

# **H**UNGARIAN **T**HEATRE **B**ULLETIN



**2012**

Anamnesis  
Katona József Theatre and Sputnik Shipping Company  
Photo: Kékes Szaffi

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## Introduction

These days the international contacts of individual Hungarian theatres are richer and more varied, thanks to guest performances, festivals and, last but not least, the development of means of communication. In this changed world, nevertheless, the Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) does what it can to make a contribution to the further growth of the international links in Hungarian theatre life. It goes almost without saying that we organise international conferences, gatherings and visiting programmes, most frequently in association with other organisations and institutions. A few years ago, however, we began to publish the Hungarian Theatre Bulletin, which displays Hungarian theatre from more and more angles. It is our intention that, modest in size but rich in content, this publication may give interested people in theatre abroad, festival organisers and theatre managers, the opportunity to acquire as much information as possible about Hungarian theatre.

The reader has in his hand the fourth number of the Hungarian Theatre Bulletin. In the first we dealt principally with the receiving houses, their programming policies and the structure of the Hungarian theatre system. In the second, emphasis was placed on introducing important theatres, so that writers of articles analysed the performances and ambitions of four provincial theatres – those in Debrecen, Eger, Miskolc and Kaposvár – and four in Budapest – the Katona József Theatre, the Örkény Theatre, the Opera House and the National Theatre. In the third number we concentrated on two main areas: an introduction to contemporary Hungarian drama, and critics were invited to write on the different, and often clashing, attitudes of independent theatres and dance theatres.

In the present number we wish to acquaint those interested with the network which has for years had so beneficial an influence on the rise of contemporary Hungarian drama, and at the same time to introduce individual new plays, playwrights and theatre workshops.

The dramaturg Zsuzsa Radnóti presents an over-arching sketch of this structure. The playwright Károly Szakonyi, several of whose plays have been translated and performed with considerable success abroad as well as in Hungary, writes about the organisation set up by the dramatists and the DESZKA Festival that they have brought into being. Mária Szilágyi, founder of the Contemporary Drama Festival, gives an account of the history of the Festival and its ambitions. The dramaturg Ildikó Lőkös speaks of Open Forum, the initiative that looks for new authors and offers them professional assistance. Tibor Soltészky discusses the history of Radio Theatre, which has played a specially important cultural role in Hungary. In the past few years new readings of classic Hungarian plays have given rise to stimulating, often 'mutually contradictory' performances.

Anita Rákóczy writes about Hungarian experiments with docudrama and a PannonDrama performance. Attila Szabó analyses the plays of the newly-discovered young dramatist Csaba Székely and their performances. In addition, synopses of the latest plays of well-known playwrights may be read in other articles and interviews.

In conclusion, Anna Vécsei presents a compilation in which she displays productions of two classic Hungarian plays, József Katona's *The Viceroy* and Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* as reflected in reviews in order that the reader may visualise recent aspirations, which reveal a variety of things about the thinking that directs and occupies Hungarian theatre life.

The most important collaborative partner and supporter of the Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) is the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (HTMI), on whose premises it operates. Naturally, this closeness is not the sole reason for our good relationship, but so is the fact that by complementing one another's work we are able to realise a variety of ambitions, especially on the international plane. In 2012 OSZMI is celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of its establishment, and we add to our congratulations the wish that it may enjoy a long and fruitful continuation of its distinguished work

**Anna Lakos**

President, Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI)

## "A Safety Net for Contemporary Hungarian Drama"

### A Safety Net for Contemporary Hungarian Drama Dramaturg Zsuzsa Radnóti talks to Anna Lakos

**Anna Lakos:** More and more Hungarian dramas have appeared in the last twenty years, and most of them have actually been staged.

**Zsuzsa Radnóti:** Nowadays too there are competitions, grants and all sorts of other possible forms of support that help in the creation and staging of contemporary drama. You have to go back into the past to understand how this safety-net was formed. In the second half of the seventies – when I was a member of the Union of Dramaturgs, in fact, for a time its leader – a very quiet man from the Ministry always attended our gatherings (he's dead now, but but deserves to be remembered by name – József Bögel). I thought that he was sent to observe and report on everything. Instead, however, he was doing something very important: helping. We, of course, were always going on about dramatists getting no support, and on one occasion he came to me and encouraged me to write a request for the Vígszínház to get from the Ministry the means of supporting young writers. One surprise after another. Not only did we shortly get that means, but Mihály Kornis, Péter Nádas, Pál Békés and Géza Bereményi were also able to receive grants. I don't know whether the foreign reader will know that these writers represented a new voice and generation in those days; the work of several had been banned for years, but nevertheless they were given grants – modest, but to them significant. Péter Nádas had been kept off the stage for five or six years. When Kornis's *Halleluja* was put on at the Katona József there was a big fuss about it, and they weren't allowed to put another politically daring work of his, *Kozma*, on the programme. And so the machinery functioned, but all the same plays were written and the writers got a bit of money. Then we dramaturgs established Open Forum. It was Pál Békés's idea. He'd been in USA in the early eighties on a writing grant and told us about how drama writing and dramatists received support. One of our colleagues was very taken by the idea, and we found a home at what was then a new provincial theatre in Zalaegerszeg, where she was dramaturg. There we held readings and discussed the work of writers who were starting out on their careers. We also held reading-theatre evenings later on in Budapest, at the Radnóti Theatre, likewise using the work of young writers. Now look at the safety-net that there is under contemporary Hungarian drama these days. Of course, compared with countries like England, Germany and Poland, which have great theatrical traditions, our means are more modest, but all the same things are moving in the right direction and the Guild of Dramaturgs has played a big part in that. Even in the eighties the then cultural directorate set up a complex system of grants which covered the representatives of almost all branches of art with the exception of dramatists. If I remember correctly it was in 1998 that the proposal of us dramaturgs was accepted, since when there's also been a grant for dramatists which was later named after István Örkény.

**A.L.:** How did this grant operate? And it still exists. Who was or is supported, on what basis? Who makes the choices, takes the decisions?

**Zs.R.:** The Ministry made and makes a recommendation to the trustees, but to this day it has been validated by a professional opinions. The criterion is that a writer should be under forty, must submit a synopsis, letters of recommendation, and a short excerpt from the play that he is writing. On the basis of these we decide on the recipient of the annual grant. In this case the play does not necessarily have to be staged. In the case of the Szép Ernő prize, founded by a member of that wonderful dramatist's family and later taken over by the cultural fund of the time, the situation is different. It's more a kind of distinction, a one-off recognition of completed works, a life's work, and originally only one artist received the prize, then two, and in recent years three. So this year, for example, one writer – Károly Szakonyi – has been awarded a prize for his life's work, and another famous writer – György Spiró – has been given one for his new play *Prima környék* (Prime Neighbourhood), as was Béla Pintér for his work as theatrical creator, director and dramatist. An award can also be given, for example, to a promising newcomer, and consideration is given not only to one whose play has been staged but also to one whose play has „merely” been published. Thus it was possible, for example, to reward Csaba Székely for his very first play, which recalled the powerful atmosphere, the black humour atmosphere of the plays of Martin McDonagh. There was a third form of support as well: a few years ago the National Cultural Fund gave generous support to artists (this was a continuation of the pre-1990 grant system), but in this case too there had to be special lobbying for dramatists to be included. This had dried up by now, for a variety of reasons. The criterion with this was that theatres should provide a statement of acceptance saying that if they liked the play when it was finished they would put it on. There's also our own prize, the Guild of Theatrical Dramaturgs prize, for the best play in the season that's just ended. In the past the funding for this came from the office of the Mayor of Budapest, but this year it was no longer guaranteed, so members of the Guild decided that we would find it from our own resources. As for the mechanism of the decision: a smallish group of volunteers selects, usually, six plays which all our members have to read, and then we decide by secret ballot who is to receive this distinction in the given year. This year, 2012, the choice was Balázs Szálanger's play *Köztársaság* (Republic). We introduced it very successfully to the public in the Open Forum reading-theatre at the National Festival of Theatres in Pécs, Hungary. Our intention is to use this prize also as a means of bringing more and more writers and new plays to the attention of the theatre-goer. Sooner or later these plays are generally staged.

I'd like to mention something else that's important – the Dramatists' Round Table and the DESZKA Festival which sprang from it. The dramatists founded the Round Table a few years ago and instituted the Katona József competition. For this entries can be existing plays, and they need a statement of acceptance from a theatre, undertaking responsibility for putting the play on. The theatre will receive support for the production. This arrangement is important because the dramatists themselves devised and realised it. The only problem is whether it will continue in these 'seven lean years' for culture. The Round Table also brought into being the DESZKA Festival, which has so far worked excellently; the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen has given it a home. A dramatist has been commissioned every year to choose the performances to be invited.

Furthermore, there also exists the Contemporary Drama Festival, which also has the merit of inviting experts from abroad to see selected performances of contemporary Hungarian drama. That was established by Mária Szilágyi.

The 'net' supporting contemporary Hungarian drama has become 'thicker' of recent years, in that more and more theatres have offered drama competitions. I'll mention just a few of these. Almost twenty years ago now, in 1994, Péter Esterházy won the competition celebrating the centenary of the Vígyszínház with his *Búcsúszimfónia* (Farewell Symphony). There was also a very successful competi-

tion at the National Theatre in 2009. Ten writers were invited to dramatise one each of the Ten Commandments. Of the eight plays that resulted some were staged, some given in reading-theatre form. Finally, in 2011 the Örkény Theatre held a competition to mark the centenary of the birth of István Örkény, which a play by the above-mentioned Csaba Székely won.

**A.L.:** Which were the six plays from which the dramaturgs chose the winner of their own competition in 2012?

**Zs.R.:** One was by Szilárd Borbély, poet and marvellous dramatist, though his plays aren't yet well understood in the Hungarian theatre. He writes plays of poetic inspiration, but always with a starting-point in the real world. His plots take the reader by degrees into a surreal distance. Then there's Virág Erdős, a young poetess and dramatist, whom the Hungarian theatre hasn't yet really accepted because they haven't yet picked up the provocatively absurd theatrical language and formal world through which her plays can be made to speak. Now a work of hers has come onto the list which is a marvellous play for children. Then János Háy's latest piece too was one. György Spiró's new play is a present-day, shocking, provocative, merciless account of how our society treats the elderly and how it wants to be rid of them. A dramatist colleague of his, Zoltán Egressy, wrote: 'The plot in *Prime Neighbourhood* moves from a totally realistic setting to a surreal dénouement, which – and this is what is really shocking – is not all that hard to imagine. In this play Spiró is talking about conceivable surreality.' The sixth was János Térey's *Protokoll*. The poet Térey, too, has often and on many occasions come first, and has been awarded grants. Not in all cases, but rather successful direction has been typical of his plays. He was most memorable in *Nibelung lakópark* (The Nibelung Subdivision), directed by Kornél Mundurczó. This is a monumental re-writing of Wagner's *Ring*, played in modern times. Furthermore, Balázs Szálanger and János Térey have revived the genre of verse drama in recent years. Térey's *Protokoll* was staged by the Radnóti, Spiró's by Pesti Színház, while Háy's was premièred in the provinces.

In conclusion, as we weave together the past and present happenings in this dramatists' net, we cannot be dissatisfied. Two worrying questions, however, remain unanswered. First: what is going to become of the well formed system of support? Massive curtailments and cut-backs are constantly occurring in all cultural fields. How long with this one be able to last? Like education, it can really point to results in the future. Secondly: what work will remain for the future, and how many will there be of the old and the new that will responsibly and clearly give an account of the depressing events of our times and set out the present grievous societal and moral state of Hungary?



## Contemporary Drama Festival

### Mária Szilágyi, the Festival director, talks to Anna Lakos

**Anna Lakos:** What gave rise to the Contemporary Drama Festival?

**Mária Szilágyi:** The Festival started in the nineties, in 1997, to be precise. After the regime change a constantly growing number of new Hungarian plays were performed in theatres, though the classical works were not neglected. At the time this was not a particularly Hungarian phenomenon, but was a European trend which began in England with the plays of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. They depicted reality in their work in an immediate and raw fashion, which the Germans followed – Marius von Mayenburg, David Giesemann, Dea Loher, Bernhard Studlar and Rebekka Kricheldorf – who had all studied since 2001 at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, in the department of Creative Writing for the Stage. This had opened 1990, and was taught by Heiner Müller and Tankred Dorst. They really exploded onto the German stage and had a considerable influence on European dramatic writing and theatre art. This, of course, also called for emblematic young directors like Thomas Ostermeier, who not only staged these new plays but also declared war on the domination of classical drama in provocative statements. This was when attention started to be paid elsewhere as well to what the young were writing. At the time contemporary drama was being rejuvenated in content and form alike, which had an inspiring effect on theatres. These works were characterised first of all by social awareness and a subjective tone. Playwrights had earlier striven for universality, their work had spoken of general human values, but these new plays turned towards the reality of the present and the problems of the individual. They ventured to speak, for example, about the shady side of the German good life, about the fact that the good life often conceals a frightful domestic hell. See Marius von Mayenburg's *Feuer Gesicht* (Fireface).

In the more liberal atmosphere after the regime change – in our case not just for that reason, or not only under that influence – a kind of ferment started. In the second half of the nineties theatres premièred more and more contemporary Hungarian plays and in one season the number of these reached twenty or twenty-five. This was when the idea came to me of somehow showing this to the world. At that time I was still working at the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. As rapporteur for theatre in German-speaking countries I used to receive a large number of enquiries from abroad. Everybody was enquiring about new Hungarian plays and performances of them. That was what made me think that it would be a good idea to show these plays to foreign audiences in their original settings, in authentic circumstances, that is, when there was a Hungarian audience as well, and to have them translated into other languages. That, I thought, would be a much better way of presenting contemporary Hungarian drama and making it known than organising guest performances abroad – which, furthermore, would be disproportionately expensive. At the first Festival, which even then was called the Contemporary Hungarian Drama Festival, only new Hungarian plays were on the programme. This was a kind of Hungarian showcase which drew fifty foreign visitors from all parts of Europe. In the five days of the Festival they had the opportunity of seeing six new Hungarian plays, meeting the authors, coming across other Hungarian plays in reading-theatre situations and taking part in international symposia on the subject of dramatic writing in the nineties, while students on directing courses got to know Hungarian

plays in an international workshop. That was the start. I'd like to emphasise that in the '90s contemporary authors were carving out an ever more noticeable place in programme planning, the theatre was becoming more up-to-date all the time and was talking about new contemporary plays. This found expression in the growing number of contemporary drama festivals. I regarded the Bonn Biennale as an example; for me, its programme structure showed the way. Both they and we held a festival very two years. This changed in 2007. By then big changes had taken place in the theatre in Hungary and abroad. The performance itself rather than the play now held prime of place in theatrical thinking. Emphasis had shifted to questions of the content and form of a performance, and the various theatrical languages and esthetics were becoming more and more exciting. In short, in the first years it was the dramatists and their plays that attracted interest from abroad, and the Biennale format met that much better with regard to quality of writing, but after the millennium Hungarian theatre started to 'rev up' and the independent creative workshops producing up-to-date theatre became more and more significant – examples were Árpád Schilling with Krétakör and Béla Pintér and Company. Greater and greater liberty in Hungarian theatre life was given to the practice whereby the script of a performance was written not by a dramatist but frequently by the director himself or a creative collective, was no longer the book of a play but something akin to a film-script on stage, and no longer took anything like a central role in performance because time had gone by and theatrical devices had become less constrained. To put it in a nutshell, post-dramatic stage performances had appeared in Hungary too. The profile of the Festival too was modified in the wake of the changes taking place in theatrical art. We were – we still are – more and more interested in knowing where a performance was taking place which reacted to the situation in the Hungary of the day, to our present world, and we compiled the programme with that in mind, irrespective of whether performances were based on the work of playwrights or stage scripts, or perhaps improvisations.

**A.L.:** How did the programme take shape? Who drew it up?

**M.Sz.:** The Hungarian programme has always been selected by a jury. Over the years we've experimented with a number of variants. For the first Festival, for example, we asked the theatre critic István Nagy to be selector. Later one or two critics have made the choice, and more recently the committee has always consisted of four – a playwright, a dramaturg and two critics. We'd like to keep this format in future, because like this several points of view are expressed, which is particularly important when judging performances that cross the borders between genres, as often is the case. At whom the Hungarian theatre programme at the Festival is aimed has often been the subject of debate. First and foremost, at foreign visitors. We would always like to present at the Festival the performances staged in the given period for selection which are the most original and most worthy of attention in relation to Hungarian contemporary theatre. After all, that was the original idea behind the Festival. And it is our experience that colleagues from abroad like the programme that we compile from the aspect of the selection. They know that here they'll be able to get to know the latest and most exciting progressive creations. As a festival of non-governmental origin and so lacking a standard budget our financial possibilities are always restricted, so that most of the performances in the programme are from Budapest and the local audience already knows them. As far as we can, we try to widen the choice by inviting Hungarian performances from the provinces and from abroad, so as to make the programme interesting for the people of Budapest. In addition, in recent years we've premièred Hungarian plays in co-productions at the

Festival, and that has interested foreign visitors and Hungarian audiences alike. In 2011 we joined forces with the umbrella organisation called *Függetlenek Egymásért* /FÜGE (Independently Together Foundation), which manages ensembles on the Hungarian independent scene, for a production titled *Egyenes út* (Straight Road). This was a performance improvised on the basis of a newspaper item, a 'here and today' plot, created jointly by the cast and the director: Bonnie and Clyde in the suburbs of Miskolc. We had another performance too, *Gardenia* by the young Polish playwright Elzbieta Chowaniec, performed by the K.V. Company. We'd put it on at the previous Festival with the ensemble in reading-theatre format, and a year later staged it.

**A.L.:** Which have been your favourite Hungarian performances or plays on the Festival programme in the last three years?

**Sz.M.:** As I said, in recent years in the majority of plays staged the book has been adapted into the fabric of the performance, so there isn't much that I can say about plays or favourite plays, rather about performances. Of those that were put on I would mention János Házy's *A Gézagyerek* (The Stonewatcher). Béla Pintér and his company have appeared at almost all the Festivals and on the last occasion with this new play. I liked it very much, and I think that Pintér's work is very important, because he's able to speak in an individual voice about our personal affairs, which is characteristic of him alone. It's individual but at the same time typically Hungarian. Perhaps it's most of all a blend of Hungarian reality and mentality. And it's understood abroad! I'd like to mention their performance of *Szutyok* (Muck), which they've been invited to take to very many places abroad. *Szutyok* is important because it introduces lucidly and cleverly that negative way in which Hungarian people, in their desperation and hopeless situations in life, cling to such modes of thought as bring no improvement not only in their own lives but in those of others, indeed, are inhumane. They support right-wing groups that discriminate against people on a basis of racist views, and want to reshape society on those grounds. It is a pity that there are very few performances to be seen in Hungary today that speak about these questions with such frankness in the language of art. In the same category I place *Kaisers TV Ungarn*, which was performed last year and likewise deals with general conditions in Hungary. The same goes for PanoDrama's *Szóról szóra* (Word by Word), which deals in verbatim theatrical form with the way in which Gypsy families have been attacked and murdered. And I regard the work of the Mohácsy brothers as important – *Egyszer élünk, avagy a tenger azontúl tűnik semmiségbe* (We Live Once, or the Sea Disappears Into Nothingness Thereafter). And I also like very much the contemporary HOPPart classic, *Korijolánusz* (*Coriolanus*).

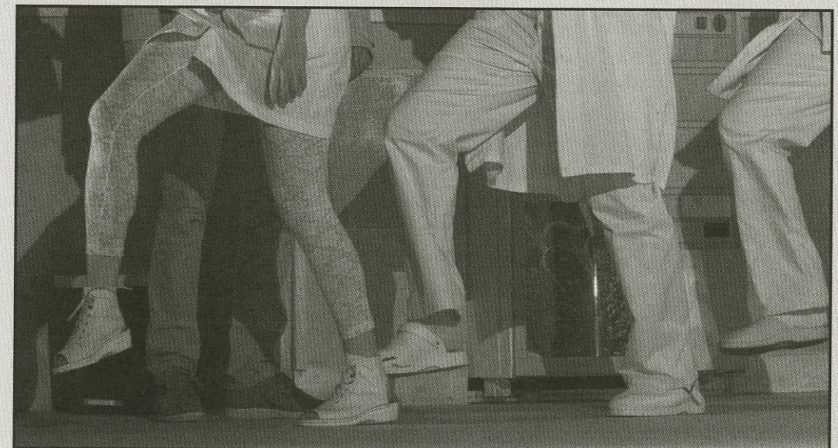
In parentheses, I would point out that the people who show an interest in our Festival – and not only ours – are in the main those foreign experts who are curious about Hungarian theatre and/or would like to invite a Hungarian performance to their establishments. Their aim is not, however, without question to popularise a Hungarian writer and play in this way with a view to a subsequent performance over there, but they want to introduce the performance itself to their audiences. Hungarian theatre has some standing abroad, and is reckoned a particular theatre culture somewhere between Russian and German theatre art. There's a lot of interest taken in it. Even now we've had a lot of letters of enquiry about whether we're having a Hungarian showcase programme this year.

