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# Survival and Renewal: Independent Theatres in Hungary Before and After the Fall of Communism

According to my rather unconventional survey, Hungarian performing arts are represented, outside the borders of Hungary, by renowned artists and companies who, almost without exception, belong to the so-called independent theatre and dance scene. My hypothesis is that this is in large part due to historical reasons: the last half a century or so, since the 1960s, has been a defining period with regards to the development of the Hungarian independent performing arts scene. This study aims to take account of the Hungarian independent artists and theatre or dance groups that were (already or still) active in the 1990s and to outline the historical background from which their activities stemmed.<sup>1</sup>

Before going further, I should make a few essential comments regarding the term “independent”. This term is strongly misleading, because the layer of performing arts in question, as we shall see, stands the most at the mercy of the prevailing cultural governance and state funding. It is, then, certainly not independence, but total defencelessness and extreme dependence that one has to address in the case of these artists.

The language is telling: the history of this scene is accompanied by uncertainty regarding the term. For a long time, groups working outside the fixed frames of the theatre structure were referred to as amateurs (i.e. non-professional), a somewhat descriptive term, which many people even today feel has a pejorative ring, only for the expression “alternative” to come into fashion in the mid-seventies.<sup>2</sup> The term “másik színház” (other theatre), sounding rather clumsy in Hungarian, and “másszínház” (othertheatre), tolerant and broad expressions proposed by László Bérczes, which describe the phenomenon in a fundamental yet not fully valid way for today’s use, are inevitably interpreted in a political context:

Whatever name we apply to othertheatre (marginal, radical, alternative, avant-garde, oppositional, etc.), it will always mean a theatre standing or finding itself in opposition to the prevailing authority. No matter if that theatre is in the institution or outside of it.<sup>3</sup>

The term “othertheatre”, despite its appeal, has never really been widely used. Regarding the words used today, it is remarkably telling that the

1 In writing this essay, a recent study has been of serious help: Tompa Andrea. *Reality Makers. Hungarian Independent Theatre before and after Communism*. In: Vessela S. Warner, Diana Manole (eds). *Staging Postcommunism. Alternative Theatre in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020, p. 3–16.

2 Árpád Schilling and Krétakör Theatre tried (unsuccessfully) to clarify the terms in a 2002 action, provoking huge response when they declined the award for “best alternative performance” given for *W-Worker’s Circus* by the Hungarian Critics’ Association. In 2012 the critics nominated Árpád Schilling’s *The Priestess* for “best independent performance”, which he also declined for similar reasons. “The award category ‘the best independent performance’ makes sense only if a category for ‘best performance in a theatre subsidised by the municipality/ministry’ or ‘best performance in a private theatre’ also exists. But this is obviously nonsensical.” Árpád Schilling. Schilling Árpád levele A papnő című előadás jelölése kapcsán [online]. *Színházi Kritikusok Céhe*, 15. 8. 2012. Available at: <https://kritikusceh.wordpress.com/2012/08/15/schilling-arpad-levele-a-papno-cimu-eloadas-jelolese-kapcsan/> (accessed 15. 2. 2020).

3 László Bérczes. *Másszínház Magyarországon 1945–1989*. *Színház*, 1996, n. 3, p. 43.

current Performing Arts Act divides organisations into three categories. Based on financial and infrastructural characteristics, institutions can be “national”, “high priority”, or “other”. Bearing in mind its history, it is not surprising that, based on this law, independent companies have appeared only in the last category: the law-makers’ choice of words suggests, rather cynically, that these artists can never acquire national or high priority status.

Accordingly, independents *per definitionem* have always belonged and belong to this day to the periphery. It is because of this that, when writing about this scene, it is especially worthy to study the relationship between the centre and periphery. On the one hand, because the exception sometimes proves the rule: Béla Pintér and Company, since their 1998 formation, have moved into the centre of public and professional attention thanks to their continuous work, advancing from amateur dramatics to the nucleus of professional theatre-making. (It is unprecedented in this milieu that author-director Béla Pintér signs, as of today, already three coproductions with Katona József Theatre, the most renowned state-subsidised theatre institution in the country.) Back in those days this all-around theatre person, the author-director-actor Pintér could not have perhaps imagined that, in the course of two decades, he will have acquired a wide repertory, a stable audience, a permanent company, dozen of awards, and plenty of festival invitations. It is also fair to think that he also did not expect that, despite it all, he will have to go without a permanent playing space or predictable state funding.

