

## Parallel Histories and Survival Strategies. The Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre yesterday and today

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**Abstract:** Receptive venues in Hungary are the „stepchildren” of the theatre structure established in 1949, which has remained essentially unchanged since then. These spaces of the independent performing arts scene could be the breeding ground of artistic innovation, progression, and experimentation, if properly subsidized by the state. This has clearly not taken place over the last few decades: neither the ever-changing funding and legislative environment, nor the public and theatre professionals’ perception of the status of the receptive venues support an improvement in the situation. This study examines and compares the theatrical profiles of two emblematic performing arts centres on the Buda side of the Hungarian capital: the Szkéné Theatre on the second floor of the Budapest University of Technology and the MU Theatre, which grew out of the former Lágymányosi Community Centre.

In the present study, I explore the history of two institutions of the Hungarian performing arts structure, which have been of crucial importance for decades, but in many ways still operate on the periphery. Shaping their histories into parallel narratives is not the result of an arbitrary choice: this has come to surface during my research on the past of the two theatres. There is no space here to go into detail about the history of the development and functioning of the theatre structure in Hungary today. Therefore, I will simply point out that after World War II, in 1949, theatres in Hungary became state-owned and maintained, which had decisive consequences to whom, what, and how the Hun-

garian theatres performed in the following decades.<sup>1</sup>

After nationalisation, the foundations of the renewed Hungarian theatre structure were organised on the basis of central instructions. The structure’s most valuable elements were the stone theatres with permanent buildings, companies and repertoire – and for many, they still are.<sup>2</sup> However, especially from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, more and more initiatives emerged on the periphery, which were in sharp opposition to state socialism, not only ideologically and aesthetically, but also, for example, in their choice of venue, the treatment of the audience and, more fundamentally, in thinking about theatre as a form of communication.<sup>3</sup>

These groups, with very different ways of thinking, using radically different aesthetics or modes of operation, have been circum-

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<sup>1</sup> For the post-WWII theatre structure and cultural governance in Hungary, see RING Orsolya, „Húzd meg, ereszd meg: Színházirányítás, színházi struktúra 1949–1989”, *Színház* 55, No. 10. (2022): 2–6; JÁKFALVI Magdolna, KÉKESI KUN Árpád, KISS Gabriella, RING Orsolya, eds., *Újjáépítés és államosítás: Tanulmánykötet a kultúra államosításának kezdeti éveiről* (Budapest: Arktisz – TMA, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For a wider context see István SZABÓ, „The System Went – The Theatres Remained”, in *Theatre After the Change: And What Was There Before the After?*, ed. by Mária MAYER-SZILÁGYI, 55–63 (Budapest: Creativ Média, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> On the changes and the key actors involved, see BÉRCZES László, „Mássház Magyarországon (1945–1989)”, Part I. *Színház* 29, No. 3. (1996): 42–48; Part II. *Színház* 29, No. 4. (1996): 44–48; Part III. *Színház* 29, No. 5. (1996): 43–48.

scribed and identified by many terms in the past decades. Without recapitulating the long-standing terminological debate, which has never been settled, I would like to point out that in this essay I use the terms independent, alternative, reform, amateur, and underground as synonyms.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the term 'independent', which is widely used today, is practically a euphemism: independents are the most dependent elements of the whole system, as they are financially highly vulnerable to the Ministry of Culture, i.e. the government in power. In contrast to the stone theatres, the 'independents' in Hungary do not receive any normative subsidy from the state: they have to prove their right to exist every year, through a rather complicated application procedure.<sup>5</sup>

The 'ancestors' of today's independent theatre groups in Hungary can be traced back to the 1960s, to a few universities in the capital and outside of it, and to other ama-

<sup>4</sup> For a recent clarification on the concepts see RIHAY-KOVÁCS Zita, „Alternatív-e a független színház?“, in *THEALTER30(+1) színháztudományi konferencia: Szeged, 2021. július 29–30.*, ed. by JÁSZAY Tamás, 79–87. (Szeged: SZTE BTK Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, MASZK Egyesület, 2022), last accessed: 2022.08.30., [http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter\\_all\\_final\\_3aug2022.pdf](http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter_all_final_3aug2022.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. TARISKA Andrea, „A függetlenek finanszírozásának története Magyarországon a nyolcvanas évektől napjainkig“, in *Alternatívok – Az első száz év*, 73–79 (Budapest: no publishing house, 2011); Tamás JÁSZAY, „Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre“, *Critical Stages*, last accessed: 2022.08.30., <https://www.criticalstages.org/8/finita-la-commedia-the-debilitation-of-hungarian-independent-theatre-hungary/>.

