

Chapter 16. Hungary

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Abstract

Contemporary theatre and performance in Hungary have continued to operate within pre-1990 institutional frameworks, and the change of regime has not altered the overall structure of the theatre system. On the whole, cultural policy is under state control, most recently leading to the introduction of a new model of governance at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE), which led to the resignation of the former administration and to the Free SZFE movement. This unprecedented protest has since become emblematic for dissatisfaction with political control per se. Despite growing discontent and the precarious state of theatre institutions, however, it is important to signal the vitality of writing for the stage and to acknowledge the role of independent platforms in shaping Hungarian cultural life.

Context: Current theatre landscape

Contemporary theatre and performance in Hungary have continued to operate within the institutional frameworks established prior to 1990. It is fair to say that the change of regime has not fundamentally altered the overall structure of the Hungarian theatre system, even though there have been substantial shifts in the funding and management of cultural activities. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, there has been a long overdue re-examination of corruption and abuse of power, leading to key institutions purging their staff, thus highlighting the untenable dynamic in the mainstream and the need for abolishing the leftover privileges of the communist era.

Despite growing discontent and the precarious state of theatre institutions under the current Orbán government, it is important to signal the vitality of writing for the stage and to acknowledge the role of independent platforms in the shaping of Hungarian cultural life. Most seasons tend to see the premiere of several new plays and some of these are included in thematic collections, such as the series *Olvasópróba* (Read-through), published by Selinunte. Browsing these collections instantly gives a flavour of the current theatre scene, bringing together authors who have started their careers pre-1989 and emerging voices at their first public production. These publications equally pinpoint venues for showcasing contemporary

work: in addition to brick-and-mortar theatres, alternative platforms that specialize in the broader field of live performance, as well as platforms in neighbouring countries with a Hungarian theatre culture.

Krétaör (Chalk Circle), in particular, has revolutionized Hungarian theatre language and institutional structures, and even though the company was disbanded in 2008 – precisely due to the difficulties of operating in a hostile culture – it has formulated a model for theatre making that left a lasting impact. Meanwhile, Krétaör's artistic director Árpád Schilling works internationally, as does Viktor Bodó, founder of the experimental company Sputnik Hajózási Társaság (Sputnik Shipping Company). This exodus of top artistic talent is an eloquent critique of the current Hungarian regime, an opinion shared by many artists. The recent reorganization of drama departments and the revised procedures for appointing theatre managers have sparked further criticism, and will no doubt influence the future of Hungarian culture.

The introduction of a new model of governance (essentially amounting to a loss of academic autonomy) at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) in September 2020 led to an unprecedented wave of contestation, involving strikes and the physical occupation of the university premises. Several key academics stepped down at once, and the university building was guarded by students, staff, and high-profile public figures for 101 days while an entirely new management and teaching team was put in place. Despite this months-long blockade of the building and wide-ranging protests, the government pushed its will through, resulting in the collective resignation of the university's former administration and Senate and, in 2022, in a further wave of compulsory redundancies. The FreeSZFE movement, however, has carried on: promising to continue the university's 155 years of tradition elsewhere, with former faculty offering classes under the accreditation of prestigious foreign institutions. This unprecedented protest against government-appointed academic leadership has garnered extraordinary international support, and has since become emblematic for Hungary's escalating dissatisfaction with political control. Nonetheless, at a time when a handful of organizations receive the lion's share of the funding, first among them the National Theatre led by Orbán-favourite Attila Vidnyánszky, who seems to be the official 'face' of Hungarian theatre, also as the head of the reorganised SZFE supervisory board, it is difficult to picture a dynamic and accessible alternative scene.

Cultures of theatre-making: Key figures, platforms, and companies

Looking at Hungarian theatre from a historical perspective, the predominant feature is a strong tradition of drama, often authored by top writers of the day. Writing for the stage is encouraged by playwriting awards: the most prominent is named after István Örkény, the celebrated author of one-minute dramas, followed by the drama competition of the literary circle JAK and the 'Kortárs Magyar Dráma Nyílt Fóruma' (Open Forum for Contemporary Drama), set up by the Dramaturgs' Guild, also publishing the best submissions in *Nyílt Fórum Füzetek*. The competition 'Reaktív' was launched to move beyond the naturalistic approach deeply engrained in Hungarian drama and to encourage new ways of expression, for which reason the organisers also initiated the book series Szín-Text' (Playtext), edited by Kornélia Deres and Noémi Herczog, with an aim to reflect critically on theatre and society.