Representatives of the most important European festivals regularly visit us, but so too do many from the 'alternatives'. Some of them are looking for a young director, some are interested

in the social content of a performance, and some are drawn by novel theatrical language. In brief, they make their choices on the basis of a great variety of points of view. If performances and companies that appear on our programmes are invited and achieve success abroad, after that productions will be 'self-propelled' and invitation will follow invitation. The Bonn Biennale, for example, which in the meantime has moved to Wiesbaden, previously adhered strictly to the principle that only plays written by playwrights were to be invited. This summer the performance of Béla Pintér's *Szutyok* represented Hungary.

**A.L.:** What is the Festival's financial background? What does the future hold for the Contemporary Drama Festival?

**M.Sz.:** The Festival was started by private enterprise, and sadly even to this day has no normative, that is, guaranteed budget, and so runs primarily on money won in competition. In Hungary only festivals supported by towns, counties or the Ministry can reckon on a more or less constantly guaranteed budget. Such, for example, the National Festival of Theatres in Pécs, Hungary, or the Budapest Spring Festival. Our situation is quite different: every time we have to start finding sources from scratch, and this makes planning and the quality development of the Festival terribly hard. It's a tight-rope walk with life at stake. Even now that's the position, even after the tenth Festival, but two years ago the Hungarian Commission for the Evaluation of Festivals, on the basis of strict standards, awarded us the rank of Quality Festival. This year we've made five applications and had two replies. The new Cultural Festival Collegium of the National Cultural Fund has turned down our application, although we're the only theatre festival that promotes Hungarian theatre with a showcase programme targeting foreigners. The other new National Cultural Fund Collegium has awarded us a mere pittance. Never before have we had such unsuccessful results from applications! We've held the Contemporary Drama Festival in November every year since 2007, but under present circumstances we've decided to postpone the event. No way do we wish to give up the Festival, but we have to come up with the appropriate material resources to be able to organise a Festival up to the standards of the past.



## Debrecen Festival of Hungarian Drama

### Károly Szakonyi

Because of the significantly altered conditions in Hungarian theatre life in and about the nineties of last century a number of dramatists considered it a good idea to set up an association to protect values. This has become the Dramatists' Round Table. Some thirty middle-aged, important writers have become members, but the majority are in the age-group whose careers began twenty or twenty-five years ago. In the following year the plan set out in 2004 was moulded into an annual general meeting and accepted the basic rules of the Round Table, the clauses of which settled the *modus operandi*.

The tasks of the Round Table were and are seen most of all in two things: firstly, the urging in Ministerial organs of the annual holding of the Katona József competition, which belongs among existential questions, and secondly the DESZKA Festival, likewise to be held annually. This took place for the first time in 2005 in Sopron, and was a slightly disorganised gathering which did nothing more than discuss theatre styles and problems. The assembly met in the municipal House of Culture, and the event lasted several days and was not at all like the present ones; the review that took place in 2006 in Eger too was also different in many respects from that of today. On both occasions, however, there was talk of making contemporary Hungarian drama better known: its importance should be revealed not merely in professional circles but also to the public at large.

That has been achieved by the cordiality and unselfishness of the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen. The events of the Festival have taken place here since 2007; these have consisted not only of stage performances, but also of professional consultations and so-called workshop conversations. Performances take place morning, evening and into the night on the main stage, on the Horváth Árpád Studio Stage, in the Chamber Theatre and the Puppet Theatre. In the morning sessions invited personalities give talks on drama, drama-writing and topical problems in the ballet room of the theatre, which is the venue for debates and introductions, while evaluations of the talks – which always arouse great interest – continue even after midnight in the actors' buffet or the ballet room itself.

Hungarian plays come to the Festival which have been given during the season in Budapest, in the provinces or abroad. There are a great number of stage works and performances, and it is not easy to choose those that come to Debrecen. Three members of the Round Table, with material support from the Csokonai Theatre, review the situation, tour the theatres, discuss passionately what they have seen and reach their decisions in good time before the Festival, so that invitations can usually be issued by early March to the companies designated.

The selectors view several dozen productions as the months go by. It makes no difference whether the work is that of official, full-size or chamber theatres, or of 'alternative' companies of no fixed abode. What counts is the artistic level. Naturally, as the meeting lasts only five or six days the number of performances is limited, so that not everything of value can be there, but experience shows that the almost twenty shows give a fair account of the good things in Hungarian drama in the given year.

The Debrecen public always shows great interest and tickets sell out early, though some of the productions are in a style to which that affluent but conservative city is unaccustomed. In the atmosphere of the Festival, however, everyone finds it stimulating to catch a glimpse of the fruits of Hungarian theatre writing. In this, the only national drama festival in Hungary, the palette carries a wide range of colours, from the traditional to the most outrageous avant-garde.

1. The poet Endre Ady (1877–1919) lived for ten years in a famous ménage à trois with Adél (Léda in his verse) Brüll and her husband.

2. An elaborate wooden covered gateway, not unlike the lych gate often seen in an English churchyard.

Of particular interest are the productions from both Transylvania and Southern Hungary. The number of companies invited grows yearly. In addition, there are plans for increased international participation, as by this means visitors from abroad can become acquainted with Hungarian theatre and we can profit from their observations. The contributions of a number of companies from abroad have proved revelatory. Such was the extraordinarily interesting performance by the Marosvásárhely theatre, who played in a mixture of Hungarian and Romanian, with the foreign text translated in Hungarian surtitles. Hungarian and Romanian actors of the Yorick Stúdió in Marosvásárhely, founded by Aba Sebestyén, wrote a special play (based on sixty interviews) about the ethnic clashes of twenty years before. This came to DESZKA in 2010. In that year the people from Szabadka (Subotica, Serbia) staged two productions: János Háy's *Gézagerek* (The Stonewatcher) and the celebrated three-actor *Adieu Bandi*, the story of Ady, Léda and her husband.<sup>1</sup> The Újvidék Theatre (from Novi Sad, Serbia) brought to the Festival a dance performance rather like a 'populist play', the essence of which was the depiction of life after the war.

As we have mentioned Marosvásárhely, a word must be said about one of the great successes at the Festival – one also connected with the name of Aba Sebestyén – *Bányavirág* (Mine Flowers), by the young Transylvanian writer Csaba Székely. Inspired by Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, the play reveals the situation of the Székely community in grotesque, amusing yet tragic scenes: a country doctor and a local miner, put out of work and having no prospects because of the closure of the mine, drown their sorrows in alcohol. At the end of the play we see an interview with the miner, the principal character, who stands there in front of a 'Székely gateway'<sup>2</sup> and speaks resignedly, schematically about his life, yes, we live here, the stream burbles, we maintain tradition, we live, yes, nicely, here's this little stream ... and so on. The play won great acclaim at the Festival for its content and outstanding acting, and has since won a number of prizes at other festivals.

We can list almost the entire dramatist generation of today, whose plays have been selected one after another for the Festival programme. Péter Esterházy's *Haydn* is there, with its special dramaturgy, as is István Tasnádi's *Cyber Cyrano*, on the critique of social connections via the internet. Péter Nádas's now classic work *Találkozás* (Encounter), together with György Spiró, Csaba Kiss, Zoltán Egressy and Béla Pintér and Company, who aroused extraordinary interest with their satirical, sometimes startling productions, but also plays for children and puppet plays occupy an important place.

On some evenings items from the Debrecen company's repertoire are staged. Memorable in Attila Vidnyánszky's direction is the dramatised version of Zsigmond Móricz's *Úri muri* (Very Merry) – he always creates visionary, spectacular, many-layered performances, not sparing the audience in a show that may well last four hours.

Reference should also be made to the reading-theatre programme, and it is often the case that new, unfinished Hungarian plays are presented in the form of reading-rehearsal.

This Festival is colourful, interesting and useful, and can be further enriched by the presence of foreign visitors and ideas, but for that material conditions must also be created.

There are no prizes at the Festival, which is non-competitive; the aims are an overview of Hungarian drama production, setting it before a wider audience, and the coming together in friendship of professional companies.

The organisation of the Festival, apart from the intellectual contribution of the Round Table, devolves upon the Csokonai Theatre. Central support is supplemented by their selflessness which, even with the proceeds from ticket sales, means a constant strain. The organisation, however, the technical discussions with the companies invited and the successful arrangement of the events all place an enormous burden on the theatre. Attila Vidnyánszky and his colleagues have always brought it off successfully, for which reason – bearing in mind the current economic status quo – there has to be cause for concern every year.

## Open Forum – The Forum of Contemporary Hungarian Drama

### Ildikó Lökös

#### The beginning – 1985.

It began in the mid-1980s, in the wake of a foreign idea. The young writer Pál Békés<sup>1</sup>, then at the start of his career, took part a workshop for dramatists in the USA and decided to introduce the method to Hungary. He found dramaturgs, critics and theatre experts who carried forward his plan. A local theatre was quickly found in the Hungarian provincial town of Zalaegerszeg – the newly formed Hevesi Sándor Theatre, the director of which was József Ruszt<sup>2</sup>, a significant figure in the history of Hungarian theatre. One afternoon in December 1985 several dozen dramaturgs, theatre critics, producers, playwrights and aestheticians met to exchange views on new, contemporary Hungarian dramas which had not then been staged, to discuss them and bring attention to them. The event was given the name of Open Forum, and on the first occasion five playwrights introduced their first plays. These included *Pincejáték*<sup>3</sup> (Cellar-play) by the inventive Pál Békés, which was immediately booked for the very next season at the Zalaegerszeg theatre, directed by Béla Merő. (The original plan was that the theatre would schedule one of the items for the season following Open Forum.) As we look back today we can see that the first selection was a good one. The names of András Nagy, László Márton, László Baranyai and Tibor Selmeczi became equally well known later, even if not only through the Open Forum – nor have they all specialised in writing for the theatre.

The timetable that the organisers devised has changed over the years, but the way in which the participants worked in the early years is of interest. The event lasted four days – as it does today. In the mornings analyses took place round a table, in the afternoons they proceeded to so-called open rehearsals – which meant members of the Zalaegerszeg company rehearsing the two plays selected with an invited distinguished director – and in the evenings a choice was made of the visitors' performances. A prize was also established, known as the Vilmos Prize – an allusion to William Shakespeare. The dramaturgs taking part decided by secret ballot (as they still do) which was the best of the works discussed, and its author is wittily awarded a specially-labelled bottle of Hungarian Vilmoskörte pálinka.<sup>4</sup>

After the success of the first meeting Open Forum developed into a series which still continues. A constant flow of new organisers has joined the original number. The procedure has changed little. Plays discovered through a variety of channels – competitions, prizes, personal contacts – are passed round and read, and a selection is made and circulated. The work is made so much easier now that the former heavy stencilled copies (which all participant received before the meeting so that they could prepare) have been replaced by circulation through the internet. The Open Forum has succeeded from the first in attracting very distinguished writers, critics and aestheticians; for example, the writer Gábor Czákó returned for a long time to lead discussions, handing over to the critic and literary historian Tamás Tarján. Speakers at morning discussions have included the aestheticians Péter Balassa and László F. Földényi, the film-critic György Báron, the director László Babarczy, the poet, translator and literary historian István Géher, the critic and literary historian Sándor Radnóti, the editor and critic József Tamás Reményi and the writer Magda Szabó. Directors of open rehearsals in the afternoons have included such as István Pál, a leading figure in the alternative

1. 1956 – 2010.

2. 1937 – 2005.

3. In this a young man in his late twenties is waiting for his lover, but the heating in the house has broken down and while his friend goes up to the flat he goes to find fuel in the cellar. From behind and among the assorted junk figures appear, former occupants of the house – even more symbolically Egy Ház (A House, but also The Church) – in various periods of the tragic history of Hungary, and in order to weave their stories together all the more the historical crimes of ordinary people are systematically revealed. Of course, only the principal character can see them, and his friend, when she first comes down for him, cannot. Finally he too is absorbed into the 'cellar-Hungarians', and when his friend comes down a second time she cannot find him either, but can see only lifeless rubbish.

4. Translator's note: Vilmos is the Hungarian form of Wilhelm/William, and körte means 'pear', so that the prize is a bottle of pálinka made from William pears – BSA.

theatre of the 1980s, while the list of playwrights over the years has been long: to name only some, Pál Békés, Péter Esterházy, András Forgách, László Garaczi, László Márton, András Nagy, Zsolt Pozsgai, György Spiró, Sándor Sults, Géza Szócs, Ottó Tolnai, László Végh, András Viski and Tibor Zalán. All have become Hungarian dramatists of distinction with numerous plays to their credit.

It is significant that the Ministry of the time, and in particular the head of the theatre department, was keen to support the Forum.

#### Changes - 1999

Open Forum gained an ever greater sphere of influence and almost every year new faces appeared as more and more generations of writers, dramaturgs and critics followed one another. There was no longer stencilled material circulating, but from 1992 elegant volumes have come annually from the printer, with Open Forum Notebook on the spine. Beginning from the tenth Open Forum in 1994 a contemporary foreign play came under consideration each year, first an American,<sup>5</sup> and after that works from neighbouring countries – Czech, Slovak, Slovene, Polish and Romanian.

After a few years József Ruszt's road and that of his successor Imre Halasi led in different directions. One of the new leaders was Géza Bereményi, himself a dramatist. But the organisers felt more and more that Open Forum seemed jaded, and therefore contemplated changes. The fifteen sessions between 1985 and 1999, however, could be taken as a record of success, and the adherents of Open Forum wanted to continue it.

The then president of the Guild of Theatre Dramaturgs, László Upor, had the idea of linking up with the national theatre conference, which was then undergoing a transformation. Until the end of the 1990s it was the tradition that every year a different town hosted it. On this occasion, however, several people suggested that these meetings should have a permanent place and constitute a real festival with numerous fringe programmes. The choice fell on Pécs, and the festival director designate, Tamás Jordán, liked the idea of Open Forum's moving there. Many of the dramaturgs were anxious that it would be swamped in the sea of the programme, but others maintained that there would be far more participants, it would gain greater publicity, and would be able to draw attention to contemporary Hungarian drama more effectively.

#### Innovations – 2001

The new location had an inspiring effect. By courtesy of the National Festival of Theatres in Pécs, Hungary (NFTP) the Guild of Theatre Dramaturgs was able to enjoy better material circumstances, and so designated one of the selected new plays and offered a prize for its performance on stage. The newly administered Forum also acquired a new producer in the person of Tibor Soltészky. The competition was won by the Budapest Chamber Theatre with Vera Filó's *Rob és Tot pont még nevet egyet* (Rob and Tot Stop One More Laugh). In accordance with the conditions laid down, the first night was at the NFTP, after which it went into the theatre's repertoire for the following season. András Almási-Tóth was the director, Tamás Lengyel, Tibor Mertz and Enikő Nagy the cast. The author, Vera Filó, had featured in Open Forum previously. It is typical of her writings that she tries to blend virtual reality with the theatrical world, and within that again is especially attracted to the world of the comic book, and indeed she illustrates that sort of thing herself. Experiments of this sort have long been accepted in films. It was the idea of the dramaturg Livia Dobák to build Filó drawings into the visual world of the performance, as the artist Margit Bella did very successfully. A witty game resulted between reality and the computerised, comic-book world infected by the media, to all of

5. Lisa Schlesinger's *The Bones of Danny Winston* (translated by László Upor).

which Filó's playful language contributed. The performance, however, was all but a flop, as the audience received its unusual language rather coldly. So began the move to Pécs. In addition, however, there was a book containing Gergely Péterfi's first play *A vadászgörény* (The Ferret) (which was staged in the New Theatre five years later by Zoltán Bezerédi), Zoltán Toepler's second Open Forum piece *A Michelangelo-rejtély* (The Michelangelo Riddle) and Ágnes Kamondy's *Johanna nőpapa* (Pope Joan), which was performed the following year with Róbert Alföldi as director.

#### Discovery – 2002.

A competition was announced in the following year too. It was won by the Mórícz Zsigmond Theatre of Nyíregyháza, and the selected work was Ákos Németh's *Autótolvajok* (Car Thieves), directed by Péter Szákás-Tóth. The author had a fine sense of how to weave together delicate lyrical quality and a fundamentally realistic plot. It had an outstanding cast, including such as the newly qualified Kata Wéber, Katalin Takács and Frigyes Barány. The book also contained plays by Csaba Mikó,<sup>6</sup> Sándor Sultz<sup>7</sup> and Tibor Farkas.<sup>8</sup> And this was the year, 2002, when the item most appreciated in Open Forum was invented in Pécs: reading-theatre. The number of days was extended to five for this reason, of which four led up to real theatrical first nights. Eminently suitable directors for the plays were found. The film director Kornél Mundruczó, then in his early career, was invited for Vera Filó's work; he cast Orsolya Tóth in the title role – she was still a student at the theatre university, but later became leading lady in all Mundruczó's film and theatre work. Csaba Kiss directed his own *A dög* (Carrion) together with the young theatre student Ildikó Tornyai. The reading-theatre version of János Háys's *A Herner Ferike faterja* (Frankie Herner's Old Man) was the work of János Vincze; he later staged it at the Third Theatre in Pécs. Tibor Csizmadia did the same for Zoltán Kőrösi's *Galambok* (Doves), staged in Eger in the season following the reading-theatre.

The readings always attracted a full house, while the strict professionals took part in the morning book discussions, and called on recognised aestheticians, critics and colleagues to initiate the debates. Feedback showed that these conversations were of great significance to the organisers. It turned out, and that too was an advantage of NFTP, that because of the wealth of programmes not everyone could get to Open Forum but they would come across its programme, be able to read the names and titles, and sooner or later some dramaturg would put a book in their hand.

#### Nibelung – 2003

It was unanimously agreed that Open Forum fitted in smoothly with the texture of the theatre conference. The dramaturgs changed once more and were replaced. The Guild no longer offered a competition, but instead invited ready-made performances, complementing the NFTP programme. Such were *A Herner Ferike faterja* (Frankie Herner's Old Man) with the Third Theatre from Pécs, and Csaba Mikó's *Apa avagy egy gyilkosság anatómiája* (Father, or the Anatomy of a Murder) from Debrecen, directed by Zsuzsa Cserje. The book contained works by Zoltán Egressy, Lilla Falussy, Gábor Németh and Gábor Schein. One play, however, among the reading-theatre items started off a real theatre history event. In addition to Csaba Mikó's intriguing piece and Zoltán Toepler's witty comedy, the first play by János Térey, already known as a poet, was performed by final year theatre university students directed by Kornél Mundruczó: *A Nibelung-lakópark* (The Nibelung Subdivision).<sup>9</sup> Mundruczó was so taken with the play that he later staged it with the Krétakör company, then in its heyday.

6. *Apa, avagy egy gyilkosság anatómiája* (Father, or the Anatomy of a Murder)

7. *Edes élet* (Sweet Life)

8. *A levelbomba* (The Letter-bomb)

#### On stage – 2004

The next year was that of the younger element: Péter Deres, Pál Nényi, István Vörös and once again Csaba Mikó. Nényi had emerged in the National Theatre drama competition, the director László Bagossy spoke favourably of him – since when he has not appeared on stage. This the organisers of Open Forum took badly. Fortunately, however, there have been more successes, and from 1986 seventy-eight plays out of a hundred and eighty-six have reached their premières.<sup>10</sup>

In reading-theatre, János Háys once more with *A Pityu bácsi fia* (Uncle Pityu's Son), and a performance by the talented and popular actor János Kulka, a splendid adaptation by András Viski of Imre Kertész's *Kaddis*.<sup>11</sup> A disturbing midweek morning. On another day Péter Forgách and theatre university students played with the text of György Baráthy's interesting new play.

There was also a guest performance, that is, a workshop-première. Lilla Falussy's *Féledes-e* (Semi-sweet?) from the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen, directed by Árpád Árkosi. This had also been mentioned the previous year.

#### Opportunities – 2005

When in those days the idea of Open Forum came into being there was no such forum, apart from the determination of a couple of dramaturgs, for plays to be seen in the theatre and for authors to come into contact with the stage. Since then the situation has changed greatly, and in addition to Open Forum there are new opportunities for playwrights.<sup>12</sup> The creative writing competition of the National Cultural Fund Theatre College and the foundation for Independent Hungarian Art at the suggestion of the Guild of Dramaturgs, each support a writer, one beginning his career and one who has produced something significant in another genre but not yet written for the stage. Among others, Gábor Németh, János Térey and Virág Erdős have received this kind of invitation. One of the most exciting of these is Endre Kukorelly's *Élnék még ezek?* (Are These Still Living?); the appearance of his successful *roman-à-clef Tündérvölgy* (Fair Valley) inspired the invitation – it presents both autobiographical material and a faithful picture of the Hungary of the 1960s and its temporarily eclipsed middle-class intelligentsia. Later Kukorelly wrote his work on a similar theme but with distinctive dramaturgy; this came to the hands of Gábor Máté, actor-producer of the Katona József Theatre in Budapest (since 2011 its director), who directed it there. Even before all this the director had spoken at Open Forum about what attracted him to the play. It may be that both this conversation and the evidence of the first night was what caused Kukorelly to nominate only contemporary Hungarian plays when, some years later, he selected the list for the NFTP competition.

Also in the book were Pál Nényi's latest work and the *Hyppolitos*, *Hyppolitos* of the talented poet Gábor Schein, in which the characters of the Greek Phaedra-myth are at the same time the *dramatis personae* of the play. Schein effectively blends the topos of the myth with our modern life. The conversation on this subject was led by the director János Ács.