On the other hand, with regards to the relation between the centre and periphery, it is also worth looking into theatre and dance formations that either already existed or came into existence at the time of the 1989–1990 changes. Many have successfully survived the significant political and social changes, although only a few could pull off truly safeguarding their aesthetic credo. For some, moving towards the centre meant giving up, admittedly or denyingly, their own voice, and conforming to the real or supposed demands of the audience.

The warlike rhetorics pervading the Hungarian public speech of the 2010s divided the world into a few selected good people and many bad people rising against them, and the question of state theatres vs. independent theatres is commonly interpreted in this toxic context. As we will see in the next chapter, the Hungarian theatre structure has suffered decades of anomaly, while the occasionally occurring radical propositions to rethink it (coming exclusively from the independents) have remained mere thought experiments.<sup>4</sup> There is an ever-growing chasm between repertory

4 See for example: Gáspár Máté – Árpád Schilling. A színházi struktúra modernizációja. *Kritika*, 2004, n. 11, p. 2–6; László Hudi – Zoltán Imre. Nemzeti Színház - mindenkinek! Pályázat a Nemzeti Színház vezérigazgatói posztjára. *Színház*, 2008, n. 3, attachment.

theatres—operating with permanent companies, their own buildings, and predictable state funding—and independent groups, who are exempt from the burdens of a stable infrastructure, and pressured to attest year after year for their existence.

The root of this present matter lies deeply in the past: the introduction delineating the current state of things was necessary because the independent groups operating in the 80s and 90s struggled partially with the same problems as their present-day successors.

### The historical background after 1945

To understand the status of Hungarian independent theatres operating at the time of the political and social changes of 1989–1990, we have to go back straight to the years following the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this is that the base of the Hungarian theatrical structure, left mostly untouched for the past seventy years, was born together with the nationalisation fever following 1945.<sup>6</sup>

After the Second World War, the formerly successful endeavours of private theatres went bankrupt one after the other while free performing art groups and occasional ensembles disappeared almost without a trace. The clearing out of the scene came just in time for the Socialist party state, who were hell-bent on the proper political-ideological nurturing of the audience. A memo by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, dated July 6, 1949, established the state theatres and this list was broadened in the following years. The repertoires were completely replaced, as the only possible mode of representation, prescribed centrally by the Communist Party, was Socialist realism.

In terms of staging plays, formulating a positive message became the primary criterium: “Theatre was put in the service of the ideology, it was degraded into an obligatory social forum, a political editorial.”<sup>7</sup> The change has had a direct influence on language use: to this day, the term “színház” in its most general understanding means not a way of operating or communicating; the expression, instead, denotes a building, namely a performing

5 For more on this subject see Péter P. Müller. Permanence in the Process of Changing. Major Features of the Institutional Structure and Social Function of Hungarian Theatre after the F/Wall. In: Attila Szabó – Joanna Krakowska (eds). *Theatre After the Change: And What Was There Before the After?* Vol. 2. Budapest: Creativ Média, 2011, p. 125–130.

6 Although there were instances of nationalisation in theatre and film during the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, Tamás Gajdó draws attention to the contrasting deliberations behind the two processes: “Nationalisation in 1919 was primarily an economic question, however, after the Second World War it was promoted as a political and ideological programme.” Tamás Gajdó. Színházi diktatúra Magyarországon 1919–1962. In: György Lengyel (ed). *Színház és diktatúra a 20. században*. Budapest: Corvina-OSZMI, 2011, p. 345.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

arts institution with a permanent company, a repertoire, and a fixed playing space.

Repertory theatres possessed a solid image and profile: if you wanted to see an operetta, you would have gone to the Operetta Theatre, if you wished to watch a puppet show, you would have been invited to the State Puppet Theatre, and so on. Each state theatre belonged to the Ministry of Culture, which provided a yearly subsidy. The programme was designed under political control, theatres had to hand in the list of their planned premieres.

