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Them and Us – Pintér Béla's *Blood-Red, Off-White, Dark Green* and András Urbán's *Sacra Hungarica* in Context

Abstract

The paper wishes to document a recent trend visible in the Hungarian independent theatre scene – a turn towards social, political issues, as well as a growing sensitivity towards the visible tensions in Hungarian political discourse. It does so through the analysis and the contextualization of two recent Hungarian independent theatrical productions. Studio K's 2019 *Sacra Hungarica* is an in-your-face attempt to portray the current distortion of the language and the abuse language is used for, while Béla Pintér's *Blood Red, Off-White, Dark Green*, a clever *Oedipus Rex* paraphrase that depicts marginalization, racism, and nationalism in a pointedly non-pc allegory.

The essay introduces the status of independent theatre vis-à-vis politics after 1989 and will delineate the changes the conservative governments brought into the alternative scene. Then, through an in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned two productions, it discusses the various means of theatricality they use to comment on contemporary Hungary.

Keywords: Hungary, independent theatre, p.c., politics, satire, roma, Béla Pintér, András Urbán

On the 13th of April 2214 Leonárdó Köteles Lábán, the governor-president of Hungary enumerates the Roma heroes of the Hungarian past: “You only have to look at those engravings, those daguerreotypes, and those photos to clearly see that Gábor Bethlen was a Vlach gypsy, Lajos Kossuth was Boyash, Sándor Petőfi was Serbuya Lovari, and yes, the greatest Hungarian, Viktor Orbán was Romungro.” His chief of police cries in protest: “No! Viktor Orbán was not a gypsy!” (Pintér).¹ This repartee that is rewarded by roars of laughter and rounds of clapping every night, is also quoted by almost all reviews on Béla Pintér's 2020 play, *Blood-Red, Off-White, Dark Green*, as a symbolically succinct summary of a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the divisive political communications that dominate Hungarian politics. The ironic yet pointed political satire that Pintér delivers in this play is symptomatic of the recent trend visible in the Hungarian independent theatre scene – a turn towards social, political issues, as well as a growing sensitivity towards the visible tensions in Hungarian political discourse.

¹ All translations from the Hungarian are mine.



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It is no secret that Hungary today is a deeply divided country where emotions run high if people try to discuss social-political issues. In anonymous comments on the internet, or in nationally publicized media coverages, personal attacks, racist and sexist remarks have become the new normal. The cultural field, unfortunately, is no exception to this rule. Luckily, theatre is there to reflect on these changes. This essay looks at two fringe productions that wish to show the anomalies of today's Hungary. Studio K's 2019 *Sacra Hungarica* is an in-your-face attempt to portray the current distortion of the language and the abuse language is used for, while Béla Pintér's *Blood Red, Off-White, Dark Green*, a clever *Oedipus Rex* paraphrase, depicts marginalization, racism, and nationalism in a pointedly non-pc allegory.

The paper will introduce the status of independent theatre vis-à-vis politics after 1989 and will delineate the changes the conservative governments brought into the alternative scene. Then, through an in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned two productions, it wishes to discuss the various means through which contemporary independent theatres portray the current political atmosphere of the country.

Theatre and Politics – Before and After 1989

When the Berlin Wall came down, and Hungary was also released from the grips of state Socialism, a long-awaited and seemingly inevitable change followed – theatres also shook themselves free from the shackles of politics. Leaving behind the long-standing categories of supported, tolerated, and banned of the Kádár-regime that dictated what could have been performed when, and in what mode², as well as breaking free from the previously almost doctrinaire performative mode of doublespeak – a seemingly liberating, yet in end-effect shackling mode of communication – theatres started to focus on the aesthetic, as opposed to the political. Postdramatic ideas and experimental theatricality that were previously relegated to the amateur movement,³ or were banned altogether, resurfaced and were embraced by a new generation of directors appearing on the Hungarian stages (by Sándor Zsótér, János Mohácsi, László Bagossy or Árpád Schilling, among others).