teur theatre workshops.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, the innovative artists of the independent performing arts movement found a new base in some of the capital's community centres.<sup>7</sup> While the university playhouses were primarily, but not exclusively, aimed at university students, the community centres were intended to provide the local communities, living in the neighbourhood, with a variety of cultural programmes, but of course within a limited framework. Both types of venues also provided a kind of refuge for artists who thought differently from the mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

Of the three slogans of socialist cultural governance until the 1989–90 change of regime – 'promote, tolerate, ban' (in Hungarian „the 3Ts”: *támogat, tűr, tilt*) – the category of 'tolerate' was the trickle-down one for venues not originally or not necessarily built as theatres, and for the mainly young audiences who were attending there. This meant that the artists and groups working in these venues could operate undisturbedly within certain, unwritten boundaries: the given university or the community centre as an institution formed a kind of protective shell around

<sup>6</sup> Cf. GAJDÓ Tamás, „Jelentős korszakok – emlékezetes pillanatok: A magyar színházművészet fontosabb törekvései az 1970-es évektől 1989-ig“, in *Színház és politika: Színháztörténeti tanulmányok 1949–1989*, GAJDÓ Tamás szerk., 307–346, (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 307–312.

<sup>7</sup> PATONAY Anita, „Kulturális közösségi terek az államosítás után“, in JÁKFALVI, KÉKESI KUN, KISS, RING eds., *Újjáépítés és...*, 118–136. presents an exciting case study of the early performing arts efforts of community centres.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief introduction to the history of Hungarian independents beginning in the 1970s, see András FORGÁCH, „The Fringe-Benefits of the Fringe“, in *A Shabby Paradise: Contemporary Hungarian Theatre 2004*, ed. Péter FÁBRI 35–41. (Budapest: Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute, 2004).

the innovative artistic work. And, of course, the works shown here also acted as a safety valve in the hard or soft days of dictatorship: the fact that the system ‘tolerated’ often radical, innovative, and experimental work in these venues could create a fragile illusion of freedom in viewers and participants. The present text deals with two receptive venues that have slowly and persistently, yet virtually invisibly, become dominant sites in the Hungarian theatre structure over the past decades. Invisibly and unnoticed: the real weight and significance of the events that have taken place here, often seem to be beyond the awareness of those directly involved.

In 2019 and 2021, thanks to two independent proposals, I started to study in depth the history of the two longest continuously operating Hungarian receptive venues, the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, with a focus on the role they have played in the functioning of independent theatre groups in Hungary in the past decades.

I examined the history of the Szkéné Theatre, which began in 1970, through a series of fifty interviews with the artists who played a key role in the life of the institution. The interviews, first published on the theatre’s website in 2020 and 2021, with a historical focus, and intention to cover the changes in the social and cultural milieu of the past fifty years, were published in 2022 in a separate volume, with an introductory study.<sup>9</sup> Around the 1989–90 change of regime in Hungary, the MU Theatre was born, an all-arts venue that, as we shall see, to some extent followed and reimaged the model set up by Szkéné. In my research I was focusing specifically on the theatre productions and the artists and groups that performed there.<sup>10</sup> The

book, which is not for commercial sale and is representative of MU’s activities in dance, visual arts, music, and community theatre, was published in the autumn of 2022. In the process of gathering documents and preparing the material, it became clear that the history of the two important performing arts venues on the Buda side of the Hungarian capital intersected at several points. In the following, I report on these possible intersections.

First of all, we should talk about the form of operation, if only because the receptive venue is a special form of theatre within the Hungarian theatre structure, which is obviously starting from a disadvantage. There is an emphatic expression in the Hungarian language: a ‘veterinary horse’ is the name given to phenomena whose operation can be closely examined to reveal and analyse the many hidden and open deficiencies and illnesses of the whole system. The image might be a vivid description of the current situation of receptive venues in Hungary as a form of operation. Receptive venue, by definition, offers a wide variety of independent individual artists and artistic groups regular opportunities to show their work, and is ideally a breeding ground of innovation and progression.<sup>11</sup> As such, it should play a prominent role in the state-subsidized performing arts scene in Hungary, both in terms of its importance and the subsidy it receives.