In most cases, contemporary drama is staged by long-established, institutional theatres, and these venues are also active in putting on international work, most of the time the canon. Some of the major theatre directors have in fact made their name with directing the classics, such as Gábor Zsámbéki, Gábor Máté, Sándor Zsótér, Róbert Alföldi, not to mention Tamás Ascher, whose 1985 *Three Sisters* has retained its cult status to this day. When it comes to home-grown talent, it is the plays of György Spiró, János Háty, János Térey, Péter Kárpáti, Zoltán Egressy, Lajos Parti Nagy, István Tasnádi, Laszlo Garaczi, Kornél Hamvai, Szabolcs Hajdu, András Jele, Máté Hegymegi and Andrea Pass that are most frequently produced. Authors residing outside Hungary but writing in Hungarian, such as Csaba Székely and András Visky, are also present.

A lot of contemporary Hungarian drama deals with current affairs and is embedded in cultural specificities, which is at the root of its popularity, but is also, arguably, one of the causes of its limited international circulation. An additional reason can be linked to the fact that many plays are written in a representational mode, or conversely, in a highly poetic and philosophical manner that poses a near-insurmountable challenge to translators. In this context, the achievements of the Magyar Magic Festival (2004) are particularly noteworthy: they secured a collaboration with the National Theatre Studio in London on rehearsed readings and the publishing of these play texts with Oberon, in the translation of then-emerging British playwrights. Echoing this showcase, in October 2020 the Petőfi Literary Fund published its first English-language anthology *New Hungarian Drama – 10,1 Plays*, featuring ten playwrights and highlighting social criticism in dramatic literature.

In parallel with this playwright-centred tradition, a number of artists and companies have made their mark by staging devised work or creating experimental productions based on

pre-existing prompts. János and István Mohácsi (the Mohácsi Brothers) or László Bagossy direct as well as generate their own material, while Veronika Szabó engages with collaborative devising. Szabó's work is unique not only because it highlights rare concerns with gender in Hungarian theatre, but also because it is performed mostly without words, to the backdrop of music and with focus on the human body. The likes of Kárpáti, Visky, Ádám Fekete, and Anna Lengyel fuse their expertise as dramaturgs with various dimensions of the theatre-making process, privileging a post-dramatic approach, while Ildikó Gáspár represents the emerging trend of dramaturg-directors, thus interrogating the underlying boundaries between different forms of artistic expertise.

Alongside the strand of director's theatre on the repertory circuit, charismatic directors have been foundational to alternative companies, too. The founder of the Kassák House Studio, Péter Halász (1943-2006) was one of the most influential figures of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, whose work challenged the politics of representation and initiated a postmodern turn in Hungarian theatre. In more recent years, Krétakör Theatre (1995-2008), has been the most audaciously innovative, operating without a permanent building and staging iconic productions of texts by Georg Büchner (*W – munkáscirkusz* [W – workers' circus], 2001), Anton Chekhov (*The Seagull*, 2003), Bertolt Brecht, or Hungarian writers such as István Tasnádi, radically re-imagined by the company (*Hazámhazám Taigetosz csecsemőotthon II* (Homeland Taygetus foundling hospital II, 2002) and János Térey (*A Nibelung-lakópark* [Nibelung gated community], 2004). Moving towards increasingly alternative forms of performance, in its later years the company also devised a number of participatory performance projects, installations and happenings (*FEKETEország/BLACKland*, 2004 and *PestiEsti*, 2007), including the theatre-in-education project *hamlet.ws.* (2007). Krétakör's international reputation started with a Paris tour in 2000 that led to a permanent ensemble and collaborations with prominent figures of the Hungarian film and theatre world, such as Sándor Zsótér, Mihály Dresch, Szabolcs Hajdu, Béla Pintér. Krétakör presented its productions at some of the most important venues of contemporary performance in Hungary, such as Trafó, MU Theatre, Szkéné Theatre, Fészek Arts Club, Bárka Theatre, Merlin Theatre, Millenáris Theatre, in addition to the József Katona and Thália theatres. For reasons rooted in Schilling's personal career choices, the company disbanded in 2008, though not without paving the way for a successor organization of the same name. For a while thereafter, Schilling continued to be engaged with risk-taking theatrical experiments in Hungary but following *Lúzer/Loser* (2015), in which he integrated direct political criticism of the Fidesz government, he was declared a national security

hazard. Now residing in France, Schilling's political video-interventions are accessible via Facebook, ironically labelled as 'one of the last forums of independence' (Herczog, 2018).