The first observable changes in a system that had put its trust in the absolute power of central regulation came after the 1956 revolution against the Soviet rule, at the beginning of the sixties, when performances at the two leading sites for the university theatre movement—Universitas at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and Szeged University Theatre established close to the Southern border of the country in the city of Szeged—had spectacularly (although, on the whole, generating a modest response) diverted from the directives prescribed by the state. This diversion was visible in their choice of plays, too: instead of *trustworthy* authors, they were experimenting with Genet and Ionesco.

In the decades of the one-party state, which determined the functioning of cultural life according to three categories, Promoted, Prohibited, and Permitted, small independent groups playing for a small audience were among the permitted: we could consider these groups the safety valves of the system. The independent formations and the eminent director figures that arose from these (József Ruszt, István Paál, and others) were determined to renew the forms of theatrical expression. After 1968, the regime strove to banish them geographically, too, to the periphery: several were offered artistic leadership at regional state theatres, where it was much easier to supervise their activities. In the eighties, this scene played a decisive role in the redefinition of the Hungarian theatrical language.

Similarly to other Central European countries, the collapse of the Socialist system went hand in hand with fundamental economic changes. Privatisation ran its course, local governments were developed, and in the midst of it all, cultural institutions found themselves in a brand new social and economic environment. The uncertainty in financing and the significant decrease in audience interest were new phenomena. The role of arts and culture was inevitably redefined, as Communism, the common enemy, had disappeared. While radical changes were taking place in various spheres of cultural life, the structure of Hungarian theatre stayed essentially the same. Although it is true that central-state funding was matched up with local financing, this concerned, as before, only repertory theatres with permanent buildings: the independents were, again, left hanging.

## Independents around the regime change

In the summer of 1989, in the midst of the changes, an interesting document was born behind the walls of the Ministry of Culture, under the command of István Szabó, the newly appointed head of the Theatre Department. “A State of Our Theatre Art”, a document of 17 typewritten pages with a six-page-long annex serves as a snapshot of the state of Hungarian theatre of the time, and it speaks of independents as follows:

Among the alternative/independent theatre ventures, we list theatres run by different collectives and associations, which operate as private enterprises, and also the semi-professional groups which grew out of the university theatre movement... On the basis of amateur movements, several groups are mostly popular on university campuses and among young intellectuals and receive modest support. These groups have exerted a certain influence over the past two decades on the professional theatres as well, as the best of them “melted into” the established theatres. One special merit of these groups was that participants often represented an alternative theatre school, conveying a different style, form language and theatre perspective. These groups might become, in the future, an even more robust part of our theatre art. For this, they would need more support—from associations, cultural funds, sponsors, local council subsidies—and also more professional attention.<sup>8</sup>

The document ascertains an accurate description of the situation, and it also prognosticates and advises. But who were the artists and groups that the makers of the document anonymously refer to, many of which were active during the nineties, too? From the groups that outgrew the amateur movement, the afore-mentioned Universitas and Szeged University Theatre both had been in operation since the beginning of the sixties. Szkéné Theatre was opened in 1970 on the second floor of the University of Technology and Economics in Budapest, while Közgáz Klub at the University of Economic Sciences (lead by György Szabó, subsequently the director of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts) became relevant in the eighties (also) due to its international outlook.

An almost entirely young audience, longing for new, brave, experimental work, always succeeded in finding these independently operating locations—which were nevertheless in constant communication with one another. The professional audience, however, with some exceptions, did not reflect too much on what had happened on these forums. Next, I will

8 István Szabó. *The System Went—the Theatres Remained*. In: Attila Szabó, Joanna Krakowska (eds). *Theatre After the Change: And What Was There Before the After? Vol. 1*. Budapest: Creativ Média, 2011, p. 58.

highlight, non-exhaustively, some of the more significant creators or groups of this scene, among them artists whose career has continued even after the changes around 1990. In my intention, these short *résumés* will show that the operation of theatre can be understood only by thinking in processes on the one hand and, on the other hand, that the influence and value of outstanding artists can be identified, through their disciples, decades after these artists have stopped being active.

