

Kassák House Studio – Squat Theatre

Photos of the History of the Hungarian Underground Theatre

In 1969, Péter Halász and Anna Koós quit the renowned University Theatre (Universitas) to found the Kassák Studio, a non-professional theatre group of young people at the Kassák Cultural House in the Zugló district of Budapest. Years later in New York, this group, under the name Squat Theatre, would find its own place among the major groundbreaking theatrical enterprises of the world.

By the 1990's, following two decades of literal coexistence and common work, probing in countless forms and on various levels to transgress the borders between life and theatre, the group disbanded. Péter Halász left the Squat Theatre to found his own Love Theatre, and subsequently returned to Budapest, where he soon took over the co-direction of the Budapest Városi Színház / City Theatre and has continued to create new productions vis-à-vis the theatrical mainstream of the era.

Since the company's founding in 1969, photographer Endre Kovács has kept track of the theatre's activities. During the initial years, with camera in hand, he took an active part in the company's life, virtually becoming a member. As a participant and witness of the Kassák Studio's daily life, he took hundreds of photos during rehearsals and performances. He was present at every major theatrical event, even documenting their "underground" productions when banned and forced to operate as an "apartment theatre".

In 1974 the paths of the Kassák Studio and Endre Kovács parted for a time when the then 27-year-old photographer left Hungary for Lausanne. In 1976 – in the wake of easing East-West relations – a few members of the company were granted official permission to emigrate from Hungary. Bundi, as Endre Kovács is called by his friends, could catch up with the company again to record its life and famed productions during visits he paid to the company, residing and working either in Paris, Rotterdam or New York.

Endre Kovács's photos change in tune with the changes of the theatre. He recorded the developments of an exceptional theatre-making enterprise, from the initial Kassák Studio phase through the fully fledged Squat Theatre to Halász's new period of activities at the City Theatre in Budapest.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the decisive moments in the theatre's life are enacted not by the countless photographs housed in the theatre's archives, but through pieces from the photographer's private collection.

I. The Beginnings – Kassák Studio

"A strange theatre is roving the fringes of our cultural life..." was how a theatre critic of a Budapest daily paper introduced, with a touch of prudence, an otherwise sympathetic review on the first performance of the Kassák Studio towards the end of 1969. "Boys and girls, all dressed in white linen, panting and sweating, fight tooth and nail, pinching each other..." evoked another influential critic, well-known even today, in a tone of curiosity seasoned with aversion.

Actually, it was rather the Hungarian theatrical scene itself that was roving the fringes of the world's cultural life. With the Kassák Studio, and with Péter Halász's initiative (following in the wake of the Universitas Theatre), a major theatrical groundbreaking movement arrived in Hungary at long last, taking its roots in the political and artistic avant-garde, building on, amongst others, Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and sacred and popular theatrical traditions such as Japanese Noh theatre, medieval passion plays, various agitative methods or circus forms.

By that time, the sudden paradigmatic changes in the cultural and political life of the 1960's had subverted all notions relating to theatre throughout the world from America to Japan, bringing new forms into opposition with classicising and superficial voyeuristic theatre. More importantly, it set new, radical ideological concerns against petrified and voided authoritarian values.

The theatrical practices of Grotowski, Brook, Kantor, Julian Beck and the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet and others, in line with the social changes of the time, placed the role of theatre in a fundamentally different perspective from the conventional, established theatres of the era.

These theatrical productions were based on professional and communal commitment, often informing the deepest strata of personal existence, and sought to generate a radical change in social existence or at least in the mode of life and way of thinking. Not surprisingly, the political authorities and their highly dependent official cultural circles attempted to flock and control the Hungarian manifestations of these influences under the roof of a "non-professional theatre movement".

Halász, as an actor of the University Theatre, was able to witness the unfolding of new theatrical movements at major international festivals of the period, including the Yugoslavian BITEF and the Nancy World Festival of University Theatres. He articulated these new influences for the first time in two pieces he wrote for the University Theatre, *Ramp* and *The Eighth Circle of Inferno*, the latter being an adaptation of the KZ oratorio by the poet János Pilinszky. With the passing of time and increasingly narrowing possibilities, Halász and a few colleagues founded their own theatrical group in one of Budapest's (Zugló district) cultural houses, where they were granted opportunity to work.

The group incorporated the name of the cultural house, named after Lajos Kassák, the greatest figure of classical Hungarian avant-garde. Their chosen name, Kassák Studio, thus perfectly suited their new venture.

