

HUNGARIAN THEATRE BULLETIN

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Front Cover
Anna Réti: Fregoli Syndrome
Photo: József Bozsits

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
The Hungarian Contemporary Drama	3
<i>The Regime Change and Contemporary Hungarian Drama</i> by Zsuzsa Radnóti	3
<i>Suicide Bomb – Dramas and Traumas in the Plays of Virág Erdős</i> by Anita Rákóczy	12
<i>Plasma World: László Garaczi</i> by Ildikó Lőkös	18
<i>A Different Kind of Happiness: János Háy</i> by Katalin Trencsényi	25
<i>The Revolt of the Teddy-cheese Fractals: Péter Kárpáti</i> by László Upor	31
<i>Playwright as Theatre Maker: István Tasnádi</i> by István Sándor L.	38
<i>FM 9.11 or the Triumph of Hope: János Térey</i> by Anna Czékmány	43
DunaPart Project	44
Danube - From Bank to Bank - Personal Approaches of Dance and Theatre Critics (2008-2010)	49
<i>Contemporary / Hungarian / Dance</i> by Csaba Králl	49
<i>Flagships of the Hungarian Contemporary Dance</i> by Csaba Kutszegi	54
<i>Lines of Forces Redrawn</i> by István Nánay	59
<i>A Fervent Environment: Thoughts on the Hungarian Independent Scene</i> by Andrea Tompa	63
Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute	66
Collaborators of the Hungarian Theatre Bulletin 2010	67

Introduction

The Hungarian Theatre Bulletin, the third number of which the reader now has, was started in order to assist foreigners interested in Hungarian theatre to obtain information and background material.

In the first number the prime objective was an account of the functioning of receiving houses, as these made a significant contribution to the mobility of the theatrical system, while at the same time providing a means of accommodating Hungarian and foreign performances and influencing taste. Trafó Contemporary Arts House, for example, had introduced very many foreign dance ensembles and the representatives of new circus, and the most important Hungarian contemporary dance performances too had received invitations. MU Theatre, with its smaller auditorium and stage, created – and still creates – opportunities for experimental dance and theatre groups to perform before a knowledgeable audience. In this number we gave a resumé of the significant theatrical festivals, among others the work of the Autumn Festival, the Contemporary Drama Festival, and the Shakespeare Festival organised in one of the loveliest spa towns of eastern Hungary.

In the second number emphasis was placed on making known a number of important theatre workshops that worked within the traditional system. There were items about theatres working in four provincial towns – Debrecen, Eger, Miskolc and Kaposvár – and four Budapest workshops. In the Debrecen theatre artists were – and still are – working on the creation of a new theatrical model, in Eger work is in hand on a new folk-theatre, while in Miskolc an opera-festival of international status is held. Of the Budapest theatres, the writers analysed workshops each of which represented a different and characteristic line of theatrical activity: the Katona József Theatre, the Örkény Theatre, the Opera House and the National Theatre.

In our new number we concentrate on two new areas: one is contemporary Hungarian drama literature, the other an introduction to the independent theatres and independent dance ensembles. Zsuzsa Radnóti's perceptive and thorough essay gives an overview not only of the period from the change of regime until the present, but also depicts clearly what the dramas written in recent years have in common and what distinguishes them. "There are as many individual voices, dramaturgies, choices of subject and styles as there are writers," she states. This is underlined by portraits of six selected dramatists and a few pages of dialogue from each. Despite their different qualities they have in common a cutting humour and an spirited theatrical form in the presentation of their prophecies of the end of the world.

In 2008 Trafó Contemporary Arts House, what was then Krétakör Theatre, and the Műhely Alapítvány (Workshop Foundation) joined in organising the "dunaPart" project, which provided foreign theatre people, directors of theatres and festivals with the opportunity to see several performances in a few days. Between 20 and 25 January 2011 this showcase event will again take place, under the joint auspices of Trafó and the Workshop Foundation. In the Bulletin we have invited theatre and dance critics to assess how they view the work of the independent theatres and dance theatres over the past three seasons.

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Anna Lakos

The Hungarian Contemporary Drama

Zsuzsa Radnóti

The Regime Change and Contemporary Hungarian Drama

1989/1990

A magical year or at least so many have designated the period when freedom, so to speak, burst upon the countries of Eastern-Central Europe. After the first euphoric years and decades, however, when miracles were expected, the now ever more weighty social and political conflicts have come to the fore, in which – so it seems at the moment – Hungary is leading the way, if in other important areas, such as joining Europe or the development of central European modernisation, it lags behind. An outstanding intelligentsia, a team of experts and politicians, presided over the great historic change of 89/90 in Hungary, keeping competence and constitutionality in view. Before 89 many of them had belonged, whether overtly or covertly, to 'those that thought otherwise', and it was with their assistance that the long and bitter process of democratic transformation began, which in our day seems to have stalled.

The new world has brought new challenges. These two decades have had – and still have – a profound effect on dramatic and theatrical art forms too.

Looking back

It is common knowledge that, in the dictatorial and softer periods of socialism alike, the words spoken from the stage played an enhanced role. In the period of the region going back over several decades of the twentieth century the most varied reprisals were inflicted upon theatre-artists and writers who could not bring themselves to reach agreement or be compliant. In the Stalinist USSR, for example, writers and directors (such as, among others, Bulgakov, Meyerhold and Mihoelsz, the great figure of the Russian Jewish theatre) who were at first treated leniently but later branded as traitors, were punished with torture, execution and murder disguised as road-accidents in a manner befitting the most ghastly Shakespearean nightmare dramas. Later came gentler sorts of punishment which varied from country to country and time to time in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania: imprisonment, enforced emigration, loss of work, judicially imposed silence or, in the eighties, here in Hungary just simple scolding. The authorities, therefore, took artists very seriously, because the word spoken in public, whether more openly or hidden in metaphors, whether simply in the form of a reference, represented danger. Public opinion, on the other hand, in reward for their 'dangerous occupation' charitably clothed wordsmiths and their spokesmen with high moral, political and social regard.

In the period of reprisals following the 1956 revolution, which very gradually settled down, in the course of a few decades (roughly by the mid-eighties) the second golden age of Hungarian twentieth-century drama took shape. The first had blossomed at the turn of the century. Reactions to the series of cataclysms of Hungarian history came thick and fast in the theatre. Naturally, only under the conditions of the given restricted possibilities, of low degrees of liberty, covertly, cloaked in metaphor, in asides, hints: after the second World War liberation from the Hitlerist empire, the Stalinist fifties, then the 1956 revolution and the consequent retaliation. The tragically personal and collective experience of the historical cataclysms which crowded one after the next is encoded as a memory which is still fresh in the texts that have remained up-to-date. One could list the names of significant writers, now seen as classics, but unfortunately they were and are not, on the whole, well known in Europe. The names and plays of István Örkény and Péter Nádas, perhaps, István Eörsi too, are familiar in German-speaking countries (though Péter Nádas is much more spoken of as a prose writer). István Örkény belonged to the fathers' generation, Péter Nádas to that of the sons'. Those called representatives of the fathers' generation were the self-tormenting generation that had believed unreservedly after the war in the coming of a new, just, democratic

world. Then, in the period before and after the 1956 revolution, they came to the frustrating recognition of what had actually been lurking behind and beneath the publicly resounding populist slogans. The sons' generation, however, looked with disgust on the fathers', because they had let themselves be deceived. A series of outstanding performances and plays portrayed these lines of force, and theatre history and public opinion faithfully preserve these works which were banned, often for years or decades, and later their memorable staging. Theatres and the theatre-makers did their work, if not, perhaps, with the vehemence and ostentation seen in surrounding countries; here we are thinking of the world-famous writers of Polish, Czech, Romanian and Russian theatre, and the fates of many of them. In Hungary too quite a few of the establishment theatres rose above the average in terms of courage and the quality of what they put on, and a number of alternative workshops too were distinguished for their civic and artistic courage. (In 1976, for example, Péter Halász and his colleagues were forced to emigrate, and later achieved the greatest recognition in New York under the name of Squat Theatre.)

After the change of regime

Freedom opened frontiers, minds and imagination, and a boundless world of opportunity spread out before artists. In return, however, the performing arts, and with them writing for the stage, moved away from their censored status and the serious prestige which this had brought and became an aesthetic principle, equally distinguished but with less at stake. Everything could now be said and taboo subjects seemed to have vanished, so strong was the decline in interest in politics, history and sociology. What had in the past been such central force-fields in plays had worn thin. This may be the single main reason why there has not emerged in the past twenty years a series of characteristic, contemporary Hungarian works that, in the international arena, could have been noted en somme as new Hungarian drama, and in which the local and the universal would have blended harmoniously, in the way that, for example, it has happened in new Russian, English, German and (more recently) Polish drama, or new Romanian film.

The sole exception

One significant name is missing from this Bulletin, that of György Spiró who must be mentioned because it is he that links together the new and the old, vanished world. He it is that for years and decades has obstinately set down the present-day traumatic events of the peculiar Hungarian reality, the story of the peculiar Hungarian mentality. In 1985 he wrote his tragedy *Csirkefej* (Chickenhead), which was produced the same year, of which it may be said that he wrote a piece of drama history and theatre history in one. The wreckage of a social and historical period appeared on stage, in its language, the morals of the characters, family connections and its tendencies which eroded every human value. A painfully bitter history, the killing of a cat which leads to a murder. And it is Spiró that has been able to continue uninterrupted the chronicles of the new period with their new content. Now as ever, his bitter, painfully satirical glimpses mercilessly confront Hungarian society with its constantly changing self-portrait, and his darkly anticipatory prophecies are one by one coming true. He it is that can tear up almost by the roots that special half-and-half condition which one of the greatest Hungarian poets described with the metaphor 'kompország':¹ in the middle of Europe, on the fringes of two worlds, we are borne now towards the East, now the West or actually yearning for it, and from this come a special individuality. In one of his plays, written shortly after the change of regime (*Vircsaft*, 1995–96), Spiró spoke, in his style (supernaturalism) blending nineteenth-century Russian satirical realism and nightmare, of the new Hungarian 'wild capitalism', which was and is permeated by a brutal, oriental Mafioso mentality.

Whether he was giving a social panorama or putting individual fates on the stage, he was always up-to-date and Hungarian. These theatre chronicles broke off in 2005 – one hopes, temporarily – because Spiró changed his genre and in recent years has been writing his nightmarish Hungarian chronicles in novel form. In one he envisions an apocalyptic future for Budapest, with a Hungarian-Gypsy war, while in another he speaks of the status quo of the post-1956 reprisals,

painting a murderously bitter portrait of the man in the street, who has learnt one thing in the cataclysms of Hungarian history, and has only that to bequeath to his posterity – that somehow one must always survive everything.

The first decade: the nineties

In overturning the Hungarian situation the great transformation period of 1980/1990 also meant that in the first decade of the historical change, the nineties, despite all the upset and anxiety the country seemed slowly but surely to be joining the trend to European development, and the following thing marked this: at the start of the cycle it was the most developed, most promising country in the Central European region, as if everything was ready for it to join in Western European development without any serious hitches. And our entry to the European Union confirmed and strengthened all these desires, expectations and intentions. This therefore meant that we were giving up our special, Central-European nature, our character, and that the modern, global, general conflicts of the consumer societies which were springing up almost everywhere, the big-city traumas, the serious personality problems of the age of universal modernity, crises of identity, and most of all questions of private life, focusing on marriage and family were becoming of prime concern in Hungary too. Hungarian dramatists gladly took possession of these new, unbounded and non-peculiar, non-territory-specific topics, and thus the emphasis in drama writing moved towards the portrayal not of the communal but the individual, not the local world but the universal. That is, naturally, not a critical observation but simply a fact, a statement. The only question is, in the long term, if there is no counterweight, how much will a genre be impoverished, which was originally endowed with serious communal traditions and intended for a community.

In the 1990s there were just a few who, in that seething of a new world, took an interest in and studied the common past which we were leaving behind. In this too primarily the recent past, and of that the emblematic event, the 1956 revolution, even the mention of which had been completely banned for decades. The middle-generation writer Andor Szilágyi and the film director András Jeles turned to this tragic and uplifting subject with portrayals that exalted the victims and condemned the executioners: their surrealistically textured works, heavy with biblical, mythological and historical allusions and associations, were a sharp departure from the basically realistic Hungarian drama tradition (Andor Szilágyi: *Angyalok lázadása* 'Revolt of Angels', 1996; András Jeles: *Szenvedéstörténet* 'History of Suffering', 1998). Public opinion received these achievements with respect, but valid, enduring performances did not result from them because the theatres failed to hit upon the right form of performance language for the plays, and so their career in theatre went no further. They have dropped all but unperceived from Hungarian theatrical and literary memory.

In contrast, the first work to become long-lasting through the aid of a very successful performance came from a noted writer of the middle generation. That writer is Lajos Parti Nagy, and his first and most significant dramatic work, *Mauzózeum* (1995), spoke no longer about the recent past but about the present time of the regime change, about the fallen, those who were living in Budapest as it wavered on the boundary of the old and new worlds, and neither in the past nor the present gained any advantage from the changes in the world. The action takes place yesterday – sometime between 1986 and 1994 – in the semi-past of the Hungarian present, in Budapest, in the inner courtyard of an averagely dilapidated block of flats. Here, therefore, history is being played, in suddenly surging mobility and changes. The exhausted crowd of people spoke about its ever more hopeless existential and mental condition, which it had in fact inherited from the former regime but which the change of regime had dramatically accelerated. It is a collective display of fate, with the intention of arousing collective responsibility. Looking back from today's perspective at that authorial intention and the spiritual condition of the audience, it seems that that traditional artistic and intellectual attitude, nowadays charged with naivety, which radiated from the text and the play was a kind of wake-up call, idealism, a communal hope that the fact of showing it and speaking out could activate helpful processes in society itself. It seemed that contemporary Hungarian drama – true to tradition – could therefore follow the events, great and small, of the great historic change. The history of a region and a country was comprised, condensed, in the resurrecting of the past and reflection on the present alike, just as in its spirituality and mentality at the same time.

¹ Ferry-land. A reference to an article in Figyelő, 1905, by the poet Endre Ady, alluding to Hungary's leanings to both East and West, abetted by awareness of the Magyars' Eurasian origin. Zoltán Kodály also wrote on the subject: 'Can we become not a ferry tossed between Europe and Asia, but a bridge, perhaps dry land connecting with both?'

The debut of the young Kornél Hamvai as a dramatist strengthened this assurance. In his scripts he brought out the voice of the new generation with a maturity that belied his age, and continued the Hungarian Chronicle of the great communal events: in the darkly satirical, tensioned to the point of supernaturally grotesque *Körvadászat* (The Shooting Party, 1996) he wrote a nightmare grotesque of the years of Stalinism, and then continued with the period of savage reprisals following the 1956 revolution, and with the dramatic history *Castel Felice* (2003), realist in tone, the tragic story of the tens of thousands that fled the country in search of new homelands. His most successful play *Hóhérok hava* (Headman's Holiday, 1999) has been translated into English, Czech and French, shows the dramatic days of the French Revolution in Paris through the eyes of a provincial jailer who is inadvertently caught up in the middle of events. In this amusing, picaresque, acerbic play and very successful production at the Katona József Theatre we see the changed view of the younger generation of writers, departing from the older pathetic, tragic manner of description of great historical events.

More and more young dramatists have come along, whom other things in the world have interested. The present time has attracted them, as it did Parti Nagy, but they have had absolutely nothing to do with the past, not even on the level of reference, and for them the old regime is a continent which has sunk without trace. Nor has the concrete Hungarian present reality drawn them, but the reality of the universal, global, multicultural world. This is the attitude to life, the common feeling that they are happiest to speak of in their talented and successful plays. In the reflection of the multicultural, global, existential and spiritual condition of the world they have set down their personal feelings, conflicts and stories: the minutiae of modern society, the disintegration of partnerships and families, big city traumas, the amortisation of human relationships, stories of individual destinies and confusion of identity are ranged on the Hungarian palette.

Ákos Németh was one of the discovered authors of the nineties, although his first writings in the late eighties received much attention. His successful plays stage the feeling of loss the young generation, their inability to fight against aggression. On the other hand, he depicts the hopeless fate of young people who have entered the machinery of force *Haszonvágy* (Profit Seeking, 1996) *Autótolvajok* (Car Thieves, 2002) These cruel stories are written in tight dialogues, in film-like, mysterious series of scenes.

Zoltán Egressy's *Portugál* (1997) perhaps heads the performance list for the past twenty years, here and abroad alike. Its hero is the young superfluous man type, who can find his niche neither in his partnerships nor in petty Hungarian reality, and yearns for the enchanting landscapes of distant Portugal. It is a sparkling, micro-realistic, poetic biography. Attila Lőrinczy's first and most successful stage play *Balta fülbe* (An Axe into the Ear) is a bloody satire on the pitiless mafioso world that rules supreme in new big cities that have expanded into megapolises, calling to mind the brutality of American gangster films. (The ironic title is a reference to Feydeau's classic play, *Bolha a fülben*.)

László Garaczi, Péter Kárpáti, István Tasnádi and András Forgách were well known names in the theatre of the nineties, and then at the turn of the second decade new and even younger writers were added to the list: János Házy, János Térey, Virág Erdős, and more and more often young directors who also write their own scripts and improvise with a group (Árpád Schilling, Béla Pintér, János Mohácsi and Viktor Bodó). These drama scripts have won themselves ever greater space in the second decade after the regime change, in the millennium years.

The decade following the millennium

In the first half of the new decade it seemed that the trend of the preceding years was continuing. Later, however, instead of that a more and more separate world appeared in stage texts. It was as if their immediate surroundings, the events of everyday reality in Hungary, had lost interest for the younger writers. They had become remote from the social, societal and political historicity of the generation. Their heroes were individuals who walked their inward paths. One of the most typical examples of this completely internalised world, totally disconnected from the outside, is László Garaczi's *Csodálatos vadállatok* (Magical Wild Animals, 2001), one of his most mature works. It is a real 'Garaczi' stage text, a crowded family drama full of matrix worlds. It reveals the inner, crowded, dense,

² Une puce à l'oreille (A Flea in her Ear)

dark world of a young man, enriched by journeys through time – and by the skilful changes of planes of projection, the labyrinthine, merciless atmosphere of his inner conflicts, his fantasies and a world of drugs.

In the middle of the decade, on the other hand, Garaczi's most successful opus to date appeared, *Plasma* (2006), which is featured in this Bulletin. In this, the world of which he writes has become wider, and the merciless, ultimately deserted, cynical, satirical world of the multicultural, mediated, world city that leads to merciless sensations comes to life in a play written in extremely strong stage language, and in which nevertheless one can recognise a very strong Budapest feeling. Such, then, appears a defining aspect of post-regime change Hungarian reality in Garaczi: 'plasmacity in the plasma world, in the comedy of loss of identity. And the writer unites marvellously the local and general sensations: 'A city can be recognised, the outlines of Budapest, its situations, its figures ... but the living, flowing ancient material surrounds everything, permeates, entwines, floods, absorbs, transforms ... The characters in the play, although they are present-day, urban Hungarians, are at the same time ectoplasms, auras, patches of mist and light: outwardly and inwardly they are subject to the law of 'plasmacity'.

Similar to Garaczi is the individualistic writer Péter Kárpáti. He too was powerfully present in the decade of the nineties, but his maturity as a writer came at the millennium, by when the young directors had discovered him and the successful 'Kárpáti style' had been formed. As a writer – like László Garaczi – he too has fully excluded himself from the realities of the day and has withdrawn into a special (dream) world of his own making, into fantasy spaces never anywhere to be gazetted: '... your immediate environment becomes uninteresting, that real social embeddedness in which you exist. It may be that this is a by-product of globalisation,' he said in 2002. He has created a story-world of enchanting beauty, precisely constructed and linguistically brilliant. He makes use of 'compilations' of anecdotes preserved in the collective memory, Hungarian folk tales and Hasidic legends to create pseudo-naïve texts, poetically humorous and very likeable, and by means of ironic-poetic mythical enchantment of 'refined-naïve' tone creating the atmosphere of a communal way of life, communal theatre, ancient storytelling. (*Tóth Feri, avagy hogyan született a világ hőse* 'Tóth Feri, or how the World Hero was born', 1999; *Pájkás János* (2000); *A negyedik kapu* 'The Fourth Gate', 2003.)

Some years ago his writer's world too underwent a change. In his plays he turned farther still from everyday reality. Together with his disciples he evolved a peculiar technique of improvisation in which he took an active part as director and writer. This improvisation is the diametrical opposite of that which Schilling used, because he turned his people outward, created an externalised world, while Kárpáti probes inwards to reveal the hidden, most personal spheres of the soul. These young heroes of his, as they struggle in partnerships and conflicts, do not live in the real world, only in the maelstrom of their personal sufferings. Neither space nor time is any wider than the confines of their personal I, their own most constricted living-space.

The great discovery of the 2000 decade, János Házy, is poet, prose writer and dramatist, drawer of spectacular humanoids and doleful-looking angel-demons and a former beat-musician. The four theatrical texts that he wrote between 2000 and 2003 – original in language and atmosphere – will certainly become permanent items in contemporary Hungarian drama. Although his plays have a characteristic socio-medium and faithful background – the world of the ruined amortised, once flourishing Hungarian countryside of past decades, and the people vegetating in it – the socio-environment is only a backdrop, and in the foreground the plot spreads, by means of showy authorial language, into a general existence- and world-condition, a world-drama with overtones of Beckett.

About the middle of the decade – to be precise, in 2005 – Házy changed his tone and turned to even more closed worlds. Once more his heroes are taken from the middle class of the big town: aged about forty, well established, quite well-off people, fathers and mothers of families, who none the less live in emotional disarray, have lost their way in relationships or exist in a paralysing emotional wasteland like the heroes of Antonioni films. The shattered small and large families fall apart before our eyes, lose all their emotional stuffing, their content. Having lost everything that formerly, in the orderly, classic, bourgeois world provided security for the individual, and especially children, and protection for the family and the emotions, these alarmingly isolated people and their damaged children become beings without inner substance or security, vulnerable, resentful and heading for defeat.

In the world of Kárpáti and Háy the field of view is tightly confined in a vertical direction, towards private sin, private morals and private mythology, and turns more and more away from any wider dramatic, theatrical, communal, sociographic or historical horizon. They are 'I-centred' dramas, which – going back to our earlier line of thought – could be played out anywhere, in any big European town, as parables of a general crisis of values in the modern age. With Háy, so much more is perceptible as his characters are of riper years, and therefore their existential insecurities too influence them.

András Forgách is that marvellous theatrical 'all-rounder' – prose writer, dramatist, director, translator, and essayist. His most notable play *A kulcs* (The Key, 2004) delineates precisely the individual, solitary, inward-built authorial trend that turns away from the outside world, the model drama of the present-day family: a plot full of secrets, pregnant with enigmatic private sins. It is like the malicious reversal of a doleful Ibsen-type drama: from leaving everything unsaid at the beginning to the mounting revelation of petty, shameful secrets, from dramatic tone to comical confusion, everything finds a place in the chronicle of an unquiet night.

Until the second decade of the regime change, roughly until the middle of the year 2000, no tendentious change took place in contemporary Hungarian dramas. There was no decrease, on the contrary, there was a rise in the general inward turning away from the outside world, from concrete Hungarian reality, from an attitude critical of society. 'I-centred' dramas, individualistic creations continued to occupy first place in play production, or, if the authorial lens opened to a wider angle, the universal conflicts and traumas of the age came into the field of view as features peculiar to the present day in Central Europe and Hungary. That present was all the more striking because individual countries in the region were more and more going their own way, and that describes Hungary perhaps best of all, especially in the middle of the first decade after 2000.

At this point mention must be made of a writer in whose texts, the space and the time in which he lives are deeply ingrained: István Tasnádi. He too did not, in his young days, consider it beneath him to politicise openly, and in the performances in which he took part as a writer the picture of the new Hungary can be recognised in his very sharp anger and sarcasm. István Tasnádi was, as a writer and an intellectual, a colleague of the director Árpád Schilling and his team, the internationally celebrated Krétakör Theatre, one of the most significant Hungarian contemporary theatre associations. Its great days came at the turn of the millennium, and its performances were produced by means of an experimental method which aimed to create collectively improvised, extensive social tableaux. In their joint works they depicted in plastic, courageous and satirical fashion the satirically, passionately distorted picture of post-regime change Hungary.

In 2002, Schilling and his team staged two performances, significant in theatre history, which have become a present-day lasting product of the former communal theatre-ideal, total theatre, telling its tale in social, political and present-day-political tableaux. *Hazám, hazám* (Country, my dear Country, 2002) was given at the Budapest Grand Circus. Two years later, came the second masterpiece, *Feketeország* (BLACKland, 2004), which also was given in a temporary performing space, and which met with a similar public reaction to the first.

