

NTQ Reports: Theatre in Hungary 2014

doi:10.1017/S0266464X14000724

THEATRE IN HUNGARY 1

Jozefina Komporaly

Showcase in Budapest

Report on the annual showcase at the Katona József Theatre, held in Budapest from 30 May to 1 June 2014.

THE ANNUAL showcase of the best productions in the current season at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest took place between 30 May and 1 June 2014. This event is one of the rare occasions when Hungarian mainstream theatre makes a concerted effort to court a non-indigenous audience, and invites a selection of theatre professionals (critics, producers, and directors) from abroad to view the productions in the circumstances in which they were originally created, and engage with the Hungarian theatre establishment. As with any festival, the organizers hope that in forging these links some of the productions will have an afterlife elsewhere, and potential collaboration may ensue with other theatres, directors, and practitioners. For the duration of the showcase, productions are presented with English-language surtitles and, as a result, in addition to the invited theatre specialists, the audience also includes a cross-section of foreign nationals who have an appetite for theatre while in Budapest, but who would otherwise find theatre productions in Hungarian inaccessible.

This year's showcase not only attempted to bring together some of the most acclaimed productions of the season but also to provide a sense of the variety of Hungarian theatre-making. The Katona József Theatre is one of the most respected art theatres in the Hungarian theatre landscape, and is well known for its carefully chosen repertoire (Hungarian and international), its high production values, and its access to the best of the established and emerging acting talent in the country. It is also a theatre led by some of the most influential directors in Hungary, having been formerly under the charge of Gábor Zsámbéki and regularly staging productions by Tamás Ascher and Péter Gothár.

The theatre's current artistic director is Gábor Máté, who combines a flourishing career in acting with that of directing and training the future generation of theatre-makers at the Hungarian Academy of Theatre Arts. Last but not least, the

Katona József is also a theatre that actively nurtures new writing talent, and pays focused attention to the importance of dramaturgical input in the creation of its productions. In this sense, the role of the theatre's resident dramaturgs, Tamara Török and Annamária Radnai, is highly visible and of central importance. Their contribution to the finalizing of dramatic texts utilized by the theatre is crucial, and their names are credited on a broad spectrum of interventions, ranging from dramaturg to adapter and translator.

The showcase brought together five productions over three days, including a performance devised collectively by the company (*Illaberek*), a production of a trendy international author (*Martyrs* by Marius von Mayenburg), two politically charged versions of canonical plays (*A nép ellensége – An Enemy of the People*, by Ibsen, and *Fényevők – Children of the Sun*, by Gorky), and a stage adaptation of a recent Hungarian work of fiction (*Ahol a farkas is jó – Where Even the Wolf Is Well-Behaved*). Through this selection, the theatre was able to convey its stylistic and thematic range, offer an insight into its working practices from collective creation, adaptations, and text-based theatre, and to introduce the audience to its well-oiled and highly talented company.

The showcase also allowed access to the directorial visions of major names in contemporary Hungarian theatre, including Tamás Ascher (*Children of the Sun*), András Dömötör (*Martyrs*), Péter Gothár (*Where Even the Wolf Is Well-Behaved*), Gábor Máté (*Illaberek*), and Gábor Zsámbéki (*An Enemy of the People*).

Over and above this variety, the selection also shared a common denominator: a more or less overt protest against the current political climate in Hungary. The Katona József Theatre has been long known as a bastion of anti-establishment views, and its hosting on 26 May 2014 of a heated debate on the social and political role of theatre illustrates this stance. The theatre thus created a platform for the expression of, on the whole, contradictory views from the director of the Hungarian National Theatre (Attila Vidnyászky), the director of a leading provincial theatre (Pál Oberfrank, of Petőfi Theatre Veszprém), a key figure on the independent theatre scene (Árpád Schilling, founder of internationally acclaimed Krétakör company), and a high-profile director of the Katona József Theatre itself (Tamás Ascher), confirming its status as a major advocate of artistic independence and non-accountability to political leadership.