Máté Gáspár, former managing director of the Krétakör Theatre, wrote in 2012 in the context of the early history of Trafó, House of Contemporary Arts, a receptive venue founded in 1998, that has since grown to international significance: “When in a socio-cultural context a massive set of meanings is almost automatically formed about a con-

<sup>9</sup> JÁSZAY Tamás, *Színház a másodikon: Ötvenen a Szkéné 50 évéről* (Budapest: Szkéné Színház, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> JÁSZAY Tamás, „Itt van a ház, vagyunk lakói: Színházi csoportok a MU Színházban a kezdetektől 2021-ig”, in *MU*, szerk. BÁNÓCZY

VARGA Andrea, 166–245 (Budapest: MU Színház, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> On receptive venues in general see JOÓB Sándor, „Modernkori vándorszínészet? A magyarországi befogadó színházakról”, in *Ellenfény* 2, 4. sz. (1997): 22–23.

cept, the marketing and acceptance of any initiative that differs from it is a risky but certainly time-consuming undertaking.”<sup>12</sup>

Receptive venue is the *difference* itself to the common notion of theatre. From the point of view of the maintainer, e. g. the state, the very existence of receptive venues is an anomaly, as they are hybrid entities. Practically, receptive venues combine certain characteristics of a stone theatre existence, with a permanent building and infrastructure, which is in every sense rather bound, but also the elements of a reformed, amateur, alternative, independent medium, traditionally viewed with suspicion and/or incomprehension by the authorities.

The sustainable and predictable functioning of receptive venues would be in the common interest of the whole theatre structure regarding innovation and progression. Instead, we find that even venues with their own ethos and well-defined profile, such as the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, are constantly struggling to survive, and in the meantime, they no longer have the energy and/or will to communicate their own role, which would be crucial for the whole sector.

Outward communication is crucial for connecting with one's audience, and there is really no recipe. The hybrid form is one of the reasons why, despite decades of continuous operation, both the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre have remained, in a sense, invisible to the wider community of theatre-goers in Budapest. Invisibility, hiding in the shadows of the greats, can of course be an advantage, but it is also a circumstance that makes moving forward, developing, or changing scale impossible. Although these venues were a relatively well-defined community and crucial for the socialisation of theatre for the artists and teams who performed there, the real breakthrough towards the audience never really materialised.

<sup>12</sup> GÁSPÁR Máté, „A Trafó mint színház”, *Színház* 45, 3. sz. (2012): 26–29, 26.

Existing on the periphery is an equally comfortable way of being for both institutions, adding immediately that – not least because of the rapid changes in the legal-financial environment over the last decade – the once parallel paths now seem to be drifting farther and farther apart in the two cases under study. Since the 2010s, both institutions have been consciously building their brands, but while the Szkéné Theatre has admittedly been primarily seeking to develop a sustainable business model, the MU Theatre has, for some years, been interested in a new form of theatre. Unique in Hungary for the theatre professionals and audiences alike, it seeks to establish a community theatre profile as the basis of its operations, which does not have much tradition here.

It is important to emphasize that since its opening in 1970, for a quite long period of time, the Szkéné Theatre was the only high-quality receptive venue in Budapest (in fact, in the whole country), which, thanks to the dancer, choreographer, and pantomime artist Pál Regős and his son, the playwright, actor, director and all-round theatre person János Regős, developed a well-defined, noteworthy international performing arts line ahead of all others. The emergence of the MU Theatre around the change of regime was preceded by the birth of the Petőfi Hall, which fertilised the Hungarian contemporary dance scene, and then by the Merlin, a theatre that was a 'regime changer', like the MU Theatre, born in 1991. Still, we had to wait until 1998 for the opening of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts, and until 2001 for the National Dance Theatre. Like the Szkéné Theatre, the MU Theatre has had a long period in its history when it should have been one of the few venues of its kind to get attention.

