged. Local actors read the texts collected and edited by Fátyol, which continue to expand and change.

***Tale of the Soldier* – a performance directed by Klaudia Gardenö at Trafó House**

The Russian composer Igor Stravinsky and Swiss writer Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz created a 'theatrical work,' *The Tale of Soldier*. Directed by Gardenö Klaudia and conducted by Gergely Dubóczy at Trafó House, the performance combines music, dance, and storytelling. Klaudia Gardenö, a young director, complements these elements with puppets. Trafó's "grotesque opera without arias" benefits from its circus-like precision, but what sets it apart is that the audience inevitably associates it with the bloody war in our neighborhood. Even though the production makes no effort to drag the current events and geopolitics onto the stage, we realize that soldiers face similar horrors in every age and every war.

The performance tells the story of a soldier who loses his comrades in the war and tries to escape from the mountain of corpses to return to his beloved ones. He is confronted by the Devil (played by Pál Mácsay) and sells his violin in exchange for wealth. The performance begins with the Budapest Sound Collective Orchestra dressed as soldiers entering a dark, black, foggy stage covered with legs, hands, grenades, and helmets. Four actors (László Hevesi, Toma Hrisztov, Attila Lestyán, and Attila L. Nagy) – also as soldiers – begin to tell the story of a soldier: “Thanks to Mr. Afanasyev, Ramuz, and Stravinsky, let Josiph’s, the soldier’s mama be heard to comfort the hunger and the orphans, as his comrades told it in the hell of the Crimean War.” Then, Bendegúz Bartha charismatically appears as a Soldier who guides the audience through his story. Pál Mácsai, as the Devil, playfully embodies every character he takes on, periodically revealing his true evil self from beneath the abstracted figures.



The Tale of Soldier, directed by Klaudia Gardenö at Trafó House. Photo by Iringó Simon.

The performance presents something traditional in a new form through dance, music, storytelling, and puppets. We meet familiar folk tales where good triumphs and the soldier forces the Devil into retreat with lead bullets. But at the end of the performance, we gaze at a mountain of corpses floating in white light for minutes. Then, each soldier walks out through the same door they entered, the only difference being that the Devil awaits them backstage, watching the orchestra until they stop playing.

Independent theatre-makers in ‘stone theatres’ – Szabolcs Hajdu directing his new play *A legközelebbi ember (The Closest Person)* at the Radnóti Theatre

The Radnóti Miklós Theatre presented four performances in the 2022/2023 season. Their aim was clear: to stage as many contemporary plays as possible. Balázs Szálinger’s play *Kályha Kati*, which deals with the trauma of the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon when the areas of Hungary were allocated to neighboring countries after World War I, was directed by Gábor Rusznyák. Attila Bartis’ novel *A vége (The End)* was adapted by Csaba Mikó and directed by István Péter Nagy. The last performance of the season was written and directed by Szabolcs Hajdu.

Szabolcs Hajdu is a renowned writer, director, actor, and founder of the Látókép Ensemble. He is mostly known for award-winner films such as *White Palm* (2006)

and *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010)). In recent years, he and the Látókép Ensemble created several successful productions, such as *It's Not the Time of My Life* (2015) – which was adapted to a multiple award-winning film –, *Kalman's Day* (2016) and *One Percentage Native American* (2019). He was initially best known as a filmmaker who produced films with small budgets and independent financing. He also created theatre performances, films, and radio plays as an independent and with the group Látókép Ensemble (which also seems to be disappearing).

Although Szabolcs Hajdu is rightly counted among the outstanding Hungarian artists, his list of works created in Hungary is getting thinner and thinner, primarily due to the lack of state funding. So in a sense, he has been 'cast out' of the Hungarian state. In September 2022, Hajdu said in an interview, "I do not want to be a part of this system, neither as a resistor nor as an opportunist. (...) I will seek resources from elsewhere for my next projects, and the film will not have any connection to Hungary or even Hungarian topics in any way. Nothing that is here. Frankly, I am no longer interested in the fate of this country."¹⁷ As Ádám Fekete and Péter Kárpáti, independent playwrights and directors, presented their performances at the Örkény István Theatre¹⁸, Szabolcs Hajdu returned to direct at the Radnóti after the 2019 production of *Gloria*. The question arises: will independent artists only survive by creating in so-called 'stone theatres'?