In a country where the director of the National Theatre – and of other major cultural institutions – is appointed under political pressures and

Scenes from
Illaberek.
Photos by
Dániel Dömölky,
courtesy of
Katona József
Theatre,
Budapest.



solely from supporters of the regime in power, it is particularly important to create at least pockets of cultural resistance that offer an alternative reading of current events.

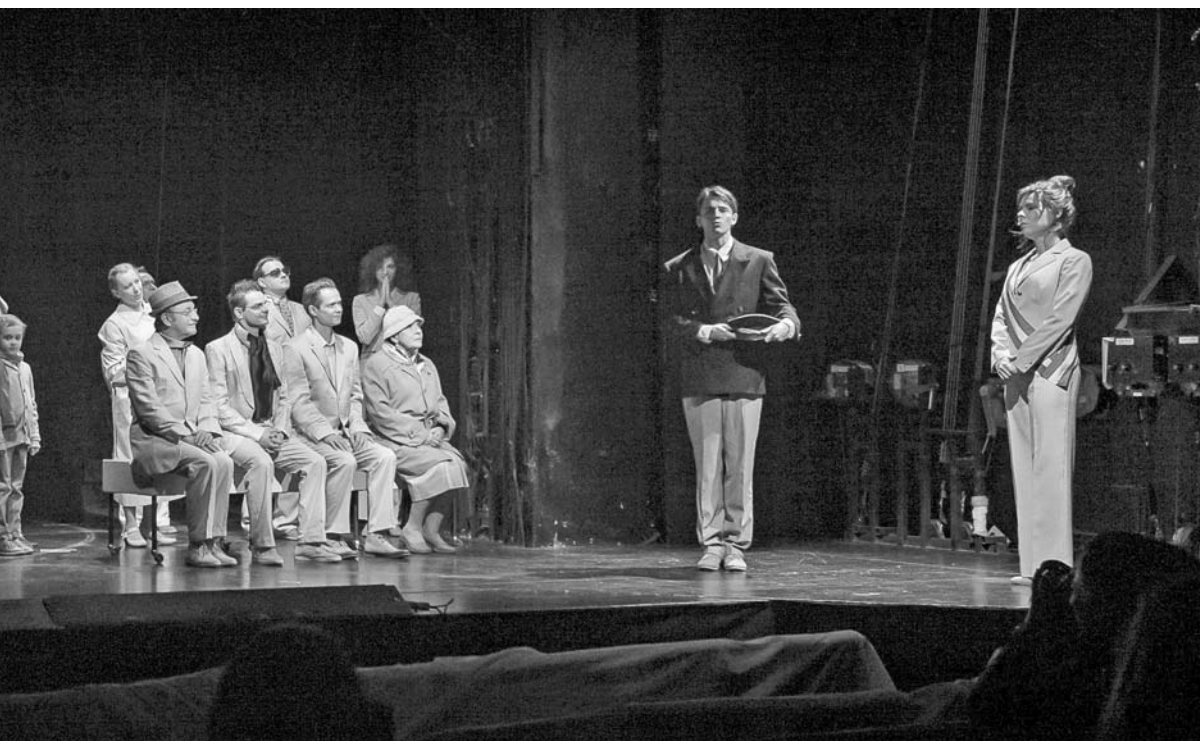
The showcase ensured this parallel interpretation of history was present in the programme, and to this end either turned to current phenomena such as migration or updated classical texts with a subtext of contemporary relevance. *Illaberek*, for instance, offered a humorous and enjoyable, yet highly topical meditation on the scale of emigration from Hungary. This phenomenon has been ongoing for years, but it has now reached alarming proportions and has become the subject of political concern, sociological studies, and artistic interpretation in various media.