What could be the reasons that allowed the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre to stay outside the system? My hypothesis is that the circumstances of the start-up already implied neglect as a possible long-term consequence. The Szkéné Theatre opened on

the second floor of the Budapest University of Technology on 21 March 1970, providing a rehearsal and performance space for the amateur theatre company of the same name, which had been operating there for almost a decade and was managed by the director and exceptional educator István Keleti. And not only for them: at the time, it was compulsory to run art groups at the university, and many of them found a home here. The studio space of the Szkéné Theatre, designed by László Vidolovics, an architecture student (!) who studied here, and partly built literally by the artists who performed there, welcomed the groups with an infrastructure and modern theatre architecture that was unique in the country at the time. Although the theatre has been renovated several times, certain technical limitations have become clear over time, which have both hindered and inspired the artists who have worked there. The recent renovation of the theatre in 2011 is a landmark moment in the history of the Szkéné Theatre. Despite being crowded and chaotic, the bohemian space, which had long been a cosy home for many, now offers audiences a clearer auditorium and artists much more comfortable conditions than before. There were and will be no revolving stages, no complicated stage technology, and the sets are still transported through the corridors of the University of Technology, but after many decades, the view of the Danube is finally back; the spectacularly renewed venue bears traces of the old memories.

The history of the present MU Theatre dates back to the 1980s. The Lágymányosi Community House (Lágymányosi Közösségi Ház, LKH) of Kőrösy József Street, was a particularly vibrant venue at that time, even compared to other community centres of the 11<sup>th</sup> district.<sup>13</sup> It became the base and

concert venue for numerous bands and their regular audiences, and the place was also a high-quality venue for the manifestations of the leading figures of alternative music, visual arts, and literature, as well as for classical cultural education events. After the occasional theatre programmes at the LKH, theatre (and contemporary dance) began to be more and more prominent only around the change of regime, initially in joint organisation with the Szkéné Theatre (!), then as part of the LKH programme, and from 1991 onwards, under the distinctive MU project name. In the MU Theatre, both the main hall and the later opened upstairs studio are almost 'anti-theatre' spaces, serving the audience with minimal technical conditions and demanding a lot of compromise from the creators.

In 1992, János Regőcs, director of the Szkéné Theatre for almost a decade and a half, wrote about Hungarian alternative theatres, and although he did not name the MU Theatre specifically, his words are easy to understand for the present and the near future of the freshly opened institution:

„...several new venues have opened or been strengthened in the past year, festivals and meetings have been organised for so-called alternative theatres and productions. And, contrary to all rumours, there are audiences... A new audience is emerging, one that is not very keen on the so-called ordinary theatre, preferring to go where they can see something unique and new, even if it is perhaps not very professional... people have a renewed desire for intimacy and immediacy, the mere spirit of the place, to visit a small theatre where the director greets them in the foyer, where they feel that the director is sitting among them at each performance, where they see a real creative collective on stage, and where

<sup>13</sup> Cf. FARKAS Zsolt, SZAKMÁRY Dalma, „Kultúra és közművelődés Újbudán – a XI. kerületi közösségi házak története”, in *A közművelődés háza Budapestén 9.*, ed. by. SLÉZIA Gabriella, 67–116 (Budapest: Budapesti Művelődési Központ, 2014), 72–74.

they have the desire and the opportunity to stay for a chat, a beer, or a coffee after the performance... there is no better 'advertiser' than tonight's audience. If the word gets out that something is good, then there is bound to be a big series, which, in the case of such productions, of course does not mean hundreds of performances, but it certainly brings with it artistic and professional improvement and change, since the process of development does not usually end with the presentation."<sup>14</sup>

As I have indicated, the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, which are less than a kilometre apart as the crow flies, were not only theoretically but also very practically linked – a fact worth emphasising if only because it was not typical yesterday, nor is it today, for artistic institutions to see each other as partners rather than competitors. Lívia Fuchs, renowned dance historian and dance critic, says in a 2017 conversation about the 1990s:

„Obviously, there was some competition between the MU, the Szkéné, and the Petőfi Hall, but they were able to work very well together... It's surprising to recall a series of performances that could be seen in all three venues: the host venues did not work against each other, the incredibly rich lineup at the time eventually spread nicely between them."<sup>15</sup>

The archives of the MU Theatre are kept by the National Museum and Institute of Theatre History. It is from there that we know

<sup>14</sup> REGŐS János, „Tendenciák a magyar alternatív színházak munkáiban”, in *Fordulatok: Hungarian Theatres 1992*, szerk. VÁRSZEGI Tibor, 467–471 (Budapest: editor's publication, 1992), 470.