Hajdu's latest work at Radnóti Miklós Theatre carries themes familiar in Szabolcs Hajdu's work: intimacy, everyday people, dissonances, and conflicts that pop up in banal situations. In the performance of the *Closest Person*, it is as if we walked into some people's lives, observing their micro-tragedies with a cinematic close-up while sitting in their aura. The focus is on an everyday situation where Krissz (Dániel Baki) and Martin (Ádám Porogi), along with their partners Elvira (Eliza Sodró) and Petra (Nóra Blanka Berényi), arrive at a family holiday home to go through decades of accumulated clutter and junk, sorting out what to distribute among themselves and what to throw away to sell the house. It is perhaps not a spoiler that this decluttering process never ends, as they all procrastinate and dilly-dally in this daunting. Then Bob (Szabolcs Hajdu) appears, whom Petra met on the train and invited to this event for some reason. The focus of the performance slowly shifts from physical chaos to emotional and spiritual turmoil, and with the appearance of Bob, who radiates wisdom, the commotion grows.

¹⁷ János PÁLINKÁS: "I Am No Longer Interested in The Fate of This Country", *Józsefváros Újság*. September 23, 2023. An interview with Szabolcs Hajdu: <https://jozsefvarosujsg.hu/mar-nem-erdekel-a-sorsa-ennek-az-orszagnak>

¹⁸ Cf.: Noémi HERCZOG: „A Refreshing Venue: Örkény Theatre”, *Hungarian Letter of News*. March 2023.



Legközelebbi ember, directed by Szabolcs Hajdu at Radnóti Theatre. Photo by Dániel Dömölky.

Rudolf Lábán Award – The Independent Professional Award for The Best Hungarian Contemporary Dance Performance

In the fall of 2005, Trafó House and MU Theatre jointly established an independent professional award to acknowledge and promote the best Hungarian contemporary dance works and artists. The award, named after Rudolf Lábán, the foremost innovator of European modern dance in the 20th century, is presented annually by a board of independent aestheticians, critics, and journalists¹⁹ who have been actively observing and analyzing the Hungarian contemporary dance scene for years.

In November 2022, Artus – Gábor Goda's Company, Adél Juhász, Máté Mészáros, Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas, Imre Vass, Sub.Lab.Pro., Milán Újvári, Ábris Gryllus, György Philipp, and Áron Porteleki were nominated for the award. For the May 2023 award, the works of Anna Biczók, Adrienn Hód, Viktor Szeri, and Boglárka Börzsök were nominated.

¹⁹ The award's board of trustees in 2023: Szilvia Sisso ARTNER – journalist, critic; Livia FUCHS – dance historian, dance critic; Zsuzsanna KOMJÁTHY – dance critic; Csaba KRÁLL – dance critic, editor; András RÉNYI – aesthete; László SZÁZADOS – art historian, editor; Ákos TÖRÖK – critic.



Sub.Lab.Pro: *Ring*, choreographed by Jenna Jalonen at Trafó House. Photo by Dániel Dömölky.

One of last year's winners was the piece [game changer](#) by three well-known artists of the Hungarian dance scene: Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas, and Imre Vass. The performance starts with an audience discussion, where the artists satirize themselves, mixing seriousness with clichés and self-irony. The audience plays along, asking the artists about the performance they have not (yet) seen. Together, the artists and the audience analyze the non-existent play (which they refer to as if they'd already seen it), creating the 'play' ad hoc. Then, at some point, they 'restart' the performance, rehearsing, experimenting, brainstorming, and adding more and more game-changing moments to the performance while examining dance methods and stage presence from the perspective of the dancers and the audience. This clearly makes the spectator a co-creator.