Among experimental Hungarian directors working between various genres and media, Kornél Mundruczó is 'the "independent of the independents"' (Tompá 2019), since his Proton Theatre, founded in 2009, has no permanent base or company members. Mundruczó is best known internationally as the award-winning director of the film *Fehér Isten/White God*, and like Bodó, he started his career at Krétakör. Mundruczó works with professional and amateur performers alike and draws his subject matter from current social concerns. His themes hail from the periphery of society, centring on prostitution, orphanhood, and mental illness. Addressing violence against the weakest members of society, often women, is central to his work, which, as Andrea Tompa points out (2019), has given 'critics a reason to accuse the director of sexism'.

Institutional structures: The Hungarian theatre system

Hungarian cultural policy is heavily under state control, and this tendency has only increased in recent years. Political influence on theatre-making has been widely discussed, including the issue of unfair competitions for artistic directors' positions (Cf. Lengyel, 2008). At present, Hungarian theatre institutions can be grouped into state-funded and independent clusters, with the subsidy system categorizing theatre companies as 'national', 'high priority' and 'other'. At the top of this hierarchy is the National Theatre in Budapest, occupying a purpose-built building, erected in its current shape and location against the advice of theatre professionals and continuing to challenge the tastes of many progressive cultural figures. Operating at a smaller scale, there are a handful of 'national' theatres in Pécs, Miskolc, Győr, Szeged, and forty-odd repertory theatres financed by local government in Debrecen, Szolnok, Nyíregyháza, Eger, Kecskemét, Veszprém, etc. In addition, there are numerous public theatres of municipal status in Budapest, including the Vígszínház, Kamaraszínház, the Örkény, Katona, Radnóti, and Thália theatres. Most of these have a permanent company and operate on a repertory basis, with some of their productions touring regionally. In addition to theatres performing in Hungarian, there are a number of opera houses and operetta theatres, and a few companies staging work in Bulgarian, Croatian, German, Polish, Serbian, Romany, Slovak, and Romanian.

Independent theatres are categorized as 'other' in terms of funding, and as Herczog

argues, their independence means that they are not given regular support and are operating under unpredictable conditions despite the fact that directors and managers continue to be nominated by the state. Tompa argued back in 2008 that being an independent performer ‘can be a good deal more inspiring than participating in the “system” of heavily subsidized repertory theaters’, and many of those ‘who are out of the system want to get in but keep their freedom’ (2008, 9). In the decade that has since lapsed, however, she came to the conclusion that in Hungary today, ‘becoming an artistic director/general manager of an institution no longer depends on professional excellence . . . being politically acceptable and “on the right side”—the ruling one, that is—are almost the exclusive requirements’ (Tompá, 2017). In this context, it is particularly important for organisations on the independent circuit to rely on professional administrative and financial expertise, and an essential contribution is offered by production companies, most prominent of which is FÜGE (Függetlenül Együtt/Közhasznú Egyesület/Independently Together Non-profit Association). Based at Jurányi Produkciós Község Inkubátorház (Jurányi Production and Community Incubator House), FÜGE operates an open-door policy for a variety of performing arts and civil organisations, also hosting community activities and audience-facing performances. Besides Jurányi, Trafó is the most important venue for contemporary experimental arts in Hungary. As Herczog points out, work by the best Hungarian expat artists can only be seen in this venue in Hungary at present, and there are basically no opportunities for experimental companies to upscale their work.

The longest-standing independent company is the Pintér Béla Társulat, while iconic organisations such as Krétakör and Szputnyik succumbed to funding difficulties and political controversies. Their legacy, however, lives on in collectives that are continuing their work in terms of socially committed and artistically innovative projects, which could be grouped under the applied theatre label. Mentőcsónak Egység (Lifeboat Station) started off as a subgroup of Szputnyik in 2014, with the aim to investigate burning social issues such as poverty, racism, migration, and emigration. Drawing on a younger demographic, there is a strong focus on eliminating prejudice and on facilitating tolerance and integration, both within the framework of staging author-attributed plays and creating interactive forms based on audience participation. The latter, known as ‘theatre board games’, are a novel practice in Hungarian theatre, first seen in László Bass’s poverty-research play *Sociopoly* (2015), based on a board game developed by Bass himself that makes the audience experience the feeling of surviving in extreme poverty, while their decisions as players are mapped out in theatrical scenes.

