

SZÍNHÁZ



HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS

30 June 2022

Friends,

Here is the latest HUNGARIAN LETTER OF NEWS, written by László Upor. Beach reading, it is not!

It is a major set of reflections and news, written in the wake of the Hungarian national elections that will keep Viktor Orbán and his “illiberal” government in power for another 6 years.

I know of no one better to mark this moment in Hungarian cultural history. László has been a good friend and colleague for over 3 decades. And what he writes here is from multiple perches:

- a working artist-dramaturg
- a translator
- a teacher
- a cultural leader

László was the last Rector at the Academy of Drama & Film (SZFE), and in that role fought the losing battle to save the independence of the 150+ year old institution. He now is working with **Freeszfe Association** (the educational and art community founded by students and faculty who left the old Academy).

László covers a lot of ground here. Censorship, the Olympic Festival in 2023 and other financial inequities, recognition of important women’s voices as performers and thinkers, and an incisive take on the future.

Worth digging into, friends.

From Our Side

June has been a tough month.

I’ve been glued to the January 6th hearings, and last Friday, the 24th was, in my view, a small step toward some action around gun control, and a massive loss for half the population with the overthrow of Roe v. Wade. Carol and I have five granddaughters between 13 and 24. Their lives changed overnight. A darkening cloud descending on their future womanhood.

And the 24th marked the beginning of the 5th month of the War in Ukraine.

A New Theatre in Kyiv

But the 24th also celebrated the “soft” opening of the Theatre of Playwrights in Kyiv. We have helped Maksym Kourchkin, the founder of TOP, commissioning 23 short plays from his member playwrights, helping out with funds for the renovation of their space, and supporting the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Reading project.

Max sent me a gaggle of photos of the opening. Take a good look at these two. Imagine being in that in-progress space, with sounds of the War outside.



Here is a report of that night, straight from one of the horses' mouths, playwright Andriy Bondarenko:

“The hall was full - people really crowded the place, many were standing because there were not enough chairs. The readings lasted about three hours and in the end people continued to sit, reluctant to go - and

Max did very good thing - he said - "you don't want to go - ok, let's hear a few more texts" - and the readings continued for twenty more minutes. And then there was a discussion and again people didn't want to end this and were talking and talking. Everybody said that we really need to hear these texts even if they tell some very traumatic things. Because drama and theatre has the capacity to heal even when telling something traumatic."

And this, from a letter from Max to me two weeks ago:

"At present everything our theater professionals have is very modest. But I have great belief in the potential of our people.

We can change the world! To do this, of course, we first must win. But I believe in victory. And I feel like every event, every word from real friends, strengthens me specifically, increases the chances of, and accelerates, the day of victory."

Max went back to the front on Monday. Godspeed, Max.

UPDATE: Worldwide Ukrainian Play Reading project.

75 plays in database

151 total texts: multiple translations of some of the 75 plays

181 pledged readings, as benefits for Ukrainian NGOs

23 in countries

41 US organizations and individuals participating

If you're interested in being a part of this, contact John Freedman, the Project Director at: jfreed16@gmail.com for details.

ÁRPÁD SCHILLING & THE IMAGINISTS in San Francisco



June also put me on an airplane, along with Hungarian critic and journalist Tamás Jászay, Howard Shalwitz, and Yury Urnov to spend a week with the company at ZSpace, and see old friends. It was my first plane ride in 3 years! But well worth it.

Here is a link to a piece on the project by Robert Avila, published two days ago in American Theatre. [AMERICAN THEATRE | Who's There: How Árpád Schilling and the Imaginists Took Aim](#)

[at Gun Violence.](#)

To close out our week, our gang was joined by Árpád and Brent Lindsay and Amy Pinto (directors of The Imaginists and performers in the production) for a HowlRound TV look at the project:
<https://howlround.com/happenings/international-exchange-world-turned-upside-down>

So.

Monday, this divided country marks the beginning of the 264th year of our Declaration of Independence.

We all have a lot to do--fixing, making, dreaming, exploring—and we have a little over 4 months until a critical November election. I'm doing all I can to use these 4 months to support our democracy.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Philip' written in a cursive, stylized script.

Philip

IN THIS ISSUE

- **Schizophrenia I** – A war on protestors
- **A Country that is Two, Part I** – Parallel worlds
- **Do You Feel the T-Pain?** – The Trianon Battle
- **Portrait of a Young Woman** – Márta Béres' *One Girl Show*
- **More Portraits** – A highlight of books by Petra Doma, Kinga Boros, Kornélia Deres, and Noémi Herczog
- **Schizophrenia II** – How do you pronounce the C-word? A panorama on censorship
- **Schizophrenia III** – Reviews and the “Make or Break” mentality
- **F..K Censorship!** – An exhibition and more about fearless speech
- **A Country that is Two, Part II** – Cathedrals and huts
- **A Country that is Two, Part III** – Fireworks and gaslights
- **Is it Over Yet?** – Art and morality



László Upor is a Hungarian dramaturg, literary translator, essayist and university professor with a specialty in contemporary drama and performing arts. As a dramaturg, he has worked with most of the leading mainstream and independent companies in Hungary. He spent two years as resident dramaturg at the Literary Departments of major theatres in London, New York and Dublin. His translations include novels, non-fiction and over 50 stage plays. He has published two books and numerous articles on theatre, film, and contemporary circus.

László is former Vice Rector/ Acting Rector of University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest where he had been teaching for over three decades. He is founding member of Freeszfe Society.

His international activity includes conferences workshops and university courses as well as collaboration with theatre companies in Europe and the US.

SELF-CENSORSHIP AND COMMUNION WINE

Snapshots from the Cultural (Double) Life of Absurdistan

(Parental advice: the following pages contain names and full-frontal honesty)

(Instead of a) Prologue: You cannot begin a publication in May 2022 without a reference to the war Ukraine, it seems. Or close it without one, for that matter.

Schizophrenia, Episode I: A War on Protesters

Time: the last week of April 2022, the second day of MITEM, an international theatre festival in Budapest; two months into the ever-intensifying Russian aggression on Ukraine, two months into the ambiguous and controversial messages the Hungarian government keeps sending to the rest of the world (including its European/American allies) regarding the war. Place: The Hungarian National Theatre – a Budapest art institution of controversies since its opening in 2002 (discussed numerous times in our Newsletters).

Action: two Lithuanian companies performing on the two stages end their respective shows by powerful actions that respond to the Hungarian government's reluctance to clearly support the Ukrainian case. At curtain call on the main stage, actors of the Klaipėda Drama Theatre show two large Ukrainian flags and a large banner, that says in Hungarian: "Hungarians, don't be indifferent". At the end of the other piece, instead of taking a bow, actors of OKT/Vilnius City Theatre perform a choreographed series of repeated falling and resurrecting until they all remain on the floor as if hit

by bullets – meanwhile a background projection features black and white siege photographs with red writing: Hungary 1956, Ukraine 2022, plus flaming red letters: "Orbán, are you serious?"

Both companies attended a post-show discussion, the protest actions were discussed in the social media and reported in the mainstream in various forms and attitudes. **Attila Vidnyánszky**, Artistic Director of both the National Theatre and the Festival (among many other things) made a cameo. Once he delivered an indignant



Instead of a curtain call 1 – the stage at the end of Delhi Dance – OKT/Vilnius City Theatre at MITEM, April 26 (Photo: Erzsi Sándor)

and arrogant opening speech, he left without waiting for response either from the company or from the audience. Both Vidnyánszky's verbal rant and the statement the National issued argued that Hungary (the nation and its government) went out of its way to help Ukrainians and the Lithuanian action was mean and self-indulgent. And we (meaning, the leaders of the theatre) didn't prevent/ban the action although we knew something was boiling (well, the companies warned the AD that they'd prepare some kind of action) – because we believe in freedom of speech, but we resent the Lithuanian arrogance (and the arrogance of others – all along our history) when others try to interfere with our affairs and want to tell us how to behave.