To a degree resonating with the recent documentary film series *Menjék vagy maradjak? (Should I Stay or Should I Go?)*,¹ the Katona production brought together a series of loosely connected short scenes devised by the company led by Gábor Máté and drawing on a variety of scenarios inspired by real-life events, some experienced by the actors themselves and others encountered via research. All feature Hungarians of various social backgrounds in their quest for a better life abroad, or offer interpretations of why staying in present-day Hungary is, if not entirely impossible, then deeply problematic.

The production does not attempt to transgress clichés or stereotyping in terms of choosing its protagonists, in fact it capitalizes on the audience

being familiar with these types; however, it strives to offer an accurate reflection of the problem and of attitudes towards the newfound possibility of leaving and the former norm and moral duty of remaining. The scene bringing together the aspiring professional (a gay gynaecologist who has left his new husband behind), the disillusioned prostitute, and the clueless blue-collar worker in the same downtrodden space in London is hilarious and moving at the same time, and makes the pertinent point that people of all walks of life are facing a similar problem: the need to reassess their goals under changing economic and political circumstances and to act according to their best abilities to fulfil them.

The flexible and imaginative set features a stack of suitcases that transforms into all sorts of domestic and public environments, and keeps the urgency to leave top of the agenda at all times. The title 'illaberek' is a well-known Hungarian idiom which instantly connotes the idea of absconding but also invokes a certain mythical dimension and playfulness, as the term is a staple of fairy tales and hence familiar to all ethnic Hungarians from early childhood. The production alludes to its own topicality by integrating footage from a short vox-pop conducted previously on what subject the public would most wish to see explored in a production, and then develops the thread of migration, as suggested by the respondents. Whether the outcome is quite as sharp a social and political critique as claimed in



some of the pro-government press is debatable: it highlights a major problem in no uncertain terms from the position of an influential mainstream cultural establishment, and in this sense is an important and bold contribution to the debate. On the other hand, emigration has been a hot

topic for years and, arguably, a production flagging this up as late as 2013 smacks of time delay. Moreover, by May 2014 Hungary had entered into the second term in office of a national-conservative government, whose brief referencing via the projection of documentary

footage may establish a direct connection between cause and effect, but can hardly be considered cutting-edge political satire.

Schaubühne dramaturg and internationally rated playwright Marius von Mayenburg's 2012 play *Martyrs* was a very different proposition. Billed as a new play by a trendy German author, the production was staged in the theatre's studio space (Kamra) and signalled its ongoing interest in non-indigenous contemporary theatre practice. Mayenburg's play addresses a series of universally valid problems including not only the ubiquity of terror and the role of religious faith in contemporary society, but also the clash between generations, the fallibility of the education system, and the complexities of sexual awakening. The play has become, in the short while since its premiere, a staple of the international theatre scene.

The version at the Katona steered clear of locating itself in a recognizable Hungarian milieu, focusing instead on the contemporary relevance of the multiple issues raised and on conveying plausible human situations superbly rendered by world-class acting. In parallel, however, the production also concentrated on drawing attention to the play's rich subtext, and this is where the connections with present-day Hungary become more pertinent.

Mayenburg's exploration of fanaticism and extremism is immediately relevant in the current political climate in Hungary, and so is the interrogation of what is permissible and forbidden in a democracy. The spectacular results achieved by the extreme right in the general and European elections of May 2014, together with the prevailing intolerance in Hungarian society towards minority rights of most descriptions, makes plays such as Mayenburg's perfectly applicable to the local context.

Although set in a German educational framework, the protagonist's religious fanaticism is an easily recognizable parallel to racist behaviour as witnessed on a regular basis in Hungary; however, since this parallel is only implicit rather than explicit, the production managed to sidestep the negative criticism that productions such as *Illaberek* generated for its overt discussion of an urgent social problem. Although *Martyrs* is on many levels a thesis play that demands a certain degree of naturalistic acting and staging, the production offers sufficient occasions where the pressures of this obligation can be relaxed and performers and audience can enjoy subversive comedic moments. The scene of the biology lesson where the pupils are being shown how to apply a condom on a carrot is a case in point. In this way, the production avoids becoming agit-prop or even acquiring a persistent moralizing tone, and can continue to exist in the realm of the much broader and safer genre of family and socially committed drama.