<sup>15</sup> HALÁSZ Tamás, „Talpon maradni – MU25: Kerekasztal-beszélgetés”, in *Parallel* 35. sz. (2017): 16–33, 19.

that around the opening of the MU the institution published programmes jointly with the Szkéné Theatre: the programmes of the two theatres were coordinated and complemented each other. In addition, we know of a number of artists who, after “outgrowing” the Szkéné Theatre, i.e. either began to think of larger-scale projects or simply ran out of audience, in several cases tried their luck at the initiative of János Regős and found a home within the walls of the MU Theatre. Not officially, but in a practical sense, the MU Theatre has become a kind of after-school of the Szkéné Theatre. Here is a list of some groups and artists who started their career at the Szkéné, then turned to the MU: György Árvai and the Természetes Vészek Kollektíva (Collective of Natural Art Disaster), Gerzson Péter Kovács and TranzDanz, who experiment with contemporary folk dance, Gábor Goda and Artus, who work on the border between dance, theatre, and visual arts, Csaba Méhes, who presents humorous (mostly) one-man shows. More recently, the presence of the newly dissolved k2 Theatre at the MU Theatre, was inspired by similar motifs: the company with its political performances was reflecting on our present, bringing young artists together. In the past fifteen years, a similar dynamic can be identified between Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts and the MU Theatre.

Witnesses from the 1980s and 1990s, the heyday of the Szkéné Theatre, speak of an excited, eager hunger, an overwhelming curiosity for each other's work. It may seem like an exaggeration, but the impression to today's observer is that it was almost compulsory to be involved in as many and as varied projects as possible. The history of the Szkéné Theatre could be written in terms of these connections, but here I mention only one extreme example.

The most popular member of the independent theatre community in Hungary today, internationally acclaimed Béla Pintér, started his career in the 1980s as a teenager in, what was then called, the Tanulmány

Színház (Study Theatre). This group grew into the Arvisura Company, which was the emblematic independent theatre of the period: the director, István Somogyi, leader of the group, experimented in a direction that was quite unusual in the realist-based theatre of Hungary. He created complex theatre that was strongly visual and musical, and that primarily focused on the senses. At that time Béla Pintér worked for seven years at Artus, with the direction of Gábor Goda, where he developed his movement culture, body awareness, and acting presence. Pintér also appeared in the performances of several small independent groups at the Szkéné Theatre, which existed for shorter or longer periods of time: he was present at most of the performances of the Utolsó Vonal Színházi Érdektömörülés (Last Line Theatre Workshop), which practiced self-reflective meta-theatre. Pintér also performed in groups such as the Dream Team, the Picaro and the Hattyú Gárda (Swan Guard). Until 1998 Pintér also appeared as an actor in early productions of the later internationally renowned Krétakör Színház (Chalk Circle Theatre), founded by Árpád Schilling in 1995. In 1998, Pintér created his first premiere. The title of it, *Népi rablét (Common Bondage)*, is the anagram of his own name, and the show is a grotesque, bloody-ridiculous performance that founded „the” Béla Pintér and Company. In many ways, Béla Pintér is an exception in contemporary Hungarian theatre history, and the list of actors and directors who passed from one company to another at the Szkéné Theatre is, in any case, a long one.

There is no such intense “coexistence” in the MU Theatre. According to the recollections, everyone did their own thing, and although they were by no means excluded from working together, their circles seemed to intersect at fewer points. There are just a few exceptions to the rule: György Árvai, who was present when the foundations of the MU were being laid, was involved in the projects of several other artists from a wide range of performing arts (e.g. Ágens, Edit Szűcs, Ani-

kó Zsalakovics, Krisztián Gergye, László Hudi and others). Further exceptions include the Pont Műhely (Point Workshop), born out of the Pont Színház (Pont Theatre), the old and new AIOWA, which originated in Vojvodina, Serbia, and the close ties that existed between them and the András Urbán Company in Subotica. In more recent history, the cooperation of small, mobile companies from rural Hungary, conceived in the amateur, student theatre and theatre education milieu, is also worth mentioning as an exception, e.g. the cooperation between FAQ, a theatre company originally based in Győr, KB35 Inárcs near Budapest, and the Rév Theatre in Győr, as well as the aforementioned k2 Theatre and the Soltis Lajos Theatre in Celldömölk. The last two mentioned, according to the company managers, were not so much motivated by the MU Theatre: most of the teams knew each other from amateur and other theatre festivals, and the MU Theatre merely provided a venue to present the results of their joint work in the capital.