The other winner of the Lábán Award of 2022 was an artistic group founded by Péter Juhász and Jenna Jalonen, the [Sub.Lab.Pro](#). In their performance [Ring](#), choreographed by Jenna Jalonen, a Finnish artist based in Budapest, young dancers explored the origins of the circle dance to find the 21st-century energy source of this dance form. Regardless of nationality, historical period, or geographical location, all kinds of circle dances were combined in the performance, allowing the audience to witness medieval ritual and prayer dances, hora, folk dances from the Carpathian Basin, and even urban dance. The performance is a harmonious blend of past and present, order and disorder, in which the performers not only perform and explore simultaneously but also truly pay “homage to our ancestors of dance.”²⁰

In 2023, two significant dancers and choreographers in Hungarian contemporary dance and theater artists, Viktor Szeri

²⁰ The show's website: <https://sublab.pro>



Viktor Szeri: *fatigue*. Photo by Szabó R. János

and Adrienn Hód (Hodworks), received awards.

Viktor Szeri's solo performance, the [fatigue](#) focuses on a deeply personal matter that rings a bell for every artist at least once in their career: fatigue, tiredness, and burnout. Viktor Szeri demonstrates and represents these states of mind through his movements; when the music and visuals speed up and then slow down, he just stares blankly at the audience. The performance is built on the will to do nothing. Through the lens of burnout, he examines the boundaries of the performer's body while also experimenting with how the audience can connect with a slow, mesmerizing performance.

[Hodworks](#) company, led by choreographer Adrienn Hód, in collaboration with the company-in-residence of Theater Bremen, the [Unusual Symptoms](#) produced the [Harmonia](#), a contemporary dance performance that explores the harmony of human relationships and the theatrical and social context of the body with the participation of dancers with disabilities. Adrienn Hód's production focuses on the dancers' individuality rather than on pity. We encounter not only the movement limitations of dancers with disabilities but also the vulnerability of non-disabled dancers. On stage there is equality; everyone has a handicap, which eventually becomes irrelevant in the performance. The *Harmonia* provides a space for the audience to reflect on how they observe the bodies and postures of their fellow human beings.

In 2022, the special prize was shared between three musicians and composers, Ábris Gryllus, György Philipp, and Áron Porteleki, who have actively participated in dance companies' works, making a significant artistic contribution to their performances. And in 2023, Boglárka Börcsök was awarded a special prize for her documentary, [The Art of Movement](#), and her performance installation [Figuring Age](#), both artworks about elderly dancers.

***Idol* – a contemporary dance performance with non-normative and able-bodied performers, produced by ArtMenők (ArtMan Association) and Hodworks at Trafó House**

The dance performance titled [Idol](#), choreographed and directed by Adrienn Hód featuring ArtMenők, a group that works with and supports people with all kinds of differences, premiered at the Trafó House at the end of May.



Idol, directed-choreographed by Adrienn Hód, produced by Artmenők and Hodworks at Trafó House. Photo by Gergely Ofner

After collaborating with disabled artists in their previous project called *Harmonia*, Adrienn Hód continues this kind of work further in *Idol*. The director-choreographer approaches this form by humbly adapting even physical limitations into advantages. The performance presents a powerful and emotional image of the encounter and connection between non-normative and non-disabled people. By requiring the audience to recognize phenomena that sometimes remain hidden, we realize there are no limits to self-expression.

From the vulnerability at the beginning of the performance, a unified and structured movement gradually emerges where all the artists create and communicate together. The gestures slowly transform into choreography, and instead of focusing on differences, dance, and partnership connect the artists. The dancers create stunning moments with unique and superb movements.

The *Idol* creates a focus on the uniqueness and the inclusive artistic practice that the ArtMan Association has represented for a long time.

Balázs Dohy – a young emerging director

Balázs Dohy initially studied dramaturgy at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. Following the university's takeover, he pursued his education through the Emergency Exit program of the Freeszfe Association. In 2021, he obtained a master's degree in theatre dramaturgy at the Academy of Performing Arts Baden-Wuerttemberg in Ludwigsburg. He was also a member of the [Krétakör Free School](#), a group of high school students led by Árpád Schilling. From 2021 to 2023, he participated in the [LINKAGES: Hungary](#) project organized by Philip Arnoult's [Center](#)

[for International Theatre Development](#) (CITD), as part of a cohort alongside Andrew Freeburg and Sasha Kostyrko.