The name of Gergely Péterfi emerged once more in the reading-theatre with his drama *Preparált angyal* (Stuffed Angel), which remains unfinished; even so, it has inspired many, and among other things a puppet

9. Térey's verse-drama *A Nibelung-lakópark* is a veritable portrayal of the age: it is a disaster-play, an all-embracing and layered work which revives the Wagner tradition and presents the present-day Hungary in a framework of myth. The world, symbolised by a housing estate, is in dire straits.

10. See appendix.

11. *Kaddis* a meg nem született gyermekért (Kaddish for the unborn Child) is one of Imre Kertész's most personal works. In it a middle-aged survivor of Auschwitz decides once and for all, on a tormented night, pregnant with memories, that he will live out his life childless. Based on this deeply disturbing short novel, András Viski, poet, dramatist and dramaturg living in Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca, Romania), has written a theatrical monologue which was delivered to great effect by János Kulka.

12. The Debrecen-based DESZKA and Mária Szilágyi's Contemporary Drama Festival in the country, and some more outside Hungary, such as that in the long-established organisation of Rozália Brestyánszki Boros in Szabadka (Subotica, in Serbia) or the new drAMA conference in Szekelyudvarhely (Romania). Furthermore, a growing number of scholarships assist the dramatist, such as the Orkény prize.

adaptation has been made. So too did György Kerékgyártó with his first play, and Róbert Balogh's work *A Vagon* (The Wagon), which tackles an important subject, making some use of docu-drama technique. It analyses the tragedy of the German deportations, and excerpts were directed by Zsuzsa Dávid with actors from Pécs. It was she, then still leader of the Szekszárd German Theatre, that encouraged Balogh to work up the subject and planned to stage it, but her successor in post no longer considered it important.

On the other hand, it brought great pleasure that some actors from Veszprém, guided by Péter Gyula and with the assistance of dramaturg Johanna Fülöp, had begun to work for pleasure on the text of Virág Erdős's *A Merénylet* (Suicide Bomb), which they eventually premièred. They had a good understanding of Erdős's humour, topicality and playfulness.

One of the workshop premières was again from Debrecen, Gábor Németh's *Túl az egészen* (Beyond the Whole), directed by Árpád Árkosi; the other was Krisztián Peer's *Türelmetlenek* (The Impatients) in the Honvéd Ensemble performance, a witty, modernised variant of Molière's *Les femmes savantes* directed by Éva Naszлады with music specially composed for the occasion by the popular writer of light music András Lovasi.

#### Women – 2006

These days more and more women are writing plays. When Open Forum started women writers were rather the exception, as for example Irén Kiss with her *Mayerlingi fondorlatok* (The Mayerling Mystery).<sup>13</sup> At the twenty-first Forum, however, the ratio was 3:1 in favour of the ladies. In addition to János Lackfi – also a significant poet, who had written an exciting village Mafia story – there were Virág Erdős's latest play and Noémi Kiss's experimental dramatic adaptation of her own short story.

Thanks to the additional support of NFTP, there was also reading-theatre of contemporary drama every day at the festival. One of these, for example, was from the disturbing writings of Alaine Polcz, an adaptation from her *Asszony a fronton* (Woman at the Front) for two women's voices by László Baranyai; performed by Katalin Takács and Kata Pálfi, this was directed by Attila Vidnyánszky. The young director Máté Szabó directed his own play *Hétvége* (Weekend). There was also a reading from Lackfi, *Hambi-pipóke*, written in verse and set in a fast-food restaurant, which can be taken as a sort of modern *Hamupipóke* (Cinderella) story. Gergely Miklós Nagy's *Alkalmatlanok* (Unfit) was of interest because it was preceded by a stimulating workshop between the author, the director Gábor Csőre and the dramaturg Eszter Harangozó.

Finally, it is amusing to mention the reception of Zoltán Bezerédi's direction of László Garaczi's *Plazma*. Everyone recognised its merits, its linguistic inventiveness, the witty way in which it spoke of the debasement in which we live – but because of its irregular dramaturgy it had little chance of appearing on the stage in Hungary. Since then it has recently had its sixth successful staging. On the repertoire of the KoMa company for five years, it was given at NFTP, and its prize-winning performance made it immediately a cult item.

Although dramaturgs in the classical sense exert themselves to preserve the literary quality of dramatic texts they have to realise that this is not absolutely necessary for the theatre. Three performances were invited to the workshop-premières to debate this tendency. The text of László Bíró's *Őszinte, de igaz* (Sincere, but true) was worked on by the improvisation of the actors of Pont Workshop, as was the *Priznic* (Compress) of Réka Szabó's Tünet Ensemble. In connection with the performance of János Háy's *A Pityu bácsi fia* (Uncle Pityu's Son) by the Illyés Gyula Theatre of Beregszász (Ukraine), however, one was able to talk about the meaning of obscenity in a text of literary quality.

<sup>13</sup> The plot turns on a nineteenth-century love affair (that of the Habsburg heir apparent Rudolf and Mari Vetsera) and reveals the influence in the personal sphere of political machinations.

#### University students – 2007

This year belongs to the young and the university students.

Péter Gazdag's work *Ha csak úgy nem* (If Only Not So), which appears in the book, speaks of the special action of the young students of Budapest and reveals their sub-culture. Márton Kiss wrote *Pilonon* as a dramaturgy student, together with his fellow students later staged it, and has subsequently continued on the same path with his more recent pieces. The theatre university students also read aloud Péter Kárpáti's *BúvárTheatre* (Diver-theatre), led by their teacher Eszter Novák, the recently qualified Zoltán Géczy directed Zoltán Toepler's latest piece *Halotti póz* (Funeral Pose), and not long afterwards staged it in Stúdió-K. Zoltán Egressy is there again, as is György Baráthy.

#### Abroad – 2008

Again an innovation, following the proposal of Anna Merényi.<sup>14</sup>

A special team was assembled for this purpose, who read and translated foreign contemporary pieces. On the first occasion the work of Lukas Bärfuss, a Swiss, Juha Jokela, a Finn, and a Norwegian, Arne Lygve, were brought up. Of these, the Swiss work was specially translated for the occasion by Ildikó Gáspár.

Hungarian plays too were many and various. Members of KoMa, committed to contemporary drama, worked on Csaba Mikó's *Idill*. Shortly afterwards Péter Gothár directed András Vinnai's *Gromov* at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, while in Pécs Zsolt Anger brought to life the reading-theatre and Gothár was called on to open the debate. András Maros's *Mérleghinta* (See-saw) is a melancholy, well-written play. A real sensation in the book was *Kalevala* by the young poet Balázs Szálanger, written at the request of the choreographer Csaba Horváth.<sup>15</sup> It is a fine plot about the perpetuation of myths. Katalin Trencsényi is a dramaturg living in England, and her *Málna* (Raspberries) is of interest because it portrays a real-life dramatic situation sketched from her own sociographically inspired research into mothers that have lost their children. Róbert Balogh's *Távol a szemtől* (Far from Sight) continues to confront the past, while Tamás Halmai, at Open Forum for the first time, analysed philosophical problems with his *Az üresség közepe* (The Middle of the Void).

In the workshop-première programme were Szilárd Podmaniczky's *Beckettre várva* (Waiting for Beckett) by RS9, directed by Dezső Dobay with Péter Vallai and Imre Csujá, and György Spiró's *Prah* by Pécs Third Theatre, directed by János Vincze with Tünde Bacskó and Gábor Bánky.

#### Translators – 2009

There were three plays in the book, which this year was a joint publication with *Critikai Lapok* (Critical Pages), a theatre profession periodical of the highest quality edited by Katalin Ágnes Szűcs. One of these was Bettina Almássy's competition entry *Megfulladok!* (I can't breathe!), a successful play in the dramatists' workshop titled 'After the Fall' held by the Goethe Institute and PanoDrama, and which has now been given in reading-theatre form at the National Theatre. Balázs Maruszki likewise trained as a dramaturg, but deals mainly with film scripts; now, however, he appeared with a promising stage work *Végevégevégemindennek* (Theendtheendtheendofeverything), in which the film mindset can be detected – in which respect it is not alone in the sphere of contemporary drama.

The poet, dramatist and literary translator István Vörös has taken part more than once in Open Forum programmes; his play *Az ördögszáj* (The Devilmouth) can be taken as a modern-day witchcraft-story and a

<sup>14</sup> PanoDrama.  
<sup>15</sup> PanoDrama.

sort of perpetuation of myths. It had been performed not long before at the *Nyitott Műhely* (Open Workshop) in Buda, directed by Kriszta Kováts. This time the change of location produced an interesting result: theatre does not always require a real theatrical space.

Once again, three women and one man took part in the afternoon reading-theatres: Judit Ágnes Kiss's *Prága, főpályaudvar* (Prague, Main Station); Véra Filó's *Játék* (Play); Noémi Kiss's *Legénybúcsú* (Stag-party); and András Maros's *Hulladék* (Rubbish). In addition, two interesting projects. The National Theatre of Budapest held an invitation dramatic competition on the theme of the *Ten Commandments*.<sup>16</sup> Excerpts from the entries were read out, and before that Róbert Alföldi, director of the National, held a conversation with the dramaturg Zsuzsa Radnóti, a member of the jury. The internet literary periodical *www.litera.hu* initiated a play titled *Magyar Staféta* (Hungarian Relay), in which five Hungarian writers took turns in writing a play. This too was read. In three foreign contemporary works of the reading-theatre, once again the Swiss Lukas Bärfuss was represented, this time with *A próba* (The Rehearsal), translated by Attila Lőrinczy, together with Vasil Sigarev's *Guppi*, translated by Annamária Radnai. The third was the German writer Alice Müller's *Elvira és Petúnia*, which she wrote in Hungarian.

#### To be continued – 2012

An interesting tendency is appearing: there is more and more verse drama. A few years ago János Térey was regarded as an oddity in this respect, but now it is as if a dead form has been resurrected. Among others János Lackfi's *A hinták* (The Swings), Gábor Lanczok's *A malária* (Malaria), Máttyás Szöllősi's *Kanikula* (Dog-days) and Szilárd Borbély's *Az olaszliszka* (The Man from Olaszliszka) should be mentioned.

And a great discovery: Csaba Székely from Marosvásárhely, who has moved into a much-neglected area, speaking out with the bitterness and humour of an Örkény about the parts of Hungary lost after the First World War, impoverishment, alcoholism, unemployment, Hungarian-Romanian, indeed, Hungarian-Hungarian conflict. Since his first appearance at Open Forum, Székely has been winning prize after prize and assiduously turning out new plays.

And more authors are emerging, the latest, for example, in the Örkény Theatre drama competition, of whom two, Annabella Szép and József Keresztesi, have been included in the book, both with their first plays, and both dealing with the problems of everyday life in the Hungary of today. Szép places her heroes in the world of the political élite, Keresztesi embeds them in a characteristically present-day Mihály Kohlhaas story. And in addition to Csaba Székely other Hungarian authors are coming forward in neighbouring countries. The latest is, for example, Róbert Lénárd from the Vajdaság in northern Serbia, who creates a surreal world on the site of the deserted railway station in a small town.

The discussions, however, have become so much more lively that each new drama is given its place in some tendency or theme, in among similar but well known plays. By this means much more stimulating discussions can be generated, and by now more and more people are eager for the morning conversations.

I might write that Open Forum in Hungary has been a success story, that many essential Hungarian playwrights have begun their careers here – and that one may hope that it will always be rejuvenated again and again in the search for the format within which it will be able to assist contemporary Hungarian drama in the most innovative fashion.

<sup>16</sup> Among the entries were, for example, Péter Esterházy's *Én vagyok te* (I am thou), which in 2011 won the dramaturgs' prize, the title of the best Hungarian drama of the season, and Pál Závada's *Magyar ünnepe-e?* (A Hungarian festival?), which confronts us with weighty questions in Hungarian history at the time of the Second World War.

<sup>17</sup> All five – Virág Erdős, András Forgách, László Garacsi, János Háy and István Tasnádi – started out from Open Forum.

## Contemporary Drama on the Radio

### Tibor Soltészky

Radio Theatre – i. e. the Drama Department of the Hungarian public radio – was established as an independent editorial and production unit in 1951 and ceased to exist as of 30th June 2011. Radio drama (radio plays) had been produced before, and are being produced nowadays, of course, and the public radio is still broadcasting programmes under this name.

I am not going to give a full account of the activities of those six decades... Of course, where contextual need emerges, I shall say something about history...

I shall try to keep my mind focused on the last eight to ten years, when the ever-shrinking drama department tripled its audience – owing to the significant change in programming policy: with a focus on contemporary writing. In 2004 the daily average number of listeners to Radio Theatre on Channel 1 (Kossuth Radio) hardly reached 100,000. In June 2011 it was over 330,000.

From the early 90s the organisational structure of the Hungarian Radio was changed ("reformed") several times – and the constant loser of these reforms were drama productions. They lost space (broadcast time) and resources (budget and personnel). The former "Entertainment Department" and "Youth Programming" – both producing drama – were disbanded, and some of the personnel joined either Radio Theatre or the Department of Literature, bringing their priorities and authors with them. The two remaining departments were combined in one Arts and Culture Unit in 2002, retaining some independence in programming, but with a common budget. These were the worst years for Radio Theatre, because in practice the financial resources of Radio Theatre were swallowed by the massive development of the Cultural Department (the Dept. of Literature was transformed into this, which covered all fields of arts and culture), while a number of drama broadcast slots were redistributed to these cultural talk programmes. The yearly production of new drama dropped to 25-50 – though new, external resources appeared through the tenders of the National Radio and Television Authority (ORTT) in this period.

Let me quote some passages from a lecture I gave at an international gathering of radio professionals in Valencia, Spain (Rencontre 2003). The group I addressed dealt with so-called "talk radio". You probably know that Hungarian culture is a mélange of European – mainly Roman Catholic – culture mixed up with Central European Jewish traditions and memories of our Asian roots. And it is communicated in a language understood only by Hungarians. It has no relationship to any other European language, though like the people, Hungarian is a linguistic mixture, full of external influences. Nevertheless, this mixture has helped us to survive for twelve hundred years in Europe. Coming closer to the subject, some media history. Hungarian Radio is one of the oldest public broadcasting companies on the continent (regular broadcasts from 1 December 1925). But the company's predecessor was Phone News Service PLC, based on a Hungarian industrial patent of the phone switchboard of the late nineteenth century (1893)!

At the moment there are two major national commercial radio networks and dozens of local and regional ones. There is even a pure news channel, a local radio for Budapest, called Info Rádió. And, of course, there are a handful of non-profit-making local radio stations, among them one which will be mentioned later as maybe the only "pure" talk radio in Hungary, one – for example – which broadcasts in their languages for the large Roma population of the country (9%), and another called Civil Radio, which gives a voice to small and large NGOs. So we are not the only public service provider... Still...

After this long introduction something about talk radio, and the Hungarian Experience with it. Heads and managers of the two major channels (Kossuth and Petőfi) have always toyed with the idea of converging to form a talk radio. Not because they had a vision of the contemporary listener longing for endless talk, but because it is cheaper. Channel One has succeeded to some extent: weekday mornings, afternoons and early evenings are talk-streams. Channel Two has been almost totally transformed into a 24-hour talk channel, incorporating some traditional entertainment blocks, such as our 36-year-old soap *Szabó család* (The Tailor Family), the Cabaret Theatre, and a lot of sport. And the results? On Kossuth, when the news blocks are over and it is the turn of talk – as we sometimes joke about it, 'the country echoes to the sound of the click as listeners escape and switch off' whether it is about growing cucumbers, new grants for students, beauty contests, the construction industry, cooking recipes, entrepreneurial skills or whatever. But a surprising datum: the listeners come back before noon, when there is a half-hour literature/drama serial slot. After the 12 o'clock news the click resounds again. The figure rises during the afternoon talk stream, three times a week, when our department (Arts & Culture) has a slot for a mixed cultural magazine, titled "Thinking aloud" (in Hungarian *Társalgó*). And in the evening, there is also the daily Bedtime Story (Good Night, Kids!), followed by literature/drama serials that bring in a number of listeners.

And what has happened to Channel Two, Petőfi Rádió? They are constantly losing audiences. Even sports programmes are doing so – probably because of the decreasing respect for the channel. The peaks of the curve are located at the soap and the cabaret.

Why and how does it happen? Why does radio journalism and pure talk not attract the Hungarians? The overall time spent listening to radio has increased slightly in the last six years. This is because of the rise of commercial radio stations: there is a much wider and more colourful radio menu at hand. Of course, public radio is the great loser: over half of our former listeners are now adherents of other broadcasters. But the last one and a half years have witnessed a reversal. There are certain groups of listeners who have returned to us. Not a high figure, but a slightly increasing number of people, who do not like the tone of commercial presentation, who are fed up with being regarded only as consumers, their wallets or purses being the target all the time. And, of course, the Iraqi War has brought back many of them who wanted more information, and looked for reliable sources. The news service of Hungarian Radio is still seen by an overwhelming majority of listeners as the reliable one.

So at what point did the credit of commentaries and radio talk disappear?

Talk became contaminated in a politically contaminated and polluted environment.

We work in a moral crisis. And the listeners hear it. And they want none of it. So they switch off when it is the turn of talk radio. Or they stop tuning in if they get the political propaganda of the extreme right disguised as a cultural talk magazine every Sunday morning.

I mentioned earlier one non-profit-making radio station, which is probably the only pure talk radio. It was – and still is – a pirate radio. Its name is Tilos Rádió, which means Forbidden, Outlawed, Unlicensed Radio. A group of young radicals, backed by quite a large group of intellectuals and artists, were simply fed up with the political games of the parties who were fiddling around with the Media Act in the first half of the 90s, and they began to broadcast illegally. It was a huge success in audience terms. It was sexy, it was trendy, it was refreshing. During the first euphoric weeks in the metropolis called Budapest everybody discussed what they heard on Tilos Rádió. Even we media professionals, who hoped to get a creative impetus from the young ones. A fresh tone, a new approach, a real dialogue. But soon the fresh tone became irritating, it sounded impertinent, their new approach turned out to be old fashioned, *épatiste*, *scandaliste* – like some of the commercial media, the dialogue they initiated became a monotonous monologue. They lost their listeners. Although the talk is still going on

– after three years of being licensed on the air – now they broadcast on the web. For their club members. They shrank, because they insisted on the political gesture that brought them into existence – which the audience does not see as a valid attitude any more.

I cannot miss the opportunity to mention again the rising and comparatively high audience figures of literature and art programmes. It is my conviction that there are times – and our days in Hungary are of such a nature – when artistic communication (elaborated pieces of craftsmanship or Virtual Reality) looks or sounds more real than everyday modes of communication. Such as ordinary talk radio. With my theatre background I am more than happy to serve these needs.<sup>1</sup>

These were the socio-political-cultural trends behind the unexpected rise in audience figures. But we cannot forget what was mentioned in the introductory paragraphs: the significant change in programming policy of Radio Theatre with a focus on contemporary writing.

In earlier decades (70s and 80s), when drama production was at its height (more than 300 new productions a year, produced by four editorial units), there was a ratio for producing scripts from domestic writers and foreign authors, and it was about 60%-40%. So Radio Theatre from the late 60s spent a lot of money on buying scripts by foreign authors – of course, the majority were imported from the "friendly countries" of the communist bloc through the exchange programmes of OIRT. (For younger readers: from Russia [Soviet Union], Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, GDR, sometimes from Yugoslavia, etc.). But we produced quite a large number of British, French and (West) German contemporary drama and original radio plays too.

At first, when the position of drama production began to worsen at the end of the '90s, Radio Theatre gave up its openness towards the World At Large and neglected the former ratio of foreign productions for budgetary reasons... They were too expensive... For the price of a British or German script we could buy three Hungarians... (And there were no such expectations from the High Management any more.)

It sounds a bit cynical, but it is true – this was the pressure that turned our attention towards contemporary writing... There were a great number of domestic writers who had written for radio before. Some names, for example... Iván Mándy, the great novelist who found the radio play his most convenient genre, has left behind a massive oeuvre – very popular on German radio stations, too. Károly Szakonyi, a very popular dramatist in the theatre, also wrote more than thirty radio plays. István Csurka – who later became leader and idol of ultra right political forces – in his early career wrote a radio play yearly, besides writing for the stage and being a star out there... Together with Miklós Gyárfás, Endre Vészi, Magda Szabó, Miklós Hubay and many others...

Yes, contemporary playwrights and novelists were always attracted to radio drama, but in the seventies and eighties they were not at The Focus. In those years a new production of, say, Dürrenmatt or Stoppard was higher in the scale of values – because they opened windows on the Western World... (To be frank, there was a period, right after World War II until 1948, when contemporary writing, including drama, did have priority in an unexpectedly high proportion of programmes: 12.6% of all programme time was devoted to literature, 87% of it involving domestic writers...)

Coming back to the last decade... As mentioned before, contemporary writing and drama have come back into focus. At the turn of the millennium public radio held a drama contest (anonymous, entries by code name) that attracted 112 applicants. The winner of the contest was András Vinnai, a young actor unknown in the circles of dramatists of the time, with the play *I've got a very bad memory*; since then he has become one of the most popular contemporary stage writers. Dozens of the scripts entered for the competition were produced in the following two or three years...