The Ballad of Two Brothers, their first production, bore the influence of Jerzy Grotowski's "poor" and "cruel", sacred theatre. The piece written by Halász is an allegory of despotism and subjugation, located in the Middle Ages, in which a new tyrant rising from a downtrodden origin, comes to power and is even willing to sacrifice his younger brother so as to retain power.

The performance was largely based on the intense physical, corporeal presence of the young company. In a large space, surrounded by the audience, they performed a series of move-

ments demanding great effort and high concentration. This was a performance of minimal means accompanied by aggressive light and sound effects, which reinforced the script's original dramatic power.

The success of the performance proved the newly born theatre viable, and during the subsequent years it became a key workshop in more than one sense for the specific Hungarian neo-avantgarde, "forbidden art", underground.

The company that came together during rehearsals and performances for the first piece, came up with a new production of a fundamentally different tone: a joint creative work without any preliminary written script.

'Cause Everyone Just Hangs Around Doing Nothing comprised an array of scenes verging on the absurd, with unambiguous yet spectacularly easily handled political and ideological references. Executions, burials, homicide, suicide, sexuality, authority, dictatorship, and servility: these were more or less the issues articulated through the subsequent scenes, in a collage of quotations, situations, texts and tunes superimposed one onto the other.

The company continued operating choreographically, with acrobatic highlights, emphatic rhythm, and minimalist means.

With the joining of playwright István Bálint, the written play came to the foreground again. The questions posed by *Labyrinth*, with Theseus killing the monster and taking its place, however, kept on analysing the issues fundamental to Hungary during the 1960's and 1970's: authoritative power and defencelessness, betrayal, and the reproduction of tyranny.

Formally, the central position of the sage was retained. With Péter Donáth's scenery and a musical environment inspired by the New Musical Studio however, the approach became for some time a bit more aestheticising, and with the involvement of new colleagues, a somewhat more traditional model of theatrical division of labour gained ground for a transitional period of time.

The individual performance of the actors also became more accentuated, albeit still rather staying within the framework set by the Grotowski-inspired, Cieszlak-type of corporeal, physical, "cruel" theatre.

II. Nancy Festival

In spring of 1971, the most prominent avant-garde theatre festival, the annual Nancy Festival Mondial du Théâtre, as directed by Jack Lang, extended an invitation to the Kassák Studio to participate in the international gathering despite contrary suggestions by the Hungarian authorities.

For the majority of the young people, mostly university or high school students belonging to the company, this was the first opportunity in their lives to travel beyond the iron curtain. As was symptomatic of the era, Halász, the theatre's director, summoned the group together before their departure. Appealing to their sense of duty, he requested that even if they toyed with the idea of emigration -- or defection, as the term was used at the time -- none of them should do it on this very occasion, for the sake of the company's further existence. As he put it, "there will be other, more suitable opportunities for it", i.e., fleeing the country.

One day toward the end of April 1971, the company arrived in Nancy late in the night. In the richly decorated Baroque theatre-palace of the city, the evening's main highlight of the European premiere of Robert Wilson's seven-hour play, *Deafman Glimpse*, had long been under way. This production, with its hour-long tableaux alternating in time-challenging rhythm, formulated fundamental questions.

This performance unexpectedly and suddenly threw into question the Kassák Studio members' views and expectations of

modern theatre, which they had formulated during their short, one-year period of common work into a heartfelt belief and deep-seated conviction.

Their one-week stay in Nancy meant a turning point in the company's life in every sense. The sympathetic reception of their performances, the completely new influences -- first and foremost Robert Wilson's theatre -- and last but not least, the Western world itself, with its state of turbulence, excitement, challenges and opportunities, instilled in them both euphoria and angst, a desire for freedom and free creativity, a state of both resoluteness and bewilderment.

All this happened only two years after May 1968; the signs of a life-style shifting culture and rebellion were still omnipresent. The Kassák Studio members, mingling with the actors-participants of the festival, as well as trade unions, various leftist and anarchist organisations holding their demonstrations at the main square, flung themselves into this intoxicating freedom for a short, fleeting moment, not giving a pin for the scrutinising gaze of policemen.

III. Quick Changes – 1971

French press reviews covered the Budapest company's performances with special regard. Learning this, the functionaries on various levels of the domestic cultural-political scene faced a difficult task, in that they were at once longing for acknowledgement from the West and resolved to retain the "rules of socialist coexistence" through a new rush of restrictions. What should be done, then, with this suspicious formation, whose productions are loaded with political allusions and sexually indecent manifestations?