Following theatre historian Árpád Kékesi Kun's categories (85–105) we can delineate four major trends that dominated the Hungarian theatre world in the 1990s: “radical reinterpretations” that drastically rewrote dramatic texts and radically changed the outcomes of dramatic situations;

² Uniquely amongst most Central European countries, Hungary did not have a central censorship office. Instead of direct censorship, the Kádár regime developed a multi-level system, in which it expected the members on all levels to self-censor themselves. Through this regulatory system of many layers, and anticipating the self-censoring cooperation of its citizens, the authorities very rarely had to resort to the method of direct control. Contrary to the binary system of banned or supported materials of the Stalinist regime, the new regulations relied on the tripartite value scale of banned, tolerated and supported, the second being a non-prescribed, only vaguely defined, category of works of art which, though not openly socialist, were at least partly acceptable for the regime. This group changed incessantly: what was banned one day could easily be performed the next. No official guidelines were put down for what passed as tolerable, since the regime wished to keep everyone on their toes, guessing. There were certain general taboos that had to be avoided (anything that would offend the Soviet Union or any friendly socialist countries, any criticism of the Party leadership, any obscenity or vulgarity, or open description of sexual acts), but everything beyond these was up to the temporary judgment of the officials. See further: Veronika Schandl, “Writing Between the Lines: Reviewing Shakespeare Productions in Socialist Hungary”, *Shakespeare and Tyranny*. Ed. Keith Gregor. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, pp. 165–181.

³ See: Veronika Schandl, *Shakespeare's Plays on the Stages of Late Kádárist Hungary – Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain*. Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.

“imagist theatricality”, where productions centered around the compositions of striking images; “neo-avant-garde visuality” that suspended dramatic linearity and forcibly disassembled plots; and finally a later also influential tendency that propagated a disharmonious ideal of beauty, and reflected upon the nature of theatricality. Productions in a more experimental vein appeared both in mainstream theatres as well as in alternative venues, both in Budapest and in the countryside.

One has to mark, however, that the overall institutional framework of Hungarian theatre remained unchanged after 1989. Although operating in a market-based society, most Hungarian theatres still relied on government subsidy for most of their operational costs. National theatres in Budapest and in larger Hungarian countryside towns got funded by the government, while municipal theatres were partly funded by municipal councils, too. This subsidy system, established under state Socialism is still in operation. It is only independent theatres that receive no regular normative funding from the government, their independence therefore mostly denotes their financial status. Called “amateurs” before the regime change, independent companies used to operate in the grey zone between “tolerated” and “banned” – although constantly monitored by the authorities, they managed to introduce neo-avantgarde tendencies to Hungary, broadened the repertory and produced shows that were stretching the boundaries of centrally accepted artistic and political norms. Often acquiring international fame, in Hungary these companies were still treated as marginal, and when their artists were granted official status in state-funded theatres, it was mostly with the wish to silence their non-conformist ideas.⁴

After 1989, these fringe companies were re-labeled as “alternative,” a category that mostly reflected on the different aesthetics these theatres operated with. Partly building upon the traditions of the avantgarde groups of the 1960s and 1970s (Orfeo/Studio K, Universitas, Arvisura, Monteverdi Wrestling Circle, etc.), and influenced by Western theatrical trends of the new millennium, especially German theatre, these “alternative” companies introduced such artists to the Hungarian theatre-world as Viktor Bodó, Kornél Mundruczó, Béla Pintér, and Árpád Schilling, whose names also ring familiar for a wider European public. Theatre companies like Bodó's Sputnik Shipping Company (Szputnyik Hajózási Társulat), Mundruczó's Proton Theatre (Proton Színház), Pintér's Béla Pintér and Company (Pintér Béla és Társulata) and Schilling's Chalk Circle Theatre (Krétakör Színház) attracted new generations of theatregoers with their productions. As Andrea Tompa has summarized, “The independents have influenced and changed the picture immensely, not only because of a growing artistic crossover, but also because the independents' new aesthetics, methods of working, and overall spiritual presence have made an impact” (“Hungarian and Independent” 15). These methods included improvisations, active engagement with the text and an emphatic break with psychological realism, a trend that has been the most influential theatrical form of expression on the main stages of Hungary since the 1970s.

Finally, and most importantly for our present discussion, it was the “alternative” scene that brought politics back to the Hungarian theatrical idiom. Krétakör's *BLACKland* reinterpreted the traditions of political cabarets, while Béla Pintér's works reflected on the social issues of alcoholism, the state of the Hungarian healthcare system, the role of religious sects in rural Hungary, as well as on ideas of nationalism.