It consisted of a series of connected brilliant sketches and spoke of the political elite of the time, but especially the right-wing elite, and the general distortions of public life. Both (and other) productions were characterised by a deep social responsibility, as was György Spiró's writer's ars poetica. Krétakör has since dissolved, while Schilling is now directing abroad more than at home, and at the same time holding drama-training courses.

Tasnádi, however, as a freelance writer, has become the most successful author in Hungarian theatre life. It will come as a surprise, perhaps, but since becoming a freelance writer Tasnádi too has turned away – for the time being, at least – from the concrete political problems and subjects of modern Hungarian society and his overt interest in present-day politics too has faded into the background, and, like Garaczi's plasma-world, he is more concerned with the general, multicultural, amoral, consumer world condition, the global value-crisis and the strained inter-personal relationships devoid of human values.

The turn: 2006, the sinister year

We can witness especially significant changes about the middle of the decade, more precisely in 2006, in a series of events great and small: we can register personal changes for writers and creators, and witness macro-political events. It appears that a quality of public life had begun slowly but steadily to trickle back into Hungarian performing art, the dramatic texts and performances illustrating political activity and the country's actual present time, which had practically vanished from the palette since Feketeország was staged at Krétakör Theatre in 2004. (A few exceptions must be mentioned: György Spiró's drama *Elsötétítés* (Darkening, at Pesti Theatre)

In 2006 came the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 revolution, which was marked on the stage, and, in October, by street protests against the left-wing government. This was a turning-point in the history of drama and the theatre and in macro-politics too.

The turn in writing for the stage is connected to the name of a talented new dramatist: János Térey started out as a poet, and the critics hailed his first dramatic work as 'large-scale'. This was *Nibelung lakópark* (Nibelung Residency, 1994) an ironic, parodic, prophetic and brutal transcription of the world of Wagnerian myth, transplanting it into the European civilisation and culture of the present. Strictly speaking, this is a family drama, enlarged to world dimensions. In the destruction of the German town of Worms it projects as an apocalyptic prophesy the destruction of all Europe, humanist Judaeo-Christian culture and modern civilisation. 'We closed our eyes / And the crime was committed: / The world is not what it was before,' says Térey through his character.

At the focus of Térey's text a pivotal role is once more played by shared Hungarian history – past, present and even future. In *Asztalízene* (Tablemusic, 2007) the cynical, no-illusions attitude and serious malaise of the nouveau riche middle class speak out. In the foreground of history is the global attitude of the new, cynical, self-justifying period, with indifference, frivolity and falseness of life, with intrigues for power and love, but in the background events pregnant with disaster cast menacing shadows on the events being played out before us and on the enervated, conceited, uncaring characters. The play is set in Budapest 2006, where two real and traumatic events occurred: political unrest broke out which has had effects that destabilise society to this day, and an unexpected tempest, which resulted in deaths, struck the crowd watching the festival fireworks. Jeremiás vagy isten hidege (Jeremiah, or the Coldness of God) is an apocalypse-drama which is set in the future, and also written in verse. It is the clear biblical destruction-story of a Hungarian town, which heat, followed by water, destroys along with its inhabitants. 'I would have liked to say something about the Hungarian defeat-culture,' was Térey's reply to a reporter's question.

Finally, let us mention Térey's second work – in fact composed first, in 2006 – co-written by another poet. Its title is *Kazamaták* (Casemates), and it is set at the time of the 1956 revolution. A provocative intent to de-glamorise is evident in it. A more remote, objective, emotionally uninvolved stance is reflected throughout the play. The dramaturgy of the play does not depart fundamentally from the tradition of Hungarian realist theatre, and so it was more successful than the two previously mentioned works of Szilágyi and Jeles. Térey did not follow the hitherto familiar and customary division into victim and executioner but evoked a single dark event: the lynching of State Security officers, the communist opposition, by an excited revolutionary mob.

The same de-glamorising purpose was applied that same year to the anniversary production at the internationally famous Kaposvár Theatre. János Mohácsi's 'home-made text', likewise about the 1956 revolution, signalled the change in viewpoint of the new generation and was, if possible, even more provocative in its supernatural, visionary grotesque style than Térey's. *Órült lélek, vert hadak* (Mad Soul, Beaten Armies) was a vision and demonstrative tableau of the wretched history of Hungary over the previous fifty years, with at its focus episodes from 1956 which were provoking in bitterly satirical theatrical form. It would have called for an adult reception in society and audiences, instead of which it fell into the hands of the small-town right-wing political trouble-makers in the year 2006 of all years, when tempers

were strained to breaking-point in both public life and in politics. Moreover, this episode anticipated the poisoning of the present 2010 political atmosphere and the dangerous procedure whereby the left-wing government, returned in April of this year with a big majority, means to exercise serious influence on cultural life.

This performance drew attention to yet another important phenomenon. Mohácsi and the company had no trouble in accepting the peculiarly 'anti-realist' style of playing, based on a free-associative way of speaking, which the director's own text inspired. On the other hand, when the previously performed literary text had called for that (in the cases of Andor Szilágyi and András Jeleš, mentioned above) its realisation on stage had been a flop. In Hungarian theatre and theatre history it has often been the case (and still is) that, especially in our day, stage symbolic systems and styles are much freer, more creative, more modern and more daring in performances derived from improvisation and directors' own scripts than in productions based on literary texts. It can often be felt that the manner of speaking on stage now runs freely without being tied to a literary text, now lags behind in the unfamiliar realised space offered by the literary drama. A sufficiently negative example is the case of Virág Erdős, who is featured in this Bulletin; one after the next she writes her peculiar nightmares and visions – shocking in tone, anguished, ironic, grotesque, indeed, one might say, provocatively amusing – 'the everyday apocalypse', in which the catastrophe bursts from within one and does not arrive from the external world. (*Merénylet* 'Suicide Bomb' and *Madarak Birds*.) Up to the present, however, there is not a single theatre that has been able to give an adequate performance of these marvellous, independent texts.

Of course, it is a great pleasure that, nevertheless, there are a constantly growing number of productions in new, modern stage language, and this process is due to the new generation of directors. These young men, either working alone or in a given company, are realising their independent manners of speech and acting, and organising their own teams in Hungary or abroad. In the first place Árpád Schilling must be mentioned again, but the most provocative 'bombers' too are significant names: Sándor Zsótér, Balázs Kovalik and Róbert Alföldi, the present director of the National Theatre. Those that have their own teams, or just work freelance: Béla Pintér, Viktor Bodó, János Mohácsi, Csaba Horváth, Krisztián Gergye and many other young workshops who have been pushed out of official, traditional theatre life, or have been unwilling to join it. These teams work more and more frequently with their own material and not with 'imported literary material', they are children of the post-dramatic theatre period. And this, in part a delightful development, is in part a cause for concern over the destiny and future of literary drama.

Returning to contemporary Hungarian drama: since the middle of the decade, even more precisely since 2006, works have become more numerous that delineate a worrying perspective that look into the future, and think in terms of great prospects and much bigger communities. We may call these, with something by way of professional thieves' cant, apocalypse or catastrophe drama: Beckett's *Endgame*, Karl Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind*, the dramas of Edward Bond and Heinrich Müller and the scripts of the Polish classic catastrophe dramatists point in this direction. Contemporary Hungarian writers in this bracket are János Térey (with particular reference to his *Jeremiah* or *the Coldness of God*) and the light-hearted and easy-going end-of-the-world plays of Virág Erdős. One must not fail to mention one of the most significant middle-generation dramatists, Mihály Kornis; his 'danse macabre opus', *Rendkívüli állapot* (*An Extraordinary Condition*, 1993), a surreal, grotesque, apocalyptic vision of the Day of Judgement, has yet to be performed.

In conclusion, the crowning work of this dramatic school, Péter Nádas's *Szirenének* (*Sirens' Song*, 2009), a grand-scale theatrical vision and Last Judgement play. This was written to a German commission and broke the author's thirty-year silence as a dramatist. He wrote his three emblematic dramas between 1977 and 1980, the encoded tragedies of those years: *Takarítás* (*Clearing up*), *Találkozás* (*Encounter*) and *Temetés* (*Funeral*), after which he attained international reputation as a novelist with *Emlékiratok könyve* (*Book of Memories*).

András Forgách has written what are, to date, the most valid comments on *Sirens' Song*: '*Sirens' Song* is at once a reconstruction in negative of a great myth, a series of scenes and images full of theatrical quality, a merciless tableau, somewhere, I say tongue in cheek, in the region of *The Twilight of*

the Gods, *The Tragedy of Man*, *The Entry of the Magyars* and *Star Wars*, and considering its allegorical colouring it may in fact be regarded as a kind of sensual conglomeration of the great Nádas standard themes – a true national drama, especially if one considers *Az élet álom* (*Life is a Dream*), the Second World War scene at the heart of the work, where Caspar David Friedrich's ruined church in the wilderness meets with Hungarian soldiers dying in the infinite snows of Russia. Little has been written in Hungarian in the recent past with so universal a message. And although the text is historical in perspective, the language here is the most youthful of any Nádas text that I know: impudent, exorbitant, free, knowing no limits (after all, it is a satire), the thousand-faced quality of James Joyce's *Ulysses* come to mind. The author visibly revels in stage speech, clearly intentionally writes himself into it, ironically imitates his own cadences. In my unbiased, unprejudiced and objective opinion a wildly successful performance could be made of it.' (The play is going into rehearsal in the studio theatre at Katona József Theatre in December 2010.)

The momentary present

The politics of the day is the genre of a moment, whereas books, if all goes well, last for ever. It is therefore very risky to say anything in them by way of a statement about the politics of the day. It must, however, not remain unsaid that Hungarian artistic life is up in arms, because the new right-wing government enacted a new media law on 1 January, 2011 that restricts the press freedom seriously in various ways. Here politics enters contemporary playwriting. Public life has stirred up, the protests have begun, but if the genre of texts intended for the stage does not, sooner or later, react with greater immediacy it will lose its most important charm, its spontaneity, its closeness to reality and the motive force of this.

There is an outstanding prose- and drama-writer whose recently staged play analyses a painful point in Hungarian history, the acceptance or condemnation of which is a question that depends on party politics, and therefore the premiere has stirred up a storm in public life. Pál Závada's *Magyar ünnep* (*Hungarian Festivity*) was excellently produced in the National Theatre studio by the director Róbert Alföldi. There are also the alternative theatre associations, formed by the young, which are able to react more quickly, more flexibly to events, and in their programmes too situations and texts full of political material have appeared – whether in re-evaluation of classics, or in texts of a more open conception, indeed, in one movement- and dance-production (Krisztián Gergye's *Adaptáció Trikolór* 'Adaptation Tricolor'). Until now Hungarian contemporary dramas have excelled in probing into private life, the past, and many into the future or the global world trend; now the way in which public life will change and whether the literary dramatic genre will react to it (which, as everyone knows, will require a longer time-perspective), and if it does, then how, what and when are all open questions. But the answer to them is outside the scope of this article.



Anita Rákóczy Suicide Bomb – Dramas and Traumas in the Plays of Virág Erdős

*I watch as bloody little
Heads and guts
And arms and legs
Like balls thrown up
Or scarves that fly
Reaching high into the sky.³*

Virág Erdős (1968 -) made her début as a poet and short-story writer, with unique awareness of the world around and within her. Her volumes of poems and short-stories have been issued by the most renowned Hungarian publishers.⁴ She began writing dramas in 2004, when she was given the most prominent career-starter playwright award, the Örkény István Scholarship. Since then she has received several dramatic awards and scholarships, and her plays are staged at various established and experimental theatres. Kalocsa, her most recent play, was commissioned by Vígszínház in 2010. Erdős's distinctive poetic voice and outstanding visual talent make her one of the few successful and highly productive contemporary women dramatists in Hungary.

As an essentially lyrical author, Erdős creates the strong, cutting atmosphere of her plays by exploring and displaying the darkest relationships and frustrations of her own self and her closest personal circles. The changing news and disasters in the world such as bird flu or terrorist attacks affect her perceptibly. However, instead of forming a dramatic opinion on the above mentioned phenomena either on a social or a political level, she has the tendency to transfer these influences deep down into her own private life and find there equivalent tragedies that she can relate to in the first person singular.

Stylistically, Erdős follows the absurd tradition of Eugène Ionesco, with a special approach to language. She writes in a rich, complex, many-layered style concerning both verbal and poetic devices that is beyond comparison with those of her fellow authors. She handles dramatic dialogue with great mastery and daring professionalism. Nevertheless, the products of Erdős's creative potential cannot be analyzed along the lines of traditional dramaturgy. She has the ability to build up a world and then decompose it by the next gesture: her plays offer the reader various approaches of understanding, which usually become confused, deconstructed or relativized within the same context. Erdős does not aim to provide us with pre-digested definitions or all-round relationships – we are given fragments, verbose and less outspoken characters, TV commercials, old Hungarian tongue-twisters, jokes, paranoia, aggression, suicide, cannibalism, adultery, various attempts at murder, domestic violence, parallel monologues, fake dialogues, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. Family affairs.

Erdős's first independent volume of dramas, *Merénylet* (Suicide Bomb), comprising four individual plays, was published by Palatinus in 2008. *Madarak* (Birds, 2007) is an ambiguous, absurd tragedy about a Hungarian family and the bird flu, focusing on human cruelty. *Biblia* (Bible, 2005) is an unique experiment on stage which is divided into 3x3 screens, a "Bible-revue" that consists of Erdős's Bible-related literary texts. *Marat halála* (The Death of Marat, 2006) is Erdős's brave adaptation of the Peter Weiss piece depicting the tragedy of a young girl that offers several ways of interpretation ranging from feminist appeal to horror drama.

The staging of *Suicide Bomb*⁵ at Mórícz Zsigmond Színház, Nyíregyháza, in 2007 was Virág Erdős's first premiere in an established, traditional theatre. The event was preceded by the staged reading of the play in 2005 during the yearly POSZT theatre festival, directed by István Pinczés, organized by the Dramaturgs' Association. A suicide bomb has exploded in downtown Budapest. The perpetrator was a young Hungarian Girl, who had mingled with the people waiting at the bus stop at Franciscan's Square, then boarded a crowded No. 7 bus, which, a few seconds later, was blown into the air. The starting point of *Suicide Bomb* is set immediately after the detonation. The opening set reveals the wreckage and destruction following the bomb explosion: the stage is covered in the debris of bus parts, wheels, scattered objects, torn limbs. However, no matter how bloody the drama turns out to be, the play is not about international terrorism and carries no political overtones. Rather it is the story of the investigation subsequent to the attempt, carried out on its perpetrator and its dead victims, the Girl's Mother, Father, Husband, Lover and Child. The bomb in the play is a metaphoric means of self-liberation that explodes within the Girl's microcosm, within the extended family, and is intended to bring about a change at last, to fill in the gap that is present in all her inter-personal relationships.

LOVER: ... She was probably thinking that if a respectable woman like her hooks up with a skunk, something's gonna happen. ... The ice rink will open... Flowers will burst into bloom... World peace will break out. But no. You've gotta blow something up to make it happen.

Structurally, *Suicide Bomb* consist of criminal interviews conducted by the Detective and real time or retrospective scenes of the Girl's everyday life from her birth, early childhood and adolescence up to her marriage, becoming a mother, adultery and death. Erdős does not allow the reader to draw a straight plot line of the events, though – the play is full of absurd textual ambiguities, and cause and effect relations do not apply in *Suicide Bomb*'s linguistically and ontologically fragmented world. There is not a single statement that fails to be undermined by another statement, which makes us feel lost among the broken bits and pieces of contradictory information that cover the reader like the debris of the explosion.

One thing is certain: the Detective who is interviewing the dead suspect and the Girl's dead family members and acquaintances is the only person in the play who is alive. It is unclear how the characters have passed away, as the drama informs us both about their natural deaths and about their deaths in the bus tragedy. The reasons behind the Girl's action are never fully revealed. In Scene 1, she tries to tell her Mother about the fatal accident and her motives, but she is not listening. She is so busy tidying the flat to clean up the mess before the Father arrives home that she fails to realize even the fact that she is dead. Although the Father is seriously criticised by the Detective for looking at his daughter [the Girl] once and raising his eyebrows, the Mother-Girl relationship seems just as problematic.

Besides being crazy jealous of her daughter even when the Father is tying the Girl's shoelaces, the Mother cannot not face up to having become a mother. She depicts the Girl as some kind of a rabbit, a monster who constantly endangers her parents' lives, follows them everywhere, and watches them with evil intention day and night. Therefore, the suicide bomber suffered a great number of attempts on her life from her Mother and Father long before the explosion. They had pushed her off the swing, buried her in the sandbox down to the concrete and thrown her out of the window. However, she was, to her loving parents' greatest sorrow, indestructible.

As time passes and the interrogations progress, we witness that the Girl treats her Child the same way as her Mother treated her – she does not listen, does not pay attention. Her frustration increases with the events, we find out about her inadequate love life, loneliness and suicide attempts. Her Husband notices some strange looking wires, and then the bomb attached to the Girl's body, only after moving in together into their apartment. Perhaps the bomb had been there for a while. It had been planned, carefully designed, it had grown on the Girl's body like a secret tumour or a device of hope. An attempt to put things right.

³ Song Of The Suicide Bomber, a poem by Virág Erdős that is the closing section of *Suicide Bomb*.

⁴ Some of Virág Erdős's major verse and prose publications: Komiss Péter-Erdős Virág: *Ukvarok, Városháza*, 1993; Erdős Virág: *Beiső udvar, JAK-Kijarat*, 1998; Erdős Virág: *Lenni jó, Magvető*, 2000; Erdős Virág: *Másmilyen mesék, Magvető*, 2003; Erdős Virág: *Euróidillék, Magvető*, 2007.

⁵ *Suicide Bomb*, in Virág Erdős, *Suicide Bomb*. (Budapest: Uj Palatinus Könyvesház Kft, 2008): 5-52. English translation by Ildikó Nagy.

Virág Erdős: *Suicide Bomb*
(excerpt)
Translated by Ildikó Nagy

6.

Colorful, concentrated light

HUSBAND: I'd like to ask for... if you'd allow me to...

FATHER: ...How much?

HUSBAND: How much what?

FATHER: How much do you want?

HUSBAND: ?? (sits back down)

FATHER: Oxen? Camels?... I'll tell you the truth... I don't have either... I've got a VW Golf... but I want to keep it.

HUSBAND: But...

FATHER: Either you take her as is, or you leave her... I've had so much trouble with that screwy dame... I've worked my hands to the bone, and for what? ...I don't want to spend any more on her. No way! ...You know how it is. A few years ago, this guy comes, made an offer, I agreed and dished out what he asked for. For what? Two days later, he brought her back... He says to me, I can't stand it anymore. He just couldn't take it... Well... I couldn't either. While she was little, I tried everything. Believe me. I pushed her off the swing, poof! She squeaked, but that's it. Jumped to her feet, got back on the swing: ooh that was fun, do it again, Daddy... That's how it was... You know what I'm saying? Once we were out late, I thought, now's my chance. I lured her to the sandbox, grabbed her neck, and buried her. And I mean right down to the concrete! ...And what happened? Five minutes later, she's running around like crazy: yay Daddy! Look! I found the red shovel I lost years ago... Right... That's how it was. Then one day I'd had enough! It was nighttime, with a sweet summer wind, and she was driving me up the wall asking for water and piddle-paddle, I grabbed her, and whoosh, threw her out the window... I peeked out... finally! It looked like I was lucky this time... 'cause her skull broke. Broke right back here (shows where) and... her brain spilled out.

HUSBAND: My God! And what happened to her?

FATHER: What do you mean, what? Nothing. She didn't care how she looked. Her pajama top was covered in bits of brain, all down her back too, some of it got in her slippers too... she ran up the stairs, knocked on the door, climbed back under the bed and went on biting her nails.

HUSBAND: Weird.

FATHER: Right... Weird.

(pause)

FATHER: You want me to tell you a secret?

HUSBAND: Ah...

FATHER: But only if...

HUSBAND: Ah...

FATHER: You sure?

HUSBAND: Ah...

FATHER: Cross your heart and hope to die?

HUSBAND: Okay.

FATHER: Listen... She's not my daughter.

HUSBAND: ...What do you mean? Whose is she then?

FATHER: God knows! I sure don't. She's some kind of mutant. Some... thing... a dissident... 'cause mine... she ain't like that!

HUSBAND: Where is yours then?

FATHER: My daughter? (slaps his crotch) Down yonder.

HUSBAND: Pardon me?

FATHER: She got stuck in my dick. And now... it's too late. You know how it is... Too bad. 'Cause she's a great gal! If you could only see her! A blue-eyed beanpole with braids... you know, tip-top, hip-hop, high-strung but low key, ambitious... a rational thinker... communicative... Has these regular little quirks. Like, you know what she wants to be when she grows up? A civil servant! But only until she becomes a mother. (slowly, dreamily, itemizing) Then she'll close the shop... open the fridge... take stuff out, put stuff in... and then... she'll wash all those dirty dishes... Then she'll wipe her hands... and call me. She'll tell me about her day... I'll ask her certain questions... and she will answer me in clear, complete sentences... She's great isn't she? ...You want one just like her, don'tcha? Sure thing! But not this supposed daughter of mine... She talks to spiders, eats broccoli! ...You're still young and full of life, but pretty soon you'll grow old. But by then... (sighs heavily)

HUSBAND: ...Woo-hoo!

FATHER: What's that, son?

HUSBAND: I just wanted to hear my own voice... After all...

FATHER: Whatever you want. You're no genius, I can see that... but... it'd be a shame... That's right... A shame.

11.

Colorful, concentrated light

DETECTIVE: Are you hurt?

LOVER: It's nothing.

DETECTIVE: Your arm?

LOVER: Leg.

DETECTIVE: Sliver?

LOVER: Shell.

DETECTIVE: Goodness. Have a seat.

LOVER: Thank you.

DETECTIVE: You're welcome. If I am correct, you are a...

LOVER: Well yes.

DETECTIVE: Just to get things straight... beaver, gopher, badger, or rat, perhaps?

LOVER: I'm a skunk.

DETECTIVE: Skunk. Super. Have a seat!

LOVER: Thank you.

DETECTIVE: You're welcome. I have nothing against skunks, you know. I rather like them. Small, spry, furry, low maintenance... they eat garbage... of course I wouldn't be too happy if, for example, one wanted to move in next door, but I suppose you don't have any such intentions.

LOVER: Nope.

DETECTIVE: Super. (offers him a seat) Have a seat!

LOVER: Thank you.

DETECTIVE: You're welcome. Let's see. If I'm correct, you were fairly close to the accused.

LOVER: Yes, you could say that.

DETECTIVE: Pardon me?

LOVER: I was her lover.

DETECTIVE: And since when, if I may ask?

LOVER: Well... since about six.

DETECTIVE: Could you tell me the exact date, perhaps?

LOVER: Sure. June, July, August...

DETECTIVE: June, July, August... I see. (offers him a seat) Have a seat!

LOVER: Thank you.

DETECTIVE: You're welcome. Let's get to the point... How would you describe the accused?
LOVER: I'd describe her as blond.
DETECTIVE: But she was really ...?
LOVER: She was actually yellow. I'd described her as slender, tall, a real skyscraper, when actually she was small and fat.
DETECTIVE: What were the circumstances under which you met?
LOVER: We met under hectic circumstances. As usual, I was lying in the gutter, when she stepped over to me, and helped me up.
DETECTIVE: Why would she do that? Did she ever tell you?
LOVER: I've no idea why. Maybe she found me attractive.
DETECTIVE: I'm sure.
LOVER: We didn't talk much back then, because I didn't know how to talk yet.
DETECTIVE: What do you mean?
LOVER: Just what I said. She taught me. (enunciating) "She sells sea shells by the seashore, she sells seashells by the seashore..." I can write too.
DETECTIVE: That's interesting. Didn't she ever mention that she had an apartment, a husband, a child?
LOVER: No... She was an abominable woman. Wouldn't tell me anything.
DETECTIVE: She didn't let you in on her plans?
LOVER: What sort of plans?
DETECTIVE: Concerning the bombing.
LOVER: Oh, that. She definitely did not let me in on her plans concerning the bombing. She just talked about the apartment, how it would be...
DETECTIVE: You two lived by the sewer then.
LOVER: That's right. We had a little hidey-hole, padded with this and that...
DETECTIVE: Meaning...
LOVER: ...we were happy.
DETECTIVE: And tell me, didn't you notice anything unusual about her behaviour?
LOVER: Well, no... Oh, yeah. Sometimes... she was sad.
DETECTIVE: You don't say! When?
LOVER: When she thought of it.
DETECTIVE: Thought of what?
LOVER: She didn't say.
DETECTIVE: And what did you do on these occasions?
LOVER: Well... I beat her up.
DETECTIVE: Why did you do that?
LOVER: We decided at the very beginning, that no matter what happens, I was to act the way... people like me usually act.
DETECTIVE: And?
LOVER: People like me are usually violent in these instances.
DETECTIVE: And what did she do?
LOVER: ...She hid.
DETECTIVE: And you?
LOVER: I made notes about her routes.
DETECTIVE: Then you remember what she said the last time you saw her.
LOVER: Sure... She was praising Chegevara.
DETECTIVE: Chegevara?
LOVER: Or Rasputin. I can't remember. She said, long live the Soviet Republic, then she packed her bags.

