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Contemporaries in the Drawer?

Professional Conference on the State
of Hungarian Drama Today

Among the masterpieces of our national drama, some works that are considered among the greatest today were hidden in desk drawers for years, even decades. *Bánk Bán* was first performed as late as eighteen years after it was written (in 1833, in Kassa), but it did not really enter the literary and theatrical landscape until the Revolution of 1848-1849. *The Tragedy of Man* waited even longer, twenty-three years after it was written, Ede Paulay staging it at the National Theatre in 1883, which was an extremely daring undertaking at the time. It is also well known that Mihály Vörösmarty did not live to see the premiere of *Csongor és Tünde* in 1879, which was also directed by Paulay. Forty-nine years elapsed between the play being written and its first performance.

On the 23rd of May, 2022, the Hungarian Academy of Arts organised a conference on the state of contemporary Hungarian drama, entitled "Contemporaries in the drawer", in an attempt to address the question as to how well new Hungarian plays of recent decades are finding their way onto the stage, and how this compares with the situation in other European countries.

The situation in Hungary

In an impassioned speech, playwright József Kiss, the main organiser of the conference, affirmed the description of the situation as given in the title: in the last ten years, thirty-nine theatres have announced as few as thirty-nine contemporary Hungarian premieres, with an average of one per theatre every ten years. The programmes of twenty permanent theatres in the countryside and eighteen in Budapest show that the number of premieres of full-length contemporary Hungarian plays for adults performed on the main stage is remarkably low. Nationally accredited theatres have fared no better than the national

average, and the fluctuations in the number of performances do not indicate any conceptual trend. Kiss relates this negative picture to the crisis concerning drama as a thoughtful, sovereign work of art: discourse on theatre increasingly refers to texts that are merely the raw material of theatrical performance, rather than the backbone. The excuse offered by the theatres is that due to the season schedule, which is tight, and the pressure to sell out houses, they are compelled to select works by well-known authors that guarantee sure success. At the same time, there is a demand from audiences for fresh, high-quality and accessible performances that speak a modern language. According to Kiss, a possible solution would require mentoring and scholarship programmes, which would continue in the form of a career model, while at the same time theatres should be given financial incentives to stage contemporary Hungarian productions. He recalled the *József Katona Tender*, which was launched in 2001 but which has unfortunately been forgotten since then.

Relying on the data of the Theatre Data Repository, which was developed by the National Theatre History Museum and Institute, I have examined the aggregated data of Hungarian premieres from the last fifty years, which may somewhat clarify the picture. The Repository currently contains nearly forty-six thousand theatrical performances, with a steep increase every decade. From the 1970's to the present day, Hungarian authors account for nearly 50% of all performances, so the number of performances of Hungarian works is commensurate with the growth of the theatre system. Although what is meant by a contemporary author is far from easy to define, it is telling that the number of works by authors who are currently still living has increased dramatically since the 1990's, compared to the essentially stagnant number of presentations of "classical" Hungarian playwrights. Performances of living authors more than doubled in 2010 compared to the 1990's. From the 2000's, the total number of performances of the most frequently staged authors has significantly increased, with the result that works by "established" authors are performed more frequently and in more venues than in previous decades. From another perspective, however, the pool of authors whose works have been played has widened, as the number of authors who have had at least six of their plays staged is also rising sharply. This otherwise welcome diversification may also have the consequence that dramatic masterpieces that attract large audiences, and that are performed in several theatres and in many versions, are less likely to appear. Thus, the figures from the Theatre Repository may not contradict the conclu-

sions drawn by József Kiss to any great degree, particularly since, in many cases, the adaptor, or stage writer, is also credited as the author.

Ottó A. Bodó employed a similar methodology to summarise the stage presence of contemporary Hungarian authors from Transylvania. He examined ten Transylvanian permanent theatres, with 60% of a total of 380 contemporary performances being the works of Hungarian authors, while the proportion of Transylvanian Hungarian authors amounted to 15%. His presentation revealed that the situation among Hungarian-language theatres in Transylvania is no better than in Hungary: the scarcity of contemporary performances in the fixed season ticket system can also be explained by the lack of interest on the part of directors under the age of forty-five. The percentage of those under the age of thirty who are receptive to contemporary texts is approximately 7.8%, which rises to 17% for those under the age of forty-five. Young directors are more inclined to turn from world literature to contemporary drama.

The European outlook

Ákos Németh, playwright and chairman of the newly-formed Playwrights' Roundtable, reviewed the programmes of Austrian, German, French, Belgian and English theatres and drew attention to the dominance of contemporary authors. The Deutsches Theater in Berlin, for example, stages twenty performances a week in May, with full houses, of which only three are classical plays, the rest being contemporary drama. The programme of the Schaubühne theatre featured only one single classical author, and four of the eight performances this season have been premieres of contemporary plays. Yet many premieres are also staged in Vienna, Zurich, Brussels, and London. The Comédie Française seeks contemporary works in a programmatic way: when an author submits a play, it is read by a group of leading actors who may or may not recommend the text for performance. What is more, London's Royal Court Theatre has been organising workshops and artist-in-residence programmes for international contemporary playwrights for decades.

György Vidovszky has presented a case study from Ireland, drawing attention to the curious contradiction that while Irish drama is one of the country's most significant cultural "export items" worldwide, Irish theatre is largely unknown to the world. He spoke about the well-known predecessors and contemporaries: the names of Murphy, Friel, Carr, Kilroy, and McPherson were mentioned, as well

as the best known, Martin McDonagh. The latter is highly controversial because although he is seen as a fresh and strong articulator of Irish identity on the world stage, the author is in fact of predominantly English identity and is less accepted by the Irish as their spokesman. It is possible that there is an image of Ireland that only exists in literature.