⁴ Whereas Neo avant-garde tendencies were often tolerated, performance artists and productions were banned and silenced, since, as theater historian Magdolna Jákfalvi pointedly remarks, those in power “considered the theatrical idiom that opened several layers of interpretation, as a possible (but controllable) source of danger, whereas direct speech [appearing, for example, in performances or avant-garde productions] as imminent danger” (Jákfalvi 69).

Us and Them

The rhetoric of current Hungarian political discourse is one based on dichotomy and conflict.⁵ With its insistence on a single-focus national identity, government politicians continuously posit themselves against groups, individuals, and ideas – such as Liberalism, gay and transgender people, or George Soros, to name but a few of the Orbán-regime's latest culprits. Relying on an idea of civic nationalism that is driven by a desire to assimilate everyone under the banner of a nation, this narrative fails to endorse the rights or give a voice to diverse cultural groups within the society. Furthermore, the continuous emphasis on the “us” versus “them” narrative results in creating widening rifts within the Hungarian society. Recent research into these divisive tendencies (Pap-Patkós, Patkós-Boda, Kovách) reveals that they impact not only social but also economic changes in Hungary, and actively contribute to negative development. They also prove that conflict-based diction creates further conflicts and enhances antagonism.

These divisive rhetorical strategies in the past ten or so years have infiltrated the cultural sphere, too. While the appointment of theatre managers and the distribution of cultural funding was always a political matter in Hungary (also under the liberal-socialist governments of the 1990s), the Orbán-regime now openly talks about a culture-war, unremittingly challenging not only ideological but also aesthetic values of theatricality. The populist rhetoric of the Orbán-government relies on the frequent use of the theatrical in their everyday propaganda – giant billboards announce the successes of the government, massive state-funded “spontaneous” marches express the “will” of “the people”, and lavish celebrations re-tell the important events of Hungarian history. In turn, theatres are also used to advertising the single-vision national narrative the regime propagates: rock operas, horse musicals and ballad-like apotheoses depict events from the Hungarian conquest, from medieval history to the 1956 revolution. These shows often rely on rock-popified versions of Hungarian folklore, use folk music and folk dances only to conjure up an image of a strong, patriarchal Hungary.⁶ The aesthetic of these productions embraces over-the-top kitsch⁷, straightforward narratives that glorify a homogenous nation, and they shun irony, the appearance of multifocal views as well as a postdramatic questioning of teleological narratives. One could therefore argue that a production's adherence to aesthetic experimentation in itself is a subversive move, especially when, as in the case of the two shows this essay engages with, they deconstruct theatrical tools mainstream propaganda also operates with (such as folklore, national myths or hate-speech).

In the following I will focus on two productions that reflect on the divisive stereotypes that split Hungary today, and on the different modes of theatricality they use to discuss these issues. While the two productions differ in several ways, what links them is that they both reverse the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ rhetoric and play with the consequences of this reversal. Furthermore, both use sketchy non-PC stereotypes to depict certain groups of Hungarian society, thus they both challenge certain social and political taboos violating the rules of political correctness their mostly liberal audiences would expect them to follow. In doing so they both follow the traditions of the political cabaret, a genre developed in Germany in the 1930s. The shows at hand do not strictly follow the episodic

⁵ This, however, did not start with the Orbán-regime, the previous, Socialist, Gyurcsány-government also used the “them” and “us” rhetoric when advocating against Hungarians in neighbouring countries becoming Hungarian citizens. The divisive rhetoric of their campaign left a long-lasting mark in Hungarians within and outside the border.

⁶ See the controversies of the recent film *The Battle of Pressburg* (dir. Tamás Baltavári)

⁷ See the 20 August celebration in 2021, in which, among other items, a giant chrome plated Turul bird was being dragged by half-naked men in tribal tattoos.

modality of the cabaret, yet in their tone they seem to have been influenced by it. What gives the non-pc edge to the productions is their cabaretic use of the language, since “the cabaret does not speak the language its audience does but uses this language as a tool for an ironic game. A game that temporarily places the normal usage of language in parenthesis, so that it could make fun of it” (Szilágyi-Gál). This game allows the cabaret to reflect the reality of its audience in a distorted, yet revealing mirror, while also opening up the range of topics, even to include non-politically correct issues, too.