Working with experts and NGOs specialising in socially sensitive fields has become an important dimension of independent theatre practice in recent years, with artists aiming to achieve long-term societal impact as well as an immersion into the concerns of the here and now. Organisations such as Studio K, Nézőművészeti Kft, Látókép Ensemble, Titkos Társulat (Secret Company), Maladype Theatre, T6, Független Színház (Independent Theatre) share an agenda fuelled by the rise of inequality and racial and sexual exclusion in contemporary Hungary. Független Színház, led by Rodrigó Balogh, is an education and performance platform with the mission to help underprivileged Roma youth to become artists or professionals, and encourages them to play an active role as citizens. This company has been described as an ideal case scenario for the future of theatre, seeing that it integrates performers and audiences of diverse backgrounds and thus it is deeply instrumental in the democratisation of theatre culture. Independent Theatre Hungary has been organising an annual 'Roma Heroes' Festival since 2017, with the agenda to showcase the diversity of artistic avenues among Roma companies. In 2019 the first international Roma drama anthology *Roma heroes: Five European Monodramas* was published in English translation, bringing together a selection of texts to 'show the values of Roma theatre and Roma communities'. A number of independent organisations have joined forces under the umbrella Platform-művészet: Részvételi Művészeti Program (Platform Art: Participatory Art Programme) to conduct art pedagogy activities in underprivileged rural areas and, using the means of documentary theatre, to explore the relationship between the individual and the social system. This theatre in education platform is an alliance between Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Atelier), StereoAkt, Parforum (formerly anBlok) Részvételi Műhely (Participatory Studio), Murál Morál (Mural Morale) and a number of other civil activist groups. The series 'Színház és pedagógia' (Theatre and Pedagogy) published by L'Harmattan is a direct reflection of these preoccupations, and addresses topics such as socially oriented forms of performance, participatory theatre, and case studies in drama pedagogy, while PanoDrama Theatre, set up by the late dramaturg Anna Lengyel, specializes in docudrama based on field research about ethnic intolerance and growing racism. .

University-based theatre training takes place at the aforementioned SZFE in Budapest, Veszprém, and Kaposvár, and there are about a dozen conservatories and drama schools. Theatre criticism is integrated into various cultural platforms, including the influential literary weekly *Élet és irodalom* (Life and Literature). Among the specialist journals, *Színház* (Theatre) founded by Tamás Koltai is the most prestigious, until recently edited by eminent critic, academic, and novelist Andrea Tompa. Theatre criticism, addressing

the broad spectrum of theatre and performance activities, is regularly published by Noémi Herczog, Veronika Darida, Beatrix Kricsfalusi, István Nánay and Tamás Jászay of the online portal Revizor. There is a Museum and Institute of Theatre History in Budapest, and several professional organisations engaging with distinct facets of theatre making.

The Pécsi Országos Színházi Találkozó (POSZT) used to be the top national showcase of theatre productions before descending into controversy in recent years due to the selection team and the proposed content. Perhaps more contentious is the festival initiated by the National Theatre (MITEM - Madách International Theatre Meeting), boycotted by a number of high-profile international guests due to the SZFE scandal. A long-standing festival is the gathering of Hungarian language theatres from and beyond Hungary held in Kisvárdá near the Ukrainian and Romanian border. Somewhat less in the public eye but important from the point of view of the theatre profession is the showcase put on by the József Katona Theatre, while the Szegedi Szabadtéri Játékok (Szeged Open-Air Festival) takes place in front of the picturesque Dome at the height of Summer, attracting large audiences and featuring an eclectic mix of artistic styles. Important forums for contemporary movement-based practice are the annual Dance Festivals held in Budapest and Veszprém. Deszka Festival in Debrecen is a forum for contemporary drama, and though the independent sector has fewer opportunities, the Independent Theatre Festival in Szeged (Thealter) and the dunaPart Platform of Hungarian Contemporary Performing Arts have acted as representative forums.

In conclusion, contemporary Hungarian theatre is marked by diversity and ongoing crisis, rooted in differentiated funding streams and unprecedented political pressures. Cultural policies since 2010 have systematically dismantled the independent scene with legal restrictions and grant cuts, not to mention direct attacks via party publications. On the positive side, several companies and theatres have developed an international profile by cooperating with global festivals and projects. In a still predominantly patriarchal society, it is noteworthy that not all theatre jobs are held by men and that there are leadership opportunities for women directors and managers. Some of the most influential theatre critics are women, and there is a promising gender balance in the independent sector. In the wake of recent scandals that have rocked the Hungarian theatre scene, there is also hope for a structural reconfiguration of the system that could truly inspire the democratization of the field.

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