1. This was the time when Radio Theatre had approximately 100,000 listeners a day... It is a nice addition to the story, that during the following years Tilos Radio, seeking to establish their new identity, broadcast radio plays of ours several times plus open talks on them – with the permission of the copyright owners, of course.

But more important was the constant "workshopping" with writers, commissions given to write radio plays on themes they were interested in or which emerged in the course of everyday dialogue. The most powerful connection with contemporary playwrights, though, worked through the channels of Open Forum, the yearly gathering of playwrights and theatre experts, organised and managed by the Guild of Theatre Dramaturgs. From the mid-eighties, from the very start of the Forum, scripts that appeared in the discussions or workshops found their way to a radio studio... Two or more Radio Theatre dramaturgs regularly took part in the event, bringing home the publication *Open Forum Notebook*, which carried new texts. They or I, the author of this article, as one deeply involved with the organisation of the Forum, passed the booklet to all interested colleagues (editors and directors). In the early years, in the first fifteen years of the Forum, plays by László Márton, Pál Békés, László Baranyai, Ferenc Kulin, Péter Esterházy, Ákos Németh, Géza Szőcs, Andor Szilágyi, Lajos Parti Nagy, István Turczy, Zoltán Egressy, András Visky, László Garaczi were adapted and broadcast by Radio Theatre. The majority of them then became addicted to writing for radio.

Of course, besides the newcomers, our 'core crew of writers' – György Spiró, Péter Nádas, László Krasznahorkai, Károly Szakonyi, István Eörsi, Dezső Tandori and others – regularly appeared with their new radio plays or adaptations.

From the year 2001 the list contained new names, such as Gergely Péterfy, János Háty, Zoltán Toepler, Csaba Mikó, István Vörös, Virág Erdős and Balázs Maruszki.

It has already been mentioned, that the National Media Authority (ORTT) acted as a co-funding partner of radio literary and/or drama programmes from around 2004. Since their priorities changed year by year, and drama was not always among them, this resulted mainly in the rise of adaptations of novels and longish series of short radio programmes, rather than in single dramas. (Ádám Bodor, János Lackfi, Alaine Polcz, Géza Páskándi, Peter Hunčík, Julia Láng, Ágnes Gergely, Zsuzsa Vathy, Ervin Lázár, Mihály Kornis, Béla Fehér and many others.) But some wonderful dramatic works were also born within this scheme, like *The Day of Our Birth* by Zsófia Balla.

From 2006 on we had a project of producing mini radio plays (from sixty seconds to three or four minutes in length) to attract young listeners on several platforms. The idea came from a German radio station, and the first round of productions took place in an international co-production led by EBU (European Broadcasting Union). Playwrights taking part in the project were Lajos Parti Nagy, Szilárd Podmaniczky, András Vinnai, György József and Gábor Zoltán...

The final years are marked again with an open playwrights' competition announced by the Radio on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2009... The evaluation period, planned for two months, had to be extended to five, to the end of May 2010, because a huge number of scripts were entered – 413 (!). The real factors behind the unexpectedly high level of participation can only be guessed, but it shows parallelism to the strongly rising figures of radio drama audiences of recent times... The winner of the contest (again held anonymously, with code names) was Katalin Gabnai, an experienced drama teacher and a popular playwright for children, with a play that adapted Roma stories, legends and poetry for the stage in a unique way... The radio adaptation was ready by the autumn of 2011.

Other names, writers/playwrights among the contestants were Szabolcs Benedek, András Hatházi, Szilárd Podmaniczky, Bettina Almássi, Károly Szakonyi, Judit Ágnes Kiss, Szilárd Borbély, Mátyás Szöllősi, Csaba Mikó, Dénes Krusowszky, Zoltán Toepler-Péter Janicsek, Gábor Lanczkor, Noémi Kiss. Only a handful of the vast number of good scripts have been produced since then. There is no autonomous editorial unit any more, the remaining dramaturgs (3 of them) have practically no right to come forward with programme ideas, and the responsibility level and decision making have been passed up to

the Cultural Editor in Chief of MTVA (the new production company incorporating both former public radio and public television programme makers).

Shortly before it was disbanded the editorial unit called Radio Theatre started thematic programme planning. (Just a short explanation: because during three or four decades of communist rule all kinds of topics and themes had had to be dealt with (compulsorily) in literature and drama, editors and dramaturgs fought for the "quality principle", i.e. it was only quality of writing that mattered. We were more than happy slowly to be rid of the prescriptions of Party bodies...)

Without giving up the "quality principle" we tried to respond to certain new sensitivities in society. That was how a series of women writers or plays dealing with the Roma population appeared in our programmes. An example of the former programme is a series of thirty short stories adapted from two "scandalous" anthologies: *Night Zoo* and *Thirsty Oasis* (which deal with female sexuality), and from *Jungle in The Heart* and *Dog of The Heart* (women and their mothers/fathers).

To contribute to the rising respect for the Roma population – to act against the racist tendencies in our recent history – we produced a handful of programmes on different aspects of the issue. These included Katalin Gabnai's play *The Good Life*, winner of the 2010/2011 drama contest, which has already been mentioned; a selection of adapted short stories by the Roma poet/writer Attila Balogh, titled *HumoRom* (which can be taken two ways in Hungarian: 1. My Humour 2. Funny Roma Stories); *I'm a Gypsy – monologues of a Romany woman*, by Anna Nádudvari; Szilárd Borbély's *The Man from Olaszliszka* – a poetic recollection of dramatic events in a small village where ethnic conflict ended in the death of a teacher; *Pimpare and Blind Crow* – a fable for children (and their parents) by the poet Virág Erdős, about how love replaces hatred between the young princess and the Roma prince. And last but not least, the radio adaptation of *Handwork* by the Austrian Elfriede Jelinek, about still existing racism against Gypsies – which was the important opening piece of a series in documentary theatre by PanoDrama.

Radio Theatre had always had strong contacts with new generations of actors and directors, since up to the year 2000 the company (our directors and dramaturgs) took part in their training at the Academy of Theatre and Film. The institutional relationship could not be restored, but Radio Theatre tried to follow the tradition and had recently invited new directors and artists from emerging independent companies (Krétakör, HoppArt, KoMa, etc.).

In 2009-2010 our biggest project from the financial point of view was to take the first steps towards finding new platforms for radio plays and literature in radio. With respect to the coming era of digital radio and audiences addicted to the internet, we thought we had to go where the audiences were... With a fairly high budget we began to buy the rights from our authors to appear in a digital channel and/or on the internet (copyrights of both archive productions and new ones). Over 600 titles were bought this way. At the moment, though, nobody knows if the company called MTVA, the successor of Hungarian Radio plc, has plans for launching either a web shop of radio plays or a digital cultural channel...

To sum up these facts and names (and historical references), I venture to say that it was contemporary writing, including drama, that attracted those masses of audiences to listen to Radio Theatre in recent years. It was fresh, it was topical, and it had the voice required for contemporary cultural dialogue.

## Portraits and Plays

### Word for Word, Verbatim and the Gypsy Superman

Anita Rákóczy

9 scenes

78 shots

11 Molotov-cocktails

reckless endangerment of 55 lives

6 dead including a 5-year-old

1916 items of evidence including 2 pellet-guns and a shotgun

2000 people interrogated

4.5 million calls and 800 hours of CCT-camera records checked

170 experts, 85 special force policemen and 100 detectives involved

100 million forints offered for leads<sup>1</sup>

On August 8 2008, Molotov-cocktails were thrown at two houses in the Hungarian village of Piricse, when the attackers started shooting at the people inside. Five children, father, mother, and in the next house, the grandmother. Luckily, they all survived the murderous attempt on their lives. This is how, four years ago, a series of attacks on the Roma population in Hungary began. These few lines also serve as the exposition of *Verbatim, Word for Word*, a highly confrontational piece of Hungarian contemporary theatre, created by PanoDrama, through the joint work of an international team of writers, actors and dramaturgs. The production is pioneering in two senses: it is the first attempt at deep penetration into the taboo territory of hatred of the Roma population in Hungary. Secondly, as the evocative title suggests, *Verbatim, Word for Word* is a professionally staged and shocking documentary drama, a genre that has little tradition in Hungary. Strictly following the requirements of the artistic form, the production contains solely unaltered original materials: oral history, in-depth interviews with survivors, family members, attorneys, police officers, and also statements by public figures and media response. The world premiere of PanoDrama's *Verbatim, Word for Word* took place at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts on March 10, 2011, and was transferred to the National Theatre on December 2, 2011, as part of the program of Contemporary Drama Festival, Budapest.

Documentary drama is one of the most exciting and influential tones in the field of contemporary theatre; by using the devices of film, dance, fine arts, music and related disciplines, it provides a whole range of potential means of reflecting directly to the unresolved social, political and societal problems of the present, the here and now. The genre has a long-standing history and practice in several countries throughout the world including the U.S.A., Germany and Russia. However, for various reasons, it has failed to strike root in Hungary.

In describing the characteristics of docu-drama and documentary theatre, this paper will rely on Peter Weiss's definition: "Documentary Theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary

films and other contemporary documents are the basis of the performance. Documentary Theatre refrains from all invention; it takes authentic material and puts it on the stage, unaltered in content, edited in form."<sup>2</sup>

As Thomas Irmer argues, by introducing a new dramaturgical model, Erwin Piscator, emerging in the 1920s, had a crucial impact on the history of German documentary theatre. In his early agitprop pieces, he used authentic documents and film in order to create a theatrical language for addressing the historical and political events of the time. The expression "documentary theatre" originates from 1925 and the monumental Piscator-production, *Trotz alledem!*. After a long interval, the first examples of German contemporary literary documentary drama began to appear in the mid-1960s. In their plays, which are based on original historical documents, Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth and Heinar Kipphardt reinterpret and adapt for the stage a number of scandals and historical cataclysms of the twentieth century, thus making them unforgettable and imperishable for their own and future generations.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s, the genre of documentary theatre has been flourishing in Germany – both artists (Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop) and audiences are attracted to the genre by the unique form of expression and the chance to actively reflect on and interact with their present social, political or personal context.

Although documentary theatre is highly relevant in Russia, artists had had a hard time struggling through the crisis of the 1990s until they finally found freedom of expression and explored the wide range of options this artistic form can provide. After the change of regime, Russian society too was forced to face such problems as drugs, homelessness, economic crisis and prostitution, issues that had previously been unknown, undiscussed or hidden. The world of theatre, however, failed to acknowledge this fact for a while. It gradually lost its function of social and political catalyst, and became lacking in direction and purpose in the *new world*, where it was suddenly possible to talk about almost everything without any restriction regarding form or content – the theatre "froze into the figurative/metaphorical language that it had become used to over the past decades."<sup>4</sup> Then, in 1999, a group of artists from the Royal Court Theatre, London held a workshop in Moscow so that the Russian theatre professionals could acquire the genre of documentary drama and 'verbatim', a technique that has been applied in the UK only since the end of the 1980s. The fundamental rule of verbatim is that texts of documents and interviews used in docu-drama have to be kept in their unchanged original form. Theatr.doc, the first independent Russian documentary theatre has "imported" this creative process, without fully observing its main principle – they deal with their materials with greater liberty. Since 2002, Theatr.doc has become a distinguished venue, providing theatre space for various different creative artists and verbatim projects.

At this point, one might wonder why the genre of documentary theatre has never prospered in Hungary. Starting from the propaganda-plays of the 1960s, there have been various endeavours to introduce docu-drama as a means of artistic self-expression. These have met with mixed success, however, and the intensity with which the German, Russian, British and American representatives of the genre have burst into common knowledge with their widely influential, internationally acclaimed documentary productions, has been absent from the Hungarian theatre scene.

We Hungarians have never been particularly good at facing our past. It might be worth noticing that documentary drama has succeeded in becoming an integral part of theatre culture and social awareness only in those countries where people have been forced to come to terms with their past

1. Anna Lengyel and PanoDrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, unpublished playscript, trans. Lengyel Anna, [Budapest: 2011], 4.

2. Peter Weiss, "The Material and the Models. Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre," trans. Heinz Bernard, *Theatre Quarterly* 1 (1971): 41.

3. Thomas Irmer, "A Search for New Realities: Documentary Theatre in Germany," *The Drama Review* 50 No. 3 (2006): 16–28.

4. Olga Perevezenceva, "Az orosz dokumentarista színház," *Színház* 8 (2007): 60.

collectively and in due time. For example, on October 19, 1965, the world premiere of *The Investigation*, Peter Weiss's Auschwitz-play took place at more than ten different theatre venues in East and West Germany, on the same day. One of the most authentic productions was that directed in Volksbühne, Berlin, by Piscator himself, and several radio stations broadcast the piece in the following weeks throughout West Germany.

Although such an event would be inconceivable in Hungary, there have been a number of attempts at, and antecedents for, Hungarian documentary drama over the past decades. However, these were memorable but one-off, isolated artistic creations scattered over time, and failed to give rise to the flourishing or continuity of the genre. In 1973, István Paál's *Petőfi-rock* caused a great stir throughout the theatre world, the legendary production of Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad (University Theatre of Szeged). The performance included original texts from the diary and revolutionary poems of Sándor Petőfi, the emblematic poet of the 1848 Revolution, as well as informers' materials and police reports of the period. In the same year, the documentary drama *A holtak hallgatása (Silence of the Dead)* by István Örkény and István Nemeskürty was premiered in Pesti Színház, thus raising a monument to the memory of the the Hungarian Second Army, the men of which were massacred in World War II. Although the play is not based exclusively on original materials, it represents the highest literary standard among properly written dramatic pieces of documentary theatre.

After Péter Halász, founder of Squat and Love Theater, had returned from New York to Budapest, in 1994 he directed a stunning series of documentary productions, *Hatalom, Pénz, Hírnév, Szépség, Szeretet (Power, Money, Fame, Beauty, Love)*, the 'disposable theatre': he presented the audience with a different performance every evening. The scripts were usually written overnight, based on the articles of Népszabadság, a daily newspaper that provided the artists with a copy every night before publication. In connection with the genre of documentary theatre, Árpád Schilling's ground-breaking productions, *Blackland* and *Fatherland, my all (Hazámhazám)* should be mentioned, as should the name of Gábor Máté, the present General Director of Katona József Theatre: greatly influenced by Péter Halász, he founded Hírlap Színház (Journal Theatre) in 2008, the idea behind which is to stage performances based on current newspaper articles.

However, for the first time in Hungary, it is PanoDrama's *Word for Word, Verbatim*, based exclusively on original and unchanged materials, that has shown the courage to stand up for something important that has never before been the subject of a Hungarian documentary theatre production: by using the facts of the series of attacks on the Roma in 2008 and 2009 – along the pioneering lines of verbatim technique – and investigating the responsibility of the community in the murders, they openly fight against the racism that is strongly present in Hungarian society.

Anna Lengyel, founder of PanoDrama, Elfriede Jelinek's co-artist and fellow-fighter against racism, argues: "I've never liked political theatre. But what I would like even less is not talking about what's going on in Hungary today. That we perform Chekhov and Feydeau as if murderous racism weren't back on the streets and as if we weren't forced to read slogans from the thirties on the walls and in certain papers".<sup>5</sup> She travelled to various Hungarian villages where these crimes had occurred – Tatárszentgyörgy, Nyíradony-Tamáspuszta, Galgagyörk – with a group of actors and dramaturgs, talked to victims, witnesses, neighbours, relatives or friends of perpetrators, mayors, attorneys, so as to be able to present the audience with a complex set of disturbing and appalling fragments of reality. Normally, we would not make the effort to venture into the elusive territory of gaining firsthand information somewhere deep in the countryside, so PanoDrama has done this job for us. However, the artists do not teach us a lesson, do

not force anything down our throats – they gently let the facts presented on stage speak for themselves. All PanoDrama has added to the authentic materials is selection, organization and magnificent dramaturgy.

The stage is almost empty – a simple black box with some chairs, sets of small televisions irregularly arranged on the floor, and a screen projecting images of the crime scenes, close-ups of faces, and highly relevant textual information, crucial data that is not enough to be heard only – it is presented in writing too so that it can make a greater impact on our consciousness. A group of eight actors, Gergely Bánki, Yvette Feuer, Anna Hárs, Róbert Orsós, Tamás Ördög, Márta Schermann, Zsófia Szamosi and Krisztina Urbanovits deliver their alternating parts with precision, sitting or standing, mediating the exact words of interviewees to the audience. At times, the loudspeaker joins in and becomes the invisible ninth actor.

As L. Korinek, criminal expert, puts it after the ninth murderous attack on Roma, "the Hungarian police does have its deficits. János Kádár's skull was never found. We don't know who shot at police HQ in Teve Street. After forty years, the infamous downtown double murder remains unsolved, and we still don't know who kidnapped Helga Farkas. We must accept that not all crimes can be solved 100%. Jack the Ripper was never found. But most are, and I think the perpetrators of these murders will stand trial one day."<sup>6</sup> On March 25, 2011 the trial of the four people charged with the Roma murders began.

Like most documentary theatre productions, *Word for Word, Verbatim* lacks "plot" as well as dramatic conflict in the classical sense – instead of contrasting characters and a situation reaching its climax through the development of the play, the conflict here arises from the various shocking, awkward or provocative fractions of reality that the audience is urged to put together. After completion, this puzzle may not be the satisfying toy that one can toss aside with relief – there are disturbing parts that confront our feelings of responsibility and compassion with our declared, hidden or subconscious racist views.

The play operates on several dramaturgical levels that alternate throughout the production: the audience can find out about the views of politicians, leaders of the local minority governments, mayors, attorneys, police officers and the Hungarian media, which provide the context around the massacres. However, the actual interviews conducted with the survivors and their families draw us much closer to the people who have gone through these terrible ordeals – PanoDrama helps us witness the fear they have gone through and are experiencing to this very day. "Our little girl is home. I look at the window, she is asleep. She says the gunmen are coming. I say, don't be scared, they won't come back. I had to quit my job, I used to work at the chicken factory. [...] I didn't dare leave them. You see no police around at night. No guards. [...] They come once, while there's light, but in the dark they won't come near. [...] I still can't sleep. Sometimes till 3.30. My wife can tell you. I tell you honestly, I don't wish this fear on anyone, what I lived through with the kid. [...] The incredible luck was that I came home that day, I sat down in the kitchen to eat. Threw it in the micro. The double bed was here, two boys sleeping with me like this, their heads like that. I slept on the edge, so they don't fall off. I had no idea. I just noticed that the house was in flames. The last shot was loud, I jumped up ... but so that I hit my knee in the corner there. I didn't dare to get up, just pulled the kid back into bed with my knee. My wife pulled them down, put them in the corner. But I wanted to go out. And the boys followed me. But the key... the key... it broke in the lock. That was my great luck, 'cause if I'd gone out... they were shooting in the doorway... like that... one, two, three of them. Right there, in a row."<sup>7</sup>

PanoDrama increases dramatic tension by demonstrating the destructive force of racism on the most intimate personal level: we are gradually introduced to the story of a young Roma woman and her Hungarian boyfriend. The girl, living with her adoptive parents, chooses to conceal her Roma origin,

5. "PanoDrama Plays", accessed January 12, 2012. <http://panodramaplays.blogspot.com/2011/01/hunting-feast-and-b-sector-with-jelinek.html>

6. Lengyel and Panodrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, 6.  
7. Lengyel and Panodrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, 1-2.

therefore she has dyed blond hair, blue contact lenses and an exotic, but unsuspecting brown complexion. The love of her life, who happens to be a racist Roma-hater, finds her very attractive with these attributes. However, because of some rumours spreading in town, the girl feels the need to confess her true identity to her boyfriend, as the relationship is important to her, and she cannot believe that such great love could vanish just because she is Roma. From time to time, her monologue is broken up by the racist remarks and comments collected from of the 'Man of the Street', the Hungarian 'Everyman': "The Gypsies are no nation, they have no homeland and no religion!"; "It's not social housing they need, but strict laws and the death penalty like in the good old days."; Is there "a single country which managed to integrate this filth?"; "If only those celebrity Gypsies paid their taxes, they could build enough houses with it".<sup>8</sup> Although we kind of hope that, in the meantime, the young Roma woman's boyfriend receives the news well, PanoDrama makes sure that the evening is not about happy endings. Of course, he dumps the devastated girl: he cannot imagine having half-Gypsy children, as all Gypsies are dirty and should be exterminated. The actors then create a blog-choir out of common Hungarian racist slogans, and chant them with rising rhythm and volume: "Parasite pricks // Fuck yourselves to death // White Christmas // Jewish slave, Gypsy mare // Hit the Gypsy where you can, you'll defend the motherland".<sup>9</sup>

There are two outstanding theatrical devices by which *Word for Word, Verbatim* manages to elevate its chosen topic to the height of archetypes. At one point, a woman is standing center stage in a jacket with the road map of Hungary printed on it. Then, a black toy car appears in her hand that she slowly starts pushing along the map on her jacket. While its close-up image is projected onto the screen, we can hear recorded associations concerning the black car, coming from Roma children perhaps, who live in isolated country villages, defenceless, unprotected by the police, in constant fear. Another cathartic element of the production is the introduction of the Gypsy Superman to the audience – a mythical hero born out of the in-depth interviews that is always there to protect and fight for the undefended. Leaving no room for anxiety, his appearance and armament are carefully planned, so that they assure victory over his Nazi enemies: "It's time I described the Gypsy Superman's attire. The point is mixing clear visibility and a disguise. You will recognize the Gypsy Superman from afar, exuding safety. His shield will be yellow, but underneath he can wear other colours. Green or purple, but only one colour. His feet will be covered by steel boots. He'll have shields on his shoulders and a harder leather shield on his arms. Leather gloves and a helmet, so they can't bump him on the head. The Gypsy Superman has to have a moustache for authority, but no beard. He should have a leather neck shield and a green coat to hide when following someone."<sup>10</sup>

Letting the world know that there is a Gypsy Superman out somewhere who will come to defend his people any time they are subjected to verbal or physical violence is one of the production's greatest merits. Until the hero arrives, PanoDrama takes on his role and fights against racism by all possible means of verbatim documentary drama. No matter how discouraging darkening political and economic times may seem for theatre art, it might as well serve as a catalyst for professionals to take sides, stand up for their artistic and human views and rights, and bring forth a new generation of contemporary Hungarian documentary theatre.