In the light of such a favourable international reception, they finally opted for a greater support for the company than had been previously provided. Although this decision would be very soon followed by measures aimed to paralyse the theatre, for the time being the Kassák Studio actually enjoyed greater opportunities than they had expected.

This situation allowed for the company to stage *Quick Changes*, a spectacular, musical, dadaist opus that also incorporated Bob Wilson's influence and that, as compared to their earlier works, was a large-scale production presented at an open-air movie theatre (Rózsavölgy) in Budapest.

Through the working method they had perfected together during the production of *'Cause Everyone Just Hangs Around Doing Nothing* and the series of scenes composed of themes and ideas built associatively one upon the other, they managed to incorporate both the new influences and the lessons learnt from the previous pieces.

The fundamental chord they touched was still a stance to challenge the extant power relations and rules meant to regulate human relationships. What this piece brought as a new element was rather a sense of irony rising above all, mingled with fantasy, and dadaist impertinence.

This "musical play in two acts" was a colourful commotion of dragons, heroes, witches who cursed weddings, series of grotesque scenes enacted behind the doors of wardrobes, and cheerful executions -- all ending up in an operetta-like, surrealist finale, challenging the grey, colourless world of the era and the immediate environment. The full title of the play was *Quick Changes, Enchanted by Remote Seas and Far Lands, or the Dragon's Turbulent Cry Silenced by Thunder Following Lightning, in the Tibetan Sense of the Word*.

Based on what they experienced in Nancy, the company understood the significance of advertising and PR. This explained the fact that during the performance's lead-up time, agitated policemen were searching through downtown Budapest for "people dressed in red, leafleting". In fact, the people searched for

were members of the company, who had marched along Váci Street, the main pedestrian shopping street, disguised in the costume of the red, seven-headed dragon acting in the play, and handed out fliers announcing the performance.

Unfortunately, however, not publicising in newspaper columns or on advertisement pillars reserved for officially supported art programs, this action not only invited the anger of the authorities, but also failed to spread word throughout the city about the summer outdoor performance. The piece, which had anyhow received permission only for two performances, was withdrawn before it could have reached a wider audience.

Consequently, their subsequent piece, *Murder in the Skanzen*, was prepared under more confined and intense circumstances, with the participation of new playwright member, Péter Lajtai. In this piece, the surreal comedy of the *Quick Changes* switched over to a truly scathing and outspoken absurd.

This tone was already more than the authorities could tolerate. With this, the process of trying to get the theatre under control began, leading up to the obstruction of its functioning and ultimately its prohibition.

IV. Theatre in the Living-Room – Breznyik and a Woman

On 24 January 1972, Péter Halász received the decree that banned *Murder in the Skanzen*. Following this, the company moved from the public space to the private sphere, to create and present performances in the homes of friends and acquaintances, and increasingly often in Halász's flat in Dohány Street.

As far as the forms, and to a certain extent, the topics are concerned, the staple features of this "apartment theatre" period (to last until 1976) were shaped by *Breznyik and a Woman*, a several hours' production by Péter Breznyik, who had been one of the most active members of the theatre since the very beginning.

Aware of the changing external conditions, i.e., existing in the private sphere instead of public space, Breznyik focused on the "private" message as the subject matter of the theatre. *Breznyik and a Woman* is a confessional work, in which the protagonist renders his own life public, mingling in a peculiar manner the profane and the mundane, the natural and the sacred with theatrical elements.

The central theme – the communication possibilities of a subjectivity reduced to its basics; the relationship with the Other; sexuality; self-abandonment; the ability or inability to be united – was articulated partly through a particular person, Breznyik, in a particular interpersonal relationship (Breznyik and Ágnes Laurenczi, and later, Breznyik and Anna Koós), and partly through the clown-masked characters of the play.

By performing rituals and other acts – cutting female genitalia into a loaf of bread with a hara-kiri movement, listening to the songs of Katalin Karády (celebrated Hungarian singer/actress during WWII), fumbling with his father's war mementos, then creeping under the woman's dressing gown, etc. – the masked character (Breznyik) confronted the viewers with the individual's Dostoyevskian "notes from the underground". One should understand the viewers were the actor's acquaintances or friends, owing to the illegality of the performance.

With its amorphous and sometimes depressing tone, *Breznyik and a Woman* immediately withdrew the theatre from the traditional game of mimicry as well as from the other, then seemingly reasonable, game of direct politicising. With its radical and confessional tone, moral anarchism and self-mortifying gestures, this performance anticipated fundamental elements of the subsequent pieces to be created in New York.