Now, Vidnyánszky's situation is really and truly delicate. Not only does he hold an insurmountable number of offices where he very often DOES tell other people what they can or cannot do, but he is also a native of Ukraine, so whatever happens there affects him in various ways. While his friend the Prime Minister is still playing a game where he doesn't seem to ever want to clearly distinct himself from Big Brother Putin.

And, true, MITEM organised a "Solidarity Day for Ukraine" (featuring the fantastic Dakh Daughters), although, not heavily advertised.

A Long Way

Vidnyánszky came a long way from an independent theatre maker directing a Hungarian minority theatre in a (then) Soviet republic (Ukraine) to the heights of an all-powerful rule-setter in the very mainstream of a country that re-allies the post-Soviet



Instead of a curtain call 2 – the stage at the end of *Between Lena's Legs* or "Death of the Virgin" – Klaipėda Drama Theatre at MITEM, April 26
(Photo: Csaba Formanek)

(Neo-Soviet) Russian imperialism. With so many oppressed and/or lost identities it must be next to impossible not to lose the inner balance, not to conflict with himself (i.e., one of his many selves).

A footnote: the man, once a sensitive artist, who is most responsible for the 2020 merciless destruction of the old University of Theatre and Film (also widely discussed in earlier newsletters), now invites Ukrainian refugees to the abandoned dormitories of that conquered and deserted institution...

Must feel like (at least) fifty shades of schizophrenia.

A Country That Is Two, Part I

Parallel Worlds

When in the last decade of the previous Millennium a handful of (then) young democrats (the party FIDESZ) aired the idea that Hungary should adopt the British/American two-party system instead of having “too many” parties to vote for, the (then) naive author of this article thought it irrational and unlikely to happen in a budding new democracy. And – bang! – it happened practically overnight. Thirty years on, we still watch in disbelief how intense and effective the parting/dividing of a nation can be. It only needs devotion and a little (or more) ruthlessness.

Want to play the power game? Learn a simple trick and excel in that: whatever the situation or the actual problem is, just distil them to clearcut yes/no questions and repeat those endlessly. Where and if analysis, balanced and thorough investigation, independent research, sophisticated

“ The present situation is that two parallel universes exist within Hungary.

explanation, calm discussion, and reasoning was the natural course – opinions and people would naturally be polarised. Wrong: create a situation where all this is impossible, and everyone will (consciously or unconsciously) answer the hidden REAL (loaded) question that

goes “are you WITH me or AGAINST me”. Are you US or THEM? The most effective marketing tool for sure. Once there are but two options, you really have ONE true way to go. Otherwise, you are an enemy of the people under the appropriate label.

The system is based on dichotomies: tradition OR progress, patriotic values OR global worries etc. No shades, no mixing. And to all these dichotomies there is a hidden “how to” instruction that shows which choice belongs to the “left” and which one to the “right.” Thus, a two-party system in an undeveloped democracy serves as a masked one-party system.

Historians will decide whether the fierce and ever intensifying cultural war is/was rather a tool or a consequence of this general *bi-polar* policy (both, of course but our descendants will analyse only how much the consequence caused a fast-spiralling vicious circle).

Whatever the future verdict, the present situation is that two parallel (and practically non-communicating) universes exist in Hungary – and that is very much the case in the culture/art field, too. The government strategy looks less brutal than that of pure totalitarian regimes, still, highly effective. Instead of simply banning individuals, closing institutions, or taking “opposition” media out of the press or off the air (well, that happens, too) there is a systematic and radical relocation of resources. Most of the existing art institutions (theatres, art societies, etc.) and media are let live but deprived of vital resources, while parallel institutions with similar missions (plus a political agenda)

are established and quickly inflated with generous donations of (national) properties, huge injections of state-funding (that is: taxpayers' money) and, very often, tightly secured privileges in distribution of further funds and state-subsidies in the given fields. These "B-versions" become healthy monsters that literally take the sun and oxygen off the officially-not-banned-yet-still-disenfranchised counterparts (often with a splendid history and track record).

According to the official explanation (aka: cultural policy) the new institutions are to set the balance right, that is: to finish/compensate the "overwhelming liberal dominance". Well, the fight for survival is far from an even battle (this phrase is to please the ubiquitous prime minister who loves war terminology). So much uneven that for many the choice is: corrupt yourself or starve? Distribution of funds depends, more often than not, on the caprices of powerful individuals. Funds, then, come as favours – "presents" from the feudal father-figure – and sometimes with clear indication of what you are expected to do or not do in exchange. Joining these new monster units, collaborating with them, or accepting membership/grant etc – that is, being associated with them, in general – is easily seen as complicity with the government and its arrogant, discriminating ways. There is an obvious attempt from the government (not totally unsuccessful) to corrupt independent minds, to buy people by the pound...

But what would you expect in a country where the governing party proudly sails under the pirate flag of "illiberalism?"

Do You Feel the T-Pain?

The Trianon Battle

One of the false accusations, when referring to "liberal" artists is that "they" (we) are globalists – as opposed to true patriots –, not offering hope, not presenting national (Christian) values, not rejoicing in the glory (glorious past) and not dealing with great national loss and trauma. Of which, the most lasting, and probably most relevant and devastating, is "Trianon". This name has become a symbol of a non-healing wound. (The peace treaty, prepared at the Paris Peace Conference, was signed in the Grand Trianon chateau in Versailles, France, in June 1920. The country lost about 70% of the territory and about two-third of the population of the multi-ethnic pre-war Kingdom of Hungary. Although the areas allocated to neighbouring countries had mainly been populated by other ethnicities, millions (approximately one third of Hungarian natives) became of minority status as a consequence. This and other regulations caused deep resentment since. "Trianon" also became a propaganda tool and a common indicator of true patriotism. You are not an honest patriot if you don't feel the *Trianon-pain*.

While the official Hungarian cultural policy tends to support giant-budget theatre and film-projects of disputable quality, produced and/or directed by "close to the government" artists, one of the true *enfant terribles* in theatre, András Urbán directed a very low-budget international national show, *The Trianon Battle*, in Átrium, one of the few private theatres in Budapest. Urbán, artistic director of

Kosztolányi Dezső (Hungarian minority) theatre in Subotica, Serbia, is well-known for his imaginative and highly physical productions with overtly political anti-establishment, often anti-clerical, content. Urban isn't into *sotto voce*: these pieces are very loud, sometimes deafening.



The Trianon Battle (directed by András Urbán), Átrium Theatre, Budapest (photo: Csaba Mészáros)

The Trianon Battle is ironic/sarcastic from the title on (as there was, obviously, no such battle). The cast consists of highly successful Budapest actors of the mainstream and the independent scene, together with a range of wonderful actors from Subotica. The two acts – based on improvisations by the company – are

very different. The first half is a heated and orchestrated reality-show like debate between the cast-members of various cultural and national (sometimes even ethnic) background and social status. The power-dynamics between the self-sufficient “Budapest liberal” actors and the fellow theatre makers with minority complexes, the not-so-friendly battle of the jovial, but arrogantly patronising Budapest star (actor/director Róbert Alföldi of international fame) and the others of “lesser importance” is brilliantly poignant. Clear statements, fair arguments, undeniable facts as well as highly personal opinions, misconceptions, conspiracy theories and stupid accusations clash, thus showing how complicated the issue, how used and abused (sometimes still ignored) the frustration is on all political sides. This showcase of attitudes to the national trauma on the basis of the actors’ various social and political status is rooted in reality and



The Trianon Battle (Bori Péterffy, Róbert Alföldi), Átrium Theatre, Budapest (photo: Csaba Mészáros)

experience but seems all absurd. A philosophical and political cabaret/satire of pure words and sentiments in a “rehearsal”-situation.