DETECTIVE: Did she say where she was going?
LOVER: To the House of Terrorists, I think... Then she walked out to the bus stop, and boom!
DETECTIVE: Interesting... And what about you? What have you done since... then?
LOVER: What?... What do you think? Can you guess?
DETECTIVE: I have no idea... Have you been thinking things over? Have you cleaned the tub?
LOVER: I killed myself! You don't believe me?
DETECTIVE: Sure I do.
LOVER: Wouldn't you have done the same thing in my place?
DETECTIVE: Definitely. I understand you... Alright, enough is enough! Let's see. You two planned and executed the darkest, vilest, and depraved deeds in the history of mankind. Rape of the Sabine women? The collapse of the Daco-Roman Empire. The walls of Jericho, huh? The death of Marat, you want to hear more? D-Day... and May-day, right? The Battle of Muhi? Of Verdun? Of Srebrenica? And those two pretty twin towers, right? Those don't count, eh? And all those little kids in the schoolyard? You think you can get away with it by acting stupid? You hook up with a woman who thinks she's Joan of Arc, at her age! Fantasizing about hacking up English... and Americans... I can't believe this! Even an ayatollah would cringe from the thought! And they're not even Hungarian!... Or are they? ...And you're trying to tell me, that you didn't know anything all along? You weren't even there? How could you not have been? At a moment like that? The whole world was there. That's right! Except you. Right? Come on, buddy!
LOVER: If you must know, I have no idea who this woman is! I don't even know what she looks like... But she's not in her right mind. That's for sure. She appears out of nowhere, attacks me on purpose, and believe it or not, she wanted to strangle me with her love! She wasn't kidding! ...She was probably thinking that if a respectable woman like her hooks up with a skunk, something's gonna happen... The ice rink will open... Flowers will burst into bloom... World peace will break out. But no. You've gotta blow something up to make it happen... However...
DETECTIVE: However?
LOVER: However, I'd like to give you a name.
DETECTIVE: Yes?
LOVER: (enunciating) X. Y. Z.
DETECTIVE: (writes it down) Where can I find this person?
LOVER: Anytime, anywhere.
DETECTIVE: (writes it down) Super! ... Now you're talking... That wasn't so bad... You're not as stupid as you seem, are you? ...I have nothing against you. ...You're spry, low-maintenance... you eat garbage... of course I wouldn't be too pleased if, for example, you'd want to marry my wife, but I suppose you don't have any such...
LOVER: No.
DETECTIVE: Super! Then perhaps... (offers him a seat) Why don't you have a seat?
LOVER: Thank you.
DETECTIVE: You're welcome.
LOVER: I'm what?
DETECTIVE: What what?



As with many others as they dipped their oars into the waters of literature, the first thing that László Garaczi (1956–) published was verse, but his first book (*Plasztik*, 1985⁶) contained prose pieces too. Even in this early material one can distinguish what was to become characteristic of his writing: the merging of the dimensions of time and space, the uncertainty of the boundaries of personalities, the linguistic playfulness. Another three volumes followed *Plasztik*,⁷ at which in 1994 appeared *Bálnák tánca – Három színpadi játék*,⁸ containing *Imoga*, *Mizantróp* and *Jederman*. Of the three, one has so far been given at Debrecen, directed by István Pinczés.⁹ Although the title of the first evokes an unknown northern region (or the ultimate metamorphosis of insects) all three are borrowed plots. We can easily place the northern region in Denmark, and then recognise Hamlet. True, in this 'burlesque', as the author describes the genre, the situation is a small hotel, better described as an inn, in a remote place somewhere in Hungary. By their mutual relationship and family ties, however, the guests and the innkeeper strongly remind us of Hamlet, or for that matter Electra – in any case, that story in which the young man returning to his home brings about the redemption of the corrupt world. Among the characters are the local lord of the manor Istugén and his wife, Földi Mása, whose name conceals an all but untranslatable play on words. Dorka, the 'local Ophelia', is the daughter of Ocella the innkeeper. She is principally waiting for that redeemer, her lover, Imoga, who is the son of Cobor, the chief accountant (and rebellious polecat, as the author calls him, thus conjuring up the nineteenth-century Hungarian drama *Bánk bán*). Imoga arrives, but is no saviour. He is just as corrupt as the rest. He nonchalantly hands her over to Istugén's German guests in exchange for money. There is no one left to stabilise the unsettled times. On the threshold of the regime-change in Hungary there appears, in addition to the dictatorship of the previous decades, the spectre of the contradictory nature of the years which are to follow.

The 'Molière-ism' in the volume, *Mizantróp*, was performed in 1996 in Székény, the alternative theatre in Budapest Technical University, with Sándor Zsótér as director. Although he wittily transposed the seventeenth-century plot to the Budapest of the '90s, making his own creation, the immoral servant Dubois, who dominates everyone, into the principal character, the strong points of the work also include linguistic playfulness, snatches of popular songs and classics that call up unexpected associations, and the lightness and yet murderous irony of the whole. The very first line is disconcerting, consisting of merely an authorial instruction: Alf and Fil (the two principal characters) are on stage; they slough and pupate into themselves. What can the director do about that? Furthermore, by the end Garaczi does not forget this: Alf sinks into the chair, takes the cigar into his mouth. He sloughs and pupates into a corpse . . .

In the early '90s Géza Fodor, dramaturg at the József Katona Theatre, invited a number of young writers to write a modern-day Everyman-story. Garaczi came up with *Jederman*, the principal character in which is a middle-class family, the head of which, Árpi, is found to be terminally ill. He starts to set up a business: he advertises that he will undertake commissions in the next world. A second plot is delicately interwoven with this – that of the Hungarian Conquest and the establishment of the state. It is easy to recognise historical ancestors by the Christian names¹⁰. All this is very smoothly worked together.

Six years later Garaczi published another book of plays,¹¹ but in the meantime he had gained recognition as a writer. His two novels¹² had seen the light of day, he had written film-scripts, *Prédales* (Stalking) had been produced in 1998 at the Katona by Gábor Máté, and *Csodálatos vadállatok* (Magic Wild Animals) in German in Vienna,¹³ and in addition to other awards he had received a József Attila prize and a Szép Ernő award for his work as a playwright. This new book too contained three plays. The first, *Csodálatos vadállatok*,¹⁴ is perhaps one of the most characteristic of Garaczi's works. The plot has several strands, fantasy blends with reality, and the dimensions of space and time lapse into one another. Memories of what appears to be a family story call to mind a mother who abandons her children and the consequences, but in this play too the author proposes what was to become typical of his later work: each actor should play more than one part, which results in exciting fantasy-associations.

Fesd Feketére! (Paint it Black!) too is a borrowed plot, inspired by Marguerite Duras' novel *Dix heures et demie en été*. but this Garaczi placed in a Hungarian setting, focusing on the conflict between various strata of Hungarian society, leaving in place Duras' view of life but even so shaping it into a characteristically Hungarian story.

At the end of the '90s Garaczi received a grant to go to an American provincial writers' house to write another play. Write it he did – or strictly speaking, why he could not. The drama of non-writing is *Prédales*¹⁵ – the préda (game) is the subject of the play, which the author stalks – but this method is not without precedent, and Pirandello can be quoted as an example – the writer himself goes into and out of his own story, makes stories in the real and imagined world slide this way and that, with exceptionally powerful humour and ability to create situations and characters.

When Garaczi began to write his first dramas, and one by one courageous directors tagged them, the view of his theatrical work was often expressed that they were clever experiments with language, with humorous situations and with demonstrations of the reversibility of the world – but with little feeling for the stage. Since then opinion has changed, and one may say that Garaczi has become a successful writer for the stage too. Nowadays his pieces are not just for anomalous evenings in the theatre, but every Garaczi première is a guarantee of success. The first such breakthrough can also be read in this book; *Plasma* was written in 2006, and in its wake came the livelier *Ovibrader*¹⁶ of 2010, which was introduced almost immediately with the subtitle *Péniszdiológok* (Penis Dialogues).

Garaczi's plays are gradually beginning to resemble a serial novel: recurring characters, situations, problems – and the playful language, filled with humour. In *Ovibrader*, once again the many-sided nature of the man-woman connection is at the focus in our world beset with the internet, media mess and pseudo-science, and the dialogue is sprinkled with verse. He wrote it for two male and two female players, who play very many roles with characteristic bitter Garaczi humour.

Probably by now a theatre-making generation has caught up with Garaczi that can find its own theatrical language in these works – and fortunately the public too has learned to appreciate him.

Plasma is the most popular among all of his pieces. At the start of the drama (or, as the author puts it, the 'game') a plastic description of the 'location' can be read. This is the plasma itself, which seethes and bubbles, sounds break from it, indeed, the characters too emerge from it and sink back into it. It is a symbolic description, and it is up to the producer what he does with it.

11 *Az olyanok, mint te – három színdarab* (People like you – three plays), 2000, Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs.

12 *Minta élénl – Egy lemúr vallomása 1* (As if you were alive – Confessions of a Lemur 1), 1995, Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs; *Pompásan buszuzunk – Egy lemúr vallomása 2* (We travel splendidly by bus – Confessions of a Lemur 2), 1998, Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs.

13 *Csodálatos vadállatok* was given at the Wunderbarer Biester in 2001.

14 Premiered at Zsámbék, 2001.

15 Premiered at Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, 1996, director István Pinczés.

16 Premiered at three Hungarian theatres in 2007: Petőfi Theatre, Veszprém, director Péter Gyula; Vörösmarty Theatre, Székesfehérvár, director Péter Valló, and Komla company, Budapest, who still keep it in their repertoire.

6 László Garaczi (1985): *Plasztik*, Magvető Kiadó, Budapest.

7 *A terület vissza foglálása a madaraktól* (Recapturing the Territory from the Birds), 1986, Magvető, Budapest; *Tartsd a szemed a kígyónál* (Keep your Eyes on the Snake!), 1989, Holmi kiadó, Budapest; *Nincs alvás!* (There is no Sleep!), 1992, Pest Szalon Kiadó, Budapest.

8 *Bálnák tánca – Három színpadi játék* (Dance of Whales – Three theatrical games)

9 Imoga, directed by István Pinczés, Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, 1990.

10 For example: Árpád – Árpi for short – was the leader of the Magyar tribes when they entered the Carpathian basin in the late ninth century.

The actors: three men and two women, or rather one plasmaguy, one plasma-bloke, one plasma-member, one plasma-woman and a plasma-girl. So many may play the many, many roles, or more precisely the unaccountably many roles.

The play begins in a radio studio, where Fabian and Mohai, two good friends, are the lead presenters. They chat relaxedly, then they cut in an outside broadcast in which an intending suicide is on a bridge. An on-the-spot report, even the prime minister is brought in – but it's only the two of them creating these voices in the studio. They ask for ideas for April the First jokes. Soon Balla too appears, who proposes that they ring up his friend and tell him that his new-born child, who has been taken home only today, has been mixed up in the hospital. Meanwhile we are introduced to a one-parent family, in which the lone father is bringing up his daughter, who is actually an UFO, but the father does not know about this, or it is possible that it is only the girl's imagination. Also in the play are another two young girls, one of whom has a boyfriend, and loves him, but he is boring – therefore the other seems to like him. There is also a married couple – who have had news that their child has been mixed up, though it soon emerges that it is only a dream – but it is true that the wife had deceived her husband with their best friend, so one cannot know for certain who the father is really. We return time and again to the radio studio: on one occasion an aggressive mafioso businessman is shouting at them in a vulgar manner, another time a phone-in burglar – who happens to be the daddy of the one-parent family – robs one of their flats, and the injured party almost recovers his plasma TV, but at the last moment it changes into something else, and he realises that material things, objects, are worthless in the world. Meanwhile back to the suicide on the bridge, of whom it transpires that he is the boring youth that one of the girls spoke about – and that he went to school with Mohai of the radio. Mohai goes up to him on the bridge, cheers him up, and everyone bubbles back into the plasma. That is most of the plot, if there is a plot to speak of at all. In addition, during the scenery changes there are witty songs, which those putting on the performance can use as they please.

These are apparently wide-ranging, or at least wide-flowing, stories, out of which, all the same, the picture comes together in the end – meanwhile Garaczi has hit on the playwright's equivalent of the plasma of special physical substance and embellished it with excellent opportunities for roles, actor transformations and linguistic playfulness.

László Garaczi : *Plasma*
(excerpt)
Translated by Ildikó Nagy

Scene 10.

Radio jingle. The studio. ON THE AIR. Music in the background.

FÁBIÁN: Hello?! Mr. Bácskai?

BÁCSKAI: (over the phone) Yes?

FÁBIÁN: Mr. Bácskai, I'm calling from the studio of Ace Radio. My name is Petey Fábíán. Sitting here next to me is my co-host Zsolti Mohai.

MOHAI: A good afternoon to you.

FÁBIÁN: I hope we've caught you at a good time, because we'd like to ask you a few questions about Psycho TV, of which you are the chief owner. The IRS accuses Psycho TV of economic corruption. Investigations are being conducted into the case. What steps are you planning to take in response to these investigations?

BÁCSKAI: My opinion with regards to this is that you can suck me off, Petey (beeping, each time he says a 'dirty' word), and so can Zsolti Mohai along with each and every employee of Ace Radio. And you suck me off first. Report it like that, okay, say it like that. Blow me! Quote me directly, just as I said it on your Ace Radio. All your damn radios can suck all my cocks. Okay?

FÁBIÁN: I don't understand why you are so irate, sir. I posed my question politely, in a civilized tone.

BÁCSKAI: You are polite and civilized. And I tell you, you can suck me off, Petey, and so can Zsolti Mohai. Broadcast that on Ace Radiol Suck me long and hard and wet. You and Mohai and everybody at Ace Radiol

FÁBIÁN: But sir! In the 19th year of our democracy...

BÁCSKAI: I don't give a shit about the 19th year of democracy. You asswipes, you broadcast whatever you want. Can't you see I'm fighting with you? That you've got a radio, a TV, a press trust! What am I fighting with? A shitty TV and still you're gonna suck me off! My TV's gonna have you suck me off politically, right in the face!

FÁBIÁN: We have nothing to do with political shows. We are concerned exclusively with financial questions and analyses...

BÁCSKAI: Fine, then you can suck me off from an exclusively financial side, not some other side, you blow me right there. Why? Did you guys ever report anything about me? My opinion? Always the opinion of my rivals! Did you ever tell anyone about me? Ever?

FÁBIÁN: I would like to emphasize that my questions are not directed towards politics.

BÁCSKAI: Why? You think they're going to let you report anything about me? About my opinion? You're gonna report whatever the hell you want. So now report what I'm saying. Suck me off Petey, and Zsolti Mohai can suck me off too!

FÁBIÁN: I'm afraid the management won't allow us to broadcast this conversation.

BÁCSKAI: How come? 'Suck' means to suck on a candy! Get it? Or you can bleep it out. Bleep-Petey-bleep-Mohai and dot-dot-dot everybody at Ace Radio and you whole press trust!

FÁBIÁN: Mr. Bácskai! I am asking you about a question in the most serious manner. I am being honest and respectful here.

BÁCSKAI: Enough. I've wasted enough time on you cocksuckers! Blow me! Now buzz off!

(music)

Plasma Rap

Plasma fever in the city
All that's useful or a pity
All that's flat and all that's round
Plasmas large and small abound.
Neath plasma sky and plasma moon
a hundred trolls do gaily croon
Plasma tunes through plasma nights
ordered, paid with plasma cards.
You're plasma by night
You're plasma by day
Plasma girls plasma boys, together they play
Plasma channels they're flicking
On plasma TVs they're watching
They talk Plasmaese
With plasma ghosts if you please.

Chorus:

Oozing like hot magma
Honey sweet you know
Everywhere it's plasma
Anywhere you go.
This is the plasma ball
The razma tazma ball
The plasma, plasma ball.
Plasma makes bodies so round
Thin angular contours no longer are found.
Plasma the heart and plasma the lips
Everyone talks in new plasma quips.
Changing while chatting and rapping
This talk has no bones that are cracking.
It stretches this plasma and bubbles
No power can hold back its struggles.
Plasma fidelity and plasma virility
Plasma myrtle on head of plasma virginity.
Plasma chick to the plaza she goes
Her plasma boobs to augment them you know.
There is no exit, no taking off
So come to these plasma arms, arms oh so soft.
Plasma people they queue in long line as a stream
As a matter of fact, each one I have been.

Chorus:

Oozing like hot magma
Honey sweet you know
Everywhere it's plasma
Anywhere you go.
This is the plasma ball
The ram tama ball
The plasma, plasma ball.
Everyone's altered
And not themselves, really
It saved you from agony
That plasma, you silly.
All has been stretched
The plasma's so hot
And that's honest truth,
Like it or not.

Chorus:

Oozing like hot magma
Honey sweet you know
Everywhere it's plasma
Anywhere you go.
This is the plasma ball

The razma tazma ball
The plasma, plasma ball.

Scene 5.

A couple at home with their newborn: the baby gurgles as the wife bathes the child. She talks to the baby during the entire scene.

FÁBIÁN: (over the phone) Good afternoon! I'd like to speak to Szabolcs Ritter.

RITTER: Speaking.

FÁBIÁN: I'm Dr. Keve from the Bakáts Square hospital. Your wife gave birth the day before yesterday, if I'm correct?

RITTER: Yes.

FÁBIÁN: First of all let me offer my congratulations.

RITTER: Thank you.

FÁBIÁN: I suppose the family's very proud.

RITTER: Yes.

FÁBIÁN: You left the hospital this morning with little... er... What's the baby's name?

RITTER: Fanny.

FÁBIÁN: Fanny – a lovely name, good choice. Once again, please accept my congratulations.

RITTER: Thank you.

FÁBIÁN: Er... um... this is not the only reason I called. Er... It seems that there's been a teensy-weensy little mix-up.

RITTER: Pardon me?

FÁBIÁN: Unfortunately, we suspect that your baby has been... The way things look at the moment, it appears that the baby was... er... you know.

RITTER: What?

FÁBIÁN: Don't panic now. What happened is that by accident... totally completely by accident... at least it seems that you took home someone else's baby instead of yours. So the baby you have there isn't little Fanny, but... but... let's see, ah yes, it really makes no difference, but yes, she is little Gladys. Not Fanny, but Gladys! Not much difference really, but there is the possibility that...

RITTER: What are you talking about?

FÁBIÁN: Sometimes a pebble snags even the most perfect machinery. A glitch in the paperwork, you know, the files get mixed up and so um... you know.

RITTER: Who is this?

FÁBIÁN: I'm Dr. Keve, director of the Bakáts Square hospital. I know this might not be easy at first. It's hard to understand that such things even occur at all. But the thing is, your baby, little Fanny, is still here in the maternity ward. The baby you have there, the one you took home as your own, well... that's somebody else's. That's little Theresa, er, no, I mean, Gladys, a different baby, and er... I'd like to request, with the deepest respect... if possible, let's try and handle this discreetly, as it is an uncomfortable situation for both of us. Bring the baby back, and you'll get your own, the original one. When you arrive, tell the doorman a kind of code word, so unauthorized persons don't get wind of the situation. The doorman is informed. He will understand and will escort you to my office. So let's say the code is... 'We're delivering the kumquat.' Okay? That's what you'll need to say to the doorman downstairs, we're delivering the kumquat, and he'll know what to do. I'll be expecting you then! Good-bye! (he hangs up, the phone beeps)

RITTER: Hello? Hello?

(bubbling)

FÁBIÁN: And what else could we play after that joke? Well? Oh yes! The Poopy Song by Flaccid Karma!

(music)

The Poopy Song

In Poopyland the Poopy Prince upon his throne is sitting
His poopy daughter Poopy Polly for spending money begging
Poopy dance, poopy dance, for spending money begging.

Chorus:

Poop the poopy in the potty, poopy hopping, poopy trotting,
Poop the poopy in the potty.

In Poopyland, on piles of poopy, a poopy castle can be found
Poopy miner, poop is mining on his cart brown coal he's mined
Poopy dance, poopy dance, on his cart brown coal he's mined.

Chorus:

Poop the poopy in the potty, poopy hopping, poopy trotting,
Poop the poopy in the potty.

Poopy morning, poopy day, from poopy bed he's on his way
On poopy feet his shoes he throws, and quickly off to school he goes.
Poopy dance, poopy dance and quickly off to school he goes.

Chorus:

Poop the poopy in the potty, poopy hopping, poopy trotting,
Poop the poopy in the potty.

Teacher knows the reason why, poopy question, poopy reply
Student didn't know his stuff, didn't study hard enough
Poopy dance, poopy dance didn't study hard enough.

Chorus:

Poop the poopy in the potty, poopy hopping, poopy trotting
Poop the poopy in the potty.

Piles of poopy is the ration from Poopyland's pooped generation
What silly thoughts reign on the throne, in a brain where no one's home.
Poopy dance, poopy dance in a brain where no one's home.

Chorus:

Poop the poopy in the potty, poopy hopping, poopy trotting
Poop the poopy in the potty.



Katalin Trencsényi

A Different Kind of Happiness: János Háý

János Háý (1960 –) is a writer, poet, playwright and self-taught painter. He began his career as a poet, with his poems appearing in literary magazines; although his first complete volume *Gyalog megyek hozzád a sétálóúton* (I Walk towards You on the Footpath) wasn't published until 1989. This has been followed by nine further volumes of poetry, to date.

As a prose writer, he published short stories, before his novel *Dzsigerdilen* (Djigerdilen, 1996), set during the sixteenth-century Turkish occupation of Hungary, brought him recognition as a novelist. Of his later novels, *A gyerek* (The Child, 2007) is considered the highpoint of his career so far. This novel follows the life of a villager (from hopeful youth to broken-down middle-age) who tries but fails to break the familial cycle of paternal alcoholism and fulfil his parents' dreams for him in the city.

As a self-taught painter Háý claims not to follow any "isms" but paints "what I want and what I can." His pictures of melancholy, two-dimensional creatures, somewhat reminiscent of Cortázar's cronopios or Klee's pencil-drawn angels, have slowly found their way into (and onto) his books, and since 1996 Háý's own paintings have featured on his book covers.

Háý's playwriting career began in the late nineties with two adaptations for children, but the play that made him a celebrated playwright was *Gézagyerek* (2001). The play received several awards, including Best Hungarian Play, and it was translated into ten languages. (The English translation of the play, *The Stonewatcher*, made by Phil Porter, had a staged reading at the National Theatre, London and was published by Oberon Books in 2004.) The drama focuses on Géza, a young man with learning difficulties who lives with his mother in a decaying village full of jobless alcoholics. Géza's life changes when he's offered a bogus job at the local quarry, making sure that the German owner abides by the safety regulations. It doesn't take long, however, for Géza to realise that this job is absolutely senseless. In the whole village it is only the village fool who understands the meaninglessness of their existence; that something has gone seriously wrong with the world, and that God isn't there to mend it.

The Stonewatcher became the first play in Háý's tetralogy, followed by *A Herner Ferike faterja* (Frankie Herner's Old Man), a philosophical murder-mystery, *A Senák* (Senák), a tragedy set during the forced collectivisation of the 1960s, and *A Pityu bácsi fia* (Uncle Pityu's Son), a ballad-like piece about the impossibility of breaking out from one's social background.

Making use of gentle humour and irony, all four plays deal with the question of fate through the lives of god-forsaken people, living in the middle of nowhere. In these plays Háý addresses the core questions of human existence (who are we? what are we here for? is there a plan?), it's no surprise that the subtitle of them is: "God dramas." "One of the foundations of human thought is that one thinks about one's own finitude. Another foundation is that one compares this finitude to the infinity surrounding one. The tension between these two gives the basic anxieties of human existence. This is an irreconcilable contrast." – said Háý in a recent interview.