8. Lengyel and PanoDrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, 9-10.

9. Lengyel and PanoDrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, 31-32.

10. Lengyel and PanoDrama, *Word for Word, Verbatim*, 20.

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## Just Drinking and Talking – Csaba Székely, a Fresh Dramatic Voice from Transylvania Attila Szabó

Csaba Székely's eruptive debut as a playwright was an unusual surprise for Hungarian theatre life. Nowadays young artists rarely emerge only as playwrights, since we have slowly adopted the post-dramatic model: even well-known playwrights tend to found their own companies and work both as authors of the texts and directors of theatre projects (like Péter Kárpáti), or appear as director-playwrights in the first place, like Márton Kiss for instance. This coupling of these two functions makes it really rare for a new Hungarian play to gain public attention as a literary text, and it is even more unlikely for a new play to live up to several different stage versions. In both ways, *Bányavirág* (Mine Flowers) by Csaba Székely is a most interesting exception. The play, published in 2011, has already been staged in two versions in Târgu Mureş, the author's Romanian home town, and in Budapest at the small Pinceszínház (Cellar Theatre)<sup>1</sup>, and a third version is coming this season at the National Theatre in Budapest. Last season, the text and its stage versions won all the most prominent Hungarian theatre prizes. In 2011 the play won the William prize of the Open Forum of Hungarian Drama at Pécs and the Szép Ernő Prize for the most promising newcomer. This summer the Transylvanian production of *Mine Flowers*, having won the main prize of the theatre meeting in Ghergheni/Gyergyószentmiklós (Transylvania/Romania), was also awarded two of the most important prizes at the National Festival of Hungarian Theatres at Pécs (POSZT): the prize for Best Actor was divided between the two protagonists, Viola Gábor and Kelemen Barna Bányai, while the performance, directed by Ába Sebestyén, won the highly prestigious Best Performance award.

The young Hungarian writer from Transylvania, born in 1981 in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely), had an unusual debut as a dramatist. In 2009 he won the BBC's World Drama competition for the Best European Afternoon Drama, with a sharp satire on the time of the communist dictatorship in Romania, titled *Do You Like Bananas, Comrades?* In his short biographic statement given to the BBC he claims: "I'm 28 years old. I used to be the cultural editor of a weekly magazine, then cultural editor at the local radio station. Now I'm just a writer. I'm also a translator (from Romanian and English to Hungarian) always looking for a job. I write film reviews and book reviews too. I'm not famous."<sup>2</sup> He admits that the kick-start for him as a dramatist was given by the success at the BBC competition. Consequently, he enrolled on an MA course in playwriting at the University of Arts in Târgu Mureş.

The fact that Székely was born, studied and lives in Târgu Mureş has a great influence on his writing. The town, situated in central Transylvania, represents a unique multicultural and multilingual environment. A famous historical market town on the river Maros, it has names in three languages: Târgu Mureş (Romanian), Marosvásárhely (Hungarian) and Neumarkt (German), because the three cultures have lived side by side for many centuries. Historically, the town has been in several states, and today the population is half Hungarian, half Romanian. With the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, together with the rest of Transylvania, Marosvásárhely became part of Romania, following the 1920 peace treaty after WWI. The University of Arts operating in the town, with tuition in both Hungarian and Romanian, offers theatre and drama courses with a unique mixture of both practical and theoretical training, attracting many students from Hungary. Csaba Székely's swift success as a playwright testifies that there are some very effective new channels working between East and West in the Hungarian theatre world.

1. The first production of *Bányavirág* in Hungary was directed by Tibor Csizmadia at Pinceszínház, Budapest, Premiere: 2 March 2012, Cast: Gergő Kaszás, László Széles, Andea Bozó, József Tóth, Éva Vándor.

2. Quoted from the cover of *Do You Like Bananas, Comrades?* A BBC Radio Afternoon Drama, available at Amazon's [www.audible.com](http://www.audible.com), Audio Go Ltd, Freddy White (narrator) Michael Bagley (Tibor), released: March 1, 2012.

In the distribution of the 1.5 million Hungarians living today in Romania, Târgu Mureş represents a borderline between Western Transylvania and the Székely Land to the east. In the Middle Ages the Székely 'Seats' were not part of the traditional Hungarian county system, and their inhabitants enjoyed a higher level of freedom, largely due to the military service the Székelys provided until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, protecting the one-time boundaries of Hungary under the Carpathians. Even today, they have a distinct identity from the rest of the Transylvanian Hungarians: they speak Hungarian with a strong and specific accent and they are stereotypically known for their pride, sharp humour and quick temper. Since they live in very closed communities, the Székelys managed to resist the settling of other ethnic groups, so that even today the three Székely counties represent a fully Hungarian-speaking enclave in Romania.

Usually, innovation in contemporary Hungarian playwriting is achieved through a reinvention of dramatic language. Lajos Parti Nagy and István Tasnádi came to prominence with radical rewritings of classical plays in highly contemporary language, while János Térey is known for unexpectedly bringing back rhymed verse to the Hungarian stage, and for a most contemporary content. János Házy and Csaba Székely have found the language of country people a radically innovative medium for their dramaturgy.<sup>3</sup> At a first sight their approach seems very similar. The two playwrights have created an original dramatic language, very much based on real-life speech, which they have then used in not only one play but a whole drama cycle. The characters of both cycles live in fictive Hungarian villages, small, remote, and seriously affected by unemployment and alcoholism. Both Házy and Székely present the village, so often idealized by classical Hungarian dramaturgy, without any embellishment, as God-forsaken places in a state of total moral and social decay. In the backdrop of both cycles mines (representing the unsustainable remnants of socialist heavy industry) have been closed, and small-scale agriculture is unprofitable, which leaves people in the depths of poverty. Their only escape is through constant drinking and – conversation.

Conversation, as a Chekhovian form of surrogate activity, occupies a central position in both cycles. Though Chekhov's characters also drink constantly, neither the 19<sup>th</sup> century text nor its stage interpretation usually capitalizes on how linguistic forms and thinking are affected by alcohol.<sup>4</sup> Házy and Székely use a language which amplifies the dirtiness, brutality and viscosity of alcoholism on the one hand (with undeniable references to Martin McDonagh and in-her-face theatre<sup>5</sup>), yet on the other hand a certain poetic elevatedness, philosophical inclination and a permanently present brutal, but extremely witty humour. As the characters often discuss theological and philosophical topics or argue about which global processes are destroying their societies, these fictive villages become metaphors for the whole country, and the pitiful characters reflect a certain common Hungarian consciousness.

The main difference between János Házy and Székely, however, is not only that Házy is inspired by a north-western Hungarian setting and way of speech, while Csaba Székely sets his plays in the land of the Székelys in eastern Transylvania. Beyond the obvious differences in accent between the two dialects, the two playwrights use different linguistic patterns. János Házy emphasizes the fragmentary and broken syntax that country people tend to use, abounding in repetitions and rephrasings. This structure gives a certain wavy rhythm to the text. ('MOTHER He loves it, Mary dear, that's what he loves. / GÉZA I'm on my way to the bus station with the bag on my shoulder, to the bus stop. MOTHER There, right, to the bus, the 5.30 bus.'<sup>6</sup>). A proliferation of linguistic forms, with the meaning evolving slowly and hesitatingly, as if the

3. János Házy's trilogy: *Gézagerek* (The Stonewatcher). A Herber Ferike faterja (Frankie Herber's Old Man). A Pityu bácsi fia (Uncle Pityu's Son), is set in a village where people commute to work in a quarry. Csaba Székely's trilogy: *Bányavirág* (Mine Flowers), *Bányavakság* (Mine Blindness) and *Bányavíz* (Mine Flood) present characters living in a small Transylvanian village where the mine has been closed, leaving everyone unemployed.

4. Though a 1998 staging of *Uncle Vanya* in Nyíregyháza, directed by János Szász, was based on a naturalist portrayal of all the characters gradually getting drunk during the performance.

5. 'Chekhov is more sentimental, yet in the good sense, while McDonagh is very physical, and also has a specific language of his own – what I wanted to achieve is a 'mélange of the two.' Gabriella Nagy: A boldogság elutazott erről a vidékről (Happiness Departed From This Land), interview with Csaba Székely, *Litera*, 10.07.2012, online at: [http://www.litera.hu/hirek/szekely\\_csaba\\_a\\_boldogsag\\_elutazott\\_erről\\_a\\_vidékről](http://www.litera.hu/hirek/szekely_csaba_a_boldogsag_elutazott_erről_a_vidékről)

6. János Házy: *A Gézagerek, Drámák és novella* (The Stonewatcher, dramas and short stories), Budapest, Palatinus, 2005 (my translation A.Sz.)

characters were chewing, ruminating on their words. Székely, on the other hand works with a surreal (and very comic) amplification of the extended linguistic code. In his plays the conversational exchanges are eruptive and lasciviously decorated – usually with the most splendid profanities, in a density only present in the Székely dialect. At a most characteristic point it goes:

IVAN: Sell this house, move to the city, look for a job. And just live. Not in three or four months, not in a year, but now. Right now. But we can't because of the old fart. I would have hanged myself a thousand times if I'd been in his place, may his stupid selfish skull split in two!

IRMA: Please don't get mad yet again.

IVAN: May his eyeballs vomit pigswill!

IRMA: It's okay, Ivan.

IVAN: May deathwatch beetles eat his bowels at Christmas!

IRMA: That's enough.

IVAN: May he shit...

IRMA: That's enough, Ivan.

IVAN: I'm gonna say this last one for sure.

IRMA: Okay, but just the one.

IVAN: May he shit solid cabbage heads into his own mouth!

Silence

IRMA: Feeling better now?

IVAN: A bit.<sup>7</sup>

As the fragment shows, the very graphic tirades of bad language obviously work as a release valve for the accumulated emotional tension. But more than that: the characters use this language mostly as a means of distancing. When thinking of elaborate or humorous ways of wording things, one undoubtedly gets into a reflective mood, which helps cope with the most difficult or unbearable things in life.

As noted by many reviewers, *Mine Flowers* abounds in references to *Uncle Vanya*. Take this paraphrase of the conversation between Sonia and Dr. Astrov about his drinking too much. This section also shows how Székely adapted the Chekhovian dramaturgy to a Transylvanian setting: women seem more realistic and harsh, generally more powerful than men, who try to drown their weaknesses, disappointment and despair in alcohol.

MIHÁLY: Maybe I had big dreams when I came to this wretched mining district, well, most certainly I was dreaming. I was a stupid little daydreamer with no idea about anything. And now, I wish I could have slept longer. All I've got left is brandy, which once in a while makes me a dreamer kinda guy.

ILONKA: Till now I had the impression that it makes you the blind drunk kinda guy.

MIHÁLY: Don't you hold that against me as well.

ILONKA: I'm not holding anything doctor, I'm just trying to cheer you up a bit here.

MIHÁLY: Thank you, Ilonka, for trying to cheer me up. It's a lot better than trying to push a chainsaw down my throat.<sup>8</sup>

As in *Uncle Vanya*, the main subject matter of *Mine Flowers* is disappointment with the father-figure. Iván, who used to have a high regard for his father as the leader of the mine, realizes that he has actually been a "stingy arsehole all his life", "making people work like animals down the mine". Together with his sister Ilonka

7. Csaba Székely: *Bányavirág* (Mine Flowers), *Látó Szépirodalmi Folyóirat*, Aug-Sept 2012, <http://www.lato.ro/article.php?Bányavirág/2134/>, all excerpts from the play translated by me (A.Sz.)

8. Csaba Székely: *Bányavirág* (Mine Flowers) idem.

he had sacrificed all his youth to take care of the dying old man, only to find out that their father meant to bequeath his entire estate to the church, leaving him and his sister without a penny. Exploding with anger when he finds this out from the doctor, he still cannot find the strength to kill him, and just stabs the mat on the old man's bed a dozen times, just as Vanya fails to shoot Serebryakov. However, the dying father never appears on the stage, though his name is present on the list of characters. "THE FATHER – sleeps in the next room, he is seriously ill, we never see him". The image of the missing or dying father is a central topos of Hungarian literature.<sup>9</sup> In Péter Nádas's play *Takarítás* (Cleaning) the father-figure is only represented by an old photo hanging on the wall. We find the same in János Házy's *A Gézagyerek* (The Stonewatcher), where the dead father's portrait looks down on the living with a cunning smile. This is Székely's interpretation of the missing father: "For some reason we Hungarians like to write about fathers. In the West they tend to write more about the girls, but we've got stuck with fathers for some reason. I wouldn't call this morbid, since one reason for this could be that we've had a regime change here, and we always identify the father with a certain regime; we want to get rid of him, but give him a monument at the same time. Therefore I believe that as long as we live, our fathers will also be present, even if they are dying in the next room or buried in the cemetery."<sup>10</sup>

In Székely's radio drama, *Do you Like Banana, Comrades?* the character of the father and communism are literally connected. We hear the narrative of a boy struggling to understand how things work in Ceaușescu's Romania, where his father, though a Hungarian, was a very influential man, probably a top agent of the Secret Police, with the power of sealing the fates of other families by sending the men to prison or to forced labour at the canal constructions in the Danube Delta. What the child narrator experiences is that because of his father many people hate him but everyone is afraid of him, his mother cries incessantly, and that they are the only people in those times who can get hold of bananas. However, after the 1989 Revolution, which overthrew the Ceaușescu dictatorship, the father finds no problem in changing sides and becoming an important politician again, a county chairman, "all the old guys are there, we help each other, (...) burning old documents, writing new ones, building a new country." He also swaps national identity and becomes Tibor instead of Tiberiu when the political expediency demands it: "At home we used to speak both Hungarian and Romanian. My mother was Romanian, and we were always taught to be good Romanians. Now, suddenly, my father says in front of that crowd that we have to be good Hungarians. Even his name changed." He becomes Hungarian to fight for the rights of the people living in a minority situation – and use the subvention of the Hungarian state to buy a fancy new BMW: "The Hungarian government is helping our nation to live through these harsh times."<sup>11</sup> We also find out that this fearsome father had also been regularly spied on by Comrade Repairman, who wrote reports about him full of sentences the father had never said, and who under the new regime took to robbing cash dispensers and took our narrator along to London.

In both plays Csaba Székely is also very critical of the idealized image of the Székely Lands nurtured by a significant number of Hungarians in Hungary (as distinct from Transylvania), who believe that those people have preserved a certain purity of language and an unspoiled Hungarianness unseen in the other parts of the country. The image of poor people maintaining traditions of folklore and religion, also enhanced by the official Hungarian media, is both false and an obstacle in the creation of a modern Székely (and Transylvanian) identity. In *Mine Flowers* the television is a regular visitor to the remote village: sometimes to broadcast locals wearing their folk costumes, sometimes to report on the surprisingly high suicide rate.

9. Gábor Kránicz, in an essay titled 'Az apa, mint hiány' (The Father, as a Deficiency), points out that in the work of contemporary Hungarian novelists (Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, Péter Lengyel, Géza Bereményi) the increased preoccupation with the father is a symptom of the decay of the great sagas. Kránicz Gábor in *Új Nautilus*, 13.10.2007, <http://ujnautilus.info/az-apa-mint-hiany-nadas-peter-egy-csaladregeny-vege/>

10. Gabriella Nagy: A boldogság elköltözött... interview with Csaba Székely, idem.

11. Csaba Székely: *Do you like Banana, Comrades?*, idem.

In one scene the main character, Iván, discusses the issue with his neighbour Illés, who always drops by when he is not wanted.

ILLÉS: At least they didn't get you to sing.

IVÁN: True, they didn't, but on the other hand they let me know, for my information, how beautiful it is here in Transylvania, and how beautifully we maintain the traditions.

ILLÉS: Well, we do, don't we?

IVÁN: We do. Every morning when I get up, I maintain the traditions a bit, then I go into the other room, I slap the old man on the face a few times and go on maintaining the traditions a little until Ilonka arrives. And if the doctor happens to drop by for a glass or two or eight I give the traditions to him, let him also maintain the traditions for a little while. And then, he does maintain them well, keeps pouring them down his throat real nice. (...) The only tradition we maintain here is that we drink ourselves stupid, jump at each other's throats, and then go out to the forest to steal wood. That's our fucking big tradition.<sup>12</sup>

The second play of the cycle, *Bányavakság* [Mine Blindness], with a more unconventional plot, tackles all the symptoms of social decay in the same small Székely village: small-time political corruption, rising nationalism, work migration, dropping out of higher education, prostitution, in the same grim context of pervasive alcoholism and epidemic suicide. "A relatively hard play, much rawer than *Mine Flowers*. It's about nationalism, corruption, dividedness, the past, wounds, the pit-falls of living together." – says the playwright.<sup>13</sup> Just before the elections, the corrupt and ungifted mayor, Ince, invites a Romanian police officer to the Székely village to shed light on the illegal business activities of his neighbour, Izsák, who is most certainly going to take over his seat after the elections. The mayor welcomes the officer to his house, which is now owned by his sister, Iringó, hoping that his rival will be arrested and that he will manage to carry on with his dirty but lucrative deals with the local entrepreneurs, which would save him from bankruptcy. However, the plan backfires, since it turns out that the policeman has been sent to investigate the mayor's corrupt activities. Through a somewhat ironic use of the analytical structure, we slowly find out that all the characters we had initially believed to be harmless but silly members of an ill-fated family have dark secrets in their pasts: Iringó, the mayor's sister, used to be mistreated by her drunkard husband until she beat him to death one night with a crowbar "until his head turned into toothpaste" and threw him into a fountain, pretending that he had committed suicide. She was also the driver of the car involved in an accident which killed Ince's wife and son. The mayor believes that Izabella, his daughter, is studying at a university, therefore he sends all his money to her every month (since teachers need to be bribed), yet in reality she had dropped out of school years before and is working as a cashier at a supermarket. She is wanted by the police as her roommate was caught growing cannabis on their balcony, so she plans to escape to Italy and start a new life, and just drops by to ask for more money from her father. As both he and her aunt are broke, she agrees to give herself to the aggressive neighbour in exchange for some money and a lift to the city. The Romanian police officer has also suffered a grotesque tragedy: his wife had also died violently, decapitated by a tram.

One must note that under the hyperbolized grotesque and violence of the plotline the central problems of contemporary Romanian society are exposed, social processes which have caused a strong shift in the value systems of the younger generation. Although the depopulation of villages is not a specifically Transylvanian phenomenon, before the global financial crisis Romania experienced an unprecedented migration of workers to Western Europe (especially Italy and Spain). Two and a half million families had at least one member who chose to spend years abroad, performing temporary manual labour in the construction industry and agriculture, often illegally, in order to save up a larger sum of money to invest back in

12. Csaba Székely: *Bányavakság* (Mine Flowers), idem.

13. Gabriella Nagy: *A boldogság elköltözött...* interview with Csaba Székely, idem.

Romania, or just to be able to support the family at home.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the attitude of the younger generation to money has undergone a significant change in the new Millennium: earning good money or having a fancy car has become a strong status symbol, even for youngsters. Many of them choose to leave university and take up an unqualified job in order to gain financial independence at a very early age and to be able to afford the desired commodities. Izabella's character, her endless hunger for money and her ingratitude towards her parent exemplify this very common attitude.

His father is of course just as responsible for this as she herself, and not only because he spoiled her with an excessive financial support: he had made most of his money out of corrupt activities, even if he justifies what he has done with the good cause of supporting his only child. These youngsters grow up with the experience that corruption is present on all levels, permeating every system, so they don't even have the slightest hope that in Romania it is possible to work and earn an acceptable wage legally, just using abilities acquired through education.