The second act turns it all upside down. Nothing is rational there, sanity is on sabbatical. The actors become areas and territories of (historic) Hungary, and a crazy, sarcastically surreal family drama based on false (national) myths is in full bloom. An over-the-top farcical representation of today’s political climate, travesties of “national symbols” in an epic chaos – delightful but tiresome.



The Trianon Battle (The Company), Átrium Theatre, Budapest
(photo: Csaba Mészáros)

Although far from being Urbán’s most perfect, the play is healthily discomfoting – sometimes extremely funny, sometimes revolting – and an important step to reclaiming national themes, while shaving off the falsely pathetic overtones.

“We are searching for the inherent human trauma and tragedy seen through

the complex problem of Trianon, which cannot be resolved simply by asking whether it hurts or not, or whether I am expected to hurt. We look for anachronistic moments that actors – some from minority communities, some Budapest locals – can illuminate through moments of their own lives” – says Urbán in a recent interview.

Portrait of a Young Woman

Márta Béres Interstellar

“The problem is that I’m always most interested in people who don’t like me” is a typical one-liner from Márta Béres *One Girl Show*. A founding member of András Urbán’s Subotica company, the actress revives her decade-old but fresh and crispy show (directed by Urbán) – a hilarious and poignant theatrical self-representation.

Her onstage trip is a very bold one: a series of border-crossings with seemingly no reservations or restrictions. A tenderly exhibitionist exposure of a woman, an actress, who was or could be herself, but most probably is created as a fictional self out of many personal *petit morceaux*. And performed in a way that a pack of lies sound like a true confession, playacting an act of utmost honesty, bipolar reactions to the outside world the most natural thing. Exploring the situation of a woman – an actress! – in areas infected by power games, exhibiting true and false emotions and turning the soul

inside out is a political theatre act – thought provoking and entertaining. No active audience response is needed for her to create the atmosphere of interactivity. *That one*, performing, could be the actual her (although it isn't really), *this one* here watching could be *me participating* (although I'm not): still, it feels very real. Theatre about the reality of theatre, reflecting both the inside and the outside reality. Political in exploring the individual female character in a male-dominated hierarchical society. Pretend-seductive and truly fragile, hysteric and tender: playing on the whole spectrum of the senses and sensibilities...



Mártá Béres *One Girl Show* (directed by András Urbán, photo: Edvárd Molnár)

One of the most versatile actors of her generation (with an unmistakeably serious and sobering sense of humour), Mártá is home on small and large stages both in Serbia and in Hungary. Always moving forward, she's now working on a poetry evening and is planning to create and tour the English version of her *One Girl Show* (she already performs it both in Hungarian and Serbian) – so wider international audiences may enjoy it soon, hopefully.

More Portraits – by Young Women

Four Books



Petra Doma (photo: Melinda Sárvári)

It may be a coincidence and may not be a great breakthrough – but let's mark the moment: four women, representatives of the younger generation of theatre critics/scholars, publish their essays on theatre – all of them very political in different ways. (Kinga Boros' book, a collection of previously published articles, was published by UArt Press in Târgu Mureș, Romania a few months ago. Kronosz Publishers, Pécs published the other three, revised versions of the authors' PhD papers, quite recently.)

These four publications alone are enough to show how much more there is to politics and to cultural politics than simple and simplified party ideologies fighting. The below texts are based on the authors' introductions of their own work.

Attracted by the Strange. Sadayakko Kawakami, Sumako Matsui and Hanako: Actresses in the Context of Intercultural Theatre by **Petra Doma** focuses on the careers of three Japanese actresses at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries. Through their social and professional self-definitions, the book analyzes the encounter between Western and Japanese theatre from the viewpoint of theories of intercultural theatre. The problem of the dualities of West and East, Western and Japanese are elaborated from various aspects throughout the work. After the introductory chapters on intercultural theatre and Japanese history the book examines in detail the careers of Sadayakko, Matsui and Hanako, including their emblematic performances, and the reception attitudes of contemporary Western and Eastern audience. The analysis concludes that while the actresses, their companies and the Western and Eastern audience were attracted by the "strangeness" of the other, none of them were able to overcome their own cultural limitations.



Kinga Boros (photo: László Miklós Vigh)

Uncomfortable Theatre. From the political content to the politics of perception by **Kinga Boros** is a series of loosely connected essays that reflect on some phenomena of European theatre history and contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian theatre, using Hans-Thies Lehmann's definition of political theatre (the politics of perception, the aesthetics of responsibility). In addition to the Piscatorial theatre with its ideological charge, the Brechtian alienation effect as a social order and Richard Schechner's

experiments with participatory theatre are the antecedents in theatre history, starting points of the investigation. The ideological control exercised in communist Romania is described from the perspective of the history of effects: the oppositional/resistant nature of minority Hungarian theatre of the time the aestheticising, socially insensitive nature of theatre in Romania as a whole after 1989 is also under scrutiny.

Romeo the informer, Yorick the snitch. Documentary theatre, re-enactment and opening the archives by **Kornélia Deres**

Theatre, body, document: how are these three elements related in contemporary art and archival practices? What is living documentation? How does the theatre-maker become an archaeologist or a necromancer? How does a documentary theatre performance, an experimental dance performance

and an archive event reconstruction reflect on the afterlife of the communist regime? Why and how does the lack of social and individual freedom link the 60s and 70s with our present? These are some of the questions this volume seeks to answer, while exploring local and European examples of contemporary documentary theatre, artistic and critical methods of re-enactment, and the present-day connections between archive and performativity. The 1956 revolution, the Kádár informer system



Kornélia Deres (photo: Krisztián Bokor)

and its mental cost, the security state that emerged on the foundations of state security, and even Hamlet are all discussed. One of the underlying themes of the book is the need to reassess the role of the body in the processes of remembering, processing, and archiving the past. But this also requires a re-examination of the apparent axiom of the passing of theatrical performances through theories and contemporary examples of the continued presence of performance.

SHUT UP! Denouncing theatre criticism in the Kádár era – by **Noémi Herczog**

What happens to criticism in a dictatorship? How is theatre criticism of denunciation born as a technique of



Noémi Herczog (photo: Vera Éder)

cultural control in the Stalinist Soviet Union? What happens to Isaac Babel and Meyerhold after they have been denounced and convicted of committing an “ideological crime?” And what happens to artists in post-Stalinist Hungary if their works do not meet the ideological expectations of the regime? How, in what form, does the original Stalinist technique live on in the “happiest barracks” of Cold War Hungary and transform? How, for example, do the consequences slowly disappear? And why – in

what form – do these consequences still live on? Last but not least, what happens to the ability to tolerate criticism in a society whose recent history is haunted by denunciatory criticism? In a society that cannot

guarantee, through any formal legal regulation, that this practice is now a thing of the past? Finally, what inherited reflexes are at work today when we write and read criticism in Hungary?

Questions, as relevant as ever. No wonder that Noémi Herczog's book (along with other publications) is quoted and referred to in Andrea Tompa's essay in the April 2022 issue of Színház magazine.

Schizophrenia II – How do you Pronounce the C-Word?

A Panorama on Censorship

Censorship is one of the trickiest issues of all. No surprise that we keep discussing it and are still hesitant about revealing the ambiguities. Even the definition is very problematic.

And whether we admit it or not, it is present in all our lives West and East, South and North. In various ways, forms, on very different levels.

In an impressive collection of articles, a recent issue (April 2022) of **Színház** offers an overview of censorship-related attitudes, strategies and experience in Hungarian and international theatre.

What follows is a painfully brief summary of some selected writings that are, often, summaries of a wider research themselves. With all the best intentions, by condensing the already dense contributions, I could only offer a little appetiser to the hearty meals offered by the original publication.