Breznyik and a Woman also introduced one of the company's most characteristic and recurring themes and staple features:

challenging the boundaries of both (the company members') life and theatre, a desire for rendering public the most intimate and personal, and seeking a radical revision of all command systems, be they either political or moral. The period spent internalising external influences was over. Through these prohibited, unofficial performances, the theatre gained its own authentic, unique form, a foundation on which the Squat Theatre would be based.

V. The Szigliget Performance

Prior to his emigration from Hungary in 1974, photographer Endre Kovács had taken numerous photographs of the initial unofficial performances of the company in the Dohány Street apartment. These photographs document the theatre's renowned productions. Through the mediation of the Squat Theatre, the majority of the photos are housed by the Archives of the University of California Library.

Some of the performances were originally conceived for photography or film (e.g., the 1976 film, *Don Giovanni*), including the action (of Péter Breznyik and Endre Kovács) that took place in Szigliget (at the Western end of Lake Balaton) on 13 June 1973, the photographs of which are on view at this show.

The closed, private space of the apartment theatre, complete with the inspiration gained from their summer workshops at the Balaton Lake, incited the company to try their hands in an open-air, but still "private" space.

This concept generated numerous performances and actions following the theatre's prohibition in 1972, including the seven-day series of events held in the sand-pit at Surány, *King Kong* presented in the Chapel at Balatonboglár and its neighbourhood, *Birds and Red Epaulets* and the courtly stories of *Guido and Tyrius* held in Szentendre.

The concept for the Szigliget action was in line with Breznyik's frivolous private actions that often steered the theatre's activities to unexpectedly new routes. This time, it was perhaps on a Kafkaesque rather than Dostoyevskian inspiration that the naked dancer made his burlesque assault against the Castle enwrapped in mist.

VI. Squat Theatre

Between 1973 and 1976, the Apartment Theatre became one of the most outstanding, if not the most significant institutions of the Budapest underground art scene.

The members of the company realised dozens of performances, happenings and actions, mostly at their Dohány Street headquarters, but also performed at friends' places, open-air venues, the Balatonboglár Chapel, the unofficial program of the Wrocław Festival, and – on the invitation of psychologist friends – even at a Psychiatric Hospital (Lipótmező) in Budapest. On the latter occasion, the theoreticians and practitioners gathered to see the performance were asked to pay exit, rather than entrance, fees.

With its performances being observed by informers and secret agents, thus suffering constant harassment by the authorities, the company functioned within the unofficial sphere of the contemporary art scene, where a sort of *modus vivendi* secured for them an increasingly narrowing, but still existent scope for action.

The experience and articulation of this lifestyle, which in its confined yet unparalleled form seemed permanent, ultimately led to the development of the personal and artistic themes, forms and contexts, posed the questions and realised the theatrical and narrative elements that would signify the gold reserves of the Squat Theatre.

With the expatriation of Solzhenitsyn in 1974, carried out in the spirit of the so-called *détente*, which in fact meant an alertness to its increasing dependence on the West, the Soviet Union demonstrated a “decent” method of how its satellite states should get rid of their dissenting elements whose presence was a nuisance, but who enjoyed special attention from the West. This was the time when many prominent Eastern European artists and other intellectuals were forced to leave their homelands. Their departures were often accompanied by demonstrations of solidarity, such as the signing of petitions and similar actions organised by fellow artists and thinkers. Nevertheless, when the Apartment Theatre was forced to leave Hungary in 1977, it triggered no response whatsoever from domestic professional circles, whose silence might also be taken as a sign of contentment.

While the company members were waiting for their immigration visas to the USA, they were offered opportunity to rehearse and perform in Paris, where Arianne Mnouchkine, director of Theatre du Soleil, undertook a guarantee for them. From there they moved on to Rotterdam, supported with a major Dutch stipend, as well as the opportunity to rehearse and perform. In parallel with a few initial attempts to put together performances from fragments of various pieces of the Apartment Theatre period, the concept of their first original international production was taking shape.

In Rotterdam, the local authorities, after long deliberation, offered them a storefront at the harbour for the preparation of a new performance. This shop, opening to the street and bordered by a shop window, provided the company with a theatrical space that perfectly met the requirements of a theatre that had just delivered itself from the confines of an Apartment Theatre, but that had also left behind the traditional stage situation long before.

With the storefront, the apartment opened up towards the public space of the street, without losing, however, the sense of intimacy implied in the living-room situation. At the same time, the street lent itself to be incorporated in the actual scenery and serve as an additional acting space; moreover, viewers could even watch the performance from the outside.