But in his plays these profound (and often funny) philosophical debates are given to ordinary workmen, people of very low status in society – reminiscent of the gravedigger scene in Hamlet. These social outcasts are the heroes of Háý's tetralogy. They are mainly village people, often rigid and inflexible, but also weak and vulnerable. People unable to move with the changing times, who have become stuck somewhere for ever; those for whom social mobility means nothing more than a walk to the pub!

For these plays Háý invented his own, almost Beckettian language, comprised of repetitions, rhythms and pauses. He took the worn, corrupted, misused language of these people and wove poetry out of it. Slang meets metaphysics in these four plays.

One of the most exciting features of Háý as a writer (both as a novelist and a playwright) is his incredible ability to invent new languages. Some writers aim to find one voice, and stay with it for the rest of their career, whereas Háý creates a powerful, rich new language, explores its possibilities, and once he feels this might become routine, he moves on, further challenging himself. Háý is constantly striving for a valid, vital form of expression, yet is always talking about the same thing: our personal existential anxiety.

In his 'God dramas' Háy explored the possibilities of making poetry out of a corroded language, and his later plays show a search for new means of expression. There is also a move away from socio-political subjects towards an examination of intimate relations, and our capacity for self-deception within relationships. This is also the theme of his more recent novels and short stories.

After years of silence, Háy wrote a one-man play based on his own selected short stories on marriage *Házasságon innen és túl* (Before and Beyond Marriage). The play was performed at the National Theatre, Budapest in 2007, and three years later it's still in their repertoire.

The setting of Háy's recent plays is the town or city, and his protagonists are usually middle-class, middle-aged people moving in and out of relationships. They are bitter, unhappy, and cynical; their relationships are meaningless, and only routine (or the knowledge that there isn't anything better) keeps them together.

When Háy finds a subject, he examines it from every angle, and in its all variations. Just as his 'God dramas' deal with the meaning of our lives, his recent 'middle-class plays' dissect our relationships. All of his most recent plays *Házasságon innen és túl* (Before and Beyond Marriage), *Vasárnapi ebéd* (Sunday Lunch), *Völgyhíd* (Viaduct), *Nehéz* (Hard) and *Háromszögek* (Triangles) can be regarded as a variation of the above theme.

Just as in the 'God dramas', in the 'middle-class plays' motifs, themes and characters recur. The plays begin a complex dialogue with each other, widening the context of each drama.

Perhaps one of the most powerful of these recent plays is *Völgyhíd* (Viaduct), a drama written for young people, where the adult world is seen through the eyes of teenagers. In this play the most insensitive, aggressive and selfish characters are the adults. The protagonist, Péter, is a 17 year-old youth who, unable to conform, commits suicide as a desperate attempt to escape.

Another outstanding play in this cycle is *Nehéz* (Hard), which is a ballad-like tale of a man in his fifties, comprised mainly of monologues. The play is about his attempts and failure to break out of his modest, rural background. Háy shows his desire for a better life, the mistakes made, and the self-deceit to avoid facing responsibility for his actions.

With this play Háy has reinvented the monologue. The monologues in the play are speeches the protagonist makes to his mother, night after night, justifying his life and decisions, before nipping out to the pub to get completely drunk. These speeches comprise the backbone of the play, slowly revealing the background story that led to his alcoholism.

Vasárnapi ebéd (Sunday Lunch) (5 F, 4 M, 3 children), a 'middle class play' in two acts, was commissioned by the National Theatre, Budapest, in 2009. It was part of a large-scale new drama project run by the theatre, in which they asked each of ten eminent Hungarian writers to write a play on one of the Ten Commandments. Háy got the fourth ("Honour thy father and thy mother..."), and *Sunday Lunch* was written as a response to this.

The play follows approximately ten years in the life of a divorcee, the abandoning of her son of her first marriage for the family she starts with her second marriage. It reveals the patterns of mistakes she makes; suggesting that perhaps, because of the flawed nature of human beings, there is no chance of happiness or contentment. It also reveals how the once functional family has been reduced to a formal frame within which people feel restrained, unhappy and compromised. Out of habit they insist on the empty routine of keeping the family together, "for the children's sake", although none of them finds this fulfilling. Sunday lunch (at which they eat ready-made soup) is a metaphor for that.

The play opens with the last argument of a couple, in which the wife (The Girl) tells her husband that because she deserves better than he can offer her, she is going to leave him. When the Girl reveals her decision to her parents, they are concerned that she might want to move back with them, a solution nobody desires. Luckily, the recently deceased grandmother's flat can be available, provided the other beneficiary of the inheritance, Uncle Laci renounces his share in it. To the family's great surprise, Uncle Laci does this. The family, as their way of saying thank-you, invite the bachelor uncle to every Sunday lunch from then on.

After the divorce the Girl eventually finds somebody through a dating agency. With the new husband, a new circle begins for her: new house, new family – with the same bickering Sunday lunches at her parents'.

Ten years later the First Husband is jobless, the Girl's Son from her first marriage is at boarding school, and the Girl is living "every woman's dream life" with a house in a semi-affluent district and two children from her new marriage. Her friends from her former workplace envy her: she has seemingly made good second time, whereas they are

having their mid-life crises and various relationship problems. In reality the Girl is unhappy: she feels that her Second Husband doesn't love her enough.

One Sunday the Uncle voices his concern that the Son of the Girl's first marriage is never with them at these lunches. After some argument the Girl promises that the Son (who's at university now in another town) will join them at Christmas.

When Christmas comes, the Girl learns that the Son won't be with them, as he'll spend the Holidays with his girlfriend's family. The Girl feels sad and unwanted.

The Christmas dinner is spoiled by an argument. The Girl accuses her parents of making a secret deal with Uncle Laci, who in exchange for Granny's flat has taken over her Son's place in the family. She runs away in a distress.

The remaining family members reminisce about the old days when they were happy. When the children ask if they are not happy now, the answer is: "yes, we are, but in a different way".

In a way all Háy's plays are about these "different ways" of happiness.

János Háy: *Sunday Lunch*
(excerpt)

Translated by Bernard Adams

A middle-class play
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

GIRL: 26 at the start of the play

MOTHER: over fifty

FATHER: nearing sixty

FIRST MAN: Girl's first husband, a production engineer in his thirties

UNCLE LACI: Mother's brother, deep into his fifties

SECOND MAN: Girl's second husband, a mathematician in his thirties

CHILD: a boy from Girl's first marriage, about eight

OLDER CHILD: a boy from Girl's second marriage, about eight (in the second act)

YOUNGER CHILD: a boy from Girl's second marriage, about six (in the second act)

KATI: Girl's colleague, in her thirties

ANIKÓ: Girl's colleague, in her late twenties

SUPERINTENDENT: a woman in her forties

In the second act all characters are eight or ten years older

SCENE 2

A living room. The doorbell rings. Inside a man looks at his watch, and his wife looks at the clock on the wall. Father opens the door. Enter Girl.

FATHER: Where's the kid?

GIRL: I didn't bring him.

FATHER: Why not?

GIRL: There's something I have to tell you.

FATHER: What?

GIRL: I'm getting divorced.

Father looks stunned.

FATHER: You just go and blurt it out like that?

GIRL: What should I have said?

FATHER: You could have been a bit more tactful.

GIRL: I'm the one getting divorced, not you.

FATHER: What about your mother? What will she say?

GIRL: I've always considered her, but now I can't.

Enter Mother

MOTHER: What's wrong?

FATHER: Apparently she's getting divorced.

MOTHER: What do you mean, divorced?

GIRL: I can't put up with him any longer.

MOTHER: But people don't just up and get divorced around here.

GIRL: No. But I will, all the same.

MOTHER: What do you mean, all the same? Look at me. Did I get divorced? No, I didn't. I stuck it out, because in our family, everyone sticks it out.

FATHER: Me too. 'Cause I didn't get divorced either. Because then your mother would have been labeled a divorced woman if I'd have divorced her. But your mother is not a divorced woman. When half the kids in your class were from broken marriages, we hung in there.

MOTHER: It's got value. It's the only thing worth something. And if you break it up... well, you might as well do like the dogs and lie with anyone.

FATHER: Dogs don't do it lying down.

MOTHER: Who asked you? It was a figure of speech, the point wasn't the lying down. And anyway, who's got time to watch nature films on how dogs do it when I've got a household to run here, so keep your opinions to yourself. All I'm saying is, you can only knock it down once. After that, it stays knocked down.

FATHER: No kidding. And even a footballer looks bad knocked down, let alone a marriage.

MOTHER: Always football! Can't you think of anything else besides football at a time like this?

FATHER: The World Cup's coming up soon.

GIRL: He's a drinker.

MOTHER: A drinker? So what? All men drink. Drinking is not enough grounds for divorce. No one in Hungary would be married if it was.

FATHER: How much does he drink?

GIRL: More than enough.

FATHER: That's bad.

MOTHER: Why would it be bad? You always drank more than necessary. Even on our wedding anniversary. Still we didn't get divorced.

FATHER: That's exactly why.

MOTHER: What do you mean, that's exactly why?

FATHER: That's exactly why I've been drinking, 'cause in all these years we never got divorced.

MOTHER: You were so happy, right?

FATHER: I don't know. I don't remember. It really was a lot. Plus nowadays, I always forget everything if I drink. I even forget why I do it.

GIRL: And he's aggressive.

MOTHER: Aggressive? That's not the man I know. A man who's always polite and calls me 'Ma'am' can't possibly be aggressive.

GIRL: It's for show. Everyone thinks he's not like he is, but he is, except he can pretend he's different.

MOTHER: I can't believe that. Only actors do things like that, believing they're on stage even in their private lives, getting their roles all mixed up, thinking they're kings in the middle of lunch and all that, reciting poetry to the roast chicken, but Tamás... Tamás is a production engineer.

GIRL: You don't have to be condescending just because he's a production engineer.

MOTHER: Me? Of course not. I just find it hard to believe that he can pretend to be different than he is.

FATHER: Right. Because I got on pretty well with Tamás too. We understood each other just fine.

MOTHER: Especially when the two of you went out to get some wine.

FATHER: Sure, and when we talked about women.

MOTHER: Women? What women?

FATHER: Not actual women, just women in general, what they're like... we understood each other very well on that subject. And what happened? He was right. 'Cause he got the boot because he drinks. Just because he drinks.

GIRL: Dad, it's me, your daughter.

FATHER: Of course it is.

GIRL: Then you shouldn't be defending him.

FATHER: I'm not defending anybody. I'm just trying to be fair.

GIRL: The truth is, I can't go on living with him any more. My mind's made up.

FATHER: Then don't blame it on the liquor if it's your decision.

GIRL: The liquor's part of my decision.

FATHER: I just can't believe that.

GIRL: But it's true.

MOTHER: Did you think about where you'll live? You can't stay at your ex-mother-in-law's.

GIRL: Definitely not. Not for another minute.

MOTHER: Where will you go then? Where can a divorced woman with a six-year old child go?

GIRL: Home is...

MOTHER: What do you mean, home? Oh no! Your father's got high blood-pressure, you can't do that to him, and I've got problems too, with my heart. And anyway, your father's been sleeping in your room since you moved out.

GIRL: I was about to say that home is not an option. The reason I got married in the first place was to get out of here.

MOTHER: You got married because you were pregnant.

GIRL: I got pregnant so I could get out of here, 'cause I couldn't stand you two any longer. You were suffocating me. Always sticking your noses up my ass. Where was I going? When would I be home? Who I was meeting? What clothes I should wear...

MOTHER: Parents have to keep an eye on their children.

GIRL: But I wasn't a child any more.

MOTHER: Children will always stay children to their parents, even when they're grown up.

FATHER: Plus you were only seventeen, still underage. Even by law.

MOTHER: You and your insensitive comments all the time. This is our child we're talking about here. She's not a question of law.

FATHER: Fine. All I meant was that besides emotional things, there was also law.

MOTHER: Forget it. The point is, all we wanted was for you to be happy. For you to maybe go to university even. We only meant well.

GIRL: Meant well? You people? You drove me into this marriage. Even being with Tamás seemed better than you two. So, not home. You don't have to worry about me coming home.

MOTHER: A rented place? How would you pay for it? Tamás won't give you enough money for that. He's hardly got any himself. He'll be happy if all he has to pay is alimony.

GIRL: What about Grandpa's flat?

MOTHER: Grandpa's flat?

GIRL: Yes. It's been standing there empty since she died.

MOTHER: She's barely in her grave.

GIRL: It's been more than six months.

FATHER: It's a good thing she died now, not next year, cause then we wouldn't even be considering this...

MOTHER: Leave my mother alone, at least now that she's dead.

FATHER: This is why I don't believe in God, because he promises to resurrect everyone. Even your mother.

MOTHER: How can you possibly hate someone for so long? Especially someone who's dead.

FATHER: But she used to be alive, and her memory is still with us.

MOTHER: No, you can't have that flat.

GIRL: Why not? It's standing there empty. Nobody's using it.

MOTHER: It's standing there because it's not only mine. Two of us inherited it, and we haven't decided what to do with it yet.

GIRL: Then we could decide that it's mine.

MOTHER: You don't understand, it's only half mine... I'd give it to you any time, of course, but I can't do it without Uncle Laci.

GIRL: But I'm sure Uncle Laci doesn't need it. What would he want it for? He's got no family except us, what would he want with it?

FATHER: Yeah, and maybe by some freak chance he might suddenly marry a young secretary from work and she'd take it off his hands.

MOTHER: Who are you talking about?

FATHER: Some woman. There are types like that. Certain women are willing to do anything for an apartment.

MOTHER: Still, it's his half.

FATHER: True, and after all, an apartment, why, that's got real value! People don't inherit apartments from their parents every day.

MOTHER: No, only once.

FATHER: Unless their parents divorced. Then twice. Come to think of it, maybe a child of divorced parents has it better than parents who stay together. I've never looked at it from this perspective before. Plus, everyone feels sorry for them.

MOTHER: Who feels sorry?

FATHER: Their teacher at school, and the child psychologist she involves because the kid is having so many problems because of the divorce.

MOTHER: That's the reason she takes the kid. Because of the problems. And the kid's got problems because the parents are getting a divorce.

FATHER: The others have problems too, but they're afraid to take them to the psychologist, 'cause they're ashamed that they're not even divorced yet and already the kid is stressed. No one treats those kids. But once the parents are divorced, they can be treated. And then you need a psychologist for custody claims. Let's say, if your parents would have gotten divorced, we wouldn't have to bother with Uncle Laci because the two of you would have inherited two flats in the first place.

MOTHER: But they didn't get divorced. So there's only one apartment. And we share it.

GIRL: But that apartment is the only solution. We'll have to ask Uncle Laci.

MOTHER: Go ahead and ask him!

GIRL: Me? You want me to ask him? You can't be serious. (Looks at Father)

FATHER: Your mother'll do it...

MOTHER: I have to do everything, right? If anything's hard, that's my job.

FATHER: He's your brother. I can't tell him to give me his inheritance.

MOTHER: That's because you've never inherited anything before.

FATHER: Did too. But all you can get in Budapest in exchange for an apartment in the country is an old commie Zsiguli. There's nothing I can do about it.

MOTHER: It was a lemon, too.

GIRL: I really loved that car.

FATHER: So did I. The Russians really knew something back then. Later they only manufactured shittier ones, and more expensive to boot.

MOTHER: I'll call him tomorrow.

GIRL: Uncle Laci's always loved me.

MOTHER: Uncle Laci loves everybody. He's that type.

FATHER: It's easy to love if you've got no responsibility.

MOTHER: His job was his responsibility, not the family.

FATHER: But a family's different. With a family you can't say, I can't deal with this now or go on sick leave.

MOTHER: He was never on sick leave in his life, not like other people, who can hardly wait for the flu, or retirement.

GIRL: I've got to go.

MOTHER: So soon...

GIRL: My kid's waiting.

MOTHER: Of course. He is top priority always. Especially now that he'll be the child of divorced parents.

FATHER: Does he know already?

GIRL: He suspects it.

László Upor

The revolt of the Teddy-cheese fractals: Péter Kárpáti

Péter Kárpáti (1961-) is one of our most established dramatists, yet there is little predictable about his oeuvre. He is continuously reconceptualising his attitude to the dramatic genre – the stage. It is as if he were reluctant to accept the fact that he knows how drama works. He takes up just his current subject with wilfully directed amnesia, and with delicate pseudo-innocence forms non-existent dramaturgies. He is a free-thinking writer, not bound by conventions, and playfulness is the power source of his work. He is a non-realist writer, non-surrealist, non-grotesque, non-absurd – and there is a little of each in him, yet he cannot be forced into any category. The material itself, as it were, forms a drama-structure valid for that one work.

In the past he wrote about vegetating urban youth and about those living 'in abject poverty' in the countryside – with the seriousness of the sociologist or in cheery anecdotal fashion. He has adapted gypsy, Jewish and Arabian stories, recoloured historical myths, mystery-play formulae and Creation-myths, has devised and re-written comic-book characters and vies romances of past writers. At first he appeared with 'normal' dramas – they had a special world and attitude, but were conformable to the familiar theatrical model. Then, without any spectacular breakdown in form, he focused with increasing emphasis on the how? of storytelling, on unusual tailoring of the fabric of what he wrote. In time he changed direction once again and has achieved the most complete, most uncomplicated (of course, manipulated in the writing and directing) individuality: *Szörprajzparti* is played not in a theatre or any other theatrical setting, but in a house. This house contains every real and imaginary space – we too, the audience, are present in it, but this does not inhibit the characters from living their lives. From that production a straight road leads to the next, freshest 'experiment' – *Vándoristenek* (Wandering Gods), a play on reality based on improvisations, the characters in which cause dramatic confusion in their natural urban habitats and living spaces – in situations previously invented, but with outcomes that can scarcely be foreseen. *Szörprajzparti* therefore marks a turning-point – looking back from the future we shall certainly see it as such. Before, however, we go into greater detail, let us consider a number of notable stages in his quarter-century career.

The high point of the first period is *Akárki* (Everywoman), a modern-day morality play, the principal character in which is Emma, a forty-year-old woman, worn out by the stress of everyday life. When she first feels the wind of death she begins to race against time, does her best to 'put things straight' instead of looking after herself, tries to make provision for the people to whose service she has until then devoted all her energy. Only it turns out that neither her formerly helpless mother, nor her teenage daughter really need her. Her ex-husband and her girlfriend do not really 'keep her hanging about' either. Emma-Everywoman marches in due form and order towards the grave. Kárpáti's thinking is reflected in very characteristic fashion: in the alternative ending to the play (in fact, the original version, to which he returned much later) Emma finally discovers that she is not terminally ill – quite the contrary, she is pregnant. Although Kárpáti's particular brand of humour already deprives this story of all pathos, it is only years later that we are able to classify certain grotesque elements as 'Kárpátism' – at this point the outlines of his almost-realism (tinged with powerful social sensitivity) are not yet fully drawn.

Diszelőadás (Inaugural Lecture) originally appeared as a prose work, but it soon became evident that if it was prose, it was an exciting and novel spectator prose – to appreciate it fully, it is not enough to read it, one has to hear and see it. Eventually the dramatised version was made, proving that Kárpáti was altogether and irretrievably a writer for the stage.

The place and occasion of the inaugural lecture in the title is the ceremonial opening of the Hungarian Pasteur Institute. The lecturer, the deranged Endre Högyes, has struggled half his life for the Institute, and now that the long-awaited day has dawned tries to cram that half a life into the short time at his disposal. This is the painful-cathartic benefit performance of the mad professor, researcher and healer. Today is, so to speak, his first night, and he longs for wild applause. He writes, organises and delivers the lecture he conjures up an entire lecture-theatre around himself, in which there are his freely movable creations: objects, puppets, people, ideas.

Tótféri is one of Kárpáti's most wide-ranging, most complicated, most exorbitant and most fascinating works. Perhaps it is the most elevated and the most profane. And last but not least, the most amusing.

It is a labyrinthine, multicoloured universe-play, which condenses into two big parts. The first is a lavishly embellished 'one good turn deserves another'-story, in which the rewarded hero is a penniless old woman, while the rewarder is none other than the Lord in disguise, assisted by St Peter; and the ultimate gift is a child. A journey spanning dimensions time and space is at the core of the second dramatic part; the hero, the Tötferi of the title, is rushing flat out so as not to be late for his own birth – not least because there awaits him the task of saving the world from ultimate destruction. Unfortunately, however, he arrives too late; his mother – the former old woman, in the meantime rejuvenated – gives birth to a little girl, Julika, in his stead. In a tragi-comic struggle with the Antichrist Tötferi loses the race with time – yet at the same time at the twenty-fourth hour defuses the time-bomb which has been attached to the world.

Tötferi is an impudent miracle-play; a play on the mysteries of birth, creation, salvation – its heroes (little people, super-heroes and gods) are both amusing story-figures and heroes at the same time.

Negyedik kapu (The Fourth Gate) is a sort of klezmer-play. If there is such a thing (there is now), in it many strike up at the same time. Various influences are amalgamated into an eclectic-energizing music of delight, and each enriches the joint musical-theatrical mother-tongue with the flavours of his own dialect. With experience extending from the remote historical past to the present, it cares nothing for the scepticism dictated by bitter experience and common sense; it is gaiety and much fantasy.

A little Hasidic community entertains us by means of simple story-telling and invigorating role-play about the search for the way and its wanderings of another such and of its elected central figure. The story-tellers live out the stories, elaborate them, and the shared creativity has an effect on the life of the group.

The motifs of the culture of a closed community, faithfully sketched and precisely related, support the play on all sides; the nature of the stories, the portraying of the figures, the style of the words put into the characters' mouths all combine to preclude theatrical realism at every possible level. One of the main stimuli of fantasy is the individual, refracted, rich clumsy humour. And vice versa: the play of fantasy also nourishes that humour.

In fact we may not feel surprised that *Szörprájpárti* is fundamentally different from earlier Kárpáti dramas. The change – the leap – is, nevertheless, more radical than earlier. Previously he erected mysterious castles of dialogue composed of inventively multi-layered, thickly textured sentences, and now what seems a flat little dramatic construction of everyday chat-rooms, conversation-substitute telephonic phrases, impersonal private sms-fragments. *Szörprájpárti* is an easy-peasy story, with uncomplicated situations and even less complicated dialogues – but in the background there always lurk the convolutedly reflecting author's tortuous thoughts.

Waves (of his own making) are breaking over a man's head, and he decides to end his (former) life. He is being worn down, he would like to change, and not to, to bale out, and not to, and when he finally (perhaps) sets off on a new path he will meet his own death. No more, not a lot – but even in this little everything has a question mark and changes into a vaguely delineated dream reality. Yet one of the main sources of excitement is precisely this intrinsic uncertainty, the wavering between 'it is so' and 'it could be so', in the same way that time and space are at the same time very concrete and virtual. We are not on a stage: spectators and players are crowded – mixed up – in a little flat. At one point the audience becomes an active participant in the play, and the hero, marking time, travels kilometres in the town, his journey lasting for days (indeed, sometimes for phases of life); his (our) thoughts stretch from the beginning of the universe to its decay into nothing. From zero to zero. Which is too much. The amount at stake is so serious that it can almost not be taken seriously.

But no matter; in the last analysis, everything is a game. Nothing is real, nothing is finite. Only in play are we ruined and ruin others . . . Yes: in this piece everything that was 'together' has fragmented and there is only one thing and the other. It is simplicity and virtuality easy for all to decode: nothing calls for explanation. As the usual theatrical role-play is lacking from the clipped, no-frills dialogue, the characters are designated merely by signs, functional pictograms. The weary hero of the piece, the male, is ♂. His eternal(ly unforsakeable) mate, the woman, is ♀. The one, on the other hand, that brings new colour to the man's drab life – the other, with whom and without whom he cannot live – is the star of heat and light: ☀, and the latest heart-throb, the third, the great beauty only just discovered (among the spectators), is ♥.

At the core of *Szörprájpárti* is that eternal, painful game of mutual torment, the anti-catharsis of being unable to split up. From the outset the Man fights a losing virtual duel with his (semi-)deserted partners –

simultaneously. He tries by means of lying phone conversations and a mass of swiftly keyed-in sms-messages to out-manoeuvre and trap his women, who have become indifferent to the on-going struggle with and for him. Meanwhile he merely digs himself deeper into the pit of his own making. He has nowhere to go home to (or perhaps he has more homes than he needs and cannot choose), and so he roams the broad spaces of his past, an almost-homeless person, an almost-suicide steeped in self-pity. At the end of his long urban wandering, he then – perhaps actually at the opening of a new life – goes with his new (chance) girl friend into a dark (chance) house. Suddenly a brilliant light blinds him: he finds himself right in the middle of a surprise-party that has been prepared for him, but the unexpected appearance of the crowd of guests (among them the audience, who have 'become visible' for the occasion) causes a tremendous shock.

