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Contemporary dramas and their authors at the 15th jubilee DESZKA Festival

DESZKA Festival, which has focused on contemporary Hungarian drama since its inception in 2006, was held for the first time since 2019 in an interpersonal and reorganised form, welcoming theatre-makers and the wider audience for the fifteenth time this year at the Csokonai National Theatre in Debrecen. The more than one-week-long event series, which took place between 9 and 18 May 2024 and featured thirty-one performances and numerous accompanying events, examined, in the spirit of rethinking, the situation of contemporary Hungarian drama from perspectives not used before.

The idea that the popularisation of contemporary Hungarian drama has to start somewhere in childhood was also demonstrated by two programme series at this year's DESZKA Festival. CSIP—Csokonai Youth Programme—which has been operating successfully in the theatre of the "Civis city" for years, organised a conference on 9 and 10 May, the opening days of the Biennale, with youth performances, round-table discussions and workshops to explore the topic of how theatre itself, the theatrical form, could offer solutions to process trauma

experienced by young children, from pre-school to primary school. Then, from 11 May, parallel to DESZKA's adult performances, the now long-established GörDESZKA section also started its programme under the coordination of the Vojtina Puppet Theatre, the co-organiser of the event series alongside Csokonai National Theatre. Through their selection of performances invited to the festival, addressing a very broad age range of audiences from three to nineteen years old, they proved how valid and relevant puppetry and the puppet as a medium can be in reflecting on the problems of our time. These include the psychological abuse among children, which is becoming increasingly common in classroom communities (see the production *Az osztály vesztese* [Loser of the Class] written by Anikó Wéber and directed by Angéla Kolozsi), or our Covid-induced traumas, which were explored in the Budapest Puppet Theatre's adult show, *Dekameron 2023*, a wonderful combination of adult theatre and puppet theatre, based on texts by ten contemporary Hungarian authors.

By mentioning the ten contemporary authors in the context of *Dekameron 2023*—as the puppet theatre production is based on texts by Péter Fábíán, Dóra Gimesi, János Háý, Sándor Jászberényi, Sári O Horváth, Lajos Parti Nagy, Csaba Székely, Rémusz Szikszai, István Tasnádi, Péter Závada—we have arrived at one of the main questions of the jubilee DESZKA Festival, which, according to the organisers' intent, was not necessarily answered by the adult performances invited to the festival from the most popular theatres in Hungary and abroad but by the accompanying programmes called SzéIDESZKA. Namely, the question of "What does the term 'contemporary playwright' mean today?" was addressed through a series of book presentations, round-table discussions and stage readings.

As a courtesy of Selinunte Publishing, the tireless torchbearer and book publisher of contemporary Hungarian drama, the lectures were accompanied by a series of book launches, in the framework of which the head of the publishing house, István Sándor L, and myself, discussed the above-mentioned topic with Ákos Németh, chairman of the Playwrights' Round Table, which had been invited to co-organise DESZKA, along with András Forgách, István Tasnádi, Szabolcs Hajdu, Attila Lőrinczy, and Andrea Pass, and it was within the framework of this series that another discussion took place with this year's guest of honour, Károly Szakonyi, who was addressed by Ákos Herczeg, editor of the *Alföld* journal.

Symptomatically, the answer—although many authors responded—pointed in one direction: the modern-day playwright is forced to diversify their activities. See Attila Lőrinczy, who, in addition to writing, also works as a dramaturg, or

István Tasnádi, who also directs performances. Szabolcs Hajdu, who is both a film director and an actor, had the most roles at DESZKA Festival: he was not only the director and scriptwriter of the Radnóti Miklós Theatre's production of *Legközelebbi ember* (The Closest Man), but also one of the actors in the show, while the screening of his latest film, *Kálmán-nap* (Kálmán's Day) was included in one of the very important and innovative SzéIDESZKA programmes, Contemporary Dramas in Cinema, which was organised for the first time this year. Similarly, there was a screening of the film *Memo*, based on the screenplay by István Tasnádi, whose other text intended for the stage, *Szibériai csárdás* (Siberian Csárdás), was performed in a large stage production by the Attila József Theatre.

But the fact that the concept of "contemporary Hungarian playwright" can be interpreted even more broadly than the above-mentioned "occupations" is well illustrated by Gábor Gulyás, who, as an aesthete, alongside his visual arts projects, created his drama *Új honfoglalás* (New Conquest), which was presented to the audience in the programme of DESZKA in the form of a stage reading directed by Árpád Árkosi and performed by the Csokonai National Theatre.

Another example of how many different selves can be hidden within one creative person is Csaba Kiss, whose latest contemporary Hungarian drama, *Júdás* (Judas), was also directed by him and was also presented at the festival in the form of a stage reading.