Although neither the Szkéné Theatre nor the MU Theatre has been able to leap over its own shadow, both were important factors in a certain time and community. In both cases, the catalyst for these processes is linked to the theatre’s director, who had long been an emblematic figure in the life of the institution.

The real heyday of the Szkéné Theatre began in 1979, when János Regős took over the reins at the theatre, where he remained until his departure in 2010. Those three decades were not consistent, neither in terms of programming, nor in the quality of the groups that performed there, nor in terms of their strength, intensity, or their importance in theatre history. Yet, what Regős created there and then, with little money, was a unique institution at national, and, most probably, at regional level too.

The list is not exhaustive, but it says a lot about the era that the world-famous dance choreographer Josef Nadj, or Tamás Ascher and János Szikora, who are primarily known

today as stone theatre directors, worked or performed there at practically the same time. The same can be said about folk dancer Zoltán Zsuráfszky, contemporary dancer Yvette Bozsik, and her collaborator György Árvai, and other emblematic figures of anti-realist theatre, such as András Jeles, Erzsébet Gaál, or Katalin Lábán. Of course, we cannot forget about the resident company of the era, the Arvisura, led by István Somogyi, which was able to become the first independent theatre group in Hungary that was able to operate a permanent company and an ever-expanding repertoire for a long period of time; thanks to the financial support from the George Soros Foundation. The virtual family tree of the Szkéné Theatre has also grown: the Arvisura was the starting point of the careers of Béla Pintér, Árpád Schilling, and Ádám Horgas, who soon also had successful productions as directors. The model of the Arvisura as a resident company was repeated by Béla Pintér at the Szkéné Theatre in the 2000s, which meant that the name of the receptive venue was synonymous with Pintér for many people for a long time. Pintér's departure from the Szkéné was a slow and not painless process, but from the 2022/23 season onwards the director-playwright had only one production left in the venue's repertoire. Pintér decided to do this in order to ensure that his production of *A sütemények királynője (The Queen of Cookies, 2004)*, a tragedy dealing with the story of an abusive family in communist Hungary in the 1980s, would remain an intimate, close-to-conscious experience for the audience.

János Regős presented an exceptionally rich and varied programme at the Szkéné Theatre. It was under his direction that the Szkéné became a "place", and its connection to the international performing arts network through festivals and workshops would act as a low-budget model and a rudimentary forerunner of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts. It is now almost unbelievable that for more than two decades, the International

Meeting of Movement Theatre (IMMT) festivals featured groups and artists such as Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, Japanese Shushaku and Dormu Dance Theatre, Kazuo Ohno, Polish Gardzienice and Russian Derevo. Thanks to János Regős's extensive international network, the Szkéné Theatre also hosted performers outside the festival circuit, such as Min Tanaka from Japan, Oleg Zhukovsky from Russia, Divadlo na Provázku from the Czech Republic, La Mama Theatre, the Living Theatre and the Bread & Puppet Theatre from the United States. The Western artists' trips to the exotic lands behind the Iron Curtain for a fraction of their usual fees were probably also undertaken for the sake of adventure, but in the process, they had a profound influence on a whole generation of Hungarian artists. The summer workshop series of the International Dance-Movement Center (IDMC), which joined the IMMT in 1985, testifies to János Regős's pedagogical sense and future-oriented thinking: there anyone could get acquainted with dance and movement genres that were little known or unknown in Hungary at the time, such as jazz dance, musical dance, butoh, afro dance, flamenco, samba, tai-chi, etc. János Regős turned the Szkéné Theatre into an all-arts, crossover venue in the 1980s, a period when the term had not yet become trendy or banal. While Regős was a quality programmer, his selection was clearly not elitist, let alone revenue and audience maximizing, and he always left time and space for failure and trial and error.

This last point is analogous to the credo of the open-minded and liberal Tibor Leszták, former director of the MU Theatre, who led the not-so-smooth process of transforming the community centre into a receptive venue, creating, maintaining, and running another new "place". As a programmer, organiser, artistic secretary, artistic director, and director with a small but enthusiastic team, Leszták, with a strong affinity for alternative and contemporary arts, took the project forward until his early death in 2008. As he



wrote in a 1994 summary of the MU, the institution "is an inclusive theatre that does not want to see the increasing number of talented groups and ensembles of cultural value lost, as in the case of the Atlantis culture, and therefore wishes to give them the opportunity and a home to present themselves, and to continue to operate."<sup>16</sup>