Among the members of Universitas, led by József Ruszt (1937–2005), I must first mention Péter Halász and István Bálint, later leaders of Lakásszínház (Apartment Theatre) and Squat, and Tamás Fodor, who went on to create Orfeo Studio, then Studio K. Universitas was the first Hungarian company that travelled internationally, and in the context of closed countries one cannot ever stress enough the significance of this possibility: they performed *Karnyóné* in 1965 in Nancy. István Nánay, a critic who followed their travels up close, made the following remark about the university group working on the periphery of the centrally-led theatre system: Universitas “became the mediator of the kind of artistic innovation that they had encountered abroad, so they modernised their performance style and theatrical approach; the chasm between the two kinds of theatre grew even bigger.”<sup>9</sup>

At Universitas, emblematic figures such as Péter Halász and Tamás Fodor learnt a type of oppositional politics that was tightly connected to theatre-making. The groups led by them became, in the seventies, the most critical independent formations in Budapest. The most important performance by Studio K, established in 1974, was perhaps *Woyzeck*, premiered in 1977: performed in multiple locations and partly simultaneously, this work did not clearly separate stage from the auditorium. Fodor was admittedly making political theatre, and in the eighties, he moved, with his entire team, to a regional repertory theatre in Szolnok. After the regime change, he became a liberal member of the parliament, then from the second half of the nineties, he worked as a director for children’s puppet shows and as an actor in independent formations and state theatres, while until recently he has been the artistic director of the rejuvenated Studio K.

Péter Halász (1943–2006) was an internationally well-known, outstanding representative of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde scene.<sup>10</sup> The unpredictable operation of the one-party state is nicely reflected in the fact that despite Fodor committed himself to political theatre, it was Halász who grabbed the attention of the system. László Bérczes asserts that the founding of the Apartment Theatre put Halász in deep waters much more

9 István Nánay. Színpadból kápolna? Az Egyetemi Színpad múltja, jelene, jövője. *Beszélő*, 1991, n. 3, p. 26.

10 For a more in-depth view on Péter Halász’s work before 1990 see: A. Tompa, *Reality Makers. Hungarian Independent Theatre before and after Communism*, p. 6–8.

than his peers, who made allusions and hints in canonical or contemporary dramatic texts:

Each of their performances, manifestations was a question mark: they questioned everything. Reflecting on the arts, this meant: what is theatre?; reflecting on society, it was: what is freedom? They knew no taboos, meaning that their activities were a constant breaking of taboos.<sup>11</sup>

The authorities did not banish them from the country, but they left the door open, and the group took advantage. They spent the 1976–1989 period in Western Europe and America: they founded Squat Theatre in New York which had a profound influence on American avant-garde theatre. When in 1990, Halász returned home, he was accepted into Katona József Theatre, the most prestigious repertory theatre. Here he conducted, most memorably, a month-long project of so-called newspaper theatre, making a new work each day based on the daily news. Although many members of the coming generation thought of themselves as disciples of Halász, his activities after the regime change were not entirely successful. (From the successors one has to mention Vilmos Vajdai, another actor of Katona József Theatre, and his company, TÁP Theatre, who have been active since 1993 and known for constantly experimenting, often radically rethinking the role of the viewer). In 2006, one month before his death, Halász organised his last performance: he literally lay himself in a museum, where his friends and colleagues were given the opportunity to bid farewell to him.

The activities of the University Theatre in Szeged were led by István Paál (1942–1998). From here took off, among others, János Ács, who in 1981 directed *Marat/Sade* in Kaposvár, an emblematic performance of the one-party state era. Paál had romantic, revolutionary ideas about theatre-making, among his ideals were Sándor Petőfi, the iconic poet of the 1848 Hungarian revolution against the Habsburgs, and Che Guevara. The Szeged group, in their 1972 performance entitled *Petőfi-rock*, eliminated the borders between actors and spectators: everyone was a participant, and spectators formed a true community. The performance was presented with great success in Zagreb and Wrocław, respectively, where Paál met Grotowski, who had a deep influence on his work.