The other important issue in the limelight is the still tense relationship between Romanians and Hungarians, which is still very rarely discussed in film or literature, especially in theatre and dramaturgy.<sup>15</sup> In Székely's play the Romanian police officer Florin is contrasted with Izsák, the ultra-nationalist Hungarian peasant, now the owner of a logging company, who started a business after the 1989 Revolution when the forests, formerly owned by the Communist Collective were given back to their former owners. However, he has started felling not his own trees but those belonging to other people in the village, who were just too drunk to realize. The playwright contrasts the stereotypes of the 'cunning Romanian', representing the authorities, and the 'stubborn Hungarian brute', caricaturing both of them to the extreme. Izsák just cannot accept that Transylvania now belongs to Romania and is ready to take arms against Romanians at any time. He had been a member of the Fighters of the Turul Battalion, but he left them because "they were too liberal for him". Bulky and aggressive, he had previously beaten up two big army officers just because they would not let him to fill in a form in Hungarian Runic script. However, he falls for the policeman's lie when he claims to have married a Hungarian woman and given their son the ancient Hungarian name Álmos. Then he softens and calls him a "decent Romanian man". The policeman also has his emotional burst of aggressive nationalism: "(*pensively*) If I could just grab a machine gun and hunt all these filthy *bozgor*s down. (*coming to his senses*). Oh, excuse me, Mr. Ince, that's not the way I think. It's just that this man has got things out of me that I don't think at all."<sup>16</sup> Nationalist speeches on both sides are still full of accusations, claims, and repressed grievances both on personal and historical levels.

The caricature of Izsák is a reference to the regional ultra-nationalist and xenophobic associations spreading these years across Hungary, under the name of Új Magyar Gárda (New Hungarian Guard), who believe that the police are unable to cope with the epidemic of crimes committed mostly by Roma and Romanian ethnic groups. Dressed in black uniforms and heavy black boots, troops of men and women "guardians" march through villages and manifest their presence. Since they lack any official authority, their activities must remain in the sphere of the symbolic: their main tool is the show of force, which often ignites fear in the locals. In building their ideological and visual identity they monopolize such symbolic and mythical elements of Hungarian identity as the Turul falcon (a Hungarian mythical bird), medieval striped flags, or the Hungarian Runic script, an alphabet used by Hungarians before the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the origins of which are still heavily debated. Recently there has been a spreading tendency to display the welcome signs at the entrances to towns and villages with the place names written in Runic script, if the local government wishes to display a strong Magyar identity.

14. Camelia Moga: Dosar: Migratia romanilor in Europa - trecut si viitor (The Migration of Romanians in Europe -- Past and Future), [www.euractiv.ro](http://www.euractiv.ro), 07.05.2007.

15. One of the rare exceptions is the performance 20/20 directed by the young Romanian playwright Gianina Carbanariu, which is a brave investigation of ethnic clashes between Romanians and Hungarians in 1990 in Târgu Mureş. She used the interview method specific to documentary theatre to collect the experiences of both Romanians and Hungarians, and put the findings on stage with the cooperation of both Romanian and Hungarian actors (from Yorick Studio). You can read more about this project in English in the volume *Theatre After the Change*, Joanna Krakowska - ed. Attila Szabo, Creativ Media, Budapest, 2011.

16. Csaba Székely: *Bányavakság* (Mine Blindness), unpublished manuscript, page 33. *Bozgor* is a pejorative term for Hungarians in Romanian.

The most fervent verbal duel on the topic of ethnicity breaks out between the Romanian police officer and the more moderate Ince, the mayor, a "wishy-washy Magyar" according to Izsák, but when it turns out that the policeman had outwitted him and that he is about to be arrested, all his oppressed anger erupts:

INCE: You are asking me why I hate you?

FLORIN: Yes.

INCE: Right. You settled here, took everything from us, and you still dare ask why I hate you.

FLORIN: I'm from Braşov, you knobhead, we were here in the first place.

INCE: Oh no, you weren't. You took our schools, robbed our churches, dishonoured our homes. You took the Pincipality of Transylvania from us. And now you are taking everything from me.

FLORIN: Fuck your proud bozgor Horthyist kind. You think you're better than us? You Nazi Horthyists, who came on white horses to slaughter Romanian women and children?

INCE: You did the same to us, only without horses.

FLORIN: The things you did to us in '40 in Treznea and Ipp? Kids, you filthy *bozgor*!

INCE: Exactly. But you started it in '19 at Köröstárkány! You killed children, women, blind people, you polenta-eating scumbags.

FLORIN: You started it in 1785, you horse-smelling homeless barbarians, when you killed Horea, Cloşca and Crişan.

INCE: No, you started it in 1600, you dirty shepherds, when your Michael the Brave set his ravening hordes upon us.

FLORIN: No, it was you, you proud fart. You have been oppressing us for centuries on our own land.

INCE: You've got nothing to do with this land.

FLORIN: No, you've nothing to do with it. Your drunken kind tumbled into our land from Asia.

INCE: True, we came from Asia, but you were nowhere around. I tell you where you were. You were lying on the Danube bank suckin' the she-wolf's tits.<sup>17</sup>

Who was here first? Which nation started the chain of atrocities? These are the two most sensitive questions guiding the rhetoric of the centuries-long debate between Romanians and Hungarians over Transylvania. Going back in history, the two characters can always find an even earlier act of violence committed by the other nation, as the storms of history alternately gave political or military power to either the Romanians or the Hungarians. The Romanian army occupying Transylvania in 1919 on the one hand, and on the other the Hungarian armies led by Admiral Miklós Horthy who, with German support, reclaimed the territory in 1940, were involved in very similar instances of ethnic-based massacres. This chain of accusations can go back to infinity, and the ultimate truth and justice can never be found. Romanians claim to have been present there since Roman times (hence the reference to the she-wolf which fed Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome), while there are claims that when Hungarian settlers arrived in 895 A.D. from the East, these lands were uninhabited.

In present-day Transylvania, however, cooperation between Romanians and Hungarians seems to outweigh politically fuelled hatred. In the cultural field at least this is more and more in evidence. Joint music festivals are organized, Romanian directors work a lot with Hungarian companies, there is more intensive communication between the young generations, who are less intoxicated by preconceptions. And it is promising to see that more and more theatre projects and plays are born which discuss the vexed questions of language, nationality and history – bravely and openly, with a true desire for understanding and coming to terms with the issues that divide the two nations. Csaba Székely's sharp, witty and honest dramatic voice is a most promising ambassador of the present-day ambitious, colourful but also quite desperate Transylvania.

17. Csaba Székely: *Bányavakság* [Mine Blindness], idem, 40.

## Synopses

Dénes Bíró

### Balázs Szálanger (1978-), playwright, poet, translator

The play appeared in the volume of the same name, a compilation of Szálanger's verse. Questions of private and public life are treated in it, from corruption to love, as are the three genres: lyric, drama and epic. Szálanger is a poet of many interests; a year after his first volume of verse *Rowing out of the butter* he wrote a humorous epic, *The passion of Zala*, then a monumental historical epic, *The Plain*, and finally in 2007 a playful novel in verse, *The hundred and first Year*. He came to the theatre on the invitation of Tibor Cizmádia and Gábor Máté, and for his play *Kalevala* won the dramaturgs' Vilmos prize and a Szép Ernő award.

#### Republic

8 men, 5 women, 1 baby

The historical drama evokes the time of the Roman triumvirate, immediately preceding the formation of the empire. In the fictitious plot the young Gaius Julius Caesar is captured by pirates and after ransoming himself settles scores with those that captured and held him. Gaius is on a journey in search of the wisdom of an old orator, and his purpose is to return to lead Rome. His experience among the five robber pirates help to make him a true statesman.

The leader of the pirates, Haristea, a Greek slave who has been freed and become a citizen, has been a confidant of the triumvir Marius. In his boundless ambition he confronts Rome and the notion of the republic, proclaims equality (meaning the common sharing of booty) and organises what is thought to be a pirate society of a higher order. Their watchword is quality instead of quantity, and they prefer valuable prisoners rather than mass production. His aim is that by the next generation his empire shall grow to rival Rome, and as his successor intends first Arianes, his general, and later prefers Gaius, his prisoner, to whom he offers the hand of his daughter Sophia. She secretly loves Miro, the Spanish cook, and this Dadus plans to disrupt by falsely implicating Miro with another woman, and Arianes by entrusting the cook with a military assignment. Sophia kills Delea, the girl reputedly associated with her lover, but Miro is fatally wounded in the fighting. There is talk of the collapse of Rome, but in fact what collapses is the pirate empire and Haristea's family.

In the course of the action Gaius maintains his patrician haughtiness and bearing, disregards his captivity and maintains throughout his upper-class superiority. He mesmerises everybody by his rhetoric, his wishes fascinate, and he keeps his word because, faithful to his promise, he does not kill his chief opponent Arianes.

Republic is a drama in verse, and the pathos of its iambs is relieved by humour (such obvious anachronisms as football, atoms, and a bishop officiating at a coronation) and the ironic description of the relationship between public and private life.

### György Spiró (1946-) novelist, playwright, essayist

#### Príma környék (Prime Neighbourhood)

3 men, 5 women + a six-voice mixed choir.

'Home Sweet Home' is an old people's home in a former country mansion. Recently significant changes have followed the arrival of a new manageress. Relatives come, full of remorse for neglecting their parents, and the porter and factotum, Sunyi bá (*Old Sneaky*), enlightens them on the change in arrangements. The old people's home has been moved to a wing of the old mansion, while in the other part a high-class hotel has been established for foreign huntsmen, with a culture programme, special hunts, and Gypsy music – imported, as the area is devoid of Gypsies. Despite his name no one believes old Sunyi when he spills the beans. Of course, there is not so much revealed, after all, as to compel the listener to understand if he is simply not interested in understanding. But the visitors are totally deaf to the ever more revelatory and shocking statements – and so the robbery and executions committed under the guise of service can continue.

*Prime Neighbourhood* is a depiction of the present state of an unregulated capitalist country, where stolen property makes even greater wealth possible, where hoaxes lead to esteem and recognition, where the old – as they are now a burden, and so harmful, to society – can be shot with impunity, and so that they can bring one last profit for smooth operators as targets for hunters.

As a comedy, *Prime Neighbourhood* chills the blood, freezes us. The plot reaches to its surreal dénouement from a totally realistic thesis which – and this is what is really shocking – is not all that inconceivable. In this play Spiró speaks of the surreal that is not beyond one's powers of imagination.

### János Házy (1960-) Writer, poet, and self-taught painter

#### Jóska Rák, Prince of Denmark

6 men, 2 women + 4 peasants (3 men, 1 woman)

Házy's four successful plays (*Gézagyerek*, *A Herner Ferike Faterja*, *A Senák* and *Pityu bácsi fia*) form a tetralogy linked by a sound knowledge of the situations and figures of provincial life, changing and changeless through the ages, the picture of which that is drawn – now with gentle irony, now with biting satire, now with black humour – conjures up a unique dramatic world.

Házy's regime-change play blends the tragedy of Hamlet with the comedy of ordinary country people with a worm's eye view of the historical event. He borrows the formula from Ivo Brešan's Peasant Hamlet, which deals with the Yugoslav wars of the fifties, and there is no denying the influence of István Eörsi and Mihály Kornis. It is a bitter-sweet view of the historic moment when 'People' dropped off the front of 'Republic', communist became capitalist, collective-farm boss smallholder, and culture of necessity bad. The villagers stage a celebration, but to support it a cultural programme too has to be offered. Somebody has seen a good murder play in Budapest, so Hamlet is chosen and parts are allotted. The uncouth clumsiness of the cast, consisting of rough-and-ready village notables, is the source of much humour, but behind the facade of comedy an analogy of the Shakespearean world is overlaid on provincial Hungary. Revenge for a dishonest deal blamed on other people comes to a climax in the massacre of the final scene. In addition to Hamlet the character Tibor, ignored by the rest, alludes to the Hungarian national play when he makes the complaint of

his famous namesake in *Bánk bán* in the Hungary of the early nineties. The play thus deals with today as if it were the past, with the permanent uninhibitedness of the authorities, the permanent drifting of the common people, and of course of the difficult situation in which truth finds itself if it damages the interests of the powers that be.

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**Virág Erdős (1968-) poet, short prose writer, playwright**

***Pimparé and Vakvarjúcska***

6 men, 2 women + 6 animal characters.

A fine plot woven from episodes in familiar tales and numerous elements and problems of our world of today; a veritable story-play, a game with the story, for children and adults alike.

Pimparé, only daughter of King Pitypang, has reached marriageable age. . . Her parents would like to marry her off – if only to avert the danger of family bankruptcy, as the treasury is empty, and only the bride-price, the wealth hoped for from suitors, foreign money, can help.... But on the day appointed, as the suitors arrive and the girl for sale is produced a mysterious figure, a huge crow, snatches her away to universal consternation. She finds herself in inhospitable and dangerous surroundings (they live at the top of a tree, magpies steal from her, wild dogs attack and follow them). She would escape and go home, but for a while she cannot.

Furthermore, she takes a liking to her abductor, who stands by her when attacked and defends her with all his might. And when they set off to her parents' home Pimparé even offers the sight of her eyes to her companion, who has been blinded in the attacks.

And then the miracle happens. The beloved creature, the huge, hideous crow changes into a handsome prince. . . Happily they hurry home. In the palace garden, however, they are seen as repulsive crows with chattering beaks, and stones are thrown at them again.

Virág Erdős mobilises the most characteristic tools of her verse in building up the plot. She elevates into the world of abstraction and loftiness the everyday and the mundane, and turns studiously polluted language into verse dialogue, thus startling or raising laughter at every moment. Her versification is at the same time a criticism and a caricature of the language of nineteenth-century Hungarian poetry, which nowadays forms the backbone of teaching material in schools and is considered the most digestible (intended for children) form of communication in verse. But sweeping through criticism the dramatic poet tries to create afresh the validity of this language, to justify it. She quotes freely from great predecessors and contemporaries, immures familiar texts in her own, broadens the immediate content of dialogues with allusions – thus opening the spiritual environment of the play wider than the concrete dramatic action.

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**János Térey (1970-), poet, playwright, translator**

***Protokoll***

7 men, 5 women

Térey writes obsessively about the fact that we are unable to move on. We no longer screw up sufficient courage to move in any direction, only wallow and drown in shallow stagnant water.

*Protokoll* is adapted from the novel in verse of the same title. Its world and people are those of the Budapest elite – diplomats, high officials, artists, habitués, the cream of the middle class. Surgeons, ministers, civil servants, critics, sportsmen, actresses. The principal character is Ágoston Mátrai, Head of Protocol in the Foreign Ministry, who tells his own story: he explains why it is that every character speaks in the same contrived, very suave, artificially poetic linguistic register. Mátrai stands high in the hierarchy, but among his friends he merely vegetates, knows only desire rather than love, and his obligatory connections are revealed in repetitious clichés. The only thing more visible than his greyness is his professionalism: he is the man who has real ability to elevate nothing to the highest level. He is surrounded by commonplace situations, but instead of action scores to settle fill his diary. He travels the world but has no contact with it. He takes part in diplomatic moves of which he forms no opinion. Women crop up in his surroundings, thoroughly nice women in the past and potential women who seem thoroughly exciting, towards whom he is moved not by flirtation but by the protocol that permeates his inner being: after all, sometimes one needs a woman. Mátrai does not live, merely operates appearances.

Térey writes about the same types as Chekhov: they are incapable of action. The principal characters in *Three Sisters* are at least aware of yearning for Moscow, and all that prevents them from going there is simply their incapacity for action. Térey's figures no longer really know what they yearn for. They live in situations in which they feel ill at ease, but are not particularly worried about it; they do what their role in society requires of them, but all the time they feel that things are not as they should be. But there is nothing on this earth that they can do about it.



## Classics and Contemporary – Critical Overview

### The Latest Performances of Two Hungarian Classics, József Katona's *Bánk bán* (The Viceroy) and Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* (Tragedy of Man), Reflected in Criticism

Anna Vécsei

#### *Bánk bán*

József Katona's *Bánk bán* is one of the leading classics of Hungarian dramatic literature. Katona made use of a number of Hungarian and other sources in the plot, which originate in the Romantic age. According to the plot, the 13<sup>th</sup> century King Endre II goes on crusade, leaving the country in the charge of his wife Gertrude, of Meranian (German) origin, and his right-hand man, Bánk bán.

Gertrude and her entourage, however, lose the sympathy of the Hungarian aristocracy (the *báns*) and the danger of splitting between the two parties threatens Hungary. Bánk is alone in being reluctant to break the oath which he has sworn to the crown, though becoming more and more aware that only by so doing can he help the people. The second, personal, strand of the plot concerns Bánk's wife Melinda. The queen's younger brother Ottó lusts after her, but she denies him. Through a devious trick, however, she finds herself compromised. Bánk has been away and returns to find that now not only the good of the country but also his personal honour demands vengeance. Finally, in a furious argument, the *bán* kills the queen, but Melinda too dies having been spurned by her enraged husband. The king returns home, discovers what has happened and why, and, swayed by the grief that they share, pardons Bánk.

Since its première (in 1821) *Bánk bán* has hardly ever been off the stage, although its production has from time to time confronted actors and audience alike with problems. The title of 'national drama' associated with it is explained by, among other things, the fact that on 15 March 1848, the day when the Hungarian Revolution and Freedom War broke out, it was being performed at the National Theatre. Legend has it that the cast received the freedom fighters with delight, and the principal actress even pinned the symbol of the Freedom War, the cockade of national colours, on the coat of the leading Hungarian Romantic novelist Mór Jókai. That evening, however, the performance was abandoned. The war had broken out. Thirteen years later, in 1861, came the première of the operatic *Bánk bán*, music by Ferenc Erkel and libretto by Béni Egressy. Nowadays *Bánk bán* is available in English, German, French, Czech and Romanian translation.

In what follows we should like to present some examples of reviews of notable performances of *Bánk bán* in recent years. Through these even a person active in the theatre who has not previously had close contact with the play will be able to visualise the sort of problems thrown up in our day by the staging of a classic. At the same time, the critical viewpoint will also serve to show what solutions to these were adopted by the directors in question, and to what new paths these solutions have led contemporary Hungarian theatrical art.

KrétaKör Theatre production, director Sándor Zsótér, Nádor Hall, National Institute for the Blind, 17 April 2007.

**A Very Modern Play** – László Keczer interviews Sándor Zsótér on the KrétaKör performance, Critikai Lapok, July–August 2009.

L.K. At present you're directing Bernard-Marie Koltés's *Combat de nègre et de chiens* at the Katona József Theatre. You're generally known as a director of modern plays. In 2006, among other things, you received a Kossuth prize for this (for your activity in creating a school in contemporary Hungarian theatrical art). What made you stage *Bánk bán*, a classical play?

S.Zs. I can answer from several angles. One reason was the people that I was working with, the KrétaKör company. KrétaKör Theatre is the most extreme, most special formation in Hungarian theatrical life – or perhaps was, because it seems that it's being wound up. (...) It was the person of Árpád Schilling and a shared interest, an attitude, that held them together. As they had no theatre building of their own, but always played in different places, they basically dealt with contemporary work, (...) but I thought that it would do them a lot of good to try something of a different sort. It's an old-fashioned, complicated script, and I was curious to see how they'd get on with this language, what actors of a modern temperament would make of such material. It was Mária Ambrus, the set designer, with whom I've been working for twenty years, who originally had the idea of our tackling *Bánk bán*.

Also at that time I was trying to attack things which are 'hard going', things against which there's an enormous amount of prejudice from the theatrical point of view. I find it interesting to examine what the play is really about: this is the play which we get fed up with in school – that's everybody's general reaction. Nobody reads it again, they've got a vague recollection that they couldn't make head or tail of it in secondary school. When we brought it out and looked at it I saw a very exciting, pulsating script, a contemporary play. It talks about things and events which are actually very modern. I sensed nothing fossilised or outworn in it, nor did it resemble the theatrical experiences that I recalled. (...) To be quite honest, I returned in practice to the text that Katona had written, as it had been before any improvements.

I tried to restore the original style in the play, expressly demanded those vowels, those groups of vowels, those words, which had arisen in the nineteenth century, and this caused the cast cruel hardship. It is my experience that actors who are really good, those that really tried to get inside the characters, made very lively and exciting figures of the parts of Gertrude or Bánk himself (...) I think it's a very modern play (...) In my opinion, we are living in the last moments when people will still understand what this text means, and afterwards there won't be so much as pretence. Or it will be simplified, rewritten into language primitive enough to be understood, as this language has receded into such an archaic distance that it might as well be Taiwanese. I believe, however, that there must always be a power of actorial communication that will somehow help to bridge this difficulty of understanding (...)

L.K. How did the audience take the performance?

S.Zs. The reception was mixed. The reviews were good and bad ... my feeling was that they'd have preferred a parody. KrétaKör Theatre was a very modern company and perhaps more of a civil outburst was expected of them. That was precisely not what I was after.

L.K. Perhaps they would have liked the theatre to adapt the play to people in modern public life?

S.Zs. Quite, precisely, adaptation, scandalisation, that's what was expected, so that one could tell which was Ferenc Gyurcsány, which was Viktor Orbán, a very simple depiction of affairs. That's

alien to me, I know nothing about it, it never even crossed my mind. I saw it as much more difficult for a thirty-year-old actor who had previously played Woyzeck to make something of a part like this. (...)

L.K. Did you change anything in the original plot?

S.Zs. Endre II was played by the same actress as Gertrude. From the start, what people made of this has been very interesting. This may, therefore, have seemed a device brought about by necessity, but I will add that I consider Annamária Láng, who played the queen, to be a very great actress, and as she only appears in two acts (the first and fourth) I thought that it would be wrong not to see more of her. (...) In the fifth act, however, the situation arose that I had no actors left. I found that after Bánk had stabbed Gertrude with the horns her body remained alone in the room, and like in a horror film she simply got up and changed costume to become her husband. From that a lot of people assumed that I meant Annamária Láng to play two parts, but no: I wanted Gertrude to remain, but dressed as Endre II. Therefore she remained very much alive, completely fooled everybody and everything, then graciously forgave Bánk and so won him over. Everybody took Bánk for an idiot, everybody knew that that was probably Gertrude there – she'd made no secret of it – except poor Bánk. She'd wanted to rule like a man all her life, and her soul was to be locked in a male part to the end of her life. That's all that happened, but the script had nothing to do with it, I didn't add or cut a single line. (...)