This environment resembled the one already tested in the Budapest apartment with its “house in the apartment” situation built from wardrobes and a window, but was also filled with new potential. One of these was the fact that parts of the building above the shop space served as homes for the company members and thus could be used as additional performance spaces.

The incessantly changing relationship of outside and inside, public and intimate, viewer and actor attained its fully developed form in this storefront theatre. Thus, the long planned new piece was quickly shaping up.

During that time, a close friend, artist Tamás Szentjóbby, suggested that as was appropriate to the situation, i.e., their ability to create both a home and a theatre from abandoned places, the company should call themselves “squat”.

With this, Squat Theatre was born.

VII. Pig, Child, Fire!

Before the company emigrated from Hungary, director Tamás Ascher, whose productions at the theatre of the provincial city of Kaposvár meant the solitary forefront of officially supported or merely tolerated theatre in Hungary, had invited Péter Breznyik to play an anarchist student in Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils* (also known as *Demons* or *The Possessed*) that Ascher was staging.

Wisely enough, Ascher and Breznyik decided not to mingle Breznyik’s acting with that of other actors on stage, but instead,

they allocated a special acting space within the stage for the student’s abode (inside a wardrobe, behind an either closed or open door, cf., *Quick Changes*). In this manner, they secured the situation of “a stage within the stage” for Breznyik, where he could perform the walk-on part of *The Devils* according to his own rules of acting.

That performance, with Gábor Reviczky as Stavrogin, gave the initial idea for their new piece, for which company members created further scenes.

During its preview, the Dutch authorities raised objections against certain issues pertaining to the play. The Dutch regulations did not allow for the appearance of children and pigs, or the use of open flame – fire – on stage, which were, however, indispensable elements of the production. Nevertheless, it was owing to this triple prohibition that the accomplished play gained its final title: *Pig, Child, Fire!*

The unusual outdoor and indoor spaces used during the performance, with their sense of merged private and public spheres, also proved to be useful in managing to circumvent the rules relevant to Dutch theatres. The children appearing “on stage”, all daughters or sons of company members, received their dinner on the day of the performance under the public eye. Thus, it could not be taken as child labour. At the same time, fire was lit outdoors in the street (more precisely, on Halász’s overcoat) and thus could only be seen through the shop-window. As regards the pig featuring in the play, it was simply replaced by a goat.

As mentioned, the first episode of the performance in five acts was the staging of Stavrogin’s (Péter Breznyik) confession. In the area in front of the shop-window overlooking the street, a woman (Anna Koós) was reading aloud Stavrogin’s (*The Devil’s* protagonist) confession meant not only for Bishop Tikhon (Péter Halász), but for the widest public, about raping a 12-year-old girl, who then committed suicide.

In addition to the woman, visible on stage were an infant (Galush Halász) playing in the sand and a goat wearing the mask of a cherub. In the foreground, a bizarre puppet, that of Stavrogin, was hanging from the ceiling, with another head of Stavrogin tossing above the puppet’s butt like a double.

In this Dostoyevskian world, the knife used to vivisect morality and moral commands, with its cutting edge taking off from *Breznyik and a Woman*, cut deeper than ever before. “I have killed God”, Matryosha cries in a nightmare following her being together with Stavrogin, tormented by a guilty conscience and bewilderment, providing the demonic context for Breznyik-Stavrogin to make his own confession about death, sexuality, desire, sin, the private and the public.

At this point, Father Tikhon–Péter Halász, with his coat in flames, appears behind the shop-window; shaking his fist, he insists on the curtailment of all exaggerations in the form and content of the confession, in words that somewhat differ from Dostoyevsky’s original text. In reaction, the woman shouts at him, deriding Halász’s judgment as shallow psychologising. Upon this, the Bishop opens his overcoat in an exhibitionistic manner, letting his naked torso be seen.

As a closure to this episode, Stavrogin’s puppet falls down, to reveal its hanged living double: the suffocating actor imitating the spasm of sexuality, Breznyik himself.

Stavrogin’s episode and the issues raised therein draw in a sense on the origins of the company, on a summary of its “Eastern” past and elements referring to previous plays and influences internalised through them (*Breznyik and a Woman*, *Devils*, *King Kong*, Blake, Nietzsche, etc.). The subsequent scene, under the inspiration of István Bálint, already builds on a pre-sentiment of the American years to come.