István Somogyi also thinks of himself as a student of István Paál. In the eighties, he became a symbolic figure of the Hungarian independent theatre scene, first as the leader of Tanulmány Theatre, then of Arvisura Theatrical Company, both hosted by Szkéné Theatre. His performances

11 László Bérczes. Másszínház Magyarországon 1945-1989. *Színház*, 1996, n. 4, p. 48.



stood in remarkable opposition to the Hungarian theatre's storytelling tradition (*Hungarian Elektra*, *The Master and Margarita*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and so on), and drew greatly not just from folk culture, but also from ancient, spiritual wisdom. The director left the company in 1998, but his actors went on to work in several theatres, most of them in the independent scene. From the perspective of this present study two names are important: from the middle and the end of the nineties Árpád Schilling and Béla Pintér, respectively, started presenting their own performances.

Here, one must speak of the uniquely fertile intellectual environment that the afore-mentioned Szkéné Theatre stood for in the eighties and nineties. The institution that initially worked with and hosted amateur groups gained its distinct image from János Regős, who joined the institution in 1979. In that year the International Meeting of Movement Theatres organised its first edition, while in 1985, the International Dance and Movement Courses also began, and both contributed to the fertilisation of a dance style that for decades had been limited solely to classical ballet and folk dance. The revolution of Hungarian contemporary dance ran its course in the mid- and late eighties due, largely, to the activities at Szkéné.<sup>12</sup> Today we would call this theatre an incubator.

One of the many artists setting off from here where Josef Nadj aka Szkipe. In December 1986, Szkéné hosted the world premiere of *Peking Duck*, a production that established a new genre. A few months later at the Paris premiere, international professionals also took note of Nadj's singular aesthetics, with critics comparing it to the typically Central European thinking of Tadeusz Kantor, Bruno Schulz, and Franz Kafka.

Gábor Goda, also active to this day, started his career at Szkéné with the establishment of Artus Company in 1985.<sup>13</sup> Their first premiere in the house was *The Blind*, based on a text by Michel De Ghelderode, later presented in Vienna, where the artistic director of Wiener Festwochen offered collaboration and further opportunities to the group. The performances of Goda, created through workshops, use astounding visuals and associative imagery instead of linear storytelling. His theatrical thinking aims to dissolve borders: he introduces into his theatre the logic of music, poetry, architecture, visual arts, and installations.

In the mid-eighties, another exceptionally fruitful collaboration, entering international circuits early on, took place at Szkéné. The so-called visual theatre productions of György Árvay, studying visual arts, and Yvette Bozsik, studying classical ballet, are viewed today as the boldest

12 For more on this see Livia Fuchs. The Generation of New Dance. In: Tibor Várszegi (ed). *Fordulatok. Hungarian Theatres 1992. Vol. 1.* Budapest: private edition, 1992, p. 189–206.

13 About early productions of Artus see Tibor Várszegi. The Latest Performances of the Artus Theatre: Sleep Walkers; Turul. In: T. Várszegi (ed). *Fordulatok. Hungarian Theatres 1992. Vol. 1,* p. 213–219.

experimental works of that period. *Living Space* was a work drifting between the realms of performance art and body art and demanded the body profoundly through limitations of movement possibilities. The performance was presented only a few times in Hungary, but made a serious career abroad: after its premiere at the 1991 Edinburgh Festival, it received several further invitations.

Gerzson Péter Kovács also got his first opportunities at Szkéné: while Bozsik used classical ballet and Goda employed visual arts to arrive to a complex notion of theatre, for Kovács the starting point was authentic Hungarian folk dance. The time he spent in France in the eighties and his meeting with contemporary jazz were decisive in working out his artistic credo. TranzDanz, a company he founded in 1987 and that is active to this day, analyses the possibilities of deconstructing Hungarian folk dance.