Silencing: Soft and Self-Censorship - The Case of Hungarian Performing Arts, **Andrea Tompa's** 2021 essay re-published in Hungarian

There are three forms of censorship: direct censorship, self-censorship and soft (indirect) censorship. In recent years an (old-new) genre appeared: a series of articles of the "denunciation" style in the pro-government media. It is aimed to "denounce" artists, theatre-makers, writers – because of the views apparent in their work, their personal political views, or simply their sexual preferences.

It is important to understand how ideological expectations work as a form of soft censorship and as a part of the bulldozer-type cultural policy. After the 2010 elections, the political interference aimed to change the elite, mostly affecting individuals and not the whole structure or theatre system: changes in leadership of institutions were carried out. New leaders often express their preferences and expectations in the cultural field according to suggested "values" of the Orbán government and not simply cultural values, also publicly expressing loyalty to the prime minister.

Ideological expectations are reflected in grant applications or in how cultural subsidies are distributed. Cultural policy makers of the current era have strong ideological expectations toward what would be desirable to be on stage: the big success stories of the Hungarian history, Hungarian values, the sanctity of family, positive heroes, and positive messages, and above all Christian values. Some of these expectations are reflected in grant calls. To give a recent example: "priority is given

to affirmative presentation of Hungarian cultural values on high level, strengthening the consciousness of our national identity, and our belonging to the European Christian culture on a professional, contemporary theatre language in a positive interpretation.”

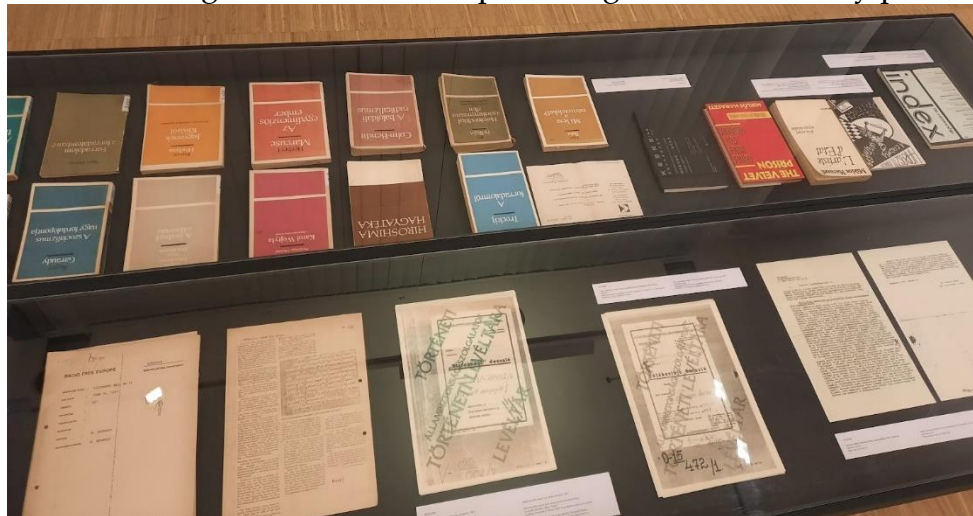
Censorship and Lousy Bureaucratism in the Late Communist Era, a round table discussion on theatre and censorship in the 1970s and 1980s (**Judit Csáki, László Eörsi, Orsolya Ring, Zoltán Imre**)

There was no censorship office, unlike, say, in Romania and Albania, but the control was still quite thorough. This made the work both easier and more difficult since there was no institution where one could appeal. Apart from some obvious taboos you weren't supposed to touch (one-party system, the 1956 revolution, the Soviet Union, etc.), there was no code or set of rules to let people know what is and what isn't acceptable in a given situation. As a result of the strict control, all statements and opinions seemed to have a political and ideological context. Consequently, circumvention, doublespeak, interference and the playing off of institutions or individuals against each other was a common practice.

Renowned dissident author **István Eörsi** sarcastically remarked in the 80s that a proper censorship office should be set up, so we know what to stick to.

The phenomenon of self-censorship was also at work. Wherever public expression is restricted, where there is censorship, there is self-censorship.

It is interesting to note that the repressive gestures – not only political repression, but also financial



“Samizdat” publications from the 1980s – from the exhibition Fearless Speech at Open Society Archives, Budapest (photo: László Upor)

repression, just like today, often lead to new aesthetic or artistic developments. This is how “apartment theatre” was born back then, and this is how later, after the great political changes, the so-called site-specific performances (dramatic action on the street, in a ruined house, in an abandoned garden etc.) thrived.

Silence and Blind Fire by **Márton Hajnal**, an analysis of a survey on self-censorship among theatre makers in recent years

Theatre as an institution is still considered to have great social potential. Theatre is relatively quick and sharp in responding to current events, in forging a community of audiences, but at the same time (unlike literature, for example) it is heavily dependent on funding, and thus on the expectations of the funding body and/or the market, on politics and the paying audience. This leads to a seemingly necessary search for compromise in staging plays of social issues, even if the written law allows (almost) anything.

This is further complicated by the fact that creating a theatrical performance is a matter of reconciling different possibilities and demands, which can easily be mistaken for formal, informal or merely supposed 'censorship'.

In Hungary, there is no official censorship (note that there was none in the Kádár era either), but those in power can control a significant part of economic or cultural capital by, for example, placing the “appropriate” (that is: loyal) people in decision-making positions, who will mainly (or

“ **The line between self-censorship and other forms of censorship is not necessarily sharp.**

exclusively) favour those who “meet the expectations” – all this without professional criteria or the necessary transparency.

An artist or a company will often make self-limiting decisions, to conform to the

perceived or real requirements/expectations of an opposing power (which may also be the public, the public opinion or some informal system of unspecified expectations). The line between self-censorship and other forms of censorship is not necessarily sharp.

“Artists themselves are often uncertain as to why they opted for a 'safer' solution” – explain one of the interviewed. “Self-censorship is very difficult to detect because we often hide it from ourselves. We self-censor even the suspicion that this was self-censorship. We prefer to think of it as 'common sense' or 'a brilliant tactical move'. But it is cowardice”.

Others argue that common sense is a positive rather than a cowardly tactic.

“I think we live on separate islands, and it's difficult to get a grip on the problems, because we experience our problems in many different ways in many different environments, and each from our own perspective. Where do we start to unravel them? To whom do we address them? What remains is silence and blind fire” – concludes one interviewed theatre maker.

Selfless Self-Censorship by Fanni Nánay, a summary of an (anonyme) survey among theatre critics

The overall picture that emerges from the responses suggests that some critics are not compelled to censor themselves in their practice, and that when they do, they do not do so under political

pressure, but rather because of the expectations of the 'profession', and often in the (expected) interests of the artists and companies. In the 'defence' of those, they censor their own public opinions.

The intertwining of theatre and power cannot be discussed with theatre-makers who are intertwined with power, because they deny the existence of the phenomenon or will always give evasive answers.

Several of the interviewed mention the problem of the theatre world being divided into *two camps*: "A good or bad opinion about someone's art is often understood a political statement." According to some, both sides are characterised by toxic entanglements and power relations.

Some critics claim to have practiced self-censorship not to defend their own position or reputation, but in the interest of the artists and companies - and this can mean not only muting negative reviews, but also "silencing" some positive criticism. As one respondent writes: "It is a different case if the work is dangerously good. Then, being concerned about its survival, one may refrain from exploring the otherwise obvious and progressive message of the piece – just to ensure that something good can live a few more months before someone 'up there' *gets it*."

Schizophrenia III

Make or Break?

People say a review can "make or break" a show. An expert opinion may have an influence – but it could also be used for marketing or political manipulation. A critic is a true influencer.

But what can be more schizophrenic than being a critic? As an insider, pretending to be out (and vice versa, of course), behaving like an ordinary spectator but once the show is over, changing the casual evening dress to the white coat of a certified analyst, asking the proper questions but trying not to suggest the answer. *Think about it*.