Béla Pintér's Theatre and *Blood-Red, Off-White, Dark Green*

Béla Pintér and Company (PBEST) is the most successful Hungarian independent theatre ensemble today. In 2023 they will celebrate their 25th anniversary. Béla Pintér writes and directs all their plays, with his long-term dramaturge, Éva Enyedi helping to finalize the texts. Although now an established published author with two volumes of plays topping the sales charts, and receiving professional accolades, Pintér is neither a trained actor, nor a trained writer. He comes from the amateur theatre movement, where he was a folk dancer and an actor in Arvisura Company, and in Gábor Goda's Dance Theatre. Some of his plays (notably *Peasant Opera*) have been produced by other companies as well, yet he mostly writes with his own actors in mind, therefore most of his plays are solely performed by PBEST. In recent years he has been invited to write and direct in Hungary's most acknowledged theatre, Katona József *The Champion* (2016), a spin-off based on works by Puccini and *Tamás Ascher in Háromszék* (2017), a Pintér original, and the actors from the Katona ensemble also joined him in a PBEST production, entitled *The Glimmer in Mom's Eyes* (2019).

Pintér's style has changed throughout the past almost 25 years, but there are elements that connect his plays, characteristics that denote his theatre. Ever since his first production in 1998, *Common Bondage*, a loose improvisational piece depicting a surreal countryside wedding feast, folk music and authentic folk dance have been major elements in Pintér's productions. In his work, folk music is used both to express authentic emotions or as the voice of a common cultural background, as a juxtaposition to classical music, as a tacky, sappy element accompanying urban life, or a means to escape from it. Pintér's training as a folk dancer guarantees that his use of folklore is not cliché-like – he uses folk music as a tool to convey meaning, never as a remnant of a great Hungarian past the mainstream political propaganda rhetoric reminisces about. The way he mixes folk motives with Baroque opera, American country music and elements of popular culture for instance in his 2002 *Peasant Opera* removes all nostalgic sugar-coating from folklore, revealing and at the same time ironically playing with its innate cathartic narrativity.

Folklore, however, is just one of the many cultural layers and commodities Pintér works with. He is known to switch registers from high-brow literacy to profanity even within sentences, balancing notions of the tragic, the comic, and the satirical in his plays. Whether he draws on well-known myths, fairy tales or historical events, Pintér's plays always tap into contemporary social and political issues, be it the Hungarian health system (*Hospital-Bakony*, 1999), alcoholism (*Drink and Die*, 2001), domestic abuse (*The Queen of the Cookies*, 2004; *Children of the Demon*, 2008), the emergence of the far-right (*Muck*, 2010), or social righteousness (*Brilliant Second-Rate*, 2010; *Till Heartbreak*, 2017). Holding up a distorted mirror that reflects our image in a multifaceted way, Pintér, who aims more to show and less to teach, (Magyar Hang) also revisits historical events that are formative for the Hungarian self-definition and are often applied in the national refashioning endeavors of the current conservative government, too. However, whereas official narratives use these events to support the overall narrative of the epic fight Hungary has been waging against the

rest of the world, be it the Austrians, the Soviet or the enemies within, Pintér actively deconstructs any attempt to view these with a singular focus, or in a teleological, celebratory national narrative.

In *Kaisers TV, Ungarn* (2011) he revisits the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, sketching up a parallel universe in which the Hungarians won against the Austrians. Mixing historical persiflage with mass-media broadcasts of the imagined Imperial Habsburg TV station, while giving audiences the satisfaction of an imaginary victory, the play also demasks the heroes of the age, Sándor Petőfi and Lajos Kossuth as self-centered and vain, and cultural memory as faulty. *Our Secrets* (2013) problematizes the simple dichotomy of “them and us” in the context of the Socialist Kádár-regime. It also engages with the dire consequences that in Hungary the files of secret service agents are still not openly accessible. Lastly in *Marshal Fifty-Six* (2021), an angry Shakespeare/political cabaret inspired satire on the corruption of the current government, Pintér questions the historical memory and cultural representation of the 1956 revolution and its heroes. These plays show a tendency in Pintér's *oeuvre* to challenge the official concepts of history the Orbán-regime wishes to offer the people of the country, and one could say that his 2020 *Blood-Red, Off-White, Dark Green* also falls into this track. The title, an off-color rendering of the Hungarian tricolor signals that the play will be about a re-toned version of the Hungarian here and now. The subtitle promises an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. As for its genre, the play is a dystopia, a political satire and at times, a cabaret sketch.