If the concept of a "contemporary Hungarian playwright" includes and can include so many things, the question rightly arises as to whether a person translating to Hungarian or from Hungarian into another European language becomes a playwright himself/herself in the process of translating a text written by another. One of SzéIDESZKA's round-table discussions, "Contemporary Dramas Abroad", explored this question as well, as András Kozma, Margit Garajszki, George Volceanov and Ákos Németh shared their views on what factors influence the marketability of a drama translated from Hungarian for theatres in Slovakia, Romania, Russia or even in German- or English-speaking countries. The quality of the translation and the translator's expertise is only the first step, because if there is no domestic or foreign intention—and no financial resources are available—to promote these texts, the translator can hardly become a contemporary playwright, or even a recognised translator, as the finished or unfinished texts will remain in the drawer. The situation is of course quite different in areas where Hungarian is the minority language and bilingual

theatres operate, and it is different again in Russia where Hungarian texts have not really made a breakthrough in theatres, apart from István Örkény's plays. Not even when they are translated into Russian by such excellent translators as Oksana Yakimenko or Tatiana Voronkina, who deceased in 2022. In the meantime, sometimes chance does help talent—the career of Ákos Németh is a good example for this as he has published more drama books in Italian, English, German, Turkish, etc. than in Hungarian.

Speaking of translation, the University Theatre of Debrecen has been organising a translation competition under the name “Egy sima, egy fordított” for years, whereby those who feel like can translate foreign-language dramas into Hungarian. This year, DESZKA Festival hosted this competition's award ceremony again, with the three winning texts being turned into stage readings by second-year students of directing at the Hungarian University of Theatre and Film Arts—Mihály Kepics, János Botond Vasicsek and Mózes Horváth—and read by the actors of the Csokonai National Theatre.



Picture 1. *Is a stage adaptation a new drama?* – Round table discussion in a SzéIDESZKA session (Photo: Csokonai National Theatre)



Picture 2. Kata Pető and Barnabás Rohonyi in the show *Milf*, directed by Krisztián Gergye (Photo: Csokonai National Theatre)

And if the concept of a “contemporary Hungarian playwright” is so complex, even fluid, then what about “contemporary Hungarian drama”? The answer to this question was sought by another roundtable discussion in the SzÉLDESZKA programme, which touched on one of the important novelty of this year’s festival in its very title.

The event titled “Is stage adaptation a new drama?” was organised because, unlike previous biennials, this year’s jubilee festival included several adult productions based on classic or contemporary novels and short stories. Talking about the stage adaptation of Dezső Kosztolányi’s *Anna Édes* by István Szabó K., the stage adaptation of András Visky’s *Kitelepítés* (Displacement) by Árpád Ákosi, the monodrama of Sándor Tar’s short story titled *A mi utcánk* (Our Street) directed by Attila Szabó, and many other adaptations of this kind not presented

at DESZKA Festival, dramaturg Ildikó Lőkös and her colleagues—István Szabó K., András Kozma, Ernő Verebes, András Visky—stated: yes, a script adapted from the original text for the stage can be evaluated as a contemporary Hungarian drama. That is why it is important that the playbill for these performances should not feature the author of the classic work as the author of the play, but should instead say something along the lines of *Anna Édes. Adapted for the stage from Dezső Kosztolányi's novel by Ildikó Lőkös and István Szabó K.*

Of course, we should be under no illusion: this latter issue—whether it is an adaptation of a classical work or a contemporary drama that is being performed on stage—is obviously only of interest and importance to a professional audience. Fortunately, the civilian audience attending the DESZKA Festival also hailed the performances that were based on contemporary dramas—see, for example, *A sűgő* (The Prompter), a production based on a text by the young actor Nándor Berettyán of the National Theatre, or the two-character but all the more monumental production of the play *Milf*, written by Viktor Kovács and Dominik Kovács, directed by Krisztián Gergye, which addresses the problems of middle-aged women, or, from across the border, the play *Félelem és reszketés Szabadkán* (Fear and Trembling in Subotica), written and directed by Borisz Kucsov of the Subotica Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre, which offered a glimpse of contemporary Subotica in the form of a bizarre dystopia billed as a “comic-book drama”. Just like the adaptation of Szilárd Borbély's novel *Nincstelenség* (The Dispossessed), directed by Bálint Botos at the Csokonai National Theatre, or the production of *Apró, véres balladák* (Tiny, Bloody Ballads), based on Endre Ady's texts, unknown to many, were also highly appreciated by the audience. After all, there could be no more wonderful acknowledgement than the enthusiastic applause—often a standing ovation—lasting for long minutes after each performance confirming that contemporary Hungarian dramas, and thus the DESZKA Festival, which promotes and celebrates contemporary Hungarian dramas, has a place and relevance in our theatrical life both in Hungary and beyond our borders.