A critic may be an exorcist or the devil's advocate – often, oscillate between the two. The critic may, in hard times, find themselves in a position of either an executioner or a safeguard. Deliberate limitation of your own freedom of speech (aka: self-censorship) may, occasionally, save lives.

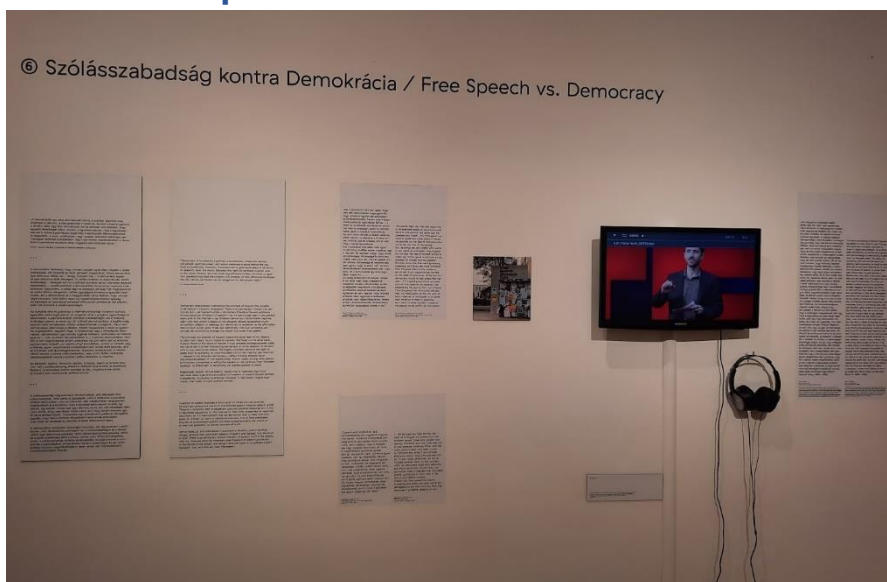
Who would disagree that the freedom of expression is one of the fundamental values we should defend at all costs? Indeed. At all costs? Why do then people practise self-censorship on an everyday basis? And not only the ones seeking favours or special benefits.

F..K Censorship!

An Exhibition and More about Fearless Speech

Fearless was an exhibition in Blinken OSA (Open Society Archives) between mid-March and late May.

Parallel to the exhibition, an equally important part of the project **Fearless Speech**, was a series of lectures, film screenings and theatre productions, arranged and performed by the Open Society Archives and Freeszfe Association in collaboration.



Fearless Speech – Picture of An Exhibition (photo: László Upor)

From the webpage:

Blinken OSA is one of the largest repositories of uncensored speech, anti-authoritarian samizdat texts, published and distributed without official permission. To mark the centenary of the birth of nuclear physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov, the 50th anniversary of the founding of *Index on Censorship*, the most important journal for freedom of expression, and the 40th anniversary of the publication of the first issue of *Beszélő*, the journal of the Hungarian democratic opposition, in collaboration with the alternative University of Theatre and Film (Freeszfe Society), we decided to commemorate, recall, and raise awareness of the importance of fearless speech in a series of events. The exhibition *Fearless* is part of this series of events.

The exile of CEU from Budapest – the violent suppression of academic freedom, freedom of thought, and expression – played as much of a role in the exhibition as the exemplary stand taken by the students of the University of Theatre and Film against the encroachment of power.

A Country That Is Two, Part II

Cathedrals and Huts

More money is spent on culture than ever – so keep bragging government representatives and “people in position” – and, for once, they speak the truth. The way that money is used, however, might be disputed. In this special distribution game, the winner takes all and winning here also means “victory” *over the other*, that is, gaining more space (that is, winning at the expense of the other). The present policymakers and their darlings are not really into *win-win* (seemingly, it would

directly be AGAINST their will and contradicting their goals), they seem to endorse and promote *either-or* attitudes.



Pancho Aréna in Felcsút of 1800 inhabitants (photo from the official website of the Aréna)

The anomalies are of two kinds. One is the earlier mentioned (very) uneven distribution of subsidies, based on loyalty rather than (sometimes: as opposed to) merits, artistic quality or social value. The second is the shocking contrast between two parts of the cultural landscape. Buildings with pompous facades, megalomaniac money pouring on one side: inviting, adopting, or creating highly expensive jumbo projects of

supposedly great public interest and/or PR-value but lesser artistic/educational/social (etc.) relevance. Leaking roofs on the other: a painful shortage of basic infrastructure for the field and the lack of support for important communal/community projects, grassroots cultural movements. Flashy cathedrals with empty halls surrounded by crowded huts with insufficient amenities.

Just like in sports. An incredibly dense forest of stadiums and sport halls sprung up in the past decade – even smaller towns can now enjoy the view of these regal buildings at their doorsteps. Hungary now takes the lead in the international (interstellar?) competition in “who has the greatest number of empty stadiums per capita.” So that this less-than-super-wealthy country could organise and host prestigious championships even at the height of the pandemic (*no joke: thanks to the overwhelmingly strong Hungarian immune system – or should we just call it stupidity? – a ticket to an UEFA match in the summer of 2021 was accepted as equivalent to a vaccination certificate when entering the country*), while there are not many places to go if you want to play basketball with your classmates, indulge yourself in jumpy ping-pong with a neighbour or take a good swim in a public pool. No, stadiums are not for ordinary people to stay healthy and fit or smooth their nerves and train their muscles. No, stadiums are for hardworking superheroes and for lazy rule-setters who think that a golden medal won by *one of those* will reflect on them, too.

Those medals then would worth generous premiums and/or a life stipend – an attempt to...uhmmm... *enhance* the heroes' loyalty to the Leader (not necessarily without success). Just like prizes and awards in the cultural "field".

Apropos awards. You can choose from a great array of state-administered awards to acknowledge special achievement in the art and culture. Traditionally, the nominations came from art associations or/and boards of experts. Time by time politicians thought they have the opportunity (even the duty) to "give guidelines". The forms and levels of gentle interference moved on a wide scale: never totally disappeared but at happier times, overall, tolerable. The past several years changed this as well. Awards are more and more politically infected and artists with real achievements are facing a discomfoting dilemma: should I or should I not accept ("luckily", though, outspoken artists are very rarely nominated lately – no temptation). Earlier, some of the awardees took the opportunity to publicly demonstrate their opposing views by refusing the award and giving an anti-government public statement. The present government invented a waterproof method to exclude the slightest chance of such a scandalous instant: all nominees must sign an agreement that they will accept the prize if selected – so much about (self-) censorship.

A Country That is Two, Part III

Fireworks and Gaslights

First, a short explanation of why subsidy is everything in the field of arts in Hungary.

Ours is a small country – with great traditions and rich cultural heritage, yes, but with a small and underdeveloped market for cultural goods (note the isolated language!). With a fairly low living standard and with little tradition of private and corporate sponsorship. So, ticket sales would very rarely rocket to the sky and can almost never cover the basic costs. State or municipal funds are, then, instrumental in helping artists, companies, art institutions, venues survive. When these funds are controlled by state officials or a handful of influential movers while transparency, set rules and clear criteria of the (re)distribution are absent, public interest and equal accessibility are severely harmed.

Note: the figures – subsidies, budgets etc. – below are all in Hungarian forints. Don't try and calculate, don't look up the



Trafó House of Contemporary Arts (photo: Gergely Nagy)

exchange rate, etc. There is no point in trying to figure out how much US dollars, EUR, or GBP these sums would equal, since the living costs, salaries, prices in Hungary are not comparable to those in the US, the Netherlands or Thailand. These figures are there, simply, for the reader to make easy and direct comparisons and show the inherent differences and anomalies in a less theoretical context.)

Whose Festival is it Anyway?