Traditionally, Hungarian theatre has thrived on the domestication of international classics, and the productions of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Gorky's *Children of the Sun* were no exception to this rule. Turning to historical material has been a staple of theatre practitioners particularly during the communist regime, where – under the guise of a foreign author and context – a fresh subtext could be developed that actually spoke about current problems and situations that would have been censored if overtly addressed.

Gábor Zsámbéki's production of *An Enemy of the People* follows the pattern of this type of contestation, as he transforms Ibsen's play about idealism and political rivalry into a reflection on democracy versus dictatorship, the freedom of speech and the expression of civil liberties in a contemporary Hungarian framework. The version is a seriously edited one, including elements written by the director and dramaturg Tamara Török. Running just under two hours without an interval, it focuses on the polarization between the two Stockman brothers, the politician and the committed intellectual. Zsámbéki realizes the conflict of good and evil on multiple levels, not least through casting and costume, opposing the groomed and calculated appearance of János Kulka, clad in smart suits and carrying an imposing briefcase, to the casual and approachable look of Ernő Fekete, sporting fluffy hair, knitted jumpers, and open-necked shirts.

The scene of the town meeting is essentially one of confrontation between opposing political and ethical platforms, and is the backbone of Zsámbéki's take on Ibsen. The spectators of the production, seated in the auditorium of the theatre's main space, are faced by the spectators of the onstage confrontation, sat on Expressionist-style highly elevated and tilted chairs, watching the performance within the performance. This metatheatrical element, superimposing several interpretations of what constitutes performance, is reinforced by the integration of live and documentary footage projected on to a movable screen that constantly reconfigures the performance space throughout the scene. An onstage cameraman films the speakers and the audience, and this is instantly conveyed via a live feed on to the movable screen that acts simultaneously as a divide between the two political camps and a platform for the mayor's professionally produced propaganda material.

Reflecting the 2014 Hungarian election campaign, these images recreate real-life situations featuring the Hungarian Prime Minister and key politicians, this time, however, centring on the figure of the mayor as the ultimate protector of his community, equally available to help old ladies cross the street and lead the evacuation process at the time of imminent flooding. This subversive use of political propaganda translates



Further scenes from *Illaberek*. Photos by Dániel Dömölky, courtesy of Katona József Theatre, Budapest.

Ibsen's parable on the opposition between two poles to a literal level and, together with the metaphor of the sewer imploding on to the stage in the final scene, ensures that no audience members leave the theatre without being offered a clear sense of the director's political allegiance. As most characters get soiled in the dirty water overwhelming the stage, the production's final image is of this contaminated flood seeping down into the auditorium, about to reach the spectators, while onstage even the future is compromised, with the doctor's young son falling face down, incapacitated, into the tainted deluge.

Zsámbéki's production also amplifies the strand in Ibsen's play that deals with the role of the media, accentuating the conversion of the town's newspaper from an ally of the doctor, and hence a platform for free speech, to a mouthpiece of the governing power. Péter Gothár's production of *Where Even the Wolf Is Well-Behaved* does not deal with the media as such, but centres on a process of investigation. This stage adaptation based on a recently published work of fiction – the documentary novel *Aprószentek (The Holy Innocents)* by Szilárd Rubin – deals with the social and political climate of Hungary in the toughest

period of the communist regime, the 1950s, and explores the parallel quests for a number of missing young women, for the perpetrator(s) of these crimes, and for a sense of transparency in history.

The former two are motivated by unfulfilled love and the latter by a sense of urgency, and the production addresses the issues of guilt and blame, pinpointing the dangers of associating particular social, cultural, or ethnic categories with criminal behaviour. This tendency has been a recurrence in contemporary Hungary, where various minorities including the Jews and the Roma are consistently ostracized for the evils and shortcomings of society. The title on one level refers to the innocent victims of a serial murder and of the horrible post-war period; but on another it addresses human vulnerability under dictatorial conditions. The young woman accused for the crimes was most probably merely an accomplice of a Soviet soldier; however, this fact was hushed up by the authorities and the archival material on the case remained inaccessible.