Csaba Horváth, who is considered the founder of Hungarian physical theatre, also began with folk dance but progressed in a very different direction. He was a dancer for Gerzson Péter Kovács, then he joined Éva Magyar's movement group, Sámán Theatre. Since the end of the nineties he has been going irrevocably his own way: together with actors and dancers, he has been experimenting with the creation of a theatrical language in which bodies, sounds, music and text are equally important. The physical theatre language redefined by Csaba Horváth (and his Forte Company, founded in 2005) uses storytelling, dramaturgy, and the presence of the actor in terms different from that of the Hungarian theatrical tradition. Csaba Horváth, as the head of the Physical Theatre Directing/Choreography Department of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, had a considerable impact on the following generation: young artists from his class have become active and successful artists in the Hungarian theatrical life of the 2010s (e.g. Máté Hegymegi, Kristóf Widder, Péter István Nagy).

The above-mentioned artists, all emphatically going their own individual ways, are related through their common struggle to eliminate the historically rigid separation of theatre and dance: around the regime change, many of them experimented with more and more complex forms of expression. From this circle, we will highlight two names, both of them active to this day. At the beginning of his career, Tamás Juronics—the head of Szeged Contemporary Dance Company, founded in 1993—was in the limelight thanks to his performances that made use of contemporary movement materials, furthermore, he was the head of a regional contemporary dance company that had been, for decades, the only one of its kind. Today, the general audience rates his performances higher than theatre professionals do: similarly to Yvette Bozsik he fell victim to simplification and commercialisation. Among the emblematic figures of this era, I must also remember Pál Frenák, who established his own company in 1999 and created his unique dance language, inspired by a diverse set of sources. His often enigmatic works that treat topics such as sexuality, brutality, and

aggression, loneliness and vulnerability, are based on sign languages and his personal experiences from the Far East.

From today's perspective, it seems that in this period Szkéné was simply unavoidable. Many of the independent artists of the nineties have shown up and worked here. László Hudi, who founded the Moving House Foundation in 1994, was also one of them. It is revealing that while the activities of his company have almost no record in Hungarian theatre history, his groundbreaking performances were recognised and taken into account early on abroad. This was the first Hungarian theatre ever to present in Caracas and Avignon, while their performance, *The Tragedy of Man*, premiered in Berlin. The staggering reticence and incomprehension of the Hungarian critics is connected to the afore-mentioned absolutist text-centred tradition: the Moving House's interest in new technologies and visual expression and their deconstruction of canonic drama texts had no fertile ground in Hungary.

Krétakör Theatre, the most relevant and internationally influential group in Hungarian theatre history after the regime change, was founded in 1995.<sup>14</sup> Árpád Schilling, who in the beginning was still a student of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, managed to develop until the millennium an exemplary mode of operation, a work in which he was joined in 1998 by Máté Gáspár, the executive director and the company's manager. Krétakör Theatre became a coveted and hated model, an independent group which, during its one-and-a-half-decade-long operation, had achieved everything: a stable and continuously growing audience, a wide repertory, a permanent company, numerous awards, festival invitations, and international recognition. In my view, it is symptomatic that, despite all of the above, there were two things they could not have: what they had brought to the table was not enough to get them a permanent playing space and stable state funding.

The early works of Krétakör bore the characteristics of amateur and student theatre, but it was palpable from early on that they will not settle for these conditions. The group that had been building around Schilling quickly overcame its amateur label, while critics paid intense attention even to their early premieres. Following the 1998 premiere of *Baal* in Katona József Theatre and until the discontinuation/disbanding of the company in 2008, the Hungarian critics avidly followed their activities. *Baal* brought European recognition: after guest performances in Strasbourg and Paris, Schilling and his group became returning guests at renowned festivals around Europe and the world: their collaborations with the Avignon Festival and Thomas Ostermeier, respectively, can also be dated to this

14 About the first years of Krétakör Theatre see the essay of the company's dramaturg Anna Veress. The Krétakör Theatre. In: Péter Fábri (ed). *A Shabby Paradise. Contemporary Hungarian Theatre 2004*. Budapest: Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute, 2004, p. 134–140.

period. Collective creation, community work, and approaching canonic texts with new associations were trademarks of their activities. This latter component—next to professional marketing strategies first used by Krétakör in the independent scene—played a crucial part in building a loyal and enthusiastic audience: they experimented with new forms in their interpretations of classical texts by Brecht, Molière, Shakespeare, Miller, Büchner, Chekhov or Ferenc Molnár, which felt not only fresh, playful, and entertaining, but also thought-provoking. It was understandably met with bewilderment when in 2008 Schilling disbanded the ensemble, to pursue a career of an organiser of creative community games and, for the past few years, a relentless critique of the right-wing government.