***The Politicians* by Wolfram Lotz, directed by Balázs Dohy at the Katona József Theatre**



The *Politicians*, directed by Balázs Dohy at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest. Photo by Dániel Dömölky.

The government is punishing The Katona József Theatre, funded by the City of Budapest, for being politically on the “other side” by withdrawing all possible funding. Despite this, in 2022, the theatre launched the Sufni Project to support young artists, offering two aspiring directors the opportunity to create a production under the mentorship of Gábor Zsámbéki at the 40-year-old Katona József Theatre during the 2022/2023 season. One of the winners of the open competition was Júlia Bagossy, who presented her adaptation of *Medea* last December, which tells a broken family story from the point of view of Medea and her children. The husband leaves his wife and children for another woman, leaving Medea so broken and lost that she turns against her children. Bagossy rewrote Euripides' play based on her own experiences and memories. While in the original text, the two children are not fully present – they only come in and go out – in the Katona Theatre’s production, both become central pillars of the story. As a result, the perspective from the children's point of view is stronger for the audience as well.

The other winner was dramaturg-director Balázs Dohy, who directed Wolfram Lotz's post-dramatic play, *The Politicians*, in April of this year. *The Politicians* is a post-dramatic text based on ideas and thoughts built on associations of the word “politician.” It’s a rhythmic repetition of words and fragments of sentences that are sometimes meaningless, sometimes tragically understandable. Lotz’s cascades of

text avoid the clichés, instead deconstructing and playing with the meanings of the word politician. This extremely musical text focuses on thoughts about what politicians can do, may do, must do, should do, and should not do at all. Although the German playwright Wolfram Lotz is little known in Hungary, Dohy previously directed an audio play by Lotz, *The Ridiculous Darkness*, in 2021 at the Szentendrei Teátrum in Hungary.

Dohy, along with dramaturg Attila Komán and poet Márió Z. Nemes, adapts Rita Hudáky's Hungarian translation of *The Politicians* into a Hungarian context. The pace of the 80-minute performance never dwindles, and the scenes seamlessly intertwine. It confronts us with the messy events around politicians and our fragmented world.

***Disappearing* by Elise Wilk, directed by Balázs Dohy, produced by SzínMűhely
Production at the Szkéné Theatre**

Elise Wilk, a multiple award-winner Transylvanian Saxon-Romanian playwright, is one of the most performed playwrights of Romania's young generation. Her plays are performed in German, Romanian, and Hungarian all over Europe. Currently, she is teaching playwriting at the University of Arts in Târgu Mureș.

Her play, *Disappearing*, was first directed by Hungarian director Aba Sebestyén at the Yorick Studio in Târgu Mureș, Romania, in 2019. The play was written at Sebestyén's request, originally in Romanian, and was translated into Hungarian by Mária Albert. The *Disappearing* tells the story of a Transylvanian Saxon family from 1944 to 2007, exploring family events, deportation, emigration, and death during three historical periods. The play is divided into three parts with the major historical events of the last seventy-five years in Romania: the deportation of the Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union (1944-1945), followed by their mass emigration after the revolution of 1989 (1989-1990), and Romania joining the European Union (2006-2007). During all three periods, the German minority in Romania drastically decreased.



Dissapearing, directed by Balázs Dohy at the Szkéné Theatre.

Director Balázs Dohy has a personal connection to the story of this play: his great-grandmother was also of Transylvanian Saxon origin. He places the family's story in a theatre-in-the-round setting, where the audience surrounds the space, sitting just a few centimeters from the actors, which creates an intimate atmosphere. The minimal use of props and the lack of any big stage design also make the audience focus on the story's depth. The long monologues, narrations, and short, film-like scenes jump from one time period to another, while the young actors (Emőke Zsigmond, Fanni Wrochna, Dorottya Gellért, Márk Márfi, Gergely Váradi, and Vince Juhász) walk in and out of the square space, keeping the rhythm for the whole performance.