Patricia Pász, dramaturge and literary translator, a mediator and expert in Polish culture, has presented a unique practice in our region, which supports the birth, dramaturgical polishing, and rapid staging of contemporary drama. The playwright Tadeusz Słobodzianek and the Drama Laboratory that he created are credited with the generational change that occurred at the turn of the 2000's and gave a fresh impetus to Polish drama. Weekly workshops feature readings with young playwrights and directors, to test the dramaturgical and stage viability of new texts. The texts that are corrected during the workshop will be performed in a closed rehearsal, with instructions from the director. The author and director will then continue to work in readings that are open to the public. Finally, the text, which will have been reworked several times, will be performed by leading actors in one of Warsaw's theatres. To date, the Laboratory's workshops have analysed nearly three hundred new plays, with the participation of approximately ninety directors, seventy playwrights, a thousand actors and a hundred external experts. As a result of their joint work, more than seventy recent Polish plays, which have since proved to be significant, have been staged in Poland. In the last two decades, a number of other forms of support have also appeared: the Drama Writing Programme distributes six-monthly grants to contemporary Polish playwrights, while the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage also supports the staging of their plays.

In her summary, Patricia Pász asked: "Where, when and how did the Polish 'dramatic regime change' rush past us? Perhaps when the Poles had the courage to decentralise culture, risking the expected losses, to put civil initiatives on a stable footing, and since then continue to provide substantial funding for it, or to place the most important theatrical and literary institutions in competent professional hands, independently of the current government policy? Or when they dared to combine professionalism with business considerations (also) in culture, while at the same time voting for their national traditions and self-conscious Polishness?"

Authors, directors, and theatre managers

In a speech entitled “Why do we sometimes write plays for ourselves?”, director Géza Bodolay illustrated his own working method, in which classic dramatic texts are sometimes so radically altered during the staging process that they can almost be considered contemporary plays. Among the many professional and common meanings of the (theatrical) piece, the speaker stressed the concept of the piece as a fragment: “That we write our texts for ourselves, along with everything else, is not a question – two of the great authors of our last century, László Németh wrote and edited *The Witness (Tanú)* and Dezső Szabó the *Ludas Máttyás* booklets alone.” Bodolay considers it an inevitable task of the director to constantly reformulate the text for the stage. As examples, he cited his own productions of plays by Bulgakov, Molière, Schimmelpfennig, Mikszáth, Jarry and Zsigmond Móricz that he has directed.

Tamás Bank, director of the Játékszín theatre, asserted that, from a theatre manager’s point of view, a theatre that is essentially described as a tabloid theatre may also provide a platform for domestic, contemporary authors. In recent years, István Csukás, Károly Szakonyi, Csaba Székely and Vajk Sente have all represented Hungarian playwrights in private theatres.

The closing discussion in the conference, which was chaired by dramaturge Brigitta Szokolai, concerned playwriting tenders and grants. The István Örkény Playwriting Scholarship, which has been in place in its present form since 1998, supports playwrights under the age of forty in writing their draft within one year, if their application is successful. The two participants in the discussion, Andrea Pass and János Antal Horváth, have won this scholarship several times. The greatest problem with the scholarship is that it does not cover the costs of the theatrical representation of the texts produced. The case of the two young playwrights is fortunate: their works have been staged, albeit only under their own direction. Both state with conviction that they would strongly wish to attend the presentation and wonder what someone else has read from their lines. Two of Andrea Pass’s plays were brought to the stage as winners of the Staféta tender, which she won immediately after being awarded the Örkény scholarship, and which then allowed several of her plays, which are now out of competition, to be presented. From the very beginning, János Antal Horváth has only been able to write independently “in addition”, his everyday life being occupied with writing series and dramaturgical work alongside other directors.

Sometimes he stages his own plays or translations, renting small independent venues, which are far from being profitable.

In addition to the Örkény scholarship, the Open Forum, the play development programme of the Guild of Theatre Dramaturges, has been in operation for thirty-six years. On average, twenty critics, peers, directors, writers, and dramaturges work on the selected texts, and in an ideal case two different companies or voluntarily recruited teams present the work, in its half-finished and final form, but without the existential security that would aid the creative period. This is the method that the National Theatre's playwriting mentoring programme, now endowed with an allowance, is designed to follow. Additionally, there are occasional grants offered by the NKA (the National Cultural Fund), the EMMI (the Ministry of Human Resources), the MMA (the Hungarian Academy of Arts), and the Theatre College, and scholarships for translators and literary translators, which relieve budding playwrights of their immediate financial problems for a few months or half a year; or drama tenders, which may offer hope that the finished work will also be presented.

According to Andrea Pass, the fierce competition forces those who are beginning their careers in this field to express their vision and originality in a great work, to demonstrate their talents with a work of such gravitas as Othello. János Horváth is examining the reasons behind this apparent lack of interest in contemporary texts in domestic director training, or rather the reasons for its shortcomings. This perhaps because Hungarian audiences, similarly to their German and Irish counterparts, also want "the new story, the never-heard-before, here and now, about their 21st century selves" (Horváth 2022).

- János Antal Horváth. *What is a scholarship worth if it is Örkény?* Round-table discussion at the "Contemporaries in the drawer" conference (moderator: Brigitta Szokolai). The Hungarian Academy of Arts, Theatre Arts Division, Pesti Vigadó, Budapest 23 May 2022.