On the programme there is a reversed 'smiley' (that is, one with a dark grin): ☹ This is the embodiment of the Grim Reaper, who, at his first appearance, turns the simple tale into a sort of Everyman-story. Except that the unsettling, thought-provoking authorial quotation marks does not spare Death either: he appears, with a scythe or without, as a life-size Teddy-cheese figure. This not exactly special moulded cheese is extremely popular in Hungary; its triangular-sectioned label is emblematic – well known to every nursery-school child and every OAP – : the elegant waiter with a Teddy-bear head carries a tray on which he offers a triangular Teddy-cheese, which . . . and so ad infinitum.

Kárpáti brilliantly develops this infinite series of mutually-enclosed Teddy-cheeses into a large-scale symbol of the universe. He not only condenses into it human life – which began somewhere 'out of shot', and ends in the most internal, unforeseeable future – but also mirrors here time and space: the whole extent of the universe and its condensation into a pin-point infinity may be described by means of this comic (un-fractal-like) Teddy-cheese fractal. (A propos, here he creates a symbol very appropriate to his own life's work: many of his plays operate with the Teddy-cheese formula – that is, with a kind of magic-box dramaturgy; Kárpáti painstakingly opens various stories together and closes them upon each other.)

When the implacable Teddy-cheese makes its scythe swish the hero begins to take his leave of the shadow-world. Not only (indeed, mainly not) of the living, but also of memories, of things 'important' and 'unimportant': of his late father, the teddy-bear, the rhododendron and the chess-set . . . However, nothing is important, nothing is real, the whole is nothing but show: a spectacle. Which on this occasion leads into a real party – at which we are not spectators but guests, contributors, fellow revellers.

Péter Kárpáti: *Surprise Party*

(excerpt)

Translated By Adam Berzsenyi Bellaagh

Characters:

Female, Male, Sunshine, Tesco, Bear, Rabbit, Heart

The phone rings.

I bet it's...

MALE: I won't answer it.

SUNSHINE: Yea, do, you don't need to leave the room.

MALE: I can't do it here.

SUNSHINE: Why not? I'll be quiet, don't worry. I'll sleep...

MALE: (bends down, in the corner of the room, answers the phone)

Yea?

Long silence.
(quietly) You there?
FEMALE: Am I disturbing?
MALE: No, not at all.
FEMALE: Why are you whispering?
MALE: I'm in a library, wait, I'll go outside..
SUNSHINE: Why are you whispering? I'm not even listening, I don't care, don't leave because of me. Where are you going?
FEMALE: What's going on?
MALE: They told me to be quiet.
SUNSHINE: When did I tell you?
MALE: I'm sorry, I do apologize, I'll hang up soon.
FEMALE: Why don't you go outside?
MALE: Because I can't.
FEMALE: Why not?
MALE: There's this new... security system.
SUNSHINE: What?
MALE: I'll explain.
FEMALE: Shall I let you go?
MALE: No, talk. I'm listening.
FEMALE: What do you want me to say?
MALE: W: Is it a problem?
MALE: No, I told you a hundred times that it isn't. I've got a headache.
FEMALE: And what do you want?
MALE: Me?
FEMALE: What do you want from me?
MALE: You're the one who called me.
FEMALE: When?
MALE: Just now.
FEMALE: Did I call you? I never call.
MALE: You always do. Every time I'm in the library.
FEMALE: What are you doing in the library?
MALE: What?! I'm fucking! Can I hang up?
FEMALE: Wait! Have you seen the English books?
MALE: They're under the bed.
SUNSHINE: Which bed?
FEMALE: Which bed?
MALE: THE bed!
FEMALE: No they're not.
MALE: Why are you crying?
FEMALE: I don't know where these fucking books are! Everything's gone!
MALE: What else?
The bed is moving, S is making love to someone.
MALE: Are you there? What else is gone? Me, perhaps? When did I go? You only need to whistle and I'm back! I'll pick up the phone just for your sake, even when I'm in the library!
FEMALE: The plumber. The talks we used to have.

MALE: What about? Huh? What talks?
FEMALE: he chats. Over the internet. I've deleted them. There's nothing under the bed, nothing, except a big dead rat.
MALE: That big dead rat, that's me!
FEMALE: What? I can't hear you..
MALE: It's me!
FEMALE: What?
MALE: The dead rat..
FEMALE: What rap?
MALE: DEAD! DEAD RAT!
FEMALE: I don't understand.
MALE: Shall I hang up?
FEMALE: I'm hearing strange noises...
(Loud sounds of lovemaking in bed)
MaleWhat noises?
FEMALE: Tell me something.
MALE: I'll hang up.
FEMALE: Don't hang up! Nook!
MaleGoodbye.
FEMALE: (Cries, screams) Don't hang up! Why!?
Screaming in bed. Everybody screams,
pitch black, silence.

M is standing in a shop, the supervisor runs in, wearing a white coat.

TESCO: Good morning, I'm sorry you had to wait. We've got a surprise party, special delivery, it's the new thing you know. Soon there'll be surprise parties on Christmas eve at the Cath - ed - ral-
MALE: You're the supervisor?
TESCO: Yes, what's the complaint about?
MaleHmmm... well... this Christmas surprise party thing at the cathedral, sounds quite good, poor old Jesus..
TESCO: Excuse me, what are you complaining about?
MALE: Well, I'm not complaining. I'm perfectly happy. I mean I was..
TESCO: That's very nice to hear. Goodbye!
MaleSee, that's the problem!
TESCO: What is?
MALE: The word "Goodbye"..
TESCO: Was I being rude? I'm really sorry, got a lot of work to do.
MALE: I see. Goodbye. And thanks. God bless. And thanks for everything.
TESCO: Thanks for what?
MALE: No, you're right. I've left a few million in here in my days, there is nothing the two of us owe each other.
(leaving)
TESCO: Excuse me, did you not have a basket?
MALE: No.
TESCO: Did you not buy anything?
MALE: No, I just came to say goodbye.
TESCO: Fucking hell!

MALE: Why are you being rude?
TESCO: Do you think I'm stupid?
MALE: Couldn't you talk a bit more politely?
TESCO: Try fucking off more politely!
MALE: I'm going to Lidl!
TESCO: Off you go then!
MALE: I hate this bloody shop!
TESCO: I hate it too! Now get out!
MALE: Don't push me!
TESCO: I've got work to do, arsehole! Somebody help me!!
MALE: Of course, if I came in here to shop every day...
TESCO: You're not coming in here again!
MALE: Fourteen years! Do you know what that means, dickhead? You weren't even born when I was already coming here! This shop belongs to me!
TESCO: To you?
MALE: Why, do you think it belongs to you? You're gonna end up the same way as the guy before you! What was his name? Karcsi! You know him?
TESCO: What are you trying to say? Come back here!
MALE: You know what I'm talking about.
TESCO: Come into the office, everyone's looking. What are you talking about? Are you being stupid? Everything is above board in here! What do you want, tell me!
MALE: Nothing! I just wanted this story to end – in a normal way.
TESCO: What – what - story?
MALE: Every single day, for fourteen years! It's a bit hard to believe, isn't it? Sometimes twice a day! Sometimes three times! Think about it: I was eating your bread, I was drinking your beer, I would have starved if it weren't for you...
TESCO: Oh. And... are you sure you're not coming again?
MALE: I told you, I'm going to Lidl.
TESCO: You could come by sometimes – look in.
MALE: Oh, that doesn't work, bouncing backwards and forwards, one day Lidl, the next Tesco, in and out, neither here nor there...
TESCO: How long have you been going to Lidl?
MALE: I'm not going there.
TESCO: No?
MALE: I've been once.
TESCO: Only once?
MALE: What does it matter? I've been! I'll migrate. I need to end this thing. Bye.
TESCO: Alright, bye.
MALE: I'll have an Amstel.
TESCO: There isn't any left.
MALE: Ah, typical.
TESCO: We've got Beck's.
MALE: Beck's makes me sick.
TESCO: I'll order some for tomorrow.
MALE: Alright, tomorrow, for the last time...
TESCO: I'm sure they've got some at Lidl...

MALE: So you don't want me to come?
TESCO: Do as you please.
MALE: No, you're right. If I come tomorrow, then I'll be coming the day after and the day after, and on and on, and it will never end. Or... do you want me to come?
TESCO: You'll sleep on it, I'm sure. Sorry, I've got to go, they're here for the stuff...
MALE: For the surprise party?
TESCO: Yea. God bless. (leaves)
MALE: Passing by the shop, every day!
Bloody hell! Fucking Amstel! I've had enough. Can't stand it anymore. Everything's so fucking empty.

(comes back, shouts into the shop) Do ya know what? Why don't you go and fuck yourself! I WANT YOU TO DIE! (looks at the audience) Now what? What you looking at? Why are you all staring at me with that stupid grin, huh? That smile of contempt. You... you... or you, you think you're good at breaking up? Are you? B-R-E-A-K-I-N-G-U-P? Live and let die! Leave if you can! Huh? Can't hear you! (pulls out his left arm, throws it into the audience) We've got so many memories together... (looks emotionally at the arm) He played bass... (looks at an audience member) I've got memories with you as well, even though this is the first time I've seen you. What's your name? ...what? I can't hear you... Another hour, and I'll be going left, you'll be going right, and we'll never see each other again. And if you see me in the street, don't say hello! Cross the road and keep walking, do you get me? What are you smiling about? Alright, big man, go on, tear it off! Go on! You being nostalgic? "oh, my noble arm, my true companion, you were the one to help me cuddle, tickle, scratch, wipe my arse..." see? It's all coming back now, isn't it? It's not that easy is it? Stop smiling! Both of you! Stop it!

Come over here, please, sit beside me... not you! That girl, the princess over there! We've been flirting since the play started. Come on! ...alright, bye. I'm going. And I will never – do you understand? NEVER, NEVER AGAIN! NEVERNEVERNEVER!

He leaves, then comes back.

Never.

Sits down on the bench, puts out his real arm, looks at it. It grew back! Respect.

Pause.

I'll sit here until you all piss off. Why do I always have to leave... go on, leave, go, leave me alone. I'm breaking up with the sun. (with the sofa... with the lamp...) And if I do love you, what have you got to do with it? (imitates sunbathing in the lamplight) Here I am, breaking up, like a little kitten... (humming) breakin-breakin-breakin up, until a huge brown butterfly lands upon my shoulder. Then I'll catch it, and crush it in my hand.

Flirts with the girl.

Long pause.

The girl gets up and tries to leave her seat, going towards him.

Don't come over here, I'm serious, don't. (Look)



István Sándor L.

Playwright as Theatre Maker: István Tasnádi

István Tasnádi (1970-) trained as an actor, and later won a competition for young dramatists with his first work *Félnap Ferdinánddal* (Half Day with Ferdinand). While working as a dramaturg in a number of establishment theatres, writing adaptations and libretti, he was constantly searching for opportunities to write for the freer theatre. Thus it was that in 1995 the performance of *Bábelna* took place in Székény Theatre, one of the most important Hungarian alternative theatres: Tasnádi was credited as author, but his work was, for the most part, based on improvisation by the cast. What makes his plays special was that they have very often been the product of collaboration between actors and directors. His works for the stage are idiosyncratic theatrical texts: they come to life in performance and do not express everything by literary means. There are a good few points at which the images and actions on stage supplement basic material from the author.

Tasnádi started out from improvisations by actors in the case of his play *Világjobbítók* (World Improvers). The principal character is a teacher of Hungarian and librarian in a secondary school who has been dismissed, and who in his embittered state (and in grief at seeing his beloved books thrown into the rubbish-bin) recreates the figure of Don Quixote and relives his adventures. In a play rich in linguistic wit, he combines Cervantes' archetypal hero and his emblematic adventures with situations of modern life. Thus the tilting at windmills becomes a siege of the revolving door of the bank, and the inn a prefabricated house on a residential estate. Here the freed galley-slaves are replaced by football-fans, who likewise beat the hero up. Tasnádi, however – abandoning the threads of action and the motifs, and sidelining the narration – distances himself distinctly from the novel that provides his source. Thus his figures come to independent life: they do not merely relive the Quixote-myth but are filled out into figures representative of the period of regime change in Hungary. They experience the afflictions of the disturbed times as their own failures and searches for ways and means.

Of Tasnádi's early independent works the most exciting is *Kokainfutár* (The Cocaine Courier) – in both its language and its idiosyncratic handling of the plot. The first half of the play consists of closed scenes that scarcely look beyond themselves. We see the inhabitants of a block of flats in a variety of situations. At first, however, what matters is not what happens to the members of the community, how their lives are run, but the kind of games (primarily linguistic) that are generated. The language of *The Cocaine Courier* evokes the mood of the 80s, not in its manner of speech and style, but in its pragmatic absurdity. In the second half of the play Tasnádi introduces, alongside the multiple love-triangles, a crime-thriller strand. The plot makes no attempt at seeming realistic, it is itself only a game, but the consequences of that game are real: a woman arriving from abroad lies to the Boy that the mafia are holding her daughter captive, and so are forcing her to smuggle cocaine over the frontier. The Boy willingly offers to smuggle in her stead the compressed cocaine that is packed in a condom, but because of a strike at the airport is unable to leave, so the drug slowly dissolves in his stomach and he dies of a powerful overdose.

The first and most successful work on which Tasnádi and Schilling collaborated was *Közellenség* (Common Enemy), which was staged at the Katona József Theatre; it is an adaptation of Kleist's short story *Michael Kohlhaas*. The dramatisation takes the director's solutions into account: anything that does not figure in the text is dealt with by an image, shown by a game or expressed in a few gestures. Instead of linear story-telling the author thinks in terms of game-centred scenes. Writer and director create a passionate, poetic, emotional and symbolic world – an opportunity for total theatre.

The next product of Tasnádi and Schilling's collaboration was *Nexxt* (2000). They had undertaken to make a performance out of two cult-novels which portrayed the raging of violence, Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), but Tasnádi's modification of the text makes no attempt at constructing a new plot from the two. Rather, he merely quotes a few situations from the novels, one or two key scenes and cruces, refers, as it were, to the main characters. In addition, however, he creates a new medium which becomes much more important than the fragments of situation and shreds of plot taken from the novel. The performance is in

fact mainly a quasi-TV show programme featuring Little Alex, the hero of *Clockwork Orange*. The conversation with him is interrupted from time to time by Rex Madison's home videos.

Later Tasnádi and Schilling made two pronouncedly political shows, in which an attempt was made at the theatrical elaboration of the time since the regime change of 1989, as if to weigh in the balance what had happened to society in the past fifteen years, and where the country stood. *Hazámhazám* (Country, my dear Country, 2002) and *Feketeország* (BLACKland, 2004) present a similarly bitter view, even if they make use of significantly differing theatrical forms. *Country, my dear Country* plays off against the circus as the basic type of mass entertainment (at the same time, making an analogy with political manipulation), while in *BLACKland* the news, followed by bizarre scenes stretched to the limits of taste, is formulated in characteristic songs and exciting modern pop-numbers. These two kinds of gesture endeavour to jolt the spectator out of his apathetic indifference to present-day politico-social events; horrors refined into a musical setting strike one as just as absurd as morbid cabaret jokes.

Meanwhile István Tasnádi was coming up with independent works. The image of a petty reality emerges from his play *Magyar zombi*, of which he made a reworked, slightly condensed variant with the title *Finito*. He borrowed the basic idea from Nikolai Erdmann's *The Suicide*: Gáspár Blondin is so tired of the world around him – at the age of forty-odd he has lost his job, and he also regards family life as prospectless – that he no longer feels like living. A number of people at once jump at this scarcely articulated suicidal intention. Instead of trying to dissuade him, they want to use Blondin's – as yet only proposed – action as a transparency of their own wretchedness. The village mayor, for example – who is on hunger-strike because of an unsatisfactory estimate – tries to persuade him to quote the low market price of pigs as the reason for his action. All this, of course, Tasnádi puts into multiple quotation marks, principally by making the characters in the play speak in verse, mainly iambic pentameters. This diverts attention from the plot to the language, the witty forms of verbal stylisation, in which Tasnádi's plays have always been strong.

Likewise Tasnádi achieves notable results in verse drama – a genre that does not seem at all anachronistic from his pen – in another drama that was staged in the recent past, *Phaidra*. The work completely revamps the mythical story. As one analyst writes, '*Phaidra* is a fateful love story about alienation and humiliation, defencelessness and loneliness, and, let us not be afraid to say, becomes an X-ray picture of the boredom that eats through life like acid and its unforeseeable consequences, mercilessly piercing and illuminating the tiniest physical and spiritual defects.'

Tasnádi wrote this play for Schilling and Dorottya Udvaros, who played the female lead. The first version, with the title *Menopauza*, was written nine years ago and was used as basic material for an international workshop in which actors from Krétakör took part. Then in 2005 a new version was produced. On this occasion, Schilling asked Tasnádi for the first time not to take part in the rehearsal process. That is to say, he was to write the play by himself, hand it over, and then just go to the premiere. Such a separation of the writer and director had never before occurred in their joint work. Eventually Schilling staged the new version of *Phaidra* in Stuttgart, with a cast of selected German and Austrian actors, and only Dorottya Udvaros spoke Hungarian in the performance. Thus *Phaidra* was not really performed in Hungarian. Obviously, this was what inspired Tasnádi to make a third variant of the play, in which his authorial and theatrical ambitions were realised. In part, the play is in iambic verse, which is the original in its language and treatment of the plot. At the same time, Tasnádi undertook for the first time the direction of a joint piece of work. Thus there came about, with the involvement of a good few ex-Krétakör actors, the play *FedraFitness*, the setting of which is odd: the action takes place in a modern-day place of youth, beauty and health, a fitness-room. It is Fedra that anchors the performance, only she has a story in the present – Theseus dreams himself into the past, while Hippolytus day-dreams into the future, holds himself ready for his father's resurrection (or death), and his nervous condition renders him impotent. Fedra is the only one who can feel anything: she is in love. But her time is past, her hero husband is in suspended animation and lives only in books and legends. His face is to be seen on coins and the cherishing of his memory is on theseus.hu. The dwarf Minitaurus only meets his father in computer games, in which, like the Minotaur, he fights his father in the labyrinth

with the aid of virtual spectacles and buttons to press. In Fedra's relationship to her dwarf only son is the same helplessness of destiny as in that to her stepson, in the erotic desire that binds her to the fastidious teenager Hippolytus. She puts on the boy's spectacles and for his sake enters virtual space, but there too they fail to come together.

When she is about to embrace him, Minitaurus bites her,' is how one analyst sums up the substance of Tasnádi's play.

István Tasnádi: *Fedra Fitness*
(excerpt)

Translated by Bernard Adams

Scene Sixteen

Theseus sits up. He sings.

THESEUS: I have come. I am here. Once more among you. My wife, my son, my servants.

CHORUS: Theseus! Resurrected!

THESEUS: I come from a great journey whence mortal never yet has returned. Persephone! I was the guest of persephone, hapless captive, she chained me to a rock, infernal beast that she is. Me, being chained to a rock, me, to a rock!

CHORUS: Him, to a rock!

THESEUS: I am hungry, lay a table while I render a full account of the trials I underwent.

PRIEST: Resurrected! Lay a table!

CHORUS OF WOMEN (sotto voce): They say that brain-death has set in.

Theseus' big aria.

THESEUS: In lovely Epidaurus came my first adventure, in my way stood a hirsute figure, brandishing a huge tree-trunk, the swine, and bragging in obscene words, out of his mind, until I left him dead there on the grass.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Periphetes is dead! He of the Club is dead!

THESEUS: Taking his mighty weapon I went on, towards the Isthmus now my steps I turned, in the valley out there rushed a brigand but failed to take me by surprise, while I found with my trusty sword his vital parts.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Sinnis he has conquered! Sinnis the Pine-bender!

THESEUS: Then I tracked down a wild and savage beast, the boar notorious of Kromyon, which had brought ruin to folk in those parts, and I saw it receive its just deserts – the evil creature met my javelin.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Hear, people! He has slain Phaia, the wild boar!

THESEUS: From Tetrapolis then I heard a call and with bare hands I wrestled the fire-bull, then from Eleusis came a hundred cries and in his filth the hateful Kerkyon dies. Damasthes tortured travellers and slew until in his own house I ran him through. Skiron defiled Poseidon's shrine – his head I beat upon a rock till he was dead.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: No evil remains, the world is purified.

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): Father, these famous exploits of yours of which you speak all happened long ago. Schoolbooks record each one of them.

THESEUS: What are you saying, boy?

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): You have relived in dream your heroic acts.

THESEUS: What dream?

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): Father, you have been sick.

THESEUS: Who, I? Sick?

HIPPOLYTUS: Look at your bed-sores!

THESEUS: Come, come, they are mere scratches! Wounds honourably earned in combat hand-to-hand, the time I pacified the Troglodytes, the surly Macedonians . . . (recitativo). Were you aware that the Troglodytes too have biological weapons?

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): But father, they're still living in the Palaeolithic!

THESEUS: Have they fooled you too, then? You still have much to learn, my boy!

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): Father . . .

THESEUS: It's good indeed, it's good once more among you after the long conflict to repose in family surroundings.

HIPPOLYTUS(prose): Your conflict was with nightmares of your mind . . .

THESEUS: Desist now, boy, from these tedious riddles! Come rather to my arms! You too, my loyal wife! Come all to my embrace!

MINITAUROS(prose): Daddy! Daddy!

Minitaurus makes with open arms for his father.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Ah, that's nice, that's nice!

Theseus pushes Minitaurus away, steps to Phedra

THESEUS: What news, my wife? I greet you with a kiss! Do you not speak? What ails?

PRIEST: Long has she waited, and the sudden joy no longer hoped for may have left her dumb.

THESEUS: My friend of holy life, you too are here! I greet you in delight.

PRIEST: I knew that you would return. When I was sacrificing the god so promised.

THESEUS: Now we will sacrifice a hecatomb, reverend sir, to mark my coming home. But for the present let us eat! Long has my mouth not tasted food of earth. Come, lettuce, tender ice-radish!

SAUROS: Good appetite, my liege!

THESEUS: Sauros, my favourite wild beast! I embrace you! You've grown fat, I see. Good living's having an effect on you!

SAUROS: Lead me again in war, my liege, barbarian necks to sever!

THESEUS: The time will come, much evil still remains. But for the present, let us eat!

The Chorus waits on.

THESEUS: I thank you, gods, for having led me home, that I once more am able to eat at my own table, and these good things to share with those for whom I care. Blessed be the God that guards Hearth and Home.

PHEDRA: Fuck the god!

THESEUS: What did you say, my dear?

PHEDRA: Husband, while you were far away one night your son appeared beside my bed, his eyes gleamed wild with a licentious fire, and on the body of your spouse branded their mark. Filled with desire, he pressed into me hot tongs, stopped my mouth with his fist, pierced my ear with his tongue, caressed my hair, and with his eager hand entered the secret places of my body, urged me to do as I would do with you, dwelt on my breasts and of my face made free. Where man has been in woman, there went he. Hear me, Theseus, your son raped me.

HIPPOLYTUS: Father, I have not laid a hand on her, not I, though she had wished it!

THESEUS: Shameless one!

HIPPOLYTUS: Father! Oh gods, I call you to my witness, Artemis, aid, virgin goddess, in my grievous woe!

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Dreadful, wicked boy, who has polluted his father's couch.

HIPPOLYTUS: Phedra! Why are you doing this?

PHEDRA: What?

HIPPOLYTUS: Slandering me! You ageing whore!

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Oh, the way he speaks to her!

PHEDRA(prose): It grieves me, Theseus, that I must bad news impart to poison your return, and yet the crime might not remain a secret, lest you go defiled to sacrifice in thanks, offending thus your heavenly well-wishers. First purge your name of this impurity!

THESEUS: I need no prompting, madam, fear not, I know my duty; It is my wont for foul crimes to seek harsh retribution.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Mercy, Theseus, show mercy to your son, will you soil your hands with your own blood?

HIPPOLYTUS: Sauros! Help me!

THESEUS: Do you call for your bodyguard, would you turn him against your father?

HIPPOLYTUS: Tell him! Sauros, I beg you!

Sauros pushes Hippolytus away.

HIPPOLYTUS: Father . . .

THESEUS: Say nothing, for you break my heart!

CHORUS OF WOMEN: What have you done, you wicked boy, your father's shame?

THESEUS: Let everything be his, who can feel regret? What can you regret? All you can do is prattle! There is no more any regard for work, no one makes things with their hands, tends neither children nor their lands nor cattle – all's beneath their dignity.

PRIEST: It's a fact, everybody's gone over to the service sector. Terribly sorry.