The theatre had already employed the techniques of Pop Art a few times before, such as in the performances in the Chapel at Balatonboglár appropriating the figure of King Kong and his

lover from the movie. In fact, the Squat phenomenon as a whole can be reckoned as belonging to Pop Art in many of its aspects. In the second part of the play even pop music appears, which is quite a new phenomenon, to accompany the slapstick elaborated previously during the Budapest period. The viewers become witnesses of a gangster showdown to the music and lyrics of "Nous sommes les mannequins" (We are showroom dummies) by the then highly popular band, Kraftwerk.

During a later performance in New York, the local police also took an active part in this scene. Unaware of what was going on, they summoned the actors to lay down their guns, until someone finally rushed from the house, waving the official permission for the performance.

Whereas this circular showdown and the gangster motif are connected to István Bálint and Halász, its counterpoint, the figure of the stoned tradesman with the woman sitting in the shop-window (Ágnes Sántha), is another gag by Breznyik, characteristically culminating in a sarcastic repetition of the already launched suicide motif: the gun that misses fire eventually goes off in the ass of the drunken man...

Once more, life and the theatre, the intimate and the public spheres, a system of personal and mythical relationships bring about a series of events that is so characteristic of Squat Theatre: an intermezzo in which the children of the company have dinner publicly. Dinner was also served up to a monitor, which in turn showed the images of actors.

The structure of *Pig, Child, Fire!*, corresponds to a dialogue of creative manifestations that generates spectacular and sensual dialectics, integrating the reading of a letter from Antonin Artaud to Breton, which reflects on the existence of the theatre and the actors' complete identification with their personal existence.

The play had overwhelming success at major European theatre festivals, so that by the time Squat Theatre arrived in the USA, the company had already made its name there.

VIII. Friends and Inspirations

Since its founding, the company meant a strong force of attraction for the most divergent of people, who thus became identified by their interest in the work and lifestyle of the company.

This circle of people yielded members fluctuating around the company corps and often exercised fundamental influence on the theatre. They joined the group for some time then left to possibly come back again. As co-creators, friends, judges and analysers, rivals and co-thinkers, they took part in various productions or helped to realise them.

Some of them took active parts in the theatre's work, while others simply enjoyed the atmosphere of freedom and solidarity in and around the group. Some were drawn close to the company through their personal sympathy or found inspiration for their own work, while others instinctively sought refuge with them from the meagre everyday of a political dictatorship.

It was this group, of course, that yielded the informers as well... Such continually intimate communication with their immediate and wider environment became a vital element of the company's activities whether they worked in Budapest, throughout Europe, or in New York. They have continued to maintain this communication even since the company disbanded (as is illustrated by the present exhibition).

Compiling a list of people associated with the theatre would be a time-consuming but worthwhile endeavour, as it would also represent and evoke a significant chapter of Hungarian cultural history from the 1970's onwards and a substantial segment within the post-modern theatrical and artistic environment of Europe and New York.

Artist Tamás Szentjóby, who had emigrated to live and work in Switzerland in 1974, was – although one of many friends – an indisputably important source of inspiration for the theatre. Not only did he give the theatre its name, but collaborated on the concepts of several plays (e.g., *Andy Warhol's Last Love*). He often visited the company during their performance tours in Europe, also in New York, and even, on the occasion of the Shiraz Festival, in Iran.

During its history, the theatre also became increasingly engaged in filmmaking. They created independent film productions (*Don Giovanni, An Imperial Message*), and subsequently involved film and video as integral parts of their theatrical productions. In addition to their individual or group appearances in various films, the Squat has meant inspiration for some major filmmakers, including Jonathan Demme, R.W. Fassbinder, and Jim Jarmusch, to name only the most well-known directors.

Squat members also took significant roles in *Tscherwonez*, a film by Gábor Altorjay, who worked as an expatriate in Germany, following the company's work with attention.

Naturally, Squat Theatre was open to influences from other art forms as well, with music being no exception. From the New Musical Studio of Budapest to Katalin Karády, the music of Noh theatre to New York funk, from Kraftwerk hits to Wagner and Strauss, music had a vast influence on the theatre's work in various forms and roles.

During the rehearsal period for *Pig, Child, Fire!*, the company's latest discovery was Antonio Carlos Gardel, whose Argentine tango music played day and night in the living quarters and the spaces used for rehearsals.

IX. Andy Warhol's Last Love

Owing to the success of *Pig, Child, Fire!*, Squat Theatre was able to rent a permanent theatre and living space in 23rd Street, Manhattan. The storefront of the building, which had been abandoned and boarded up for quite some time, once housed a club named Galaxy 21 (a name that would gain significance later). Squat moved into this building, used the upper floors as living quarters, while the storefront, according to the theatre's earlier practice, provided the theatre space, or sometimes functioned as a cinema.