We are taken into the future to 2214, when the Roma/gypsy are the majority in Hungary, since a malignant virus in the past has decimated the white population of the country. When we enter the events, Hungary, once again, is in the grips of a virus, is in lockdown, hoping to get the antidote against the deadly illness from the Russian Confederation. This they promise, in return for an investigation into the past murder of the Russian president's daughter. From then on, the play transforms into an *Oedipus* paraphrase in which we witness how Leonárdó Köteles Lábán, the governor-president of Hungary realizes that his current wife, the mother of his four children and in fact the murderer of his first wife, is also his own daughter with whom he has been living in an incestuous relationship. The ending, however, offers no tragedy: the governor manages to cover up the truth, fool the Russians and get the medicine. We are left with a gloriously glaring president on TV announcing the promised arrival of the drugs and the nearby end of the pandemic, with his wife at his side in dark sunglasses to cover the marks of the beatings that brought her to reason.

This is the story in a nutshell, but the more powerful aspects of the show are the topical allusions, the political satire of the Orbán-regime, in which the glitzy world of these future Hungarian gypsies, wearing over-the-top costumes and giant led-lit folklore carnival masks, echoes the nationalistic pride as well as the petty and grotesque reality of today's Hungarian politics. Each character on stage has a contemporary parallel in the Orbán cabinet, and one feels that the Oedipus story of personal trauma is rendered weightless by the continuous political echoes of the play. Similarly to his earlier play, *Kaisers TV, Ungarn*, Pintér gives the upper-hand to the underdog by reversing the current demographic status of the country. However, while *Kaisers TV, Ungarn* invited identification from the audience with the victorious Hungarians, making the Roma take Hungary is an open provocation.

Roma are the largest minorities in Hungary, who, besides music have virtually no cultural representation in the country.⁸ In the right-wing rhetoric of the government they take the role of

⁸ All Roma theatre operates on the fringes of the Hungarian theatre scene. There is an international Roma heroes festival that invites productions from all over Europe (<http://www.independenttheater.hu/roma-hosok-fesztival/>) and there are three companies that work with Roma actors (Balogh Rodrigó's Company, Karaván Theatre and Cinka Panna Company).

criminals, and integrational programs are as underfinanced as independent theatre projects that wish to give a voice to the Roma. They are the silent, or more accurately, the silenced Other within Hungarian society, and their tongue-in-cheek, decidedly non-PC representation on stage works to confront the mostly liberal audience with their own racist stereotypes too. The Roma-Hungarian dichotomy is, unfortunately, not an antagonism, the consequences of which are still to be debated. In 2009 Roma villagers in Olaszliszka beat a Hungarian teacher to death, then, in retaliation, three extremist right-wing men burnt down the house of a Roma family in Tatárszentgyörgy, killing a young Roma father and his son. Pintér's play is not a straightforward depiction of this – it is a provocation in a stylized, doubly removed way, through the dystopian future world and Sophocles' plot, midway between a political cabaret and soap opera-like melodrama. Yet, it does tap into the questions of “them” vs. “us”.

Pintér methodically works through all of the racist, religious, and sexual stereotypes we are surrounded by every day, bluntly disregarding all controls of political correctness, since our mirror images, the future (Roma) Hungarians, treat minorities in the similarly disparaging way we do today: all of them are sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and racist. They glorify their own grandeur, regard the rest of the world as fools, lie to the general public, blatantly rewrite history and solve uneasy situations with violence. Here I would like to return to the dialogue about Viktor Orbán being a gypsy quoted at the beginning of the essay, since that succinctly demonstrates how the layers of meaning work within Pintér's play. To quote Sándor Bazsányi one could argue that:

Here the important thing is not that in a theatre play they call the fictitious version of the current prime minister of Hungary a gypsy. What is important is whether we treat the word gypsy as a curse word. How do we use it? How do we look at gypsies, fellow gypsy citizens? Since when we are outraged or overly happy that Viktor Orbán is called a gypsy in a satirical dystopia, then we are racists. If we do not wish to be racists, then we should not be irritated or overjoyed by this delicate little detail. Pintér and his company set a perfect little trap for the viewers. It is a task to test a man, an excellent exercise in self-knowledge and in cultural identity.