Having said this, Gothár's production successfully circumvents didacticism as his imaginative studio piece can be interpreted and enjoyed on several levels: it negotiates a broad generic spectrum from cabaret to period drama, love story to murder mystery, and family drama to verbatim theatre. Its fragmented structure, the multiple and often contradictory scenarios that attempt to unravel what is essentially a detective thriller, together with the performers slipping in and out of various roles, maintain a fast-paced tempo that counterbalances the somewhat obsessive note of the text on which the production was based.

However, the almost fanatical obsession with which the author of the source text, Szilárd Rubin, dealt with the investigation, dedicating forty years of his life to unravel the case and write his novel, provides an indirect and highly topical commentary on current affairs. As a story about compulsion and fanaticism, the production reflects on a major psychological as well as politically charged peril, and has the qualities of a subtle yet authoritative warning.

Billed as the highlight of the showcase and scheduled for the final night, Tamás Ascher's production of Gorky's *Children of the Sun* – literally *Eaters of Light* – returned the focus of attention to perhaps the most established and widely encountered practice in Hungarian theatre, the staging of canonical drama. Opting for this production to close the showcase was in the event justified not only by prior but subsequent critical acclaim. Shortly in the wake of the showcase, the Katona József Theatre reconfirmed its status as a major player on the Hungarian theatre scene by winning key awards at POSZT (Pécsi Országos Színházi Találkozó), a major annual forum for theatre institutions operating in the Hungarian language and reuniting companies from Hungary itself and

the surrounding countries.² Gorky's play – part of the playwright's so-called trilogy on intellectuals – was translated and adapted for this occasion by the theatre's resident dramaturg Annamária Radnai and, unlike the Ibsen production, was billed from the outset as case of overt stage adaptation. The production relocates Gorky's play written in 1905 to the period between the 1960s and the 1980s, discussing societal segregation and charting the alienation of the privileged from the problems of other social categories.

Exploring the conflict between mundane problems and lofty ideals, the production interrogates the possibility of bridging the gap between social and indeed economic classes, but refrains from offering a didactic response. Instead, it invites the audience to ponder on the matter, and take action accordingly in their own lives. Ascher's production argues that the discrepancy between the wealthy and the poor has not diminished significantly since Gorky's time, and in the current global economic crisis is more topical than ever. For Ascher, the difference between the two worlds is reminiscent of the situation in Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* where monsters invade another world: this is the deplorable pattern we adopt in our own social behaviour, where despite occasional good intentions, lack of compassion and understanding can lead to more harm than service.

Overall, the 2013–14 showcase at the Katona demonstrates the vitality of mainstream Hungarian theatre-making, suggesting its variety in terms of artistic methods and provenance of material, and indicating the talent of the theatre professionals involved. The theatre plays to nearly full houses on most occasions, which suggests broad audience appeal, and greater use of English-language surtitling would boost popularity among a non-indigenous spectatorship. The theatre's socially and politically committed agenda is a welcome aspect of the current Hungarian theatre landscape, and forthcoming opportunities for addressing topical concerns with an even bolder politics and perhaps less overt declaration of intent would further enhance both civic engagement and artistic credibility.

Notes and References

1. *Menjek vagy maradjak? (Should I Stay or Should I Go?)* is a documentary series initiated in 2013 by the independent film-makers Imre Loránd Balázs, Józsa László, and Hernáth Csaba, with the aim of examining the trend of migration from Hungary, especially among the young generation. To date they have completed two episodes, focusing on the life of recent Hungarian emigrants living in New York and London, with forthcoming locations including Berlin and Barcelona.

2. *Fényevők* won the award for best supporting actress (Adél Jordán), best director (Tamás Ascher), and best musical score (Márton Kovács).