A text by Csaba Székely, a Hungarian playwright from Transylvania canceled at Vígszínház

Kalandfilm (Adventure Film) by Csaba Székely

[Csaba Székely](#) is an award-winning Hungarian playwright from Transylvania. His debut play, [Do You Like Banana, Comrades?](#) was awarded the regional prize for Europe in the BBC's International Radio Playwriting Competition in 2009, and in 2013, the play won the Richard Imison Award for Best Script by a New



Csaba Székely. Photo: Márton Merész

Writer.²¹ Since then, his plays and staged performances have received numerous awards in Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Poland. His plays have been already translated into English, Romanian, Slovakian, Italian, and Mari.

In recent years, several of his texts have been performed both in Hungary and Romania. Among others, Róbert Alföldi directed Székely's contemporary take on Jesus' last days, *Passio XXI* at the Budapest Sports Arena in 2017; his play *Joy and Happiness* about Transylvanian-Hungarian gays at the Latinovits Theatre in Budaörs in 2021; and *Mária országa (The Country of Mary)*, based on a lesser-known chapter in the history of medieval Hungary, at the National Theatre of Szeged in 2021. He has maintained multiple collaborations with the director Aba Sebestyén since their highly successful and awarded production of *Mineflowers* in 2011, which was a co-production between the [National Theatre of Târgu Mureş](#) and the Yorick Studio.

Csaba Székely and Réka Kincses, a Hungarian film and theatre director living in Germany, recently collaborated at the invitation of the Vígszínház in Budapest. The play, titled *Kalandfilm (Adventure Film)*, explored Hungary's current social divisions and was written in parallel with rehearsals based on personal stories and improvisations. It was to be directed by Réka Kincses and scheduled to premiere in the fall at the Pesti Theatre, which functions as the Vígszínház's studio theatre. According to Székely's statement on Facebook²², the theatre management read the half-finished script and decided not to proceed with this performance: "I would like to clarify here that **whatever the official communication may state, the real reason is nothing other than cowardice.** (...) I find it important to note that this performance did not seek to deepen the gaps. On the contrary. Was it outspoken? Absolutely. That's my style. I thought that was exactly why they approached me. It was good to believe for a short while that such a brave, free, outspoken performance could be produced in present-day Hungary, in a bourgeois theatre."²³



The billboard next to the main entrance of the Vígszínház announces the 2023/2024 season. Source: Csaba Székely's Facebook Page.

²¹ Cf.: List of 2013

Winners: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/LYcdDvsFycn6W6yK4Wvwkq/2013-winners>

²² Csaba Székely's Facebook Post:

<https://www.facebook.com/kacsabeszely/posts/pfbid023HJmVMZ6pb92gDDQK3sG1K1goLTERwEVNdo61z9Jp7N6Hg7g27TjFgH21RAfiJuCl>

²³ Ibid.

The theatre responded to the situation, stating that the deadline for the first draft of the text was May 1st, but only a draft of the first act was completed for the first reading rehearsal on May 9th. The next deadline was June 1st and the management expected to receive the complete play, including the requested corrections. They claim that they did not receive this version by June 5th, and the internal, work-in-progress premiere of the play was scheduled for June 16th.²⁴

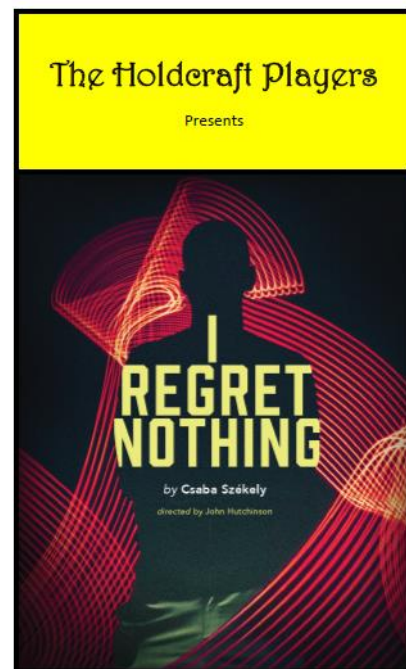
As Székely stated, due to the method of this kind of creative process, it could not be completed by the deadline set in the contract. Normally, this would not be a problem since the premiere was four months later.