Using this double-edged sword of identities as its basic tool, the play creates a general uneasiness in the audience – while making sure they roar with laughter – since the reflections of our dystopic future selves are uncanny. It is not only the ruling classes of today's Hungary that are ridiculed – although they are the butt of the jokes most of the time – but the usually unwritten codes of our conduct are also put under the microscope, since the play works with stereotypes, and they work because viewers give similar responses to them. The tiny old rabbi who bargains with the regime to gain tiny advancements, the voracious priests who hoard titles and earthly wealth, or the Dutch gay man who looks for Hungarian hunks in Budapest are clichés that are considered laughable not only by the future gypsy Hungarians, but their – mostly middle-class and educated (Nagy) – audiences, too.

On the other hand, our future dystopian descendants behave as we do: they are belligerent, hostile, and divisive – only their targets change. Leonárdó's fellow Hungarians primarily rage against the whites, who in the past have changed the national anthem and the tricolor, blown up the Parliament, sold out their countries to oligarchs and destroyed the Earth with their carelessness. Of course, lesser targets, like the “self-centered, conceited Catholic liberal priests”, the “rotten gays” and the “bloody Russians” also get their fair share. The story of the suppressed gypsies who must make Hungary great again, fighting on all fronts with cunning and common wisdom is one that strongly resonates with Viktor Orbán's master-narrative. It is a narrative that seems to work, since “Daddy” Leonárdó, “the King”, succeeds, against all odds, and at the end of the play his regime is cemented more than ever before. Yet, the Oedipus subplot adds an uneasy twist to his success: we know that they are cursed and doomed to fail in the future. They are, we are.

The visuality of the production⁹ that combines surreal masks and costumes with the realistic setting of the UP Cultural Center, the actual space of the performance, parallels the dystopian distancing the play employs. In recent years, theatre critics in Hungary (Török, Dézsi, Gabnai-Herczog) have grown more and more dissatisfied with the continuous conduct of doublespeak and reading-between-the-lines that still is the mainstream political commentary most Hungarian theatre productions use. Shakespeare is a prime culprit there – productions would more frequently turn to his classic plays, such as *Richard III*¹⁰, *Hamlet*¹¹, or *Macbeth*¹² to smuggle political criticism into their productions, than to a contemporary work. Besides Shakespeare, dystopias are also immensely popular today. 2020 alone brought about five premieres of dystopias in Hungary that all aimed at commenting on the contemporary state of affairs.¹³ When critics wish to name the one theatre-maker in the country whose goal is “a theatre that wishes to enter into the political discourse” (Dézsi) it is only Béla Pintér whom they name. Here I would like to argue that although Pintér does address political issues, his mode of theatricality is still closer to the symbolic, the doubly referenced, that Hungarians are familiar with. The form of the doublespeaking traditions of state Socialism, as well as of political cabarets also followed. This becomes evident especially if we contrast Pintér’s play with more radical forms of political theatre, as our next example will demonstrate.

András Urbán's *Sacra Hungarica* in Studio K

András Urbán is the enfant terrible of Hungarian language Serbian theatre, the manager of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre in Subotica, and an artist well-known for his politically charged productions that use vehemently different means of theatricality to comment on the divisiveness of Hungarian society than Béla Pintér. His theatre has been likened to the in-her face theatre of the 1990s, and recently has been labeled “engaged theatre” in which only those political and social issues appear that the auteurs feel a personal engagement with. In his past productions Urbán has discussed questions of local, national as well as European identity (in *Neoplanta*, 2014, *Hungarian*, 2016 and *What is Europe?*, 2016 respectively), examined psychological distortions (*Urbi et orbi*, 2008), as well as the recent migrant crisis (*In the Name of the Father*, 2020). Urbán, with dramaturge Kata Gyarmati creates his playtexts based on literary works, improvisations, and interpolations. He has radically re-interpreted several Hungarian and European theatrical classics, among others Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (2010), the most famous Hungarian play, József Katona's *Bánk bán* (2015), and Hungarian operettas in a subversive mashup gala performance entitled *The Wanton Lady's Knights* (2021).