**Péter Molnár Gál:** *Bánk Stabs Himself in the Loins*, Mozgó világ, June 2007

There's always been trouble with the play from the outset. (...) It's unplayable. Unwatchable. People don't read it much. Critics think so too: they've been well aware of that since their schooldays. And it's a hard script. Kecskeméti dialect clashes with official Latin, innovatory language with purposely antique flavours. (There exist two 'translations' into Hungarian. Those of Gyula Illyés and Dezső Mészöly, who also demilitarised it for television.) (...)

In Krétakör's performance there is no room, no hall, no corridors. They perform in Béla Lajtha's *art nouveau* Nádor József Chamber, the former chapel. (...) The tale unfolds in a blown up playing-space. The space is broken up by first one, later three, life-size stuffed grey Hungarian cattle. As do the placing and lines of force of the *dramatis personae*. It's an assumed conjectural space. It does not depict. It permits the spectator to decorate it with his imagination. It enables the actors to work to their inner rhythms. It's a public space. Life private and public: it's all the same. Everybody is spied on by ears and eyes. The events of conflict take place in full view. There is no surprise. Secrets are public knowledge. (...) The space, rendered public, does away with stage technology. Disposes of difficulties for the dramaturg (why does the peasant stroll up and down in the palace as if he had a universally valid *laissez-passer*?) (...)

For those who hear the script from hams too, the meaning of lines or single words conceived two hundred years ago as theatrical melodies, comes as a great wonder as they are slowly released from the burden of convention-bound sentiment.

The multifarious traditional *bánk* has wormed itself obstinately into our imagination. I was shocked when I heard that Zsolt Nagy was in the title role. Hitherto he has been the first of the great, whom we can imagine on horseback too. This plucky man goes about Hungary on shanks's pony. He is openly and naturally both a jealous husband and shrewd politician. He does not assume the heroic

role. His look, always moody, has in it something of innocent, childish wonder. (...) Bánk can see no way out of the insoluble tangle that is Hungary and does not compromise with the king: in his bitterness he impetuously stabs him in the backside with a cow's horn. (...)

**Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, Csokonai theatre, Debrecen, 19 September 2008.**

Despite all its difficulty – or perhaps because of it – Bánk bán is capable of enslaving directors. There are those who, after at intervals of years, come again and again to the staging of the play. One of these is Attila Vidnyánszky, manager of Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen, who first directed the play in 2002 at the National Theatre and in 2008 undertook the staging of the opera, first at the open air theatre on Margitsziget and at the Lake Stage at the Castle Theatre in Gyula, after which the performance was transferred to his home theatre.

In 2010 we celebrated the centenary of the birth of the great Hungarian composer Ferenc Erkel, who wrote the music for the opera *Bánk bán*. On the occasion of the anniversary Vidnyánszky's performance of the opera was invited from Debrecen to the Thalia Theatre in Budapest. This tempted several critics to compare the *Bánk bán* that had run for years at the Hungarian State Opera-house with the new version from Debrecen.

**László Péterfi Nagy:** *Museum and/or Theatre, Performances of Bánk bán for the Erkel centenary*, Operaportal, April 2010.

The guest performance at the Thalia by the Csokonai Theatre of Debrecen has offered new paths and a genuine alternative in the history of the tradition of the performance of the national opera. (...) Since the 1994 recording the original version, premiered in 1861, *Bánk Bán* has only been performed in 2008 – thanks to the Debrecen company – on the opera stage, and, in addition to its home theatre in Eastern Hungary, at the Open Air Stage on Margitsziget in Budapest and at the Castle Theatre in Gyula.

The performance of the original work presents the cast with much greater challenges. The music, for a start, is a whole tone (a major second) higher in pitch, and so the soloists are singing higher notes. I have now realised that *Bánk bán* is actually a *bel canto* opera, which re-working has adjusted to twentieth-century psychological realism and singing culture. The twenties in fact stripped the work of the character rooted in the *bel canto* tradition, as is most strikingly evident in the Tisza-side scene in the structure of the second act. (...)

Vidnyánszky's direction – despite all its questionable, eclectic features – offered the audience a real theatrical experience. We could see a genuine human drama, and instead of papier mâché models psychologically motivated, complex personalities. The staging concentrated on revealing eternally valid conflicts that arise in the sphere of human relationships, and thus produced that cathartic effect for the sake of which it was worthwhile revealing the score preserved in the Széchenyi Library to a wider audience in this form. The director's basic conception guaranteed that *Bánk bán* – appropriately staged – even without adaptation is to this day a vitally effective work. Perhaps the script had an antiquated ring here and there, but this was not very troublesome. (...)

**Tamás Koltai:** *Magyarising, Frenchifying*, Színház, June 2010.

The patterns, idiomatic forms and musical characters of nineteenth-century Italian and French opera are well suited to the tonality and style of Hungarian music of the period; emerging from 'mothballs' with the – partial – revival of the original work, they lend Vidnyánszky's Erkel year direction a special acoustic quality. This is, at first hearing, unusual. To the patriotic ear *Bánk bán* is now truly 'less Hungarian' than before, but then – alas – that is what was written at one time, painful though it might be to some sensitive souls. Furthermore – in for a penny, in for a pound – Vidnyánszky lays on the eclectic with a shovel, mixes Slavonic Orthodox motifs into the performance, adumbrates church architecture and an iconostasis, and dresses Gertrude as a tsaritsa. Wearing rigid sheepskin costumes, which can 'stand' on their own when taken off, the malcontents reading *Magyar Nemzet* present the audience with further problems, as does the drowning of Melinda with effect typical of alternative theatre, and a Tisza-side scene amply swathed in black canvas. It is only because of the pathos clinging to the play and our self-delusion that we are afraid to acknowledge the scenic devices corresponding to the diversity of the music. The 'national opera' has undoubtedly been given a somewhat grotesque tinge, and at times the stage gives the impression of being crowded, but now we can no longer forget that as a principle of direction the eclectic springs from the play itself.

**Directed by Róbert Alföldi:** *Bánk bán – junior*, National Theatre 23 October 2009

Like Vidnyánszky, Róbert Alföldi – actor, director, at the time manager of the National Theatre – is another of those directors who confront vigorously the challenges presented by the Hungarian classics to those wishing to direct them. His directing has generally provoked heated debates in the profession and outside it, the explanation for which is only partly his personal artistic style. Another possible reason is that public opinion in Hungary is still deeply divided over the question of the purposes that a National Theatre should serve, and the person of the manager himself has many supporters and opponents. His *Bánk bán – junior* of 2009 was premièred in Szentendre, not far from Budapest, as a sort of summer preview, to be later transferred to the National, where it has since been on the programme.

**Viktória Radics:** *Whippes-up Moods, Bewildered Authorities*, Revizoronline, 15 July 2009

*Bánk bán* is an old play, an old-fashioned play. We imagine it with elderly actors and mature actresses of thunderous voices, and listen to them in respectful boredom. Róbert Alföldi, zum Trutz, has entrusted it all to a youthful cast at the start of their careers.

Alföldi has entrusted them with both the play and the interpretation, and in fact they have also composed the bursts of rock music that are sporadically inserted. This initiative is laudable; it was truly necessary to shape a kind of relationship to our national literary and artistic traditions that was healthy, sensible, and not devoid of irony – and they aimed especially at us as a cultural body.

(...) On one occasion András Jeles made a film of *Bánk bán* with children, and the result was excellent. Now in the MűvészetMalom in Szentendre these downy youngsters, several of whom must be looking forward to a fine career at the National Theatre, were now likewise authentic insofar as

age and youthful actorial commitment were concerned – but did not succeed in convincing with regard to interpretation of the play and acting. Even now, in the open air and given freedom of interpretation, *Bánk bán* remained quite a dull and darkly grim play. (...) The approach was insufficiently ironic, the acting too often stuck in the old-fashioned declamatory, stentorian style, in the false-ness of brash, self-importantly theatrical gestures. The dresses, faces, bikinis of today are of no avail if the voice, the tone of the language is old-fashioned.

The playing space was meant to be very novel and effective. (...) It had been made into three levels, and the lowest was formed by a longish, narrow, glass-walled swimming-pool, the sort of tank in which live fish are kept at a fish stall. Then in the course of the performance actors and actresses, in swimming costumes or fully dressed, fell or jumped into the pool, swam about there, splashed and churned up the water as the mood changed. Perhaps this aquarium was meant to be a symbol of the subconscious, that of the sphere of deep and uncontrollable emotion – this latter has indeed a huge part in the play, and cast and director should have maintained a more distant, more 'deconstructive' attitude towards precisely that, rather than plunge in. They would have done better to concentrate on emotions rather than on moods; emotions are much more multicoloured and multi-layered, moods more foolish, tendentious and resistant to analysis. The splashing about in the water, sadly devoid of humour, merely illustrated the whipped-up moods without relating to them critically. (...)

On the two upper levels stood ordinary desks in two rows, as if in a council chamber, as symbols of official positions and roles in the hierarchy, and the cast overturned these, swept them aside and stumbled through them. (...)

(...) the microphone, drums, electric guitar and cymbals brought to the play a good idea, of which much more use should have been made: there should have been comment and counterpoint to the music. It was also a good idea to start the performance with a sort of party; they should have thrown a bigger one, and more open to the public! (...)

At the end of the play Endre II and Bánk try to declaim the Szózat together to the audience. They try hard to recite confusedly, in alarm, Bánk with blazing eyes, mumbling nervously. It is impossible to declaim the Szózat, actors and audience alike take a sceptical view of it, and the national declaration grinds to a halt again and again, is stifled. It gives rise to the feeling that there is no help, that is all that is tragic in it.

**Judit Csáki:** *In Deep Water – Bánk bán junior*, Magyar Narancs, 23 October 2009.

This teen-age *Bánk bán* is characterised by a confused inner world of thought and dramaturgy and a battery of trashy devices. And praiseworthy though the educational intention is, Katona's play and the director on this occasion fail to connect.

**Andrea Tompa:** *Not Only Water*, Színház, December 2009.

*Bánk bán – junior* is an unexpectedly contemporary play. While (...) grieving that theatres, especially the big ones, lack the courage to present contemporary Hungarian plays, we might also enquire: where are we to find one in which the word Hungarian is not simply spoken in quotation marks and ironically, not simply to probe questions of Hungarian identity, burdened with runaway national

moods and offended at the perceived serving of foreign interests? One which speaks about 'What is Hungarian now'?

In *Bánk bán* – junior the current nature of power and politics appears in an abstract, associative manner, not in demands for simplifying, immediate answers. In the opening scene the cast lines up and roars an aggressive German rock song into a microphone – obviously, they are men of power, they've got the microphone, quasi power, they can make their voices heard. Then a girl sings in Spanish, (...) Finally the stage empties and a man, with real Hungarian fire, sings a Hungarian folk-song to identical words: this is the future malcontent Petur. It is a polyglot community which suggests foreigners and Hungarians of foreign origin, as there is no knowing which language, race or nation is master in this house or country. In the final scene of the play Endre and Bánk, clasping one another to their bosoms and yet lonely, begin to sing the *Szózat* with little self-assurance, timidly, yet with faith and hopeful looks: thought out by them, a statement concerning us, Hungarians, now seems to be taking shape.

The discussion of foreignness brought on stage by *Bánk bán* – junior is (fortunately) not the same as the otherwise raw and divisive, though more refined, drawing-room rhetoric of our reality. Only in Petur – not in his lines but in his gestures, his moods, his old-fashioned Endre Ady-like flaring up, his rage which seems today extreme, his wrist-guards in national colours and his inflammatory speeches, his Scythian forebears – do we recognise the impatience which the performance in surprising fashion does not yet mean to project, but on the contrary: it displays the easy seductiveness of words, the sorry loneliness of frequently grotesque rage and bitterness.

The *Junior*, however, appears at a moment when – though we are scarcely at the start of the season – FOREIGNNESS is becoming a subject on the Hungarian stage. *Dogville* as the foreign plot testing the crowd and awaiting acceptance at the Barka, the foreignness of *The Moor of Venice* at the Vigszínház – hopeful moments, and it seems that Hungarian theatre culture is trying after all to respond to a social condition.

The text of *Bánk bán* has been censored several times (performances were often banned because of its 'dangerous' nature) or simply bored people to death until in 1976 the notable poet Gyula Illyés submitted it to a degree of revision. From the 1990s on interpretations of the national drama in a de-heroicised, ironic vein began (e.g. that by János Mohácsi) and the question that arose was whether the text in Katona's language could be understood and transmitted. In his performance of the opera in Gyula Vidnyánszky reverted to the so-called ancestral *Bánk bán*. There are, however, directors who strive for closer links between performance and audience by means of simplification of the language. The most recent *Bánk bán* is the re-working by the dramaturg Borbála Szabó, who won with it the special prize at the Pécs national Theatre Convention.

**Directed by Bertalan Bagó, Katona József Theatre, Kecskemét, 21 September 2011**

**Miklós Apáti: A New Bánk bán – in Four Boxes, Magyar Hírlap, 24 September 2011**

In the Ruszt József Stúdió we see an inverted, rotating mystery story – the king, who usually comes on at the end, this time confronts what has happened in the opening scene, and with him we disentangle the strands: what led to the queen's death, why did Melinda go mad, why were the Hungarian lords discontented? A defined, well thought-out, logical performance

**András Sztrókay: Bán, bán, bán, Ellenfény, 5 January 2012.**

Borbála Szabó wrote the script of the performance of *Bánk bán* in Kecskemét. She did not complete it or correct it, but rewrote it. Not in slang, not in the forced humour of the language of the street: in simple sentences. (...) It cannot be denied, the spectator is left with a sense of loss: the text is so unostentatious as to call attention to itself. There is no decoration, no distortion, just raw material waiting to be worked on. But that is what is good about it: something can be done with it.

The director Bertalan Bagó begins the performance with a nice touch of irony: the cast dress as *Bánk bán* stereotypes and, all in front of the curtain, play a much abridged fifth section.

(...) If the action that starts the performance sets the standard, what comes after follows suit: Bagó perceptibly concentrates on the human, tries to let the historical-political dimension come to life, and is not inclined to deal with it *separately*. It is important that Gertrude be broken as a person before her actual physical death, or that the malcontents are influenced by alcoholic stupor rather than Petur's words – but the plot will still have nothing to lose by this. And if it has nothing directly to lose – as it cannot have, if everyone that can be dead has already died in the opening scene, and everyone is drowned in grief that can be drowned in grief – then from the point of view of the whole not only the political dimension but also the human is stripped of value and only the surface is scratched, in many directions, of course.

**Gábor Bóta: The Homeland Is Where There Is Profit, Népszava, 24 September 2011.**

The director Bertalan Bagó makes Katona's play into a fate-drama. A work in the essence of which the ghastly dénouement can be foreseen, but this does not prevent anyone from driving the events full steam ahead towards the tragic conclusion. And as nowadays many of us probably feel something similar we can soon work out that the tale is about us. (...)

The latest modernised direction of *Bánk bán* is linked to the name of László Bocskárdi, manager of the Tamási Áron Theatre in Sepsiszentgyörgy, Transylvania, who worked on the play as much as twelve years ago. That was when he directed Katona's play for the mixed Romanian-Hungarian group at the Zsámbék Summer Theatre. We are therefore dealing with another director who cannot tear himself away from the play, and at the same time he too belonged to the above-mentioned category, the directors who made powerful dramaturgical alterations (rewritings) as early as 2000. Of the two selected reviews, one analyses the Zsámbék performance, while the second tries to place the latter in the directorial tradition of the play.

**Directed by László Bocskárdi, Zsámbék Summer Theatre, 2000**

**Andrea Stuber: József Katona: Bánk bán, Criticai Lapok, September 2000.**

If László Bocskárdi of Sepsiszentgyörgy appears responsive to the political element in *Bánk bán*, it is no surprise. No one would be amazed if the director, who lives outside Hungary, were to give through this play a personal view of authority, suppression, desire for independence, national self-awareness and patriotic feeling. (...)

No more suitable venue for the performance could be found than the Zsámbék Summer Theatre. (...) In this so evocative spot there is now no chance of creating intimate, inward-looking theatrical moments. The space is against Bocskári's ambitious imaginings. (...) Not only the actors' voices but their feelings and moods fly off into infinite space. A labyrinth of scenes is rendered clumsy by the lack of definable points for entrance and exit. (...)

But if we try to disregard the fact that we cannot see the performance as Bocskári (presumably) would like to make us see it, there are numerous things that we can appreciate. First of all, it must be mentioned that the text has been considerably altered, (the dramaturg is Rita Sebestyén.) (...) There is extensive cutting on the one hand, rewriting on the other. (Personal experience tells me that *Bánk bán* – which I have never seen without plenty of cuts – loses at least as much as it gains by the process. It is strange, but on stage not only the poetic quality of the script disappears but also the pace of the action, which, surely to goodness, is there in the book.) (...)

Politically, Zoltán Seress's Endre II is the key figure in the production. (...) When he returns home he immediately has the castle wall enveloped in banners the colour of raw meat. Previously we had thought that those were a Meranian symbol, and obviously so thought Kulka-Bánk too, because earlier – with an effort that had a comic effect – he had torn the material down from the wall. Seress's entrance gives a hint that perhaps it is not the queen that is the cause of the common people's woes, but maybe Endre himself is the nightmarish ruler.

(...) In the interests of security his law-enforcement commandos butcher everyone on the spot. So much for authority and forgiveness. (...)

**Directed by László Bocskári, Tamási Áron Theatre, Sepsiszentgyörgy, 23 September 2011.**

**István Nánay: *DETUNED*, Revizorline, 23 March 2012.**

The definition of a genre has to be taken seriously: this performance is not the latest interpretation of *Bánk bán*, it is a 'theatrical essay on the lines of József Katona's play'. With disquieting overtones. (...)

Bocskári staged *Bánk bán* twelve years ago, but this time it is obvious that he has something else in mind: instead of presenting the play on stage in its entirety his concern is focused on the existence and future being of the nation as viewed through the play. (...) Strictly speaking, therefore, he offers the spectator a section of the drama – one which, in essence, precisely follows and reflects the whole. The production tends to divide the audience, and a good few of those that criticise the direction take issue with this abridgement in particular.

The performance for the most part takes place in an empty space (...) but the white projection screens at either side have a heightened importance: on them is shown a black-and-white film that frames the production. On the first an elderly man with deeply wrinkled face (Levente Nemes as Tibor) hums and speaks the soldiers' song from the First World War that begins 'When I go out to the battlefield of Doberdó'. (...)

The overall effect of Bocskári's direction is compelling and moving. Even when at times one effect or another is less than brilliantly successful, or uneven, or a worrying grandiosity of interpretation occurs. The raising and solving of problems in the performance is in places questionable in detail, and prepares us to think further, forces us to confront our past.

## The Tragedy of Man

In 1859–60 Imre Madách wrote one of the finest and strangest works in the history of Hungarian drama. *The Tragedy of Man* is a dramatic poem in fifteen scenes which treats, in the form of a myth, the philosophical and ontological questions that have engaged man most of all. The principal characters are our first ancestors Adam and Eve, together with the Lord Creator and his fallen servant Lucifer. The opening scene begins with a debate between these two: is Man capable of good, or must he fail no matter what? The second scene is Paradise, where Lucifer – who in this work is not the arch-villain but merely the embodiment of denial – persuades Eve to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. In consequence the human pair have to leave Paradise. Adam sees the present as without prospect, and therefore asks Lucifer to show him the future. The angel, however, guides him through important places in the history of the past and is so successful in demonstrating that life is pointless and that at all times and in all places Man will pursue false ideas, that by the end of the play Adam can see the way out only in suicide. Indeed, the angel-devil manipulates Man, showing him every historical period in its corruption – the historical images introduced are the slavery of Israel in Egypt, the collapse of democracy in Greece, the idle hedonism of Rome, the perverse nature of the Crusades etc. Lucifer's counterpart is Eve, Woman, who in many surroundings gives life its only value. In the final scenes, however, even the concept of love becomes relative. Nevertheless it is she, by announcing that she is expecting a child, that draws Adam back from suicide.

A hundred and fifty-three years old as it may be, the *Tragedy* is among the most modern of Hungarian works of literature, and was inspired by another dramatic book, Goethe's *Faust*.

As a dramatic work it was premiered at the National Theatre in 1883 and was played without interruption until 1947. At that time, however, it was felt that the Falangist scene was intended to deride the communist utopia. After that followed a period of prohibitions and relaxations. It came back onto the programme in 1957, and in 1960 saw the light of day once more in printed form. We must add that only two weeks after the first publication of the *Tragedy* a German translation appeared, subsequently followed by nine others (including selections). With the passage of time Madách's masterpiece has been translated into forty languages (there are seven versions in English).