Disclaimer: Reader, feel free to skip this whole chapter if you think you already understand the system in work, if you are tired of watching the same farcical horror-story unfold over and over again, if you just think that you are not interested in feudal cultural policy – or just had enough of these pathetic artists whining all the time instead of doing their work. And, yes, this is very boring, no doubt.

I. A Little Budapest Schizo

Palace of the Art (popular name: MŰPA), a heavily subsidised cultural centre where top artists from all around the world perform, was partner to the capital's municipality for about a decade in organising the two major Budapest art festivals (Budapest Spring Festival and Budapest Autumn Festival). The Ministry contributed *1 billion* Forints of which *200 million* went to the Festival Office, *800 million* to the Palace directly (note that the Palace was just one of many venues that hosted major events of the festival all around the city).

“ Well, it's only culture, anyway.

After the opposition won the municipal elections in 2019, the Ministry (part of the Orbán-administration) was not eager to renew the contract, when it expired the same year. Instead, they decided to commission MŰPA to organise brand-new Budapest art festivals. To put an emphasis on this request, the Ministry generously offered *1.8 billion* per annum, guaranteed for the next 5 years. MŰPA tailored the new project and decided to (ab)use the names of two world famous musicians related to Hungary: Bartók and Liszt. Meanwhile, the brand owner of the Budapest Festival was totally and demonstratively ignored/dismissed. They actually learnt about the Bartók/Liszt Festivals “from the newspapers”. Furthermore, these new festivals decided that the best time for good art events in Central Europe were exactly the two periods long occupied by the “rivalling” (that is, the original) festivals. So, as of now, Bartok Spring International Arts Weeks (Govt.) coincides with Budapest Spring Festival and Liszt Fest International Arts Festival goes parallel with Budapest Autumn Festival – with a 10 times bigger budget (fact).

There is virtually no communication between the two organisations. None.

Well, it's only culture, anyway.

In 2021, festivals had to move to cyberspace – it was a hard time for all. The Budapest Spring Festival organised a series of online events and spent *20 million* altogether for the (lifesaving, minimal)

program. The other one (Bartók) had a 600 million budget for the marketing (!) of their, basically non-existing, online event. No sophisticated comment needed.

In collaboration with the Autumn/Spring Festival, **Freeszfe Association** (the educational and art community founded by students and faculty who left the old University of Film and Theatre after the government “privatized” it among controversies) organised their five days sub-festival of film,



“Art Is Free” the poster of Freeszfe Festival in collaboration with Budapest Spring Festival

theatre and community projects, both times with a tiny budget of 2 million.

*A footnote to the toxic division: for many years, Budapest ran two major **summer stages** with a rich commercial program attracting local audiences and masses of native and foreign tourists. Then, a couple of years ago, in harmony with the general (cultural) political trends, this production company split and now work as two independent summer festival venues. One is financed by the city (opposition), the other by the Ministry. For some obscure reason, the second one not only gets a much higher subsidy but is also a serial winner of extra grants administered by state agencies, while the first one doesn't have a chance (and is promised never to get one) no matter how often they both apply for, apparently, open funds.*

II. Transdanubia Chalk Circle

Pécs, a southern pearl of the Transdanubia region, was host of the annual Theatre Meeting (POSZT) for two decades. A joint effort by the city of Pécs and the Hungarian Theatre Association (**Magyar Színházi Társaság** - MSZT), this festival became very popular both in professional circles and among wide audiences due to its friendly, relaxed atmosphere and the wide range of all-around-the city side-programs at the end of the theatre season. Soon after a parallel association with a slightly different name, Hungarian Theatrical Association (**Magyar Teátrumi Társaság** – MTT), was founded, they bought a share in the Limited Company organising the event. First, MTT navigated themselves into an increasingly influential position by the year, later, a new firm was set up to take over the work. In its board all three partners (the city and the two associations) had a representative,

until the representative of MSZT (the association that initiated the whole festival in 2000) was voted out in 2019. In response, MSZT gave up their shares in the company.

The festival has been on hold and will, it seems, close for good.

Whose festival is it anyway? Well, a negative Chalk Circle story unfolded here.

*A little background. As a consequence of a landslide victory of FIDESZ party at the 2006 municipal elections, artistic directors of regional theatres were changed quickly everywhere, and the newly appointed “directors of the right” founded MTT in 2008 “to balance the overwhelming liberal dominance in the arts”. A new principle, **theatre of the hope**, was announced, meaning: artists should send positive (patriotic) messages from the stage instead of discussing difficult topics, exploring dark sides of life or supporting “decadent, globalist views”... Since then, and especially after the 2010 FIDESZ victory at the general elections, this new association, MTT, rose to brighter and brighter glory, gaining more and more influence and resources. The head of this association is, uhm... yes, you got it!*

Members of both MSZT (the “old one”) and MTT (the “new one”) are partly individual theatre artists and partly professional organisations (i.e., Critics’ League, Dramaturgs’ League etc.) or theatre companies. They both operate on membership fees and state subsidy. This latter is 1 million forints for MSZT while MTT gets 150 million (last year’s data).

III. An International Festival at the National

Theatre artists and managers, organisers and dedicated theatregoers agree that Hungary deserves a first league international theatre festival but, apart from important separate attempts, this never happened on a regular basis. Until, one day, the artistic director of the National Theatre managed to knock on the right doors and secured a significant subsidy (an approximate 300 million per year) for a new festival called Madách International Theatre Meeting (MITEM). Since the first edition in 2014 the festival (based at and organised by the National) stirs mixed feelings: usually a fairly strong line-up of top-shelf artists on one hand, the very controversial role of the artistic director (of both the



The National Theatre (photo from the official website)

festival and the theatre) on the other. Recurring thought: Attila Vidnyánszky, once a fine director with impressive creativity and artistic views, not only became an all-powerful Tzar of the Hungarian Theatre Kingdom with immense resources, but very much behaves like that and plays an important role in building solid luxurious fortresses for the chosen ones, while condemning others to starvation. Therefore, while adored and supported by some, he is close to boycotted by many others in Hungary and abroad. Because of his and his institution's active involvement in creating a very uneven field for cultural players, some of the invited artists and companies refuse to attend "his" festival (Berliner Ensemble, for example) or express their resentments and their support to the AD's opponents publicly. Robert Wilson, while he didn't cancel his show not to let down the audiences, made a very strong public statement and decided to donate half of his honorarium to Freeszfe Association – the dissidents from the old University of Theatre and Film Arts – and meet their students instead of the festival guests and authorities.

The two Lithuanian companies at MITEM 2022 produced, probably, the most spectacular protest (described in detail on the top of this newsletter) in the history of the festival. Although this time the action was not in any way critique of the artistic director, he took it somehow personal.

All We Need is a Big Firework

Again: we must admit that the government administered funds (that is, public money, that is, taxpayers' money) spent on culture, in general, surpass that of previous periods. But, again: the way it is spent/distributed may be (must be) criticised. Unknown artists with no track record whatsoever or seemingly senseless projects (National Equestrian Theatre) and lofty ideas built around well picked keywords (patriotism, Christian values, past glory) would get tens of millions with no



"The equestrian entertainer dedicates his life to entertain through (sic!) this amazing animal" (from the official website of the National Equestrian Theatre)

requirements, while valuable artists and institutions live from hand to mouth – or not even. (And this is even worse in the film industry.)

One of the long-time movers (an adviser, envoy, and personal aid in major Vidnyánszky endeavours), who so far mostly remained in the shady background, suddenly came forward in late May, and published his thesis in 13 points about favourable strategies in the all-

necessary cultural war. One of his shiny *mind-gems* propelled him to national fame even before the whole essay became public.

“It is necessary that Hungarian cultural policy be summarised in one single and essential sentence. And this sentence goes: ‘Being Hungarian is the best possible thing in the world!’ It follows that those cultural projects or ‘products’ that don’t contain the truth of this sentence do not have to be supported by the Hungarian state.”