THESEUS: Nobody looks after children, the past's no longer there, tomorrow never comes, and the society of ultimate consumers bloats itself, expostulates and raves.

HIPPOLYTUS: Father, the charge, believe me, is unjust, I have not laid a finger on your wife, I swear. But she herself was roused with desire for me and with her thwarted passion has enraged you. She has besieged me with perverse desire, taken me in her arms and whispered in my ear, flattered me, promised glory, kingly power, thus Pasiphaë's blood comes out in her.

THESEUS: What are saying now, you wretch?

CHORUS OF WOMEN: Be quiet, your father's noble heart will break.

THESEUS: It is the wife of Theseus you insult! Vile accusation! On your head be it!

PRIEST: One must excuse him, he has not been well!

THESEUS: Fall upon me, fall upon me, great heavens! Or rather, fall on him, descend and sweep away the dross of earth!

Theseus gestures, at which Sauros seizes Hippolytus.

HIPPOLYTUS: She wants you to disinherit me! So that her miserable whelp shall wear the crown!

THESEUS: Reverend sir, prepare the altar for a sacrifice. A bull we shall consecrate, a pure white bull, to the god Poseidon.

PRIEST: Bring the vessels.

THESEUS: And, as from the burning flesh sweet-smelling smoke shall upward coil into the nostrils of the universe, we'll scan the entrails, prophecies rehearse.

The Priest and the Chorus of Women strike, kick and beat Hippolytus.

Anna Czékmány

FM 9.11 or the Triumph of Hope: János Térey

"Térey [1970 -] has truly written the great Gesamtkunstwerk of postmodern Hungarian literature (or at least poetry)," wrote an expert friend of his, István Margócsy, of his second volume, *Paulus*. His first, *Valóságos Varsó. Panaszkönyv* (The True Warsaw. A Complaints Book), brought something new into the voice of contemporary Hungarian literature, primarily with its urban fetishism and with the indefinable nature of the constantly vanishing "speaker". "The greatest merit of *Paulus* is probably that with respect to the phenomena of 'greatness' and 'smallness', in terms of content and form alike it plays with extremes."

As early as in *Paulus* there appear Wagnerian motifs – in addition to references to, and quotations from, the Bible, Dante and Pushkin – which become the dominant authorial principle of the tetralogy titled *Nibelung-lakópark* (Nibelung Residency), its human-drama sequel, with its allusion to *Twilight of the Gods*. The writer endeavoured to link this to a play such as Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man) – which plays a revelatory role in Hungarian literature – or, to mention a rather more 'international', more widely familiar 'starting point', Goethe's *Faust*.

A further three dramatic texts follow *Nibelung-lakópark* in Térey's oeuvre. The first is *Kazamaták* (Casemates, 2006), which focuses on a moment in the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle, one might say quick-freezes it into the theatrical present, which has no place at all in the unexceptionable standard account of the heroic revolution: lynchings. It sets at the focus of the text a situation, also recorded by András Papp, when the infuriated, incensed crowd, into which there were undeniably mixed people looking to raise hell in the streets, besieged an emblematic building of the Party-state. The people trapped inside the Party House, for the most part innocent, and the raving crowd all speak their mind in the play without defining any moral stance – if no more than that every turn of history is heterogeneous, necessarily destructive and bloody. The play was put on at the Katona József Színház in Budapest for the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution, but the anticipated theatrical, political and social revelatory outcry did not arise. According to the almost unanimous view of the critics, the performance failed to bring out the most meaningful gesture of the play, and was no more than one of many similar 'celebratory' performances.

Asztalízene (Tablemusic, 2007) is the tragedy of the 'conversational' drama of the thirties, successful and rich but chill and wretched though poverty (either existential or emotional, one could continue with a long list of deficiencies). The scene is the White Box, a bar-restaurant in Buda, where the rich and successful, mainly the typical young characters of Buda, pass the time for want of anything better; they become involved with one another, disentangle themselves, plot and divorce to a pattern which is superficially repeated. The dialogues – a real curio in contemporary dramatic literature – are explicit, with their humorous or lamentable reflections on the current reality of Hungary, the disorder in the streets, the storm which broke out on National Day and demanded great and deadly sacrifices. Everything is done to highlight the sharp differentiation of the two halves of Budapest and the validity of Sándor Márai's remark, that to live in residential Buda is a world view. The play was staged in 2007 at the Radnóti Színház, and then in 2009 was put on the programme at the Theatre and Film Arts University as an examination performance. By virtue of the permanent company style of acting, the black and white set using the small stage and the precise direction, the performance at the Radnóti (which is still on the repertoire) is cleverly balanced between stylisation and the raw portrayal of reality.

The final text (so far) is *Jeremiás avagy Isten hidege* (Jeremiah, or the Coldness of God) is the intertwined story of a town and a man in it who is thoroughly average and settled, but who, through a murder, finds something else, even if it will cause his own death. The town, Debrecen, is the second largest in Hungary, though its population is only a ninth of that of Budapest. For the time being, it has still not even a hope of a metro, on the stations of which – as stations of the Cross – the action takes place. *Jeremiás* takes place in the future, and the familiar problems of the present provide the plot. This is the (post)modern Everyman story of the community of the town, trapped between its conservatism and its ambition to become regional leader, as contradictory as can be and rife with tensions. The National Theatre staged the play in 2010.

The three last dramatic texts are often referred to in the groves of the theatrical profession as an idiosyncratic trilogy, each play of which is an attempt to rewrite some dramatic genre – from historical drama via ‘conversational’ theatre to mystery play – and leads from the problem of the mob, touching on society and social conflict, to the tragedy of the deserted Everyman. The connection between all three dramatic works is the verse form, a choice of style that elevates everyday problems and current political events, and an opposing pole with the frequent use of slang, which creates the individual and tension-filled world of Térey drama.

Even this brief scan of his career makes it startlingly obvious that it is very difficult to give prominence to a work and, in a short introduction, to give even a keyhole glimpse of Térey’s textual world, almost overwhelmingly proliferating, complex and embroidered with allusions as it is.

It says something about *Nibelung-lakópark* that one of the most creative independent companies in Hungarian contemporary theatre, the powerfully subversive Krétakör (Chalk Circle), staged the play in places as extreme as possible, and yet fertile in tension, at first the wards of an underground military hospital built in the second World War, and later in the decaying operating theatres, wards and corridors of the defunct National Psychological and Neurological Institute.

Let just one sentence condensing the subject answer for a detailed plot of the drama: the ‘thirty’ in the city of Worms, leaders of flourishing businesses and astoundingly successful men, for business reasons, expel one of their numbers. He swears to destroy in revenge not just the others but the city and its symbol, the skyscraper office block, the sword-shaped pride of the city with its teeming public spaces, an explicit allusion to the twin towers. Meanwhile the radio speaks, FM 9-11. And *Richard III* encounters the myth of the Nibelungs, with Wagner, naturally, but not omitting Jean Paul Sartre, nor Hanna Arendt, so that they and others too shall live and die at a time evoking the terrorist attack of 11 September, from which it seems there is no escape even yet.

This is the ‘nevertheless’ and ‘not yet’, at once a ‘yes’ and a ‘that’s wrong’, which is profoundly characteristic of Térey’s text – which bears the identical title created for the performance, *Nibelung-lakópark*. Here everyone, like Richard, knows that he is wicked, and so – we may speculate – some distant gleam of not-evil exists, for they call themselves villains in comparison with something, but in their next lines they sink without a backward glance into self-justifications, so that then conscious evil and destruction, grown to almost superhuman dimensions, may triumph, and in a paradoxical way may give off once more the hope of better. There is no need to explain how Wagner comes into this company, and the title too obviously refers to the myth-cycle that provides the basis of the tone-poem and which Térey reinterprets many times more freely than does the German composer. The mythological foundation at once gives weight to the plot with a kind of timelessness, and becomes in a way a ridiculous gloss which man has daubed on himself so as to be able to justify himself and free himself from his terrors, and, of course, the painting does not change very much as time goes by. Not only Worms, the city, evokes Sartre, but so does the constant polemic that he maintained against God, because it seems that whether God exists or not, in the latter case he seems to have bequeathed his heroism to man. Does God wish to destroy his creatures so as thus to ask a curious pardon for Creation? Or is there in fact no one to expel, to put down, displace from the throne of heaven, and is man alone with his pointless but raging desires? Because desires certainly do rage in the text, as does the evil, that breed which only after the twentieth century are we able to recognise and identify, which without any purpose, far exceeding its motivation, destroys for the sake of destruction itself, condensing every course of action into a weird whirlpool of death. That is how Arendt viewed the empires of Hitler and Stalin, and insofar as the one figure, the Nibelung ‘terror-dwarf’ Hagen, reminds us of Richard or Osama bin Laden, so he reminds us of Hitler too in his meaningless pettiness and characterless mundaneness.

The development of the basic plot, all the more familiar for being simple in the extreme, is balanced not only at the level of ‘concepts’, at the peculiar and deserted periphery of ‘yes’ and ‘not yet’, and employs the so ‘post-modern’ device of allusion, of twisting in and out, but also in its material and in language. Verse form, mythological vocabulary, literal quotations from, or merely allusions to, texts from world literature all blend together, behaving like a kind of explosive mixture which never settles and melts into homogeneity, in which substances separate and yet seethe together inseparably, with raw vulgarity, ironic witticism and the burgeoning images of destruction, decay and unstoppable devastation.

“The series of physical atrocities persists, and is carried out by murder, desecration of the dead, anal and oral sex – extreme vulgarity, extreme stylisation,” writes the critic Tamás Koltai, now not (only) of the play but of its staging in the underground hospital.¹⁷ The performance was forced to strike a balance and – in the unanimous view of the reviewers – was successful in resolving the far from small problem of being bestial, deprived, destructive, menacing and senseless, while remaining in the meantime elevated and meaningful.

The performance, of almost four hours duration – once more in Kolta’s opinion – was “one of the shortest and most entertaining” that he had ever seen, and just like the play itself (more than a hundred pages in length) after it one feels rather like whispering ‘Lead on, lead on, another way, Lucifer!’¹⁸ or in the words of Térey’s Hagen: “I’d drive it on yet further with my prayers, / The escalation of the work of dread, / That not a million firemen might succeed / In dousing with their foam-guns the brush-fire / Which starts a world-wide blaze . . . / Well, let’s walk on.”

János Térey: *Nibelung Residency*
(excerpt)
Translated by Bernard Adams

Scene ten

(Total chaos in the Rhein Park. Park-keepers and police patrol the paths of the rock-garden. Gunther’s flat resembles a barricaded fortress. Siegfried and Gunther are staring at the TV, suitably awestruck, and frightening each other. The TV is showing pictures of the atrocity.)

SIEGFRIED (putting down the telephone): There’s an alert. According to Gelfrat the area’s cordoned off. There’s nobody in the streets, just silence . . . Until further notice no one may leave the Park.

GUNTHER: That’s very good. House arrest, then, until judgment day?

SIEGFRIED: Here we’ll be safe. Even Hagen won’t pierce this cordon.

GUNTHER: That’s what you may think.

SIEGFRIED: What then? Get on your motorbike, and save your skin. One at a time we’ll stand a chance to get away.

GUNTHER (raving, his eyes show that he is drunk): If he had a hundred lives, he ought to die a hundred deaths –

SIEGFRIED (quite composed, considering the situation): Wherever he may be, they’ll get him by the balls and drag him out.

GUNTHER: Too late, my friend. The worst of the trouble is now behind us.

SIEGFRIED: So what’s your problem? Was that my tower that collapsed, or was it not?

GUNTHER: How many were there in it?

SIEGFRIED: Well, about five thousand. Some resign, because they’re bright, and others get tired of working after four . . .

GUNTHER: Let me get used to the idea that this devil came from Krimhilde’s womb –

SIEGFRIED: You’ll find that hard.

GUNTHER: My own mother . . . It takes my breath away. Is my brother the twisted executioner, he who pierced your tender heart? Who set the soul of the world ablaze and found enjoyment in it, and who revels in this vile slaughter! Deep is the mark he’s left on Ymir’s body, by tomorrow half the world is going to be sick to death, and only then will Hagen say he’s had enough.

SIEGFRIED: Where is your sister?

GUNTHER: She’s on her way home. She called me from a taxi, she’d been hit by a metal splinter when the bomb went off, but just a scratch. The smoke made her feel sick. Brünnhilde?

¹⁷ A film reworking of the performance has also been made under the direction of Kornél Mundruczó, who also directed the stage production.

¹⁸ A line from Madach’s *Tragedy of Man*.

SIEGFRIED: No idea. Woglinde?

GUNTHER (Glances at the TV): At home. So are the girls... Here comes Wolfart again.

WOLFART (on the screen): The horror's not diminished. An attack so barbarous, so without equal in brutality, the nation's history has reached a turning-point...

SIEGFRIED: Oh, really: he's going on like an old woman.

(Gunther takes out his flat bottle)

GUNTHER: A little drop for your heart's sake. Hey schnapps, It's popular these days.

SIEGFRIED: Can't say the name does much for me.

GUNTHER: You'll get a real jolt out of it.

SIEGFRIED (takes a sniff): Is this your classic gut-rot?

GUNTHER: Have a good swig. Two and you'll fall over, three and you'll go blind.

SIEGFRIED: It's really strong... You live on this?

GUNTHER: It keeps me going. It keeps me warm when Hagen acts coldly towards me.

SIEGFRIED (looking at Gunther's red face): A fine quilt you have there.

(pensively) Your home-made spirit wakes bad memories... I had such stuff to drink one winter in some dive down by the Westbahnhof, with Brünnhilde – Many a year ago, and I got smashed. We took a taxi home, and on the way the driver, he was an ugly brute, amused us with his jokes, he was the Anti-Santa, so he said: he hated Christmas something terrible, so much that he would itch from head to foot, body and soul, with loathing... Poor devil. Whom can I compare him to? Who on earth?... I would have known him by the ringing tone of his mobile.

GUNTHER: What do you mean by that?

SIEGFRIED: It came from underground, a persistent hammering sound – what a signature tune! Then I began to take him seriously.

GUNTHER: Hagen!

SIEGFRIED: Yes, quite right. On a December afternoon the soot-black ruler of the Nibelheim it was, disguised as a mad taxi-driver, that spoke to me. My heart began to pound; it wasn't last year, fifty years ago: Brünnhilde woke me... I dreamed of that day, then soon forgot.

GUNTHER (the revelation has affected him strongly): You were with her...

SIEGFRIED: Yes, fifty years ago it was. I dreamed our son was coming; he would take revenge on us for all our happiness, the things we did that made him loathe us; our own son would make a pig-sty of our home; strip from our backs the velvet of the easy life, and tread upon our faces in his discontent!

GUNTHER: Why are we to blame?

SIEGFRIED: Because we're on display.

GUNTHER(explodes): my own a so what! I won't upset myself because of him. I'm all fired up again with self-esteem and booze. Give in we certainly will not!

SIEGFRIED: You know, there'll always be sufficient cause for you to sweep up the crumbling remains –

GUNTHER: You're high.

SIEGFRIED: Not a bit of it.

GUNTHER: I'm going to get a breath of air.

SIEGFRIED (pleasantly holding up his index finger): You can only go to the riverside.

GUNTHER: That's playing it too safe.

SIEGFRIED: That's what you say.

(Exit Gunther)

DunaPart Project

DunaPart2 – Contemporary Performing Arts Platform

20–22 January 2011

Although representatives of Hungarian independent theatre- and dance-life appear quite often – individually – outside the country, they had waited for a long time for the opportunity to introduce themselves to the outside world in an organised fashion. This need was recognised by Trafó Contemporary Arts House and Krétakör (then in the process of modification) when, in 2008, they decided to pool their experience of a decade of collaboration with foreign organisations and to set up dunaPart in order that the Hungarian independent sector might be enabled to take (further) steps towards the international (performing arts) market integration.

In November 2008 it was the unanimous opinion of international experts, Hungarian performers and the organisers that the five-day platform had proved a profitable and successful initiative. Some eighty foreign participants eventually registered and travelled to Budapest to immerse themselves in the exceptionally concentrated programme, which offered introductory opportunities to almost thirty artists and companies. In addition to the performances, the experts from Hungary and elsewhere took a lively part in analytical conversations arranged in the dunaPart club and in the evening programmes, which offered the chance of informal meetings. DunaPart 2008 achieved its intended goal, as it not only gave an overall picture of an existing and functioning Hungarian performing arts sphere which was searching for its own forms of expression and working conditions outside the official establishment, but also provided an opportunity for interaction between Hungarian and international professionals, artists and managers, mediators and journalists.

The series of events created created an international context in which tendencies and shortcomings, local and global values could take shape, and thus it helped to form a more realistic self-image and acted as a motivational force.

A good few of the performances seen in the Platform had had the opportunity of being proved on the world stage, so that we need mention only Kornél Mundruczó's *Frankenstein-project* – not only did the play go half round Europe, but the director also received encouragement (and no little material support) to put his latest projects on in European collaboration.

In 2010, two seasons later, the time has come to hold another dunaPart. With the support of Krétakör, Trafó is now organising dunaPart 2011 together with Workshop Foundation (a foundation that supports contemporary performing art with infrastructure, experience of networking and international projects). The aims remain unchanged: to give a sensitive and up-to-date impression of the state of the Hungarian society and performing arts of today, to provide opportunities for Hungarian and foreign professionals, artists, managers and journalists, to create an international context in which tendencies, deficiencies and local and global interests can be outlined, to assist the region and creators to form a more realistic – and at the same time motivating – self-image and finally by means of the collaborations that would come into being, to reduce the (material) vulnerability of artists.

The programme has been put together on the recommendations of a body of professional advisers, but the performances to be given at the four venues (Trafó Contemporary Arts House, MU Theatre, Merlin Theatre and Szkéné Theatre) will interest not only visiting foreign experts, but simultaneous interpretation into English will also make them accessible, indeed, comprehensible, to foreign residents of Hungary, and the intensive programme, lasting a long week-end, will offer everyone, whether from Budapest or the provinces, an excellent opportunity to catch everything that they have previously missed.

dunaPart Platform of Contemporary Hungarian Performing Arts
20-22 January 2011

20. 01. 2011.	7pm	Compagnie Pal Frenak: k.Rush (Movie-Moving) (dance)	Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts
	7.30pm	Sputnik Shipping Company - The Dice Man (theatre) Double bill	MU Theatre
	9pm	Márta Ladjánszki - Still (dance) Ferenc Fehér - Tao Te (dance)	Merlin Theatre
	10pm	HOPPart - Coriolanus (theatre)	MU Theatre
21. 01. 2011.	6pm	Tamás Bakó, Zsuzsa Rózsavölgyi - FALLING8 (dance)	MU Theatre
	6pm	Yorick Studio Targu Murefi and dramAcum Teatrul de Urgenta, Bucharest : 20/20 (theatre)	Merlin Theatre
	8pm	The Symptoms - Nothing there (dance)	Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts
	8.30pm	Béla Pintér and Company - Muck (tehatre)	Szkéné Theatre
	10pm	SHOWCASE Anna Réti - Fregoli Syndrome (dance) Zadam: In N' Out (dance) HODWORKS: Daily Rouine (dance)	MU Theatre
	10.30pm	Kornél Mundruczó and Yvette Bíró - Hard To Be a God (theatre)	other location
22. 01. 2011.	6pm	Company Krisztián Gergye - The Satyr (dance)	MU Theatre
	6pm	Maladye Theatre - Egg(s)Hell (theatre)	Merlin Theatre
	8pm	Forte Company - Godot (theatre)	Trafó - House of Contemporary Arts
	8pm	TranzDanz - Triptichon (dance)	Szkéné Theatre
	10pm	Bloom!: City (dance)	MU Theatre
	10.30pm	KoMa and ALKA.T - Fedra Fitness (theatre)	other location

Main organisers:



Partners:



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Csaba Králl
Contemporary / Hungarian / Dance

Is Hungarian dance progressive?

The question is a good one, but painfully hard to answer if we do not first clarify the concept of progressivity, which is – I regret – not possible within the bounds of this essay. There is no alternative but to rely on a hypothetical general spectator who, let us conjecture, while taking account of the cultural differences between west and east and the social ramifications of contemporary art, can still bring about greater or lesser changes of emphasis.

In Hungary we dance critics generally evade the concept of progressivity because we consider it to be simply a trendy and empty word if it is not linked at once to another – likewise a hard one to pin down, a somewhat subjective concept – that of quality. That is to say L'art pour l'art, 'because it's there', progress for progress' sake, are worthless. Nevertheless the expression is an intrinsic part of professional writings, we savour the word, use it, analyse it and its assumed meaning; sometimes we use it to honour a creator because we consider him advanced, sometimes to detract from someone because he has gone too far. Personally, I regard progressivity as one of the most important aspects in the shaping of opinion, together with professional and qualitative expectations. Because if it is to be anything, criticism cannot be a drag on progress.

Ballet ensembles: east and west of the Danube

With regard to progressivity, in the Hungary of today the ballet ensembles are lagging far behind. The Hungarian National Ballet, which certainly claims prime of place in Hungarian dance life, and gives its performances in the resplendent Opera House, scarcely ventures beyond the classical and romantic ballet repertoire. It appears that this risk-free professional vegetating is very comfortable and gratifying to the present director of the company, the former outstanding dancer Gábor Keveházi. I presume that he has neither the ability nor the imagination to change. Putting on an evening of Balanchine or a the thirty-year old choreography by Robert North (*Death and the Maiden*) now counts as a serious feat of arms in the palace on Andrássy út. What dance literature describes as 'modern classics', from Béjart to Kylian, from Hans van Manen to McMillan, have not featured in the repertoire for years. Inviting contemporary Western choreographers cannot even be dreamed of.

There are scarcely any up and coming young Hungarians, while the middle generation (Attila Kun, Yvette Bozsik) seldom if ever receive an invitation. The Contemporary Choreographers Evening is held with annual regularity, and there young Opera House dancers can try their hand in the role of choreographer, but these pieces cannot depart significantly from the conventions of classical ballet in either theme or vocabulary. Those in whom we may nevertheless place some hope are firstly Mariann Venekei and András Lukács. Venekei is at present preparing her first whole evening of choreography, although in terms of the selected theme the piece cannot be seen as over-daring (Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar of Desire*). Lukács, on the other hand, has already staged his first quite extensive one-act performance, the ballet titled *Az örvény* (The Maelstrom), with serious professional success. The situation is little worse at the Győr Ballet. The company, which gained European recognition with the choreographies of Iván Markó in the eighties has, under the direction of its founder member János Kiss (who has held the post for almost twenty years), set itself diligently to serving the public. Kiss is a marvellous manager but a poor artistic director. He has tried to remedy the lack of a choreographer firstly 'in house', then – in view of lack of success – by inviting guest choreographers, but for the most part he has invited unknown, middling foreign artists, who have produced work that has been average, feeble or disastrous. To his credit it may be recorded that he has, over the years, established close working links with Robert North, who wrote *Carmen*, for example, specially for the company, and the company has put choreographies by Robert Cohan (*Stabat Mater*, *Trojan Games*) and Christopher Bruce (*Rooster*) on its programme. Experimental and studio works likewise have hardly come along: the invitation to Attila Kun, classically trained soloist at Ballet Rambert and with an exceptional sense

of style as a choreographer, only referred to one occasion (Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*), and the company is unable to stage one of its most inventive productions of past years, Gustavo Ramirez's *Sansano Gaudi* because the set has been stolen and there is no money for a replacement.

The Szeged Contemporary Ballet uses the word 'contemporary' in its name, but it is not fully justified. The works of the leader of the company, and one may say its one and only choreographer, Tamás Juronics, whose background is in folk-dance, are for the most part reminiscences of contemporary thinking. His choreographies are dancer-friendly, his feeling for spectacle is strong, but his messages and projection of form regularly seem outmoded. That Juronics was a great promise was borne out by his early work, but for some time now he has been incapable of stepping over his own shadow. His latest choreography, *Unisono* (to the music of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*), from time to time chimed with his scenic solutions and ideas on movement but reminded one of the dance theatre attitude of the seventies and eighties, which has had its day.

The greatest openness is mostly detectable at Pécs Ballet, which celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. True, it does not enhance the name of the current director Balázs Vincze – a poor choreographer – or any other Hungarian artist, but those of young foreign dance-composers. Leo Mujic's strongly visual, abstract choreography *Change Back* was one of the most pleasant surprises on the Hungarian ballet stage last year. Meanwhile, however, the New Zealand-born Cameron McMillan, a disciple of Bonachela who had produced four short choreographies for Ballet Rambert up to 2007, is putting the finishing touches to his piece titled *In the Garden of Good and Evil*, and the invitation to Pécs of the Romanian-born Edward Clug, the young ballet director in Maribor, Slovenia, also promises to be exciting; his choreography *Radio & Juliet* literally shone even among the high-quality foreign dance offerings at the fourth Pécs International Dance Gathering last autumn.