The decade of the MU's launch was marked by the departure of György Árvai and the Collective of Natural Art Disaster from the Szkéné Theatre. Gábor Goda and the Artus were performing at both venues for a while. The group Andaxínház, which evolved from the Artus, and Csaba Méhes, who also worked with Gábor Goda for a long time, became long-time residents of the MU Theatre. The Pont Theatre, organised around Tibor Várszegi, and later the Pont Workshop, under the artistic direction of László Keszég, were also linked to the institution for decades. The legendary eccentric of Hungarian theatre history, the Szentkirályi Színházi Műhely (Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop) with Lili Monori and Miklós B. Székely, was an important team there in the 2000s, as was the ensemble of Viktor Bodó, the Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság (Sputnik Shipping Company). The Sputnik was invited to the MU by Tibor Leszták, but it only achieved significant results after his death. The company quickly became a major player in the Hungarian independent scene, won numerous international awards, but was dissolved a few years later.

In 2008, Tibor Leszták died and was replaced by Balázs Erős, who had considerable experience in managing several independent companies, such as the Krétakör Theatre or the Maladype, and initiated a decisive change of direction. Erős said goodbye to the companies that had long defined themselves as resident companies of the MU Theatre, and instead gave opportunities to young,

small, and mobile, often rural companies. The most important event of the past decade was the 2013 move of one of the oldest theatre education companies in Hungary, the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) moving to the MU Theatre. The inclusion of the Káva is a clear sign that the theatre education and community theatre line had become an absolute priority at the institution, and the theatre has recently been pursuing this path with renewed vigour. To mention just two notable undertakings: the OPEN International Community and Participatory Theatre Festival educates Hungarian audiences to understand and embrace this still unusual form through Hungarian and foreign performances, workshops, and roundtable discussions. A particularly exciting and nationally unique undertaking in recent years has been the presentation of community theatre performances by the MU Theatre's senior age groups. It is also a fine example of cooperation within the institution: the exceptional performances are directed by András Sereglei, actor, drama teacher, and one of the founding members of the Káva Cultural Workshop.

In 2010, after thirty-one years of directing, János Regős had to leave the Szkéné Theatre in a swift manner. His place was taken by Ádám Németh, an economist with many ties to the Budapest University of Technology and its firms. The managerial approach came at the right time: the changed legislative and financial environment created the opportunity for a complete re-profiling of the Szkéné. With the diminishing role of Béla Pintér, who had long been a resident artist at the Szkéné Theatre, and his departure in the early 2010s, new groups were given the opportunity to build their own returning audiences. Among the groups that were presenting new shows year by year, with permanent or virtual companies, we find important creators of the Hungarian independent performing arts scene, such as the Forte Company, which started out as a dance and physical theatre company led by Csaba Horváth,

<sup>16</sup> „MU Színház”, in *Félúton*, szerk. VÁRSZEGI Tibor (Budapest: Új Színházért Alapítvány, 1994), 28.

who redefined the language of movement on stage, the Nézőművészeti Kft., which is a company of two popular stage and film actors, Péter Scherer and Zoltán Mucsi, or the Vádli Alkalmi Színházi Társulás (Calves Occasional Theatre Company), led by actor-director Rémusz Szikszai, who represents expressive theatre and political message in almost all his performances. In addition to these, the Szkéné Theatre also hosts important chamber productions from rural Hungary and from Hungarian speaking regions beyond the borders, as well as occasional young groups, often assembled for a single project. The Szkéné also looks after the next generation of directors, regularly giving opportunities to influential young directors such as Máté Hegymegi and Jakab Tarnóczi.

The Szkéné Theatre existed as a foreign body, almost hidden, within the building of a non-artistic university, while the MU Theatre, community centre that had survived socialism and was in a precarious position and role after the change of regime, was transformed into a receptive venue. The reason why their history has been so varied, with detours and dead ends, is that they have maintained their marginal status within the Hungarian theatre structure from the very beginning. Some people, of course, are not happy about the changes, but I agree with the words of István Nánay, the doyen of Hungarian critics, whose statement about the Szkéné Theatre can be applied to the MU Theatre as well: "The history of the institution nicely describes the changes that have taken place in our society, in art, and in theatre over the last half century, and for this reason it cannot be condemned for being like this today, rather than like that."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> „Nánay István: Egy színház átváltozásai”, in JÁSZAY, *Színház a második...*, 75–80, 80.

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