***I Regret Nothing* by Csaba Székely, directed by John Hutchinson, produced by The Holdcraft Players in Michigan City**

In recent years, several Romanian and Hungarian companies have performed the play *I Regret Nothing*. The first US premiere was this April when [it was presented by The Holdcraft Players in Michigan City, directed by John Hutchinson.](#)

The play focuses on people who served in the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, before the Revolution of 1989. The Securitate tortured people, imprisoned innocents, and rarely showed remorse for their past actions because they considered themselves patriots who acted in the interest of the country. Many of these people still work for the current Romanian intelligence agency (SRI); others spend their retirement years in peace.

One of the play's protagonists, Dominik, is a retired Securitate officer who does not consider himself responsible for his past actions. The ex-officer eventually realizes that they have destroyed the life of the only person he loves, his daughter, Liza. The play highlights that Romanian society's main mechanism has been to blame the other instead of self-critically dealing with past traumas.



A Brief Political Landscape of Hungary: Homophobia Normalized – LGBTQ+ Books in Cellophane

“Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people also.” (Heinrich Heine)

²⁴ Cf.: The official communiqué of the Vígszínház: <https://szinhaz.online/kenytelenek-voltak-elallni-szekely-csaba-darabjanak-bemutatasatol-a-vigszinhaz-kozlemenye/>

We do not burn books – what a dark medieval attitude that is – we shred them or pack them in cellophane. This act is not meant to hide anything related to the LGBTQ+ community but to pigeonhole and segregate the minorities and stigmatize any author who dares to mention something ‘aberrant’ in their books.

In June 2021, the Hungarian Parliament adopted an amendment to the law that equates homosexuality and gender reassignment with pedophilia. While sexual abuse of minors is a crime, homosexuality or gender reassignment is a matter of gender identity. The law includes a ban on the ‘promotion and presentation’ of homosexuality or gender reassignment to individuals under eighteen, which also extends to advertising featuring such content. This anti-gay law (or child protective law, as it is called in the government’s communication), in addition to being exclusionary and highly discriminative, effectively criminalizes homosexuality stating that it is dangerous for children's development if they are exposed to information about different sexual orientations before the age of eighteen. In addition, some civilians are excluded from sex education, and only registered organizations and individuals are allowed to give such lectures in schools, but no lectures on anything related to homosexuality and gender reassignment.

This prohibition applies not only to advertisements and education but also to books. However, in the past two years, the law has not been enforced in this regard; no publishers or bookshops have been fined for placing such books in the youth section. Líra Bookshop, one of the biggest Hungarian bookshop groups and publishers, recently came under the majority ownership of a government-affiliated organization and started to wrap LGBTQ+ books in plastic wrap and relocate them to a different section due to this law.


While the UK publisher Waterstones celebrates Pride by assembling books that reflect the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community²⁵, Líra bookshop in Hungary is being fined 12 million forints (cca. 36,000 USD) by the consumer protection agency. The reason for the fine is that the LGBTQ+ young adult graphic novel *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman depicts homosexuality and has been placed on children and youth literature shelves without being distributed in closed packaging (i.e.: transparent, plastic wrap).

Two of our colleagues are also ‘victims’ of this stigmatizing act. Andrea Tompa, the president of the SZÍNHÁZ Magazine’s foundation, is the author of the book *A Fairytale for Everyone*, which reimagines classic folk tales with disadvantaged groups, ethnicities, minorities, LGBTQ+ people, Roma, and adopted children. Dóra Dúró, a member of the Hungarian Parliament, shredded some copies of the book with a shredder in 2020.²⁶

²⁵ Cf.: <https://www.waterstones.com/campaign/pride>

²⁶ Cf.: Mi Hazánk Deputy Leader Shreds Another Children’s Book over ‘Homosexual Propaganda’, *Hungary Today*, 9th Oct, 2020. <https://hungarytoday.hu/far-right-mi-hazank-duro-shreds-children-book-homosexual-propaganda/>

Additionally, some copies of *The Mirror Visitor* series by Christelle Dabos, translated by Zsófia Molnár, the editor of the SZÍNHÁZ magazine, have already been packaged in foils on the shelves of the Lira Bookshop.



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