Urbán has been a frequent visitor to Hungarian theatre festivals (Theater, POSZT), and has an avid group of followers in Hungary, too, yet Studio K's 2019 *Sacra Hungarica* was his first direction in Hungary. His theatre is radically different from everything else that appears on Hungarian stages. The recurring elements of his directions, such as a confessional tone, physical brutality combined with postdramatic and physical modes of theatricality make his directions radical,

⁹ Costume: Mari Benedek; Mask: Lilla Gergely-Farnos; Graphic design: Dániel Bárány; Scenery: Gábor Tamás.

¹⁰ D: Andrei Șerban, Radnóti Miklós Theatre, 2018.

¹¹ D: Enikő Eszenyi, Vígszínház, 2017.

¹² D: Rémusz Szikszai, Jászai Mari Theatre, Tatabánya, 2019; D: Ildikó Gáspár, Örkény Theatre, 2019.

¹³ Dezső Kosztolányi: *Nero*, d: Máté Hegymegi, Studio K; Matei Vișniec: *Richard III Banned*, d: Rémusz Szikszai, Szkéné Theatre; Lev Birinsky: *Turmoil 2045*, d: Csaba Polgár, Örkény Theatre; George Orwell: *1984*, d: Ádám Horgas, Szeged National Theatre. See: Almási, Zsolt. “Textuality, Heritage, and Identity in Hungary: Contexts for the Interpretation of Szikszai's Insertion in *Macbeth*.” *Theatralia* 24 (2021): 222–238.

shocking, and unsettling. His 'no filters' productions also engage themselves with questions about theatricality, often tearing down the dividing lines between actors and audiences with pointedly physical means. These elements appear in *Sacra Hungarica*, too.

Studio K, the theatre Urbán joined for this coproduction is one of the oldest independent venues of the country. In 1971 the avantgarde Orfeo Group established the theatre, which albeit in different buildings, has been in operation ever since. Its founding artistic director, Tamás Fodor is one of the most defining figures of the Hungarian independent scene. Studio K is not only an experimental theatre company, but also one that is active in its local community too, putting on children and educational productions with discussion forums. They also addressed the migrant crisis in 2015 (*Our Borders*), in a documentary show that aimed at providing a still image of Hungary at a given moment. Urbán's *Sacra Hungarica* does something similar.

Based on the improvisations of the actors, Urbán, with the help of dramaturge, Kata Gyarmati, the director of Studio K, created a text that becomes a catalogue, an in-yer face rendition of polarized hate speech. The brave new world that other, dystopian Hungarian productions imagine is here, in the present. As the theatre program details, the production is about the political awakening of an independent theatre company, who, having realized their previously faulty ways (and knowing that this is the only means to receive public funding to run their theatre) turn their back on liberalism and come to embrace the Christian-Conservative worldview of the Orbán government. They are the fully enlightened few, our future *now*.

As opposed to the flamboyant visuality of the PBEST play, this production starts with very little on stage: seven actors sitting on a row of chairs, facing the audience. Actress Melitta Pallagi utters the first lines: "I did believe in Soros. We were misled. I believed that we should create an independent theatre... I was hypnotized... We have to admit that we are the victims of a scoundrel" (*Sacra*). The others soon join in, revealing to us the eye-opening moments when they realized their Hungarianness, be it a harmonious summer afternoon, or drinking Hungarian beer. They also provide us with the new guidelines for life – selecting people they associate with and ideas they adhere to, ultimately realizing that "liberalism is the illness of puberty" one must grow out of. "I also worn torn jeans, but eventually you do dress up properly," quips actor Lajos Spilák to illustrate the parallels (*Sacra*). After these realizations they start reciting racial, sexual, religious and nationalist slurs that read like an unmediated Facebook comment thread under a political topic. Initial giggles follow from the audience, yet after a while no one can escape, the insults hit everyone, the categories of "them and us" become redundant, since, for example, you are either from the countryside, and as such, are a bumpkin who takes the jobs of Budapest people, or you are from Budapest, and are an arrogant ass who knows nothing of real life outside the capital. Everyone gets their fair share.