Pig, Child, Fire! ran there until February 1978, and was followed in June of the same year with the premiere of a new piece, *Andy Warhol's Last Love (AWLL)*.

AWLL re-used elements tested and improved over the years in many ways and variations. Formal and thematic traits from *Breznyik and a Woman, King Kong, Seven Clown Stories, Red Epaulets and Pieta, Pig, Child, Fire!* were identifiable in the work. It also recalled the film adaptation of Kafka's *An Imperial Message*, made in collaboration with director László Nadjmányi in Budapest. At the same time, the synthesis of all these elements reveals the crucial role István Bálint played in formulating the comprehensive intellectual and authorial concept of this piece.

AWLL shows the Pop Art inclinations manifest in the history of Squat in its full form, given that it explicitly chose Andy Warhol, one of the most emblematic figures of the movement as the protagonist of the play. The other protagonist is Ulrike Meinhoff, the German terrorist leader, who died under suspicious circumstances (Did she commit suicide? Was she killed by her prison guards?) just a few years prior to the creation of the play.

The point of departure for the play's narrative was information published by certain papers that traces of sperm were detected on Meinhoff's clothes when she was found dead in her cell within a special wing of the Stammheim prison. The explana-

tion – as Ulrike Meinhoff’s voice informs us from interplanetary space – is that at the moment of her death, an extraterrestrial being from Galaxy 21 – note the appropriation of the club’s name – made love to her in order to help the terrorist dying a “public death” attain her new, interplanetary existence. The woman terrorist’s new homeland is a planet within the Andromedes, where time and space are handled “with love, discipline and freedom”.

Then Ulrike Meinhoff lists the members of the revolutionary committee of Galaxy 21, in whose names she speaks, and her list also includes Jan Palach, the Prague suicide hero of freedom and Yukio Mishima, the Japanese writer who committed hara-kiri. She summons all the people listening to the message to “render their deaths public”, allowing for those coming from the Galaxy to save them too for a new existence.

“Render your life public, so that your death be public as well” is Ulrike Meinhoff’s last message. The text written by István Bálint carries the recurring Squat motifs to the utmost. In addition to the issues of personal and public existence, it poses a question about public death, although the text in the piece states that this is done with the very aim to put an end to “the cruelest form of exploitation, death”.

At the end of the play, Ulrike Meinhoff – impersonated over the years in turns by Squat members’ daughters Eszter Bálint, Borbála Major, as they had just reached adolescence, cf., the essence of revolution is the revolutionary age – shoots Warhol. She says he has earned himself a place in the community of Galaxy 21.

The play consists of three acts. The first act begins in one of the living spaces of the company – Éva Buchmüller and István Bálint’s common bedroom – where the woman (Éva) tunes in on Meinhoff’s proclamation on a universal receiver, witnessed by two other actors (Breznyik and Halász).

The first victim of death rendered public is Éva, being killed by the man (István Bálint). Following her death, Breznyik also attempts public death but he fails in the attempt: only his face gets burnt in the explosion. Halász and Bálint flee. At this point, the extraterrestrial form Galaxy 21 arrives (Anna Koós) with an erect phallus on top of her head to embrace the dead woman with a gesture evoking the Pieta.

The second act is played in the ground-floor space to where the spectators move from the upstairs bedroom. A film is projected onto a screen suspended in front of the shop-window. It shows Andy Warhol riding horseback through the streets of Manhattan, to the text of *An Imperial Message*. He is the messenger who, in Kafka’s text, is never able to get to the addressee with the message from the dead emperor. This time, however, as the play would later contend, there is not even a message.

A.W. in the film, and subsequently “in reality”, arrives at the theatre, where a witch (a true witch) makes a magic ritual, blessing and consecrating the space occupied by the spectators and actors in the name of Boticelli’s Venus. Following this, Andy Warhol (István Bálint wearing his mask) interviews Kathleen Kendel about witchcraft, and finally takes a Polaroid photo of her.

In the meantime, in the street beyond the shop-window, the burnt-faced Breznyik is dancing a jig in one place for a long time, while Warhol’s interview plays from a tape recorder, interrupted from time to time by comments from passers-by peering inside through the window.

In the third act, Ulrike Meinhoff, the revolutionary who wants to change all, meets Andy Warhol, the pop artist who accepts everything “the way it is”. We learn that Warhol is in love with Ulrike and witness Andy Warhol’s “merited” public death, executed at the hands of Ulrike Meinhoff, followed by the extraterrestrial from Galaxy 21 taking him with her...