Almost the same day this suggestion was quoted widely in the press and the social media, the propaganda minister (well, officially there is no such ministry but in reality, there is one) announced

that this year the usual August 20 Budapest firework will be the biggest in Europe.

“ **Being Hungarian is the best possible thing in the world!**”

We, apparently, need fireworks of all kinds. One for the next year going to be Theatre Olympics. Dreams we never forget. To Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s greatest regret a referendum (well, the prospect of

one!) some years ago stopped the government from officially bidding for the great Olympic Games. Now we will, at least, organise a theatrical one. The biggest in the history of this event, we are promised. Or at least orchestrated with far the largest budget in its history: more than 6,5 billion Forints. Under the careful leadership of (percussion, trumpets, surprise) the artistic director of the National Theatre.

Whose Olympics is it anyway?

Not many people have the vaguest idea what value the Theatre Olympics represent, what its impact on the national and international cultural scene would be. Whether it’s a large community-building event, a prolonged summit of artists and art presenters, or a vanity fair? In Hungary, it will, most probably be the next one in the row of grandiose spectacular events of some Imperial charm. One for the newsreels and for the yearbooks – ticking a series of boxes.

Some theatre institutions in Hungary and abroad agreed on participating, some have, already declined Vidnyánszky’s cordial invitation, others hesitate.

In his response **Pál Mácsai, Artistic Director of Örkény Theatre** says:

Participating in the “Olympics” would suggest that we agree with the content of the Performing Arts Act and accept the way it was forged and implemented. It would also suggest that we subscribe to the ways the University of Theatre and Film was transformed. Besides, the designated funds are so large, in our field so exceptionally generous, that only a fraction of it would suffice to solve basic anomalies of our profession – the situation of alternative companies, for example, whose smooth operation can, along with the healthy

mainstream, guarantee the future of the Hungarian performing arts. I made this decision in agreement with the company.

Gábor Máté, Artistic Director of Katona József Theatre wrote:

After much deliberation, our Artist Board decided to decline the invitation on the grounds that in the current situation of our theatre culture, the losses of the companies dispreferred by the authorities are so great, the gap between the two sides is so deep and the situation fraught with undiscussed conflicts and slander is so aggravated, that resolving it by participating together in a large-scale Theatre Olympics seems unthinkable.

A letter from **Adél Kováts, Artistic Director of Radnóti Miklós Theatre**:

As I have already indicated, we are open to a healing dialogue where problems can be shared, and solutions and concrete action plans can be proposed formally and at an organisational level.

I look forward to you initiating this substantial joint discussion with the theatre community as soon as possible. I believe that after this meeting a much better environment can be created so we could decide whether to participate in the Theatre Olympics.

(This is the latest letter of a two-round, polite correspondence, written in early February. The proposed discussion hasn't been summoned yet.)

Beata Barda, Managing Director, Trafó House of Contemporary Arts writes:

We appreciate the offer but will not use this opportunity. Money is a very useful tool, but it is not the only bridge between actors in the field who are far apart. Continuous dialogue and careful listening to each other are also very important for any cooperation, and we are open to dialogue.

A footnote: at the end of 2019, theatre artists and associations organised a demonstration to protest the very discriminative and unacceptable Performing Arts Act that puts independents in jeopardy and opens wide doors to government interference in the life of theatres. The tension between “progressive” artists and the authorities rose. Eventually, the opposition-led City of Budapest and the FIDESZ government made an agreement: four theatre institutions (the flagships of art theatre) in the capital should be financed exclusively by the municipality, so the government has no direct way to interfere with their operations, while all the others are partially funded by the Ministry that will have an essential say in appointing the artistic directors. Perhaps a necessary move, but an ill deal, preserving the trench-logic and labelling the companies (“left and right”). In 2020, the University of Theatre and Film Arts was forcefully transformed in spite and amidst a huge wave of protests. More than half of the students and faculty left and formed the Freeszfe Society.

These aggressive and antidemocratic moves were initiated, championed and supported by Vidnyánszky and his circles. The Reader must be bored with reading some omnipresent names repeatedly. Yes, I agree, it IS boring.

A Firework in Need

Without announcing it, Trafó House of Contemporary Arts produces a permanent art festival with only a few black nights per month. Its sparkling program is a true firework. For many, Trafó serves as the primary window to what's going on in the world of performing arts. Their strongest features are contemporary dance, "new-circus" and music, but one can see ground-breaking theatre pieces as well (usually challenging the habitual and crossing the borders separating genres). On top of the annual 15-18 visiting productions from all over the world and live concerts of the same number, Hungarian theatre/dance productions are produced or co-produced. The small exhibition room hosts experimental work.

Beáta Barda, who as a programmer has been with 24-year-old Trafó since its early days, was recently appointed for her second term as Managing Director – but wasn't prepared for the blow that hit the House in March.



Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest
(photo: Gergely Nagy)



Hunger by Knut Hamsun at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts
(photo: Vera Éder)

In happier times Trafó operates on a tight budget but now they are in real trouble. The bank managing their account (with partly Russian background) went bankrupt when the war in Ukraine began. Their small reserves, some designated grants and the regular subsidy the city allocated for the first quarter of the year (about 350 million Forints altogether) is mostly gone. Only a fraction of the losses is being compensated by the national finance authorities. The city advanced their due for the second quarter, important

donations arrived from foreign foundations, some of the performing companies (both local and visiting artists) reduced their honoraria, and a charity concert with a nice line-up raised funds from supportive audiences, but more is needed to survival.

(The public money allocated to the Olympics would easily cover the full costs of Trafó for over 10 years and equals five years of the budget of the well underfinanced earlier University of Theatre and Film Arts)

Portrait of a Hungry Young Man

Most of the Hungarian work presented at Trafó is produced or co-produced by them. One of the outstanding theatre pieces of this kind is *Hunger*, based on the famous Knut Hamsun novel, directed by **Péter István Nagy**.

Hamsun's semi-autobiographical psycho-novel enters a multi-layered and thought-provoking dialogue with the controversies around the Nobel-prize winner author in his later period as a public figure. ("The Nazi author everyone should read" – an often-quoted *bon mot* about Hamsun, referring to a great writer subscribing to unacceptable and dangerous ideologies.)

The penniless hero, so keen to write *The Big Thing* is, after going through hell, is eventually offered a job as a “hired pen” – and would decline it. (Here in the production there is a plain and direct reference to privileges offered by governmental agencies in exchange to loyalty in today’s Hungary.)

The young, ambitious would-be writer’s hunger to create and the social responsibility of the artist in general – central issues of this piece – go far beyond the characters in the piece.

Creator or spectator, all the same: you must face the dilemma, the conflict of interests the importance of the choices you make – and especially in our troubled times.



Hunger by Knut Hamsun, directed by Péter Nagy at Trafó
(photo: Vera Éder)

Haunting rendition of an ever-declining personality through clear-cut situations with a handful of actors playing many characters, *Hunger* is a memorable piece (adaptation by Júlia Sándor) with superb acting and a waterproof choreography of thoughts, emotions, and sensual effects.



Péter Nagy (photo: Kriszta Falus)

Péter Nagy got his BA in Psychiatry before he enrolled to the University of Theatre and Film Arts, where he graduated as a director/performer specialised in physical theatre. He is also a musician and has (not-so) secret ambitions in filmmaking. His work is, obviously, very physical and very visual (he works with fast emerging young designers) – but doesn’t qualify as „pure” physical theatre. A very fine *cuvée* of drama (human characters, situations and dialogues), movement, music and (very often) live video.