Similarly to Schilling, Béla Pintér, too, started his theatrical socialising in István Somogyi's Arvisura Theatrical Company.<sup>15</sup> I have saved him for the end, because at the present moment he is, beyond dispute, the highest-rated Hungarian independent artist. His performances sell out months in advance, his yearly premieres are social events, and although he sometimes receives harsh reviews from the critics, who are well acquainted with his aesthetics, his achievement in theatre is truly unparalleled.

Béla Pintér is one of the few Hungarian all-around theatre-makers: the texts of his performances are always written and directed by him, he has a notable influence on the musical universe of many of his shows, and he tailors almost all the main male characters for himself. Although the composition of the ensemble has changed a lot in the last two decades, most of the performances are still played with the original cast. Since the foundation of Béla Pintér and Company in 1998, the chamber theatre of Szkéné has been their home, although currently, they perform in almost half a dozen locations around Budapest.

Since the beginning, Pintér has picked his topics from everyday Hungarian reality. His somewhat sketchy characters are greeted as old, not-so-cherished acquaintances. Many of his works are autobiographical, while some of his recurring topics include domestic violence, alcoholism, and abuse. In the 2010s, his interest turned to the realms of public life and politics: apart from being, next to Schilling, one of the most unrelenting critiques of right-wing governments, his performances deal outspokenly with the burning questions of Hungary's past and present. The nineties, the period that this study analyses, signify the first steps for Pintér: his first serious success happened in the new millenium, with *The Peasant Opera*, on the programme since 2002, that transposes the motifs of *King Oedipus* into the world of a Transylvanian peasant. But this is already the beginning of another story.

15 About the aesthetics and early history of Béla Pintér and Company see Krisztina Kovács. No Man's Land: Béla Pintér and Company. In: P. Fábri (ed). *A Shabby Paradise. Contemporary Hungarian Theatre 2004*, p. 125–133.

## Independent theatre and money: financing anomalies back then and now

In 1984, in a significantly softer dictatorship compared to previous years, the Soros Foundation together with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences set up a committee for the strengthening of civil society. The aim of the committee was to improve Hungarian scientific and cultural life and support artistic activities. The organisation gave a serious initial push to companies (e.g. to the afore-mentioned Arvisura and to representatives of the contemporary dance life stirring up in the mid-eighties). Artists that had socialised in the time of the one-party state experienced for the first time in their lives what it meant to work not as a favour but for a fee.

Subsequently, Soros Foundation launched several sub-programmes to support performing artists, their managers, and their host venues. The most significant of these was the studio theatre programme, which between 1995 and 2003 supported more than a hundred new premieres each year. The most successful productions were presented by critics Livia Fuchs and István Nánay at the Studio Theatre Days (Stúdiószínházi Napok) yearly mini-festival.

Also in the mid-eighties, the Municipality of Budapest launched cultural grants in which independents often participated with success. The city administration recognised the critical role that these groups played in the cultural life of the Hungarian capital, and concluded that they were deserving of support. No such significant initiative is known to be taken place on the level of local governments, a fact that is perhaps also related to the invisibility of independents outside of Budapest.<sup>16</sup>

The establishment of the National Cultural Fund (NCF) in 1993 serves as a milestone in independent financing: “Operating as an independent fund served to keep the tendering system at arm’s length from the state so that it would not be dependent on the momentary state of the budget.”<sup>17</sup> The NCF, as the manager of a calculable budget, plays a strategic role in the financing of the whole of cultural life. One could only apply to the Fund for the implementation of projects, not for the bigger volume of year-long operational expenses. Grants are judged by separate boards in each domain.

16 The Southern Hungarian city of Szeged, mentioned previously in relation to Szeged University Theatre, is a notable exception. Although THEALTER Festival is not its direct successor, it does nurture the spirit of the seventies. Since 1991, this festival has been the most important place for presenting independent Hungarian theatre.