How has this dramatic poem held its place on the stage, bearing in mind its rather unusual dramaturgical structure? Take, for example, the dream in Paris which follows the Prague scene, and from the dream scene the main character returns to Prague. What will make it interesting for us today, and how can it remain true to itself? Over the years numerous directors have produced the *Tragedy* more than once. The question is, what were they really after?

**Directed by János Szikora, National Theatre, 15 March 2002.**

**Zoltán Imre: *Endless Time* ... Színház, May 2011.**

In the interviews that preceded the premiere Szikora emphasised above all else that the reason that his choice had fallen on the *Tragedy* was that, in contrast to *Bánk bán*, 'its thought is on a global rather than a national level'. (...) As he put it, 'I want to provoke this multiplex-generation, and what's more with its own methods, by projecting the kind of thoughts with which *The Tragedy of Man is bursting*'. The problem originates, then, not in the shortcomings of the concept but rather in failure radically to think it through, that is, it springs from the illogicalities of the realisation. (...)

This was at its most complicated perhaps in the Rome scene. In this, after the gladiators' duel, which resembled all-in wrestling, the songs and costumes of the unbridled carousal evoked the 1930s. Emphasis on contemporary thematics became really obvious when the bodies of victims of the plague were members of the cast dressed in the prisoner garb of the Auschwitz camps. Thus by their arrival the Rome scene was transformed into the period of hedonism and destructiveness preceding the Second World War and the myth of the happy years of peace, while the wheelbarrows brought to life the inhuman devastation of the World War. As a result, several time-dimensions are successfully made to overlap, complementing one another and offering a complex of possibilities of interpretation. The illogicality of the realisation, as compared with the conception, which appeared in this scene meant that, although it could easily have been contrived, the scene alluded to massacres in, for example, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan or Africa while having no immediate relevance to the contemporary present. In contrast, at the end of the Athens scene the *sirtaki* dance of the tourists who arrive by Boeing aircraft is relevant to the image of the Greece of today but does not create a wide and thought-out field of interpretation. (...)

Perhaps it could give Szikora's performance (...) added point that without regard to the societal, political and ideological context it is impossible to develop a really contemporary art that sheds light on the present. When Szikora stressed before the première that 'the festive moment is nothing to do with politics or the Fidesz campaign – what we do is in the province of art', he was feeding the illusion that the performance and its reception could be elevated above the given historical context. As, however, the performance failed to present one of the fundamental motifs of the *Tragedy*, the relationship to power, and also left out of the reckoning the framework of present-day politics and ideology it was easy to place Szikora's direction of the *Tragedy*, which purposed to display 'global' values (?), at the service of the Fidesz ideology. (...)

The history of the Zsámbék Theatre Base goes back to 1995. That is when the Arts Festival began; it has grown more and more over the years, and since the start of the new millennium has become a serious place for summer theatrical performances, a venue for workshops and professional conversations, and an occasion dedicated to theatrical experiment by amateur and professional alike.

**Directed by Róbert Alföldi, National Theatre, 6 May 2011**

**Balázs Urbán: *Games with Point of View – The Tragedy of Man*, Kultúra.hu, 7 May 2011.**

Although on this occasion the customary 'junior' is not placed beside the name, the demand that brought about the performance by the youngest members of the company is presumably the same as that which produced in its time the variation on *Bánk bán*: to adapt one of the 'three pillars' of Hungarian dramatic writing into something modern, to show it through the eyes of the generation of today.

The *Tragedy* is a much more complex undertaking than *Bánk bán*. Katona's play certainly has dramaturgical crudities, illogicalities and enigmas of its own, but these can be resolved by inventive direction. If the work can successfully be purged of the pathos and irrelevancies that are heaped upon it, there is a good chance that a performance can emerge that speaks validly to and of today – as in the case of Róbert Alföldi's production in the National Theatre. Even despite its poetic power and almost faultless intellectual structure, Madách's work is an extremely problematical piece to put on stage. (...) Alföldi's task is, however, rendered harder still by the fact that the questions posed

by the play are fundamentally ontological, independent of time and space, so that their reference to today can scarcely lead to revelatory discoveries. (I might express that as: it makes no actual difference which generation's eyes we see it through.)

**Dezső Kovács: *Let Us Repice, There's a Wiser World*, Kritika, June 2011.**

In the empty space there hangs a huge, curved white object with geometrical figures, perhaps symbolising the universe. Beneath it sit two slender figures, facing one another: Adam and Eve, in white knitted sweaters, jeans and trainers. A malicious, intellectual Lucifer, clad in a corduroy jacket, watches them in silence. (...)

Alföldi makes his actors play all over the theatre; Lucifer (Zsolt László) rises from the rows of the audience to debate with the Lord, and in the space scene, and the suicidal Adam – soon pulled to new life – teeters on the parapet between the balcony and the dress circle. And by the time that we have slid from space to the Eskimo scene (...) the National's massive crystal chandelier has been lowered, shedding its twinkling, sparkling rays into the infinite cosmos (and the auditorium), and slowly risen back. (...) Swimsuited youngsters enact the red-lit Rome orgy, splashing about in a pool to the sound of pounding disco-music. (...) In the Athens scene the demagogues stand on scaffolding to speak their lines into a microphone, and in the Prague scene the injured Adam, confined to a wheel-chair, cowers behind a lap-top screen and communicates with his surroundings through a loudspeaker.

Alföldi obviously does it all in order to bombard his audience with a ceaseless flow of action-packed visual and acoustic stimuli, and renders the classic play accessible to the youth by means of the physical surroundings and the culture of movement and gesture known and used by the younger generation. To this end he adapts his dramatic concept, the way that the cast perform, and the lavish visual world of the performance. (...) In the luxuriant scenic ideas, however, something is lacking: the clarified interpretation, the unified directorial reading of Madách's work (...). Instead, we are given a stream of attractions, sparkling revues, high-speed action, and so despite the multifarious spectacle the performance, paradoxically, remains to a degree conventional. (...)

It comes as no surprise that we meet one by one the names of the same directors linked to our so-called national drama. Just as with *Bánk bán*, so it is with the *Tragedy*. In addition to Róbert Alföldi, Attila Vidnyánszky too appears, and as in the case of *Bánk bán* on this occasion too returns again and again to the subject of his attraction.

**Directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, Szeged Open-air Plays, Dóm tér, 1 July 2011.**

**Balázs Urbán: *Just Leave it to Me*, Criticai lapok, September 2011.**

Before the opening performance at this year's Szeged Open-air Plays we were treated to some imposing statistics on the role of Madách's work in the history of the repertoire, but it has been a very long time since the audience at the Open-air Plays has had the chance of seeing the *Tragedy*.

Attila Vidnyánszky was invited to direct it. He had twice produced original, stimulating interpretations of the play which posed important questions. In both earlier performances striking formal ideas were used to make the questioning all the more effective. The first performance, at the end of the nineties, took place round a lamp, and the Lord and Adam were both played by the same actor (József Varga), and the tension between him and Lucifer (Zsolt Trill) gained a profound ambivalence of meaning. The lamp, however, was not a mere symbolic ornament, but served as an object of emphatic usefulness, and as it lit the stage almost by itself the direction made the historical scenes interesting and tense in a way that I had never previously experienced. The second production a few years ago (...) took a lot from the previous one, but expanded the interpretative envelope and presented a much more complex visual experience. This was a pronounced success as an open-air performance (it was given at Zsámbék and Gyula), and instead of light (or rather, as well as it, as we were able to see some marvellously beautiful images) earth played the leading role. The cast dug continuously; the labyrinth of history took the form of depths, heights, mounds and graves. The historical scenes in practice flowed one into the next and emphasis was placed on the metaphysical questions of collective existence.

The current performance too calls up the key requirements of the previous two: both the mound of earth and the lamp find their way onto the square in front of the Cathedral. Each figures in one important scene – the lamp late in the play, in the space scene, but earth right at the start of the play. 'What's happened to my independent self?' – the performance begins with this sentence in the past tense, lifted from Scene Three, and the whole of humanity appears alongside the first couple as eternal toilers, whose toil, of course, will certainly make history one way or another. At this point, however, the thought is incomplete, and the earth is present rather as a memento. (...) And this is, in fact, characteristic of the whole of the performance: there are many beginnings in it, but as far as I am concerned the innovative thought that could build on the rational system of the two previous performances, the bridge of thought, is not clarified. (...)

**Gábor Bóta: A Dreamlike Vision on Dóm tér, Népszava, 4 July 2011.**

The trouble is not that on this occasion no one is, in the strict sense of the word, stripping naked, but that in the abstract sense too not very much. *The Tragedy of Man* is a disturbing play that stimulates discussion. This time, however, Vidnyánszky is perceptibly reluctant to disturb people and stimulate discussion, preferring just to please. And for this very reason he pleases less than usual.

**István Nánay: Spectacle, Revizoronline, 7 July 2011.**

Apart from the twin towers there is little to be seen of the votive church in Szeged. It is fenced off by white stands surrounding the huge stage, and in front of it stands a sloping set fifteen metres high and spreading to thirty metres wide at the front of the stage – it might just as well be 'God's beard' as the 'scroll of the history of humanity'. (...) In the middle of the central set, in front of the church door, gapes a 'hole' closed with an ample black curtain, and behind this a revolving stage eight metres wide, a stage fit for the display of historical scenes.

I. Iain MacLeod's translation.

Alexander Belozub's visual world is therefore built on the contrast of black and white, and not only in the set is this evident but also in the contrast between the Lord, dressed in white, and the black-clad Lucifer. The third dominant colour is grey. Adam, Eve and the crowd symbolising humanity are in uniform grey coveralls. Two more dramaturgically important colours join these three: in the Rome scene the stage is all but enveloped in a blanket of red, which in what follows 'plays' in different ways, and the brown of fifty-five thousand litres of potting compost, which remains on stage until the end, covered with a vast sheet of canvas.

In this huge space which can accommodate four thousand spectators only an assertive and full-blooded spectacle can project the essence of the drama, and this is achieved by the use of colour in the direction – and, of course, the powerful and almost constant music typical of Attila Vidnyánszky's productions.

There is not a moment of silence, at all times there must be something happening, which often leads to the disadvantage that those who are each modelling a character, actually speaking, are lost in the crowd. (...)

One important innovation in the performance was an interpretation of the role of Eve that I had not seen before. This is in a way comparable with that which began in József Ruszt's famous *Tragedy* but was not carried through, that is, not only Adam passes through the stages of learning, but Eve too is now participant, now observer of the journey in history, and indeed at times both at once.

(...) The driving force, the moving spirit of the performance is Zsolt Trill. His is a powerful physical and intellectual accomplishment. His Lucifer is not the arch-villain but a thinking man, a companion to Adam and the Lord. He is a solitary being. Time and again he rushes at the wall of the sloping set, charges it, but in vain – when he is halfway up he falls back every time, slips down. An image is formed of the struggle that Lucifer wages for his truth, for mankind. In order that Man shall truly be Man. He is a thinking, talented person. Therefore he is capable of anything: he plays a role, agitates, instructs cynically, heartens, embraces protectively and repulses roughly. Is it Lucifer doing it, or is it Trill? Who can say?



## The Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (HTMI)

The year 1952 was an important one in the academic development of the history of Hungarian theatre. Two institutions – now combined in one – came into existence for the purpose of collecting, preserving and studying items from the past of the Hungarian stage, and making them a public treasure. In 2012 the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (HTMI) and the Bajor Gizi Actors Museum are celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of their establishment, and our exhibition marks this occasion.

The first part of the exhibition displays the HTMI collections, setting before the visitor its most valuable, special and rarely seen pieces. From the Manuscript Archive comes the earliest item on display, the letter from Emperor Leopold I to György Felvinczi authorising him to hold theatrical performances, together with Count István Széchenyi's 1843 receipt for renting a box at the National Theatre and Edward Gordon Craig's letter of 1908 to Sándor Hevesi. The Scenery Archive has placed at the focus the plans for set and costume at the National Theatre by Count Gyula Battyányi, one of the leading figures in Hungarian Art Deco painting (Ferenc Herczeg: *Byzantium*, 1936, and István Eszterhás: *The Horn of Döbrenté*, 1940). The range of the Picture Archive is illustrated by a pastel by József Rippl Rónai, a bronze by Alajos Stöbl, a portrait of Emilia Márkus, and János Vaszary's portrait of Gizi Bajor, together with caricatures and silhouettes. The Photograph Archive contains 600,000 items, and displays items of technical historical interest: the only daguerrotype in the collection (a portrait of Zsigmond Szentpétery from the 1840s), a cyanotype, a ferrotype, a chromotype, a bromoil print, porcelain paper, a photograph on porcelain, a glass negative and stereo-pictures of the Vígsház. Among other things, the Poster Archive has exhibited a poster of the first professional theatre company in Hungary, a handwritten document of 1795, made for a performance of *The Prince's Secret Journey* by the National Acting Company. The Memento Archive has contributed personal possessions of stage artists – fans, spectacles, make-up equipment, jewellery, lorgnettes and shoes lend colour to the assortment on show. A number of outstanding pieces are on display too, such as Gábor Egressy's silver crown of 1846 and Ferenc Herczeg's 1936 silver laurel-wreath.

The Puppet Archive has chosen glove-puppets and marionettes in a range of styles. These include Béla Büky's naive figures (Sándor Petőfi, János vitéz and Iluska), István Rév's Art Deco style puppet (Fairy Ilona) and Sándor A. Tóth's Girl and Soldier in Bauhaus style, together with male and female Spanish figures in eighteenth-century costume from the Hincz bequest.

The Dance Archive has focused on visiting performances in Hungary by international stars. There are mementos of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, a 1927 poster of Anna Pavlovna's appearance in Budapest, and documents of Emilia Nirchy's Dance academy from the 1910s and 1920s.

In the second half of the exhibition the curators have brought together mementos of three plays – G.B. Shaw's *St Joan*, Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* and Pongác Kacsóh's *János vitéz*. In this way Tamás Gajdó and Mirella Csiszár has sought to demonstrate from how many aspects and with the help of how many collections the theatre historian can approach individual performances.

## THE PUPPET ARCHIVE

The HTMI private collection came into being in 1970 with the object of saving Hungarian puppet art from destruction. The collection comprises some two thousand puppets and sets, ranging from market-place puppet shows of the nineteenth century to avant-garde puppets. From 1910 on, every designer of note and every significant tendency is represented in the historic collection.

The oldest puppets are those from the Hincz family bequest. This dynasty of puppeteers had toured the market-places of Hungary from 1841, and in 1889 settled in the Városliget in Budapest, where they established the First Hungarian Puppet Theatre. The items in the bequest span three generations, having passed from father to son, and preserve the changes that took place in the course of a century in the repertoire and styles of puppet theatre.

Several of the designs for puppets and sets, and of the paintings and drawings of puppets, are the work of Álmos Jaschik in the 1930s. Also to be seen are the works on puppets of Sándor A. Tóth and Béla Büky's shadow-play designs.

Most of the ten thousand photographs in the Photograph Collection are of documentary value, but there are also some rarities, such as André Kertész's photographs of Arc-en-Ciel, Géza Blattner's puppet theatre in Paris.

The Puppet Collection also holds manuscripts, posters, handbills and video-recordings. We would like soon to find an opportunity to show this very significant material in the main building of our institution, the so-called Áldassy Mansion, in exhibitions both permanent and temporary. The First Hungarian Puppet Archive that would thus be created, together with the little auditorium and open-air stage, can become a venue for puppet subjects in museum studies and puppet performances, and enable us to bring even the youngest gradually to the enjoyment of the magical world of theatre.



## Hungarian theater showcase

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The Hungarian Theater Critics' Association, an independent civil organization is launching a showcase on **Hungarian theater** in 7-9 March 2013 in Budapest.

We are offering for the international audience a few of the best productions of repertory and independent shows in Budapest recently opened.

Our aim is to present values of Hungarian theater, shows which were awarded by critics and also new work by well-know independent artists. All shows will be translated.

A few names:

**Viktor Bodó's Anamnesis Katona József Theater Our class,  
Béla Pintér's new production,  
National Theater and Andrei Serban,  
Kornél Mundruczó's latest production,  
Árpád Schilling  
and more.**

The program is selected by critics.

We welcome producers, festival selectors,  
programers, journalists.

Full program available on the beginning of December.

Inquires: ***hungarianshowcase@gmail.com***

Registration open!

## Collaborators of the Hungarian Theatre Bulletin 2012

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**Dénes Bíró,**  
dramaturg

**Ildikó Lőkös,**  
Joint President of the Guild of Theatre Dramaturgs,  
organiser of and participant in the Open Forum since 1989

**Zsuzsa Radnóti,**  
dramaturg, literary manager, essayist

**Anita Rákóczy,**  
dramaturg, theatre critic,  
Deputy Director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute

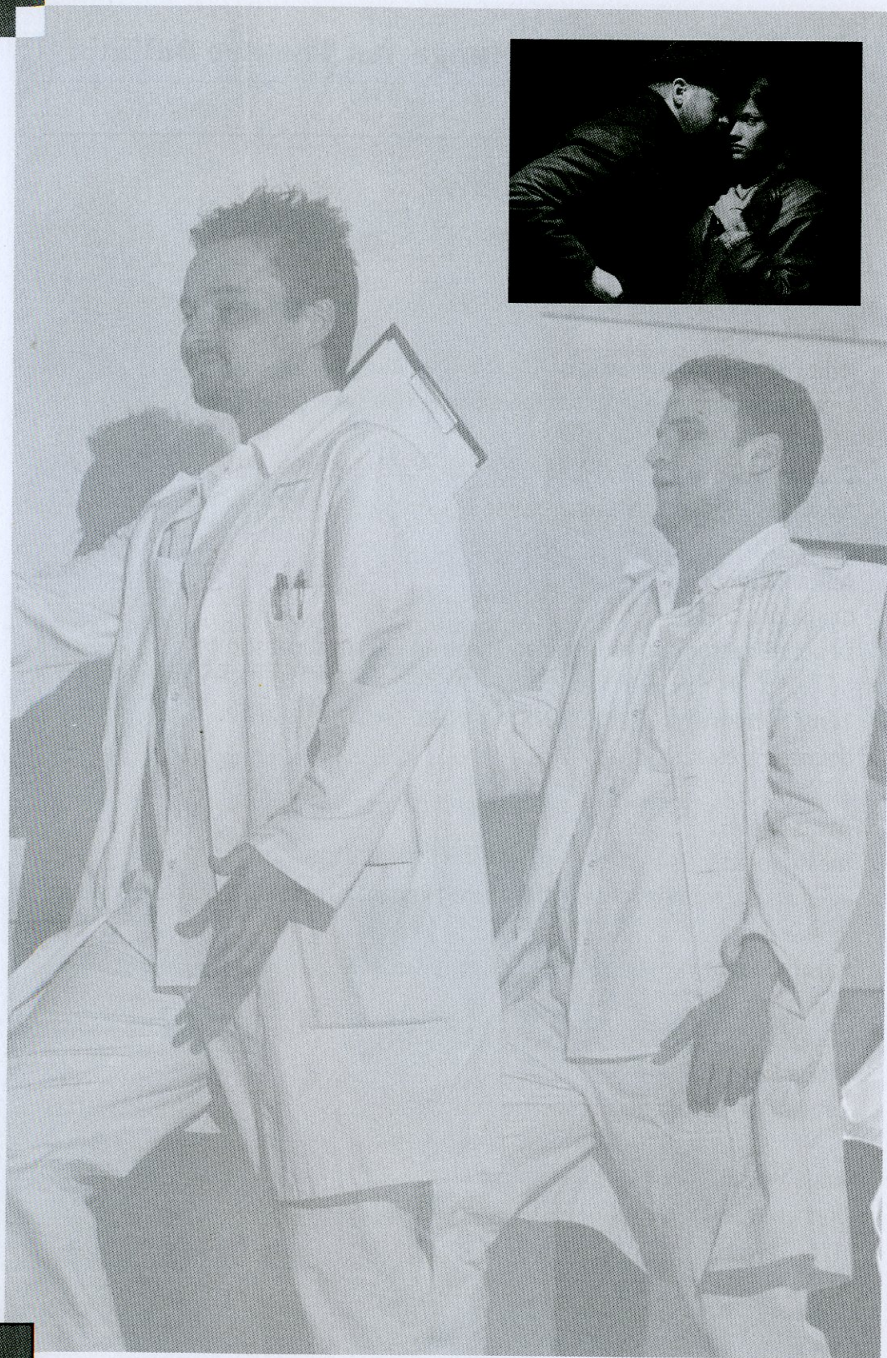
**Tibor Solténszky,**  
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**Károly Szakonyi,**  
playwright

**Mária Szilágyi,**  
director of Contemporary Theatre Festival

**Anna Vécsei,**  
dramaturg, essayist



International Year of the Girl 2012

For the International Year of the Girl (IYG) 2012, the United Nations

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

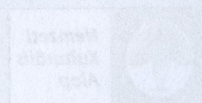
has declared 2012 the International Year of the Girl

to draw attention to the needs and rights of girls

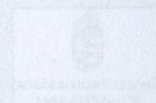
and to promote their empowerment and equality

with boys. The United Nations Secretary-General

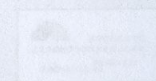
has also declared 2012 the International Year of the Girl



Ministry of Health and Family Welfare



Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India



Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

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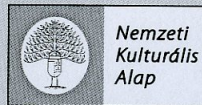
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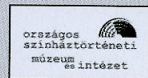
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