The initial reversal of "us and them" which in this case confronts the imagined liberal theatregoers with conservative Orbán-supporters, drawing up the ultimate divisive line of current Hungary, is just the starting point. It opens a can of worms, that is a can of animosity, where nobody can go safe, since the lens of hatred is continuously turned, finding newer and newer targets. BMW drivers who violate the Japanese-Hungarian blood treaty by not sticking to their Suzukis; minorities from the Carpathian basin who come to take our jobs; women who go to work instead of giving birth to children; gays who infringe on the order of God; Blacks, Portuguese, Italians, Germans, Dutch, Peruvians, Chinese, Jews, Austrians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Romanians, Serbians, Croatians and Slovenians, the Roma, migrants and finally, Hungarians are all called upon. Hungarians, it finally turns out, are in fact the worst: they betray you, are only interested in fattening food, are uncultured and uncultivated, they always look for loopholes, are cheap and shameful. The confessions finally

turn towards questions of culture and the actors declare their hate for “liberal-Jewish-migrant-fondling” (Sacra) theatres they have been associated with. Instead, they want pure artists to make pure Hungarian art, since “to be a Hungarian is not a question of genetics, but of intellectual choices” (Sacra). True Hungarian artists should be straight, white Christians who could transform theatre into sacred art, they claim. To demonstrate this tenet, the production turns to prayer and singing, inviting first the Lord to bless their work, then migrants to join a hunt in which they would be the hunted.

The actors smear their bodies with canned meat balls (“Listen, you migrant, I am a Hungarian and I eat pork” (Sacra)) and start an orgy to the tunes of operetta classics. Operetta is another cultural artifact that features in the Orbánist refashioning of the Hungarian national myth, as the one Hungarian theatrical product that achieved European fame in the early twentieth century. However, the genre is also connected to a glorification of the right-wing Horthy-regime of the 1930s, so its unfiltered glorification is problematic. Urbán uses the happy go lucky tunes to contrast them with the increasingly aggressive stage action. The audience cannot but be involved, since in the closeness of the studio space parts of the food get on their clothes and hair, the stench of meatballs gets into their nostrils, and it is a smell of violence they carry home with themselves. This way they are, we are, all physically and mentally violated. The outcome suggests that we are in this together.

Sacra Hungarica toys with performance art, it presents us with unmediated actor bodies on stage, offering a confessional narrative of trauma and healing. The actors are addressed by their real Christian names, and several personal details from their lives also entered the playtext. Yet, similarly to a political cabaret or a stand-up comedy, this fake honesty is only there to lure us into letting our guards down and admitting the fakeness of our well-crafted (liberal) axioms. Although the confessional, documentary nature of the production turns surreal by the end, once again echoing the political cabarets of the 1930s, Urbán’s direction works with an unfiltered, unmediated directness that is rare on Hungarian stages, and is unparalleled among the Hungarian productions that use a carefully crafted web of doublespeak.

Conclusion

Ever since the postdramatic turn, there have been growing voices of criticism within performance studies that regret the change that turns postmodern theatre from a primarily public space into an aesthetic space:

Once the doors are closed and the lights are down, theatre becomes an intimate private space where collective response is certainly felt and registered but is subsumed to the dominance of artistic production onstage. As a public sphere it becomes practically defunct, bar the occasional scandal, as the semiotic dynamics at work on the art-stage transform everything into a sign of a sign. (Balme 27)

This essay, through two prominent examples wished to show that contemporary independent Hungarian productions do register the need for a politically engaged theatre. More than thirty years after the change of the regime, however, political theatre is, as Paola Botham succinctly summarized:

in a curious position vis-à-vis theatre scholarship. On the one hand, there are strong signs of a renewed interest in this kind of practice, after the many post-Cold War dismissals proved too hasty. On the other, habitual expectations about what a political play or performance is and what it can do have been relentlessly questioned. (117)

The two productions the paper discussed aimed at simultaneously subverting and at the same time provoking the current political forces, while they wished to show the political hypocrisy of the individuals too. To what effect is yet to be known. However, their political voice is strong and is to be noted.

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