17 Andrea Tariska. A függetlenek finanszírozásának története Magyarországon a nyolcvanas évektől napjainkig. Izabel Rupányi (ed.). *Alternatívok – Az első száz év*. Budapest: BESZT Egyesület, 2011, p. 75. See further: Tamás Jászay. *Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre* [online]. *Critical Stages*, 2013, n. 8. Available at: <http://www.critical-stages.org/8/finita-la-commedia-the-debilitation-of-hungarian-independent-theatre-hungary/> (accessed 20. 02. 2020).

In the mid-nineties, the constantly renamed Ministry of Culture announced a so-called operational grant aimed at the independent sector. Theatre and dance studios that were not state-subsidised or financed by local governments had to correspond to ever-changing tender conditions when handing in yearly reports of their activities, plans, and the serviceability of the public money awarded to them. Since its establishment two decades ago, the system has stayed in use without ever truly being reformed: while it would be right to expect such a system to respond relatively quickly to the changes and transformations of the performing arts scene, the tediously moving Ministry of Culture has neither a wish, nor a concrete notion regarding the matter.

Here I would like to refer back to the thoughts regarding the inevitably oppositional nature of “othertheatre”, cited in the introduction of this study.<sup>18</sup> Independents have always served as the illegitimate children of the government. The state’s tendering system does not make possible a true living, only a vegetative state with parenteral nutrition. It is obvious that the precariousness of the Hungarian independent performing arts scene is here to stay, which is related significantly to the anomalies of a tendering system that, although at its inception had induced definite changes, has since become senescent. The development of independent theatres is impeded furthermore by exorbitant state involvement and increasingly undisguised pursuits of centralising. In Hungary, there are almost no forms of private patronage, the theatrical structure that evolved after the Second World War and through which independents trapped outside the state structure were slowly let to survive, did not support introducing private equity. The shortcomings in this field have since become irreversible handicaps.

The nineties were the era of great expectations, and not just in Hungary. In the seventies and eighties, promising processes started in the realm of independent performing arts and settled in the decade after the regime change. The significant theatre-makers, in view of their Hungarian and international achievements, rightly hoped that the 2000s will bring rest, accountability and programmability. They were wrong.

18 Cf. with the conclusion of Andrea Tompa’s above-cited article: “Drawing on its rich pre-1989 traditions, the alternative theatre has quickly adopted and adapted postmodern languages to pay homage to local and western avant-garde art, as well as to swiftly and effectively attack continuous political and social problems.” A. Tompa. *Reality Makers. Hungarian Independent Theatre before and after Communism*, p. 16.

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### Abstract

Hungarian performing arts are represented today almost solely by independent artists and companies. My study aims to uncover the historical reasons for this phenomenon, going back to the 1990s. After discussing the variations of the term “independent”, the study gives a historical context of the Hungarian performing arts system after World War II. The prominent figures of independent performing groups of the 1990s had connections with theatre-making at universities. Despite their peripheral position, these were the groups that first represented Hungarian theatre abroad. Due to the insecurity in financing in Hungary, the independents always tried to nurture international relations carefully, e.g. Péter Halász and Squat Theatre became world-famous after leaving Hungary. A small studio theatre called Szkéné had a defining role in initiating artists' careers: Josef Nadj aka Szkipe, Gábor Goda (Artus Company), György Árvay and Yvette Bozsik, Gerzson Péter Kovács (TranzDanz) or Csaba Horváth (Forte Company) all have or had relations with Szkéné. From the dance scene of 1990s, it is necessary to mention Tamás Jurónics, Pál Frenák, while among the theatre artists there are László Hudi (Moving House Foundation), Árpád Schilling (Krétakör Theatre) or Béla Pintér (Béla Pintér and Company) as leaders of the most prestigious groups. In the closing sub-chapter of my study, I deal with the financial context of the independent performing scene in the 1990s, setting up a parallel with the present situation.

**Key words:** alternative theatre, independent performing arts, contemporary dance, funding for culture, Hungary after the changes, othertheatre, amateur movement, collaborative work