I do not wish to speak of the activity of the remaining smaller ballet ensembles that work as companies (Magyar Fesztivál Ballet, Magyar Ballet Színház and Budapest Táncszínház) for lack of both space and significance. The dance sections that work in the theatres of Eger and Miskolc under Dóra Barta and György Krámer respectively have produced little of an enduring nature over recent years.

Independents: striving for the new

A minority of contemporary dance creators belonging to the independent sector work in companies, but the majority are freelance, and work on projects. Innovation and pushing the boundaries are essential in this type of artistic existence; in the end, it depends on the artists whether they can surpass expectations or not. In Hungary it is typical for anyone that has found his own style not to continue searching further and not to venture into unknown territory. It is seldom possible to divide the work of a choreographer into distinct sections or periods. If it is, however, he regularly leaves choreography proper, as it were, and moves to the contemporary theatrical side, he may continue to work in both in parallel (examples are Yvette Bozsik, Krisztián Gergye, Csaba Horváth and Réka Szabó).

Only those artists belong to the mainstream (those in the circle and those who move to and fro) who, in my judgement, can definitely be assigned to one or other of these two categories. Pál Frenák, Péter Kovács Gerzson and Andrea Ladányi have for years been figures in contemporary dance-life – they create works that are based on the idea of pure movement. Their temperaments are reliable; their manner of thought individual, their style of expression mature, and in the cases of Frenák and Kovács Gerzson their stylistic stamp is unmistakable. The best-known abroad is Pál Frenák, who often takes his company into Hungarian-French co-productions; the traumas of his childhood (deaf-mute ancestors and foster-parents, time in an institution etc.) establish with powerful effect the sincere, self-revealing nature and the instinctive, visceral movement-world of his choreography. Kovács Gerzson came from folk-dance, and eventually achieved his individual style, with its grotesque appearance and special play, by way of the deconstruction of that kaleidoscopic traditional language of form (*Re-DNS* and *Triptych*). I include Andrea Ladányi too in this group, though first and foremost I consider her an iconic dancer. Together with her extravagant choreographies she composes innovative works such as *BL*, which is based on a 'dialogue' between a drummer and a dancer, or the celebrated female solo taken from the Nijinsky-like *Rite of Spring* – a re-evaluation in a stylised environment completed by film-clips.

The second half of the mainstream likewise did not start today – they are the continuous crossers-over. Yvette Bozsik's career has spanned almost twenty-five years, and she is a seasoned choreographer. She and her company have for a long time been creating joint performances with the actors of the Katona József Theatre, which is well known throughout Europe; these have been based on movement and have tended to the absurd, but she also produces pure dance items: *Menyegző* (Wedding) which she staged in 2008 with the Opera House dancers won the Rudolf Lábán prize for the best contemporary dance performance. Krisztián Gergye too has many links to establishment theatre; he not only choreographs but also directs at the Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre), which is led by Alföldi Róbert (previously he did the same at Bárka Theatre); his choreographies, full of character, but not free from extremity, bear the formal and spiritual mark of traditional south-east Asian dance techniques (such as Javan dance). In Csaba Horváth's company, Forte, actors and dancers work together, and their performances are courageous theatrical initiatives, based on the mutual interplay of text and movement, which tread new paths. Of the four, perhaps Réka Szabó of Tünet Együttes (Thy Symptoms) has departed farthest from choreographic dance, although movement – and on occasions dance too – continues to find a role in her pieces, which for the most part are composed in mosaic fashion from scenes from ironic, humorous, post-dramatic textual fragments; they are inventive works, resembling situation-practice, which strive for complex theatrical effect.

In connection with the mainstream, mention must certainly be made of two independent companies which also serve as important creative workshops. The one is Közép-Európa Táncszínház (KET, Central Europe Dance Theatre), led by Csaba Szögi, the other Artus Stúdió. KET generally works with choreographies produced in its own 'stable' by, for example, József Hámor, Gábor Katona, Éva Duda and Krisztián Gergye, but also brings in young and talented artists as they begin their careers, such as Anna Réti and Melinda Virág. Artus, directed by Gábor Goda, has found a home in a former factory hall in the outer suburbs, and in the main their multi-discipline productions which, by bringing in representational artists, combine the genres of theatre, dance, stage installations and performance, dissect philosophical questions with little text, many images, and by appeal to the associative powers of the audience.

Immediately behind the mainstream is the middle ground, those choreographers who have mostly been dancers and have made something of a mark. They too work rather on the more traditional, dancer-friendly range, seeking to establish a personal style. Klári Pataky puts together delicate, sensitive compositions, with frequently repeated, recurrent sequences of movement. Ferenc Fehér is a natural talent and, despite lack of formal training, is certainly in command of his body; his choreographies are clear, powerful, visceral. Éva Duda has a particular feeling for creating an expansive mood from stylish movement material. Milán Újvári choreographs clownish, witty pieces in keeping with his character. Apart from them, most of the rest have only had occasional flashes (Tamás Bakó, Bea Gold, Ádám Fejes, Zoltán Fodor, József Hámor, Andrea Nagy, Zoltán Nagy, Anna Réti, Melinda Virág, Ádám Zambriczky etc.).

A striking investigatory quality, contemporary in outlook, also characterises certain of the dance ensembles that preserve tradition. The Duna Művészegyüttes (Danube Art Ensemble), its chamber company Duna Táncműhely (Danube Dance Workshop), and the highly regarded Hungarian State Folk Ensemble (MANE) have for years come up with performances which have departed from the norm in their form-world and conception. Their leaders, Zsolt Juhász and Gábor Mihályi, together with other folk-dance choreographers of progressive spirit (Gábor Katona, Richárd Kókény, Péter Gerzson Kovács etc.) work on the re-evaluation of tradition, in the course of which not only is the established vocabulary of folk-dance refreshed with contemporary elements, but performances are also clothed anew in terms of dramaturgy, scenery and music. One of the most accomplished examples of this until the present has been MANE's *Labirintus* (Labyrinth) of 2008.

If, however, I had to name the contemporary choreographers who turn most consistently from the trodden path, ignoring the fact that their experiments sometimes run into dead ends, first of all I would mention Márta Ladjanszki and Adrienn Hód. Ladjanszki reveals one after another her body-analyses – personal in tone and typically solo or chamber pieces – titled *HelyzetjelentéseM* (My situation report), while Adrienn Hód tries all manner of things from the multidirectional deconstruction of movement, dance and music by way of out-door performances to plain abstraction – she is an inter-style, uncathegorisable creator. The profession has great hopes

for Csaba Molnár (Bloom!), who returned from Keersmaeker's international 'study establishment' and straight away opened with a fresh and free-spirited piece, the five-player *City*, in a foreign co-production. And surprisingly, in the group of experimenters that cannot be called wide, I would list an independent higher education establishment, the Budapest Tánciskola headed by Iván Angelus, which, thanks to his professional openness, has so stimulating an effect on the pupils that study there that practically all their performances are memorable.

Funding: an uncertain future

An introduction to Hungarian contemporary dance and an assessment of its situation cannot, of course, be complete without drawing attention to the financial anomaly arising from not being part of the establishment. Taking that into account, every artist, when starting out, will reckon that contemporary art and independent existence are no cakewalk – in neither the artistic nor the material sense. Few, however, count on its being a daily struggle that will consume all their energy.

The situation of independent dance artists – that is, those who fall outside the established theatre, but operate freelance or in the form of companies – has never yet been satisfactorily arranged. They are notified in the second half of the financial year, usually six months too late, of the amount of operating support for the year that has been awarded competitively, while it is good if payment is made in early autumn. This brings with it the unpleasant obligation that every artist has to finance the year in advance (credit, mortgage), putting himself in quasi-debt if he wants to work. The new theatre legislation which came into effect on 1 March 2009 has not succeeded in effecting significant improvement in this wretched condition, though the annual amount coming to the independents jumped by almost half because the decision-makers assigned to the independents, referred to in the Law as Category VI, ten per cent of the sum applied by the state to support for theatres at any time. The independent sector, however, celebrated too soon, because among the first acts of the new coalition government formed by the victorious right-wing parties after the election of spring 2010 was the suspension of the order, refusing the payment of 66% of the money (which would have brought about the immediate collapse of the sector), then, under the influence of protests, reducing that to blocking 33% of the sum, which will probably never be paid. The government referred to the economic crisis, although to the profession it was evident that it was a political decision, as cuts affecting the cultural sphere were not made proportionately but, tentatively, only certain disliked artistic areas that were harder to supervise and hold in check (independent theatre and dance, and film) were afflicted with them.

To sum up: Hungarian contemporary dance is engaged in an existentially present struggle for survival, and if a miracle does not happen the situation may deteriorate further with predicted amendment of the said theatre law, which the Fidesz-led right-wing coalition, in possession of a two-thirds majority, and without any professional control, can alter as and when it pleases.

Genie out of bottle

Even so, Hungarian contemporary dance still has a long way to catch up compared with Western dance art, which is socially more sensitive, freer in its modes of thought, and formally more experimental. Among the reasons for this, none the less, we are still obliged to count the many years of the effect on minds and spirits of the political and cultural Iron Curtain. Because let us not think that a new generation knows how to make itself completely independent of the past and its legacy. For everything that happens today, which, *faute de mieux*, we call contemporary thinking, rests on the cultural knowledge and awareness that has been accumulated up to now, and on the inspirational past and future image of the transmission of knowledge.

It was no different in the beginning of Hungarian contemporary dance in the eighties. The gain in strength of the alternative theatre movement, which proclaimed freedom of expression, indirectly promoted its germination and sprouting, as did the experiments of the amateur folk-dance movement in the name of the new folklorism (from Sándor Timár to Katalin Györgyfalvai). Immediate influence, however, came from the fresh impulses brought

by an ever rising number of visiting foreign theatre and dance companies in the final period of the 'soft dictatorship', even before the change of regime. From 1979 the Technical University Székéné Theatre annually accommodated – mainly without regard to boundaries of genre – the international movement theatre festival (here the Hungarian audience first had the chance of meeting the celebrated exponents of *butoh* dance – Dance Theatre Group Butosha, Emi Hatano, Kayuo Ohno and Min Tanaka, and other distinguished companies such as Odin Teater of Compagnie Fabienne Berger); international pantomime festivals took place at the University Theatre, then from 1986 Petőfi Csarnok too became involved in international circulation, offering a series of performing opportunities to the most highly esteemed representatives of modern dance, and in particular of the French new wave (Compagnie Bagouet, Ballet du Fargistan, Hervé Diasnas, Yves Musard, Lanonima Imperial, Bill Young, Susanne Linke, Krisztina de Chatel etc.). In the eighties and nineties Táncforum, which had undertaken the task of organising the official programme, also acted on its own behalf, seeing such guest ensembles and performances as the Dance Theatre of Brema's Maguy Marin company, and Jorma Uotinen's Kalevala. The biennial Interbalett Fesztivál lent further colour to what was offered. The genie was out of the bottle. At a stroke, public interest in modern dance started a 'demand' for what were still largely unfamiliar modern dance styles. In 1983 the Kreatív Mozgás Stúdió (Creative Movement Studio) was formed, offering summer and winter dance courses, then from 1985, with the opening of the International Dance & Movement Centre, Székéné too became involved in organising dance courses. Young artists eager for freedom of expression and wishing to find an individual voice (mostly from areas outside dance, theatre and pantomime), went over to modern dance, and a very few from classical ballet (Yvette Bozsik) or by more circuitous routes (Gyula Berger). Among the members of Corpus Pantomim, for example, which was founded by András M. Kecskés and functioned from 1979 to 1984, we find names which are nowadays mostly iconic figures of contemporary dance and theatre art: Gábor Goda, László Hudi, Anikó Juhász, József Nagy, László Rókás and Péter Uray. For many, a formative workshop was Endre Jeszenky's private school, which also provided instruction in jazz ballet, while on the theatre side there were the Orfeo ensemble, led by István Malgot, and Stúdió K, rightfully considered our revolutionary. The Székéné (Pál and János Regös) and Petőfi Csarnok (György Szabó) encouraged young choreographers and ensembles, who rapidly appeared with independent works, until finally in 1984 the growing creative urge brought to life the first significant professional assessment forum of modern dancers, what became the annual Új Tánc Verseny (New Dance Competition). Incredible activity characterised this period, which we may with reason call the ancestral time of modern dance in Hungary. This was when József Nagy began his incomparable international career as Jozef Nadj with the Jel Színház (Sign Theatre), as did Gábor Goda's foundation Artus Kortárs Művészeti Stúdió (Artus Contemporary Art Studio), Gyula Berger's dance ensemble, László Rókás and the Sofa Trio, the Természetes Vészek Kollektíva (The Collective of Natural Disasters) of Yvette Bozsik and Árvai György, not to mention Iván Angelus, László Hudi, György Kálmán, Katalin Lőrinc, Csaba Méhes, Györk Szakonyi, Csaba Virágh and many more. What came next is another story.

Where do we stand now?

By this time contemporary dance has become institutionalised. In the eighties the state intervened in place of the Soros Foundation, which was undertaking the bulk of funding; the number of receiving houses increased significantly (Trafó, MU Színház, Nemzeti Táncszínház, Merlin, Millenáris, Gödör, Sín, Bakelit etc.); through Budapest Tánciskola, which partly functions as an institute of higher education, professional contemporary dance education is effectively solved; dancers can choose between countless opportunities, at home and abroad, privately and on scholarships, if they want to train or continue training; specialist criticism is constantly watching the activity of the sector, analysing and evaluating performances; festivals and choreography competitions (Szóló-Duó Fesztivál, Monotánc Fesztivál) and an incubator house (MU Terminál) help to search for talent; the Műhely Alapítvány (Workshop Foundation), which enhances the self-organisation of the system, cooperation with Trafó, provides assistance with international representation. (DunaPart Program). In brief: precaution has been taken to help those who show the slightest signs of artistic talent.

Danube - From Bank to Bank - Personal Approaches of Dance and Theatre Critics (2008-2010)

Csaba Kutzegi Flagships of the Hungarian Contemporary dance

Is Hungarian contemporary dance progressive?

Progressiveness cannot be measured. It can only be assessed comparatively: a defect can be discovered, or something strikingly present. The question posed by the title cannot be answered in such terms. Furthermore, it complicates the situation that the concept of contemporary dance is not yet adequately defined. Therefore instead of making generalising statements it is worth analysing individual phenomena (or evaluating their degree of progressiveness), but in the meantime we must keep in view that the progressiveness of individual phenomena (performances, tendencies, procedures) can only be assessed comparatively.

The Hungarian contemporary dance of today is progressive – in comparison with traditional authentic folk-dancing and traditional opera-house ballet; but if the point of comparison is itself (or another contemporary art, or foreign patterns) the above statement does not hold water. This is not the time and place to become involved in comparative discussion concerning other arts and countries, but it is more interesting – following on from the above – to examine the statement that Hungarian contemporary dance is not, or not sufficiently, progressive in comparison with itself (assuming that 'sufficiently progressive' has in fact any meaning).

Straight away one can, as many will agree, state that Hungarian contemporary dance is not sufficiently progressive in comparison with itself, or rather in comparison with the second half of the nineties and the boom at the millennium. A striving for innovation is characteristic of the majority of Hungarian contemporary dancers and choreographers, but – to add to the mass of arbitrary, vague concepts – there is progressive, original innovation, and there is quasi-innovation, mannered and rigid, which – I need hardly say – whatever it can be called is least of all progressiveness.

To speak of progressiveness, therefore, is only worthwhile if we consider the concept as a qualitative category. There is no point in analysing on the basis of their progressiveness or other characteristics those creations which pursue quasi-innovation at a level defying analysis from an artistic point of view. They are not, however, without their uses. The trend in Hungarian contemporary dance which is said to be many times more progressive, or simply deconstructive, anti-theatrical theatre, anti-dance dancing, is, in my view, not to be listed as a category of art (or logically: for it to belong in one, what constitutes art would have to be re-evaluated). On the other hand – indirectly – that trend renders extraordinary service to art by being quite successful in making audiences react, preparing them for self-examination, self-recognition, and thus – no doubt – art (and we ourselves) opens new perspectives of assessment. Therefore collective, themed, extempore body-and-soul sessions are important; in them the performer that appears on stage is hardly more in awareness, training or preparedness than the lay participant who yearns for a soul-searching experience through movement – only these communal pastimes must not be confused with art as we conceive of it today.

The products of professional creative artists, when they endeavour to bring into being quasi-innovation by means of artistic form, are often much more irksome than the undisciplined, obvious pastimes of

semi-amateurs which are proclaimed as artistic creations. The professional who strives for innovation only superficially, that is to say, interprets it according to the book of recipes of modernity and makes use of the supposedly trendy range of visual and auditive tools of modern aesthetics; the fruit of this is, for example, boringly familiar multiple image- and sound-effects, or inane and superfluous verbalising, even supplemented by numerous elements of fashionable props, costumes, scenery and what-not. In the midst of the qualitative and progressive strengthening over a good fifteen years of contemporary dance in Hungary, the canon of the easily acquired and appropriated style of modernity has taken shape and spread rapidly. The employment of the tools that belong to this serve as an entrée to the company of the 'contemporary and progressive'. Superficial and routinely contrived appearances of modernity, however, are the greatest brakes on progress. That is, not a trace of progress is to be seen in creative work, the author of which prefers the use of well-worn clichés at the expense of mature originality. Not even when these clichés are those of 'quasi-modernity and progressiveness'. To put it at its simplest and as a commonplace: when the creative process becomes routine, progress is dead.

Mention has not yet been made of contemporary choreographers and dancers who are neither amateurs nor superficial seekers after innovation, but display truly new forms and methods of visualisation by their mature originality and genuine creativity. Such – by virtue of the nature of the matter – do not exist, and at most one may refer to those who, for longer or shorter periods of their careers, meet the above criterion for longer or shorter lengths of time. This is not to detract from their achievement, but is actually the fullest recognition. As a matter of fact, nowadays, in this age of instant information, to be the flagship of progress if only for a moment is an enormous achievement. A hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago, if poets, writers, composers, painters or dancers made their personally innovative outlook acceptable to others, their innovation was considered a novelty for a lifetime. It is no longer so today. With slight exaggeration, if something new appears in Canada in February, in March people are drawing inspiration from it in Warsaw, in four months' time the phenomenon will be spreading in China, and a year later it will be impossible to stage anything of the sort anywhere in the world because audiences will be tired of it and critics will pull faces.

I will come later to who are the flagships of today's Hungarian contemporary dance.

The antecedents of contemporary dance at the Millennium

The following two general opinions are usually voiced of Hungarian contemporary dance: to a great extent it derives from folk-dance, that inspired it, and it is more theatre-focused than movement-focused. I would dispute the former.

It is a fact that the efforts at revival in folk-dance art that took place in the seventies and eighties must have had considerable influence on the development of contemporary dance, but the present-day 'ex-folk-dance-superfluity' on the stage is not due to that. I see the greatest contribution of the attempts to revive folk-dance in the idea to which they gave rise: there is room for alternative thinking even in arts which are so strongly bound to tradition. In addition, only a few of the contemporary dance choreographers of today can actually be caught displaying in their styles of movement motifs which are unambiguously derived from folk-dance and reinterpreted. This is best seen in Péter Kovács Gerzson, but there are instances in the work of Csaba Horváth at certain of his creative periods, and a number of Gábor Katona's independent choreographies may be mentioned here. Along with its motifs and their absorption into creative contemporary dance, in folk-dance – relatively independently, but here and there making use of the fruits of contemporary dance – its own pioneering continues unabated, and a certain amount of this definitely points in the direction of contemporary dance. Here first of all Duna Táncműhely (Danube Dance-workshop) and the choreographies of Zsolt Juhász must be mentioned, but it is hugely significant that the Magyar Állami Népi Együttes (Hungarian State Folk Ensemble) too now and then has boldly

participated in the innovation; their production titled *Labirintus* (Labyrinth) can safely be called contemporary dance based on folklore. The Duna Művészegyüttes (Danube Art Ensemble) too carries out similar experiments, but these remain rather within the boundaries of genre and style.

That several contemporary dance choreographers have come from the folk-dance world is explained primarily by sociological causes: professional folk-dance training and the still lively and strong amateur folk-dance movement produce many more folk-dancers than can make careers in the genre. Mobility between the different dance-styles has also been assisted by the decline since the seventies of the dance-house fashion, and because of the results of the assortment of attempts at revival the newer generations have not found their own faces, appropriate niches, in folk-dance and therefore have turned to more fashionable tendencies. A well trained dancer setting out on a basis of folk-dance (and the ballet that forms part of professional training) can relatively easily retrain with a few concentrated, serious contemporary dance courses. One way or another, contemporary dance has much to thank folk-dance for, even if schools like that of József Nagy (Josef Nadj) in Magyarkanizsa and Orleans, powerfully nourished from folk roots but essentially contemporary-orientated, have not flourished in Hungary.

Many consider that ballet art (including 'modern ballet') is an immovable area of conservatism, but they are wrong. Precisely because of the relative nature of progressivity there is no genre of which it can categorically be stated that all that it can do is to limp behind in the wake of progress. Furthermore, in Hungary the greatest dance revolution of the second half of last century was brought about by a provincial ballet ensemble – the Pécs Ballet, founded in 1960 by Imre Eck. It is common knowledge that his aesthetic revolt – unprecedented and unique – was an intellectual weapon appropriate to the dismantling of the Iron Curtain. I believe that the great majority of present-day contemporary creators could scarcely hold a candle to Eck in terms of venturesomeness in changing attitude and originality. Nor can one rate too highly the programming policy of the Hungarian State Opera in the seventies, which was open to the West. It was a powerful breakthrough that the choreographies of Maurice Béjart, George Balanchine and Alvin Ailey could be brought onto the Opera's repertoire in those years. Béjart's soloists too came regularly as guest artists, but the guest performances organised through what was then Interballet also contributed to the liberation of the alternative spirit; ensembles that evinced a progressive attitude appeared time and again. The Győr Ballet, founded by Iván Markó, also took part for years in significant pioneering work. All this, alas, is in the past, because each of the said cloud-castles of progressive dance (like their heirs and successors) has now been transformed into an institution of the public-serving entertainment industry. Even that would not be a tragedy if, in the meantime, there were in them any genuine intention, any spiritual and material fund for innovation. In most places, however, the question is not even properly raised.

In addition to folk-dance, ballet and foreign patterns the other contemporary arts too have always had a great influence on Hungarian contemporary dance. This process is perfectly permissible. All the more so, as all that we know about contemporary dance – which is not precisely definable – is that it is ab ovo a multi-art phenomenon. In my view, the cultivators of Hungarian contemporary dance have drawn – and still do draw – as much from domestic dance antecedents and foreign patterns as from contemporary music, théâtre, literature and representational art – and to no small extent from their underground movements.

Crossing over: dance and theatre, dance and visual arts

Coming to crossing over, the time has come for me to illustrate my theses with specific references. It is characteristic of all the artistic creations mentioned below that (to quote what I say above) they 'display truly new forms and methods of visualisation by their mature originality and genuine creativity'. These therefore would be flagships. Which does not at all mean master-work, but in a number of instances suspicion in that direction definitely arises within one. I must emphasise once more: my choice is arbitrary and makes no claim to be exclusive.

Andrea Ladányi in BL (2008): a meaningful blend of music and dance, concert and performance. An item for two performers: Gergő Borlai, the outstanding drummer, solo drumming and Ladányi, the dancer and choreographer, dancing. Their cohesion is astonishing. They clash, part and come together, sometimes become united in a single body (they drum together, artistically entwined). In this performance the music would have no value whatever without the movement, nor the movement without the music.