Although he is engaged in experimenting with the *form* of theatre and his creation is, most of all, a clear statement of a certain theatre aesthetics, his work isn’t “ethereal” or detached

from reality, and can be very political, too. This latter may or may not manifest in references and allusions to actual political issues but more often than not it is about exploring the enchanting human dance along the thin line between individual and collective, between rational and emotional and, yes, between right and wrong. Investigating hard choices between different responsibilities, between moral and material interests, between courage and obedience.

Together with his dramaturg/author-partners they either adapt classics or create their own pieces. Either way, the “libretto” will be full of surprise (but almost never gratuitous). Charmingly disrespectful, mercilessly funny, bold, and provocative whether he is *painting it black* with sarcasm or, ironically, showing *la vie en rose* (usually both).



Don Juan or the Fathers' Misery, Szkéné Theatre, Budapest (photo: Ede



A scene from Don Juan (photo: Ede Dömötör)

Lately, live video is an integral part of the pieces whether it be the above-mentioned *Hunger* or *Don Carlos* by Friedrich Schiller, a brand-new *Don Juan*-variation or a new version of Ray Bradbury's *451 Fahrenheit*. The camera follows the characters to hidden corners or offstage, and we'll see the larger-than-life live footage projected on walls, doors, on parts of the set while the scene goes on between other characters onstage. Very often both the characters and their projected image are present.

However sophisticated and well-crafted the video-technology, however idiosyncratic the movement/choreography, the actor is never a puppet or a clockwork but the very human centre of the creation in Péter's work.

An outstanding example is **Ákos Orosz** in *Don Juan or the Fathers' Misery* (text by Ádám Fekete and the director) – a hilarious and clever mash-up of several existing and newly invented pieces

somehow related to the legendary womanizer and sacrilegious rebel. This Juan is on a run, not one single muscle (including those of his face) seem to have a minute rest. Juan in this version is neither a poet nor a philosopher, neither a politician nor a mathematician. A mercury-legged perpetuum mobile, a wicked dancing spirit, a coward and a chameleon, a soft-hearted master of fatal destruction and betrayal. Orosz has endless colours and is reckless but never phony, thanks to his well-trained instincts and impeccable acting intelligence.

The Fathers' Misery is a co-production of the Hungarian minority theatre from Komarno, Slovakia and the Budapest independent venue, Szkéné. A very clever show with substantial food for thoughts, and great fun. What the



A scene from *Don Juan* (photo: Ede Dömötör)

actors present us is more than the map of the human heart: a graphic and disturbingly entertaining *cardio CT* revealing the dark sides of the heart chambers.

Péter Nagy's latest, *451 Fahrenheit*, opened at Radnóti Miklós Theatre, Budapest in early May. **Bulgakov** meets **Orwell** in the content, *Brazil* meets classic soap opera and farce in style (with the powerful presence of live video, of course). The adaptation (**Péter Kárpáti**) may be a bit uneven and slightly incoherent with the tune of the show (or the other way round), and the audience may sometimes get lost in the abundance of oddities, still, *Fahrenheit* is, once again, very much a piece for the present.

Manuscripts Don't Burn?

Why 451 Fahrenheit? The dystopic future (as drawn in the past) is very much present. In a country where a young woman, a mother of four, shreds children's books (accused of "homosexual propaganda") in public... in a country where this woman happens to be spokesperson of an extreme-right party ("Our Homeland", Mi Hazánk) that, since the April elections, has several seats in the Parliament... in a country where, according to some, everyone should be the same... in a



451 Fahrenheit in Radnóti Miklós Theatre (photo: Dániel Dömölky)

country, where knowledge and free spirit is systematically denounced and discredited... in such a country Fahrenheit is a mandatory vaccine for the mind.

And all that in the dark shadow of a war on our doorstep. A war that we are still ignoring on a large scale. "Not our war", declares the Prime Minister, and urges people not to express solidarity with the victims. Or,

at least not beyond a certain limit.

Breaking news of the day as I'm writing this (30th of May): Hungary will not send soldiers or weapons, nor will it let weapons travel through the country, to help the targets of the Russian aggression. We know that already – declared by the High Authorities many times.

But. But.

Our Government is sending 500 litres of communion wine to support believers in Ukraine so that they don't miss this essential ingredient of the liturgy... (no, no fake news).

A travesty of faith, solidarity, moral sense, good taste, what else...

What shall an artist do in situations like ours?

This is the question editors of Színház magazine also asked in May.

Is it Over Yet?

Art and Morality

Ármin Szabó-Székely asks Zsófia Bán, András Rényi and Sándor Radnóti in the May issue of Színház magazine. (Note that the below excerpts are heavily edited just to give a taste of this important and timely discussion.)

Ármin Szabó-Székely: Artists from many European countries have expressed their solidarity with the invaded Ukraine, and several prestigious institutions terminated their contracts with renowned Russian artists who failed to condemn Vladimir Putin's aggression. Latvia, with a Russian minority amounting to a quarter of its population, banned indefinitely 31 Russian artists from the country, including film director Nikita Mikhalkov and star conductor Valery Gergiev.

Sándor Radnóti: A general boycott is not only unjustified, but also immensely unfair, as it often affects those who protested against the aggression or are opponents of the aggressor. Valery Gergiev was the leader of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra and the mayor decided to dismiss him. I would rather see a boycott by the orchestra or the public not by the mayor, but I admit that there are extreme situations where intellectuals, artists, scientists must face the consequences of not speaking up against the evil.

Zsófia Bán: It is obvious that the Putin regime and other dictatorships or autocracies use certain artists as icons.

In the time of a war conflict, it is even more important that well-known artists take a stand. One must make clear gestures to prove that you do not support the aggressor's policy.

S. R.: We can't expect everyone to express their views in public, though. There are scientists, who lock themselves away in their own science and add very significant bricks to the edifice of knowledge. After the Second World War there was a consensus, which took anti-fascism as evidence. That is over, unfortunately. It was the cornerstone of European culture since the end of the war, and anyone who did not share it became a pariah. It is over.

András Rényi: The attack on Ukraine could be a moral turning point in Europe of the same significance as the Holocaust. If Putin's aggression cannot be morally accepted, then the otherwise excellent artists, like the ones mentioned here, must clearly distance themselves from it just like others.

Zs.B.: The artist's is a symbolic position in society, as much as that of a politician. The ones whose faces are known must come to the fore; they cannot retreat into anonymity in such a situation.

R.S.: What I expect of myself, I don't necessarily expect of others. I don't hold people accountable who remain silent. I hold people responsible who stand up for Putin and cheer him on.

A.R.: Simple questions should be asked and answered simply. And in this situation, there is no such thing as siding with Putin. If you are able to support him in this, you cannot be an integral part of our culture and you also betray your own past.

R.S.: It doesn't make Mikhalkov a lesser artist, it just leaves it to posterity to decide. There are some great artists who sided with fascism and yet are still honoured as artists in posterity.

“ **In a time of war conflict, it is even more important that well-known artists take a stand.**

A. R.: What we have now is an either-or situation. There is no excuse. When civilians are being killed, cities are being destroyed and millions must flee, it is the duty of an intellectual to get informed, look beyond the obvious and act accordingly.

Epilogue: The World is Not Enough?

At the very first session of the new Hungarian parliament (after the early-April elections), the freshly (re-)elected MPs voted in favour of the latest amendment of the constitution, thus opening the way to the new-old government to announce “wartime state of emergency”, which they happily did the next day at their first session. Even safer than the comfortable two-third parliamentary majority, this allows the government to do practically anything to save our people and nation (from “Brussels”, from the inflation, from foreign companies – you name it) without waiting for the slow and painful process of parliamentary legislation so boringly common in less illiberal democracies.

We live in a post-post-totalitarian era. It isn’t yet a new full-fledged totalitarianism, but close. It definitely has all the potential. And the short-lived euphoria of post-totalitarian hopes has long gone.

What is next?

Curtain?

SZÍNHÁZ



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