Csaba Horváth: *Kalevala* (2008) and *Csak a felhők* (Only the Clouds, 2009); Réka Szabó: *Alibi* (2007) and *Gyász* (Mourning, 2010); Yvette Bozsik: *Lány, kertben* (Girl, in a Garden, 2009) and *Újravágya* (Director's Cut, 2010); Dóra Barta: *Garcia Lorca háza* (The House of Garcia Lorca, 2008) and *Bifidus essensis* (2009). These are typical examples of the combination of word-based theatre and dance. It is not easy to decide whether any of them is to be regarded as a theatrical or a dance performance (not as if that matters). In each of them well-trained, technically accomplished dancers and excellent actors perform. More and more of the latter are appearing that are able to radiate dancing brilliance well in excess of what is normally expected by way of movement on stage. It is a reassuring phenomenon, and the coming together of the two genres still holds boundless, unexplored possibilities. It impedes their development that at the births of 'mongrel performances', for the moment, almost without exception it is choreographers/directors who started out as dancers that act as midwives. The great majority of Hungarian theatrical directors are incapable of thinking at the same time in terms of words, of demanding choreographed movement, and of the spectacle on stage that goes with both. Former dancers are naturally not good enough at analysis of drama. In principle, the creative collaboration of more than one person is feasible, but most examples show that a conception cannot be thoroughly realised unless the overall basic imagery originates in a single head. Add to that, that if one creator alone is to be able to put his name to a complex concept he must understand every part of it. Liverish critics usually assert that a significant part of Hungarian contemporary dance is orientated towards the theatre because it is not good at dancing, that is, there are not many good dancers in the country who are experienced in contemporary techniques, and choreographers' range of steps is very limited. There is no doubt that, sitting in the audience, one may sometimes have the feeling that the choreographer is trying to conceal the defects of the choreography by the use – frequently felt to be superfluous – of idle chatter, props, costumes etc. As a result, however, the interweaving of word-based theatre and dance may have a viable future.

Anna Réti: *Lélek pulóver nélkül* (Soul without a Pullover, 2006); Éva Duda: *Lunatika* (2009); Klári Pataky: *Basta così* (That's enough, 2008) and Valami történ(e)t (Something's happened/A story, 2009). Each of these successful choreographies proves that in Hungary demand and training for creators and performers do throw up 'dancing' contemporary dance choreographers. These pieces do not seek unconditionally to follow or realise the notion of pure dance, they are even characterised by the presence of a certain strand of plot and carefully handled narrative, but all their elements of content appear in the form of choreographed dance, and in fact it is form (dance) that becomes content in them. The training in dance of creators and performers (and, of course, the parallel demand) would be much more intensive if the system of training in Hungary were more secure and more plentiful. It would be very advantageous if school-type training could start and gather strength; the Magyar Táncművészeti Főiskola (Hungarian Dance Academy) has for years now been making experiments – it has at present a 'modern specialism' – and the Budapest Tánciskola (Budapest Dance School), which likewise offers a higher qualification, is producing definitely good results. But it would mean a real breakthrough if, in addition to the schools – on the West European pattern – Hungary too could develop regional contemporary art centres, where not only would 'crossing over' arts find opportunities for display, but continuous, high-standard courses in dance, movement etc. could be held. The dancing standard of contemporary dance in Hungary depends most of all on the quantity and quality of opportunities for training.

Kata Dombi: *Budoár* (Boudoir, 2009); György Árvai/Edit Szűcs/Krisztián Gergye: *Por-Hüvely* (Dust-cover, 2010); Gábor Goda: *Hermész 13* (Hermes 13, 2008). Krisztián Gergye: *Messiasok* (Messiahs, 2009). What they

have in common is that each is rather a plastic art performance. In *Budoár* and *Por-Hüvely* a leading role is taken rather by costume fantasies that can be regarded as independent objets d'art, while certain spaces in *Hermész 13* also function as exhibition places in which the exhibits are actually living people. Messiasok, however, is a living statue-performance connected with an actual exhibition, and is set in a museum courtyard. All three kinds of production (which nowadays can be called typical, trendy contemporary artistic performances), in addition to providing an excellent space for the appearance of primarily visual artistic material, comment genuinely and very strongly on society. The errand boys of the fashion world are metaphors for getting to the top, for glittering success, while the haute couture shows, enhanced by dance-music, give the indirect message that nowadays inner content is revealed more and more in external creation (it is true today if ever it was, that 'fine feathers make fine birds'). A similar phenomenon, though pointing in the opposite direction, is the 'museum dance performance'. Today, in the information age, artistic products have to make their point quickly and intensively, otherwise they are off the field of play. The same can happen to contemporary exhibition items too if their creators do not breathe life into them. And what can be more full of life (and, of course, more bizarre) than a living-feeling contemporary 'statue' complete with special 'objects'?

Pál Frenák: *In Time* (2008) and *Seven* (2009); Péter Kovács Gerzson: *re-DNS* (2009); Ferenc Fehér: *Woyzeck-koncert* (2007), *Villanyszék trónusán*, (2008) (On the throne of the electric chair), and *Stix66* (2010). What these three choreographers, who are markedly different one from another, have in common is that for years music, visual art spectacle and movement alike have played substantial parts in their creations, even though their tastes and styles in all three vary fundamentally. Frenák, who lives and works also in France, follows mostly the trends prevalent in Western Europe, Kovács (although he calls himself an 'urban Eskimo', make no mistake, he is a modern man sustained by ancient culture) has not yet said his final word on his roots, which go back to folklore, while Fehér, who is working out an independent style for himself, plainly feels a strong attraction for underground culture. All three have for years produced creative work of a high standard, which, in addition to their similar attitude to the trio of music, spectacle and movement, accounts for their being grouped under one heading. In addition to their similar qualities, their sharply divergent style-worlds show that the high level of contemporary dance is not the product of some uniform outward method (schools, trends, externals etc.) but is guaranteed, on the contrary, by an individual sense of form, by content mined from deep within, and by personal awareness, training and talent. In this respect contemporary art closely resembles the art, traditional or neoclassical, of every previous period. Going back to the first chapter, the following conclusion may be drawn: quality products of art, as defined by our present-day conceptions, may not be replaced in the past, the present, or even in the name of progressivity by polished spare-time occupations, however pleasant, however individual or however exciting.

Krisztián Gergye: *Adaptáció Trikolór* (2010). An entirely new phenomenon in Hungarian contemporary dance. In his complex, multi-discipline (it combines film, theatre, dance, singing and music) work, Gergye reacts here and there with raw sarcasm to questions of historical and present-day politics. I will not venture to say more of what is, at the time of writing, still a very fresh performance, because in Hungary everyday talk is quite sufficiently shot through by politics. Let it suffice to pronounce an original, quality opinion of our time and our world – that is the most progressive thing that an artist can do.

István Nánay Lines of Forces Redrawn

The year 2008 was an eventful one, and from a certain aspect represents a watershed in the history of independent Hungarian theatre. Krétakör Theatre, formerly one of the alternative Hungarian companies best known in Europe, has closed and changed its theatrical activity. At the same time other new and subsequently successful ensembles have come into being, such as KoMa Társulat, HoppArt Társulat and Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság.

Krétakör has retained one item from its repertoire, the three-actor interactive *Hamlet* (*Hamlet.w.s*), which is played exclusively in secondary schools, where it is supplemented by drama teaching. Árpád Schilling, the founder of Krétakör, has, over the past three years, been interested not so much in workshop activity with a stable company as in projects in which new angles could be discovered to bring creators and audiences into immediate contact. The latest of these, for example, has been their 'happening' entitled Új Néző Társulat (New Spectator Company), which they have performed jointly with the drama-tuition group Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) and the AnBlok Egyesület, which incorporates social researchers, in two villages with predominantly Roma populations. They were looking for an answer to the question of whether it was possible by theatrical means, and with the active participation of the inhabitants, to resolve the conflicts – partly ethnic, partly caused by differing lifestyles – which beset daily life in those places.

When Schilling no longer wished to realise his new ideas with his old company, and its members either would not or could not continue to work with him in future, he dissolved the ensemble. No one, however, has been left with nothing to do; most of them have been engaged by significant theatres, and a good few were soon appearing in the newly formed – and, of course, different – independent companies. Their presence among the youth means a kind of continuity, and the work which they do together will result in both their renewal and their further maturing.

Ensembles have been born

They have been able to fit relatively easily into the ensembles formed in 2008, as these were the ones that intended to make theatre. They set out by a variety of paths, but have one thing in common: they have been formed by young actors, either newly trained or with just a few years' experience. This is closely connected with the fact that some forty-five or fifty students graduate annually from the Hungarian-language theatre universities – two in Hungary and three abroad – and the majority cannot find employment in the establishment theatres other than just an occasional part. HoppArt was founded by a class graduating in Budapest, and in fact carries on the spirit which they imbibed from the distinguished teachers at the university and influential directors of Hungarian theatre, Tamás Ascher, Sándor Zsótér and Eszter Novák. Their performances are essentially the fruit of collective work, though most of them bear the mark of some actor as director. They have staged an apartement-theatre production (*Szörprajzparti* 'Surprise Party'), the transcription into present-day terms of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Kleist's *Hermann csatája* (Hermann's Battle), an adaptation of a film (*Halálkemény/Die Hard*), and a completely home-grown interpretation of the classic musical *Chicago*. As they can all sing and play instruments excellently, musicality is a strong point in their productions. The actors constitute a loosely-formed company, and who plays what in which production largely depends on which of them happens to be available.

KoMa forms a tighter group, though its members come from various places. They achieved their first sweeping success with a post-modern text, László Garaczi's play *Plasma*, which they perform in a small space among spectators seated all over the place. In this dazzling production, which captures the youthful

actors' feeling for life, the actors take advantage of the very intensive presence and often change roles. The episodes, played now here, now there in space, are only very loosely linked to one another and address immediately those sitting around them, so that the effect of the production is powerful. This first performance of theirs too is given primarily in secondary schools, universities and other small communities, while most of the later ones were devised with the express intention of addressing the young. They have performances on the subjects of youth violence (*Kisded játékok* 'Little Games' by Ildikó Lökös based on the play of Edna Mazya, the bleak future of young intelligentsia (*SZJ 9231*) and political manipulation (*Sárkány* 'Dragon', by Jevgenyij Svarc and Lajos Parti Nagy). After the productions the problems raised by the plays are discussed with the audience and jointly worked out.

The third significant ensemble, Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság Modern Színház- és Viselkedéskutató Intézet-Labor (Sputnik Shipping Company Theatre and Behavioural Research Institute-laboratory) indicates by its name that first and foremost experimentation with theatrical modes of expression lies at the focus of its activity. Its founder is Viktor Bodó, who has brought his actors together from several theatres in Hungary. All its performances are projects in each of which an attempt is made to examine some theatrical problem, while producing at the same time something worthwhile. They have a tiny stage in MU Theatre, and in effect work in an empty space using no set and hardly any properties or other scenic devices. All this shapes their modus operandi, but they have not been drawn towards the realist portrayal that results logically from the small space, but quite the contrary, towards ultimate theatricality, *commedia dell'arte*, faithful but severe solutions. Several of their productions such as *Kockavető* and *Bérháztörténetek* (The Dice Man, Apartment House Stories) have achieved success at a number of Hungarian festivals. In recent years Bodó has also directed in Graz and Cologne, and in both the productions have been co-productions by the local theatre and Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság, as not only members of Szputnyik but also Austrian and German actors took part in Molnár's *Liliom*, Peter Handke's *Die Stunde da wir nichts voneinander wußten* (The hour when we knew nothing about each other), Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and István Tasnádi's *Tranzit*. In 2010 the Handke performance was selected for the *Theatretreffen* programme in Berlin.

Physical theatres

In addition to those three companies, two ensembles must be mentioned which already existed in 2008, but whose work and styles have undergone radical change in the meantime. One is Maladype Színház, the other Forte Társulat. The former has left word-based theatre for movement-centred, what we might call 'physical' theatre, while the latter has gone in the opposite direction, leaving dance for word-based theatre.

Maladype was originally a gypsy theatre, in which Roma and Magyar actors performed together. As time went by the original personnel was replaced, and in about 2008 the director Zoltán Balázs – once he was able to establish relatively favourable material circumstances – engaged newly trained actors with whom he embarked on a lengthy and thorough training programme. The first result of this was *Leonce és Léna*, (Leonce and Lena by Georg Büchner) for each episode of which a number of variants had been prepared, and the performances became a randomly selected sequence of these. The substance of these scenes was carried not only by the script but also by a strongly stylised body-language generated by joint improvisations. In the production *Tojáséj* (Egg-night) scarcely a word is spoken, and almost everything is expressed in movement. In premières that followed – Jarry's *Űbű király* (King Űbű), Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, Chekhov's *Platonov*, and Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* – the striking of a balance between these two levels of communication can be seen.

The dancer-choreographer and director Csaba Horváth is at the head of Forte Társulat. His dance theatre changed after encountering the prose actor class which had first assimilated the requirements of

the reform-movement syllabus, then being introduced, at the Budapest Theatre and Film Art University. With them he was able to give performances in which he could build on the actors' entire basis of means of expression. With those of them that showed sufficient affinity for this complex theatrical form he began intensive work, which led to, for example, *Kalevala*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* and Gorki's *Lower Depths*. In these the verbal content was supplemented, enhanced and reinterpreted by a very strongly stylised and often acrobatic world of movement.

An untalented crowd

The appearance and existence of these striking companies, therefore, has basically redrawn the map of the independent theatres. They have brought new colours and voices to the alternative theatre world, which is defined on the one hand by ensembles that have existed and worked for many a year, and on the other hand by experimenters, still seeking their voices and places. Between these two clearly definable strata, however, there is also a relatively numerous group which belongs to this class in terms of status and financial means, but in value can hardly be considered innovative on the basis of their artistic accomplishment. Most of these have at some time filled the role that we may justly call the 'recruits of alternative theatre', but have become weary, physically or spiritually aged, and for the most part are content with the repeated reproduction of their erstwhile good qualities, which means a marking time, a stagnation of the surface, a drift into dullness. One reason for degradation is loss of mobility, and indeed these ensembles have existed for a long time unchanged in personnel, which sooner or later leads to reservedness and the drying up of artistic inspiration.

This danger also persists to some extent in those stable and functioning companies which represent the basis of current alternative theatre, and of whose working the workshop-style is typical. In order that it may be possible to achieve work that is profound, planned in the long term, reflects social reality and seeks means of expression, a certain degree of permanence and security is required. This means as much to the existence of the company as does the availability of a minimal necessary and sufficient material basis.

Exaggerated assurance of the latter does not endanger the sphere of independent theatre, because these companies can at any time only work depending on the results of annual grants, and cannot plan ahead even in the medium term. Although two years ago legislation was passed regulating all sectors of theatrical life – and that meant a degree of certainty for the independent theatres – the change of regime and the selfish lobbying activity of the leaders of the established theatres have once more placed the future of the unofficial theatres in jeopardy.

On the fringe of official existence

Worthy of mention among the stable theatres that have permanent companies at their disposal are *Stúdió "K"*, Béla Pintér and his company, *Hólyagcirkusz Társulat* (Bladder Circus Company), and *Táp Varieté és Performanz Színház* (Táp Theatre). *Stúdió "K"*, directed by Tamás Fodor, plays in its own theatre to children and adults alike. Those of its productions addressed to children are the most truly revelatory, and these are in large measure due to the fantastic and inspirational visionary world of Ilona Németh. Actually, the members of this company, although not puppeteers, present a splendid show as puppets, and the performances are set in the borderland between these two artistic branches. It is delightful that the crossing of genre borders so characteristic of alternative theatre is not routine only between music and theatre, dance and speech, but also between puppet and live theatre too. Nowadays we can count numerous puppet ensembles or puppet projects which can be reckoned among the independent ensembles not only from the financial point of view but also in spirit and with regard to artistic programme too.

Béla Pintér writes, directs and, together with his tiny company, performs in his plays, each of which examines a societal anomaly, with a great deal of music and dance, in a fully unique style. The ensemble has represented Hungarian alternative theatre in several European countries and *Parasztopera* (Peasant Opera) in particular has been a great success everywhere.

Hólyagcirkusz Társulat was founded by a musician, Szabolcs Szőke, and the basic element of their performances is music. The most varied musical instruments populate the space, the action takes place among them, and the instruments too frequently have roles. Their performances have a philosophical tone; they are grotesques, and relish the use of bitter humour. They are a little similar to one another, and the common stylistic symbols that have thus arisen are the sort which embrace a significant part of the audience and make them members of the tribal community. This is also the case with the preceding two ensembles and Tápszínház.

From the name of Táp Varieté it follows that its performances too originate in no-man's-land between a number of genres; for the most part they are satirical, improvisory, and break radically with accepted forms and aesthetic norms. The director of the theatre, Vilmos Vajdai, has no formally permanent company, but a constant stream of the best young actors and musicians perform for him, so that one may say that a virtual company exists, the members of which recognise and use the same artistic and stylistic language.

What happens to beginners?

The main problem for the independent theatre profession – apart from the material – is the dearth of receiving theatres. There are few theatrical venues where alternative ensembles can perform regularly. Numerous attempts have been made, for lack of theatre space, to convert and use disused warehouses, factories, blocks of flats and other buildings for the purpose, but these experiments have mostly failed sooner or later. Such theatres and venues struggle with the same problems of maintenance as the companies themselves.

This unhappy situation renders difficult the existence and growth of experimental groups – which spring up like mushrooms, some for an odd production, some more durably – even when there do exist a few places (Tűzraktér, Sirály, West Balkán, Fogas ház and others) which expressly make it their prime concern to promote them. Nevertheless, in order for the independent theatrical world, and by inference the whole of Hungarian theatre, to be revived, a much greater role and better opportunities than hitherto ought to be provided for these initiatives. Recognition of this, however, is criminally slow to come from both cultural policy and the theatrical profession alike.



Andrea Tompa

A Fervent Environment: Thoughts on the Hungarian Independent Scene

In the last few months not peaceful creative work, but a most stressful, disappointing political environment has characterized the whole theatre scene of the country, including the independent sector. Under this stress independent theatre artists have succeeded in becoming more organized than ever in opposing the reduction of their subsidy.

This has been a long, on-going process of *not* excluding, liberating what is clearly artistic work from political control and intervention. In an environment where theatre culture is almost exclusively subsidized by the state, the preclusion of state control could be achieved by introducing professional competition and evaluation of artistic work. The whole Hungarian cultural sector has not undergone reform in keeping with the social changes of the last twenty years, so as to encourage healthy competition, but has remained for the most part the old socialist system.

The whole independent sector had succeeded in obtaining a subsidy of 10% of the whole theatre budget, guaranteed by a law called the Theatre Law. This was passed in 2009, and should have been implemented for the first time in 2010. This legal guarantee could be seen also as a successful "branding" of the independent theatre scene in Hungary. Of course, this 10% for subsidizing independent theatre was only on a yearly competitive basis, while the rest, the whole repertory theatre system, was on a regular subsidy basis. No competition, no evaluation of work, just the automatic old system, inherited from the difficult past.

Strangely enough, the legal and technical functioning of the whole independent scene had become a modern model of how a contemporary scene should look. A three-year subsidy system had been outlined, which would guarantee greater ease of planning and development for independent work. Suddenly, however, after the elections of spring 2010 many circumstances changed the optimistic situation which could have promised a more ideal environment for independent theatre. The new government's financial restraints, the international crisis, and above all an almost predictable disinterest – let's speak frankly – a negative attitude toward independent theatre and progressive, contemporary work had to come. The new political climate would not benefit the independent institutional forms of art. While there was a legal guarantee this would not have mattered. The first step was, however, to withhold 34% of the yearly subsidy for independent theatres, then to reduce the legal subsidy for the independents from 10% of the remainder to 8%, although the big theatres' subsidy has not been reduced, and the whole independent sector is a microscopic financial part of the big cultural budget. This sends clearly and only a symbolic message: the new political set-up does not consider the independent sector an important issue, a priority, in its cultural policy. Quite the contrary.

So when, for the first time, this sector had succeeded in realizing its branding and in obtaining a legal background guarantee and stability, politics had immediately overturned the result. Today there is no big independent venue or company which is not under threat of being closed down, cut down etc. Until now nobody knows what has happened with those 34% of the independent subsidy which were "temporarily withheld" by the ministry. That is why the autumn of 2010 was full of petitions, open letters, manifestos and declarations on the independent field. In political argument the independent sector became identified with "five people in the basement" (five being the number of the audience!), something of little or rather no importance either from the artistic point of view or from that of the audience, but something heavily over-sponsored. That line of argument was also gradually adopted by the leaders of some big rep. theatres.

If, however, one looks at the whole theatre landscape of the country, and at its international importance, one will realize that independent work has become of growing artistic importance and weight, producing

more and more internationally important things, creating important companies and shows as well. Giving bigger and bigger space to independent work would be a healthy policy which would increase competition and mobility in an area of experiment and risk. This small but important nursery is very important for the whole theatre culture, as a reservoir of new blood, young resources.

That was the case with the well-known, internationally recognized Krétakör (Chalk Circle) Theatre, which has closed down after twelve years of existence. The "story" of the Krétakör has not yet been digested, and it is probably more comfortable to regard it as the personal story of its director, Árpád Schilling, who felt it necessary for his own artistic career to turn to something different and leave his company. On the other hand, however, one should not forget the company's attempts and struggles to find a place to work, i.e. a theatre building with a regular subsidy. If these attempts had been more successful, the Krétakör-story would have ended differently – or not ended at all.

The results which independent theatre has produced in the last few years could not have been achieved in the repertory field at all, from either the aesthetic or the organizational point of you. I am not talking about contemporary dance shows, which mostly belong to this sector, but about drama theatre. Let me give some examples, which I will pick from the current *dunaPart* program.

A play called *Fedra fitness* is staged by an *ad hoc* company, a bunch of actors, something rarely if ever seen on the Hungarian landscape, where theatre culture is more company-based. A unique private enterprise – a real producer – enhanced the birth of this fine play, directed and written by István Tasnádi. The strength of the production is not only the new text, a modern play based on the Phaedra myth, and not only the fine acting – some actors actually come from the former Krétakör – and their work with the audience as well, but also the space. It is a play put on in a real fitness room. This space could be a huge aesthetic risk by simplifying the Phaedra myth and making it into an ideological representation of youth and perfection of the body. The play succeeds in overcoming any simplistic ideology.

Another play, formally not Hungary-produced but a production by Hungarian and Romanian artists from Romania, is *20/20*, given by the independent Yorick Studio from Tîrgu-Mureş, Romania, written and directed by Gianina Cărbunariu. This is another *ad hoc* group of actors, but the show's most relevant "independent" characteristic is the crossing of language barriers. A play based on documentary research and a longish rehearsal process, plus the whole matter of rehearsal, would be a huge challenge for repertory theatre, but this can be overcome. Not so the company and language problem, since our (and I mean both Hungarian and Romanian) theatre cultures are monolingual. Such a project, affirms the director, can hardly be accommodated in a building with a big company, i.e. the repertory system.

The internationally well known Béla Pinter is his own writer, director and, of course, actor. He has spent more than a decade building up a company and a unique theatre language and theatricality, and also an extensive audience for such theatre. Outside the repertory sector the formation of such a company, as the whole history of the avant-garde teaches us, can only be imagined. Although Pinter has a big repertoire, most of his shows are performed regularly, and he also has a company and a place to perform (a venue owned by the Technical University) – so it might look as if this is nothing other or more special than a repertory theatre. The product itself, however, the theatre performance is strictly an alternative product.

Victor Bodó, now a director, in his best period also set up a company, and was able to rent a small space where it could perform regularly. Earlier he had also created productions in a repertory theatre, the Katona József. He is a creator of what you would call postdramatic shows, writer and director of his own shows. Recently he has been working abroad a lot, in Austria, staging big shows, regular dramas, getting more and more international attention. His Austrian productions, however – in big theatres – look completely different from his Hungarian ones: one can see striking differences between the low-budget, small-scale things and ideal theatre circumstances. The result could be the opposite, but Bodó needs big theatre machinery and big spaces for his, let's call it, grand-scale thinking. Sometimes it looks as if his funny, cool and inventive Hungarian productions are mere shadows of his real talent for big format.

On the other hand, Kornél Mundruczó, first of all a film director, has never set up a company, but worked with Krétakör, and after the Krétakör era with a temporary group of people. His productions have toured internationally (*The Ice, Frankenstein's Project*). Such productions are hard to put together without a strong background for the producer. (Of course, Mundruczó is also working abroad more and more.) He has set up big, costly productions in large-scale space. His work needs a system under which there is mobility and strong production subsidy so that big projects can be undertaken. The same goes for Bodó. Without that, such people will either work abroad or do small scale things, smaller than their talent permits. It is hard to imagine a repertory theatre taking the risk of inviting them to work.

Another model which can exist only "outside the walls" is a group called HoppArt – a company of young actors, a former class at the academy who are well trained as musical actors. Some of them work in repertory theatres, others are freelancing, but they are all still willing to work together, to create their own independent work. They have staged *Chicago*, based on the well-known musical, but combining it with an aesthetic challenge of irony, parody, Hungarian folk-dance and comedy – a dialogue between popular forms of art and elite culture. Such a company, with a specific language and knowledge, has a right to be present on the independent scene if there is space to present such works as well, which is crucial, since almost all open venues – except for Trafó – depend on the future of the independent theatre sector. And if cultural policy is prepared to consider their existence legitimate and important. If not, optimists will say: art flourishes under pressure



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