Finally, an aluminium-coated partition wall is suspended in between the spectators and the shop-window, reflecting the viewers unto themselves.

Owing to – and in spite of – its intellectual complexity and multitude of references, *Andy Warhol’s Last Love* provided an exciting and sensuous theatrical adventure as it was played in the 23rd Street Squat Theatre with its storefront space and surveillance cameras.

Andy Warhol’s Last Love repeated the success of *Pig, Child, Fire!*.

X. Life-Theatre

In May of 1981, the Squat Theatre premiered *Mr Dead and Mrs Free* at the World Theatre Meeting in Cologne. The play remained on their repertoire until 1983 in different successive variations, with a film version also shown independently, and won several prizes.

Meanwhile, Squat also started to host various film screenings and jazz, punk, rock, blues, and new wave concerts. The theatre soon became one of the major cultural meeting points in New York.

Nevertheless, the company’s always unstable financial situation did not improve; on the contrary, they found it increasingly difficult to cover the rent for the space. With the changing times and after the long years they had spent together, with repeatedly challenging personal and artistic relationships, alongside arising new ambitions and the children growing up, the cohesion within the group loosened.

In early 1984, Péter Breznyik moved out of the building, to be followed very soon by Péter Halász, so that his and István Bálint’s artistic careers parted. Bálint continued his work and staged his piece, *Dreamland Burns*.

In November of 1985, Squat lost its lease to the 23rd Street building. Some members moved into individual apartments and thus the company became divided. Bálint took on Squat Theatre until the late 1990’s when Éva Buchmüller also quit; thus, no theatre performed under the name of Squat.

In the meantime, Halász founded his Love Theatre.

The history of the world took a great turn. Some members repatriated to Hungary, others continued living and working in New York or have been travelling to and from the two parts of the world.

From this point, Squat became a chapter in the history of theatre.

Its creators continued working in the fields of theatre, film, visual arts, music, and literature. Everyone went his or her own way, taking with them the experience of a unique, or if you like, universal theatrical enterprise, in which they authenticated each moment of the theatre with their most personal and individual existence; or I might even say, at the price of their lives.

XI. She Who Once Was the Helmet-Maker’s Beautiful Wife

In 1990, Péter Halász’s Love Theatre performed Péter Halász and Seth Tillet’s “comedy in bronze”, *She Who Once Was the Helmet-Maker’s Beautiful Wife*, at Petőfi Hall, Budapest, as organised by the Dutch Ristaert ten Cate, an old supporter of the Squat Theatre.

This was the first time since 1976 that Halász visited Budapest. The Petőfi Hall was crowded with old acquaintances as well as spectators who had only heard of the Apartment Theatre or the New York Squat Theatre. You could almost hear the spectators ask themselves (in different tones, yet in one voice), “So, what is it that he can do so well?”

In front of a drop-scene imitating a brick wall, indefinable figures wrapped in black clothes, slouched in line at an unbearably slow pace. When they reached the centre of the stage,

they exchanged a few words in shrieking and hacking voices about a marketplace and the size of fish on sale there.

The curtain slowly rose, and in the awkwardly dim ambience of the conventional (!) stage, revealing dull, almost insignificant scenery, someone was moaning softly in a bed.

Lit by a simple spot light at a table in the foreground, a man, confined to the role of a once sarcastic, once empathetic narrator, was sitting.

A woman in red, sat on a chair, entered into long, dreamlike monologues from time to time, while a young girl was reading details of the woman's life from a portfolio, with a school-like accentuation and often in harsh tones.

There was no trace whatsoever of the spectacular scenes of the Squat Theatre.

Suddenly, the moaning character struggled to sit up. A grey wig became visible. It turned out that it is Halász playing an old, lame woman. Then you realised that the old lame woman he played was his grandmother. Later you learnt that the grandmother was living the last moments of her life.

Following this, it became clear that however much the grandmother tried to call her grandson, Péter, to help her through the last night of her life, he would not and could not come. Halász was not able to play the man who could run to help his grandmother, since he was already playing her. Thus, he had to leave the grandmother he was playing alone.

Thus, both of them were lonely.

Halász played the last night of his grandmother's life. She was an old woman who had survived all. She had survived the death of her parents, the death of her children, the death of her husband, and the death of her friends. She survived all sorts and

forms of death: death by fire, Spanish-flu-death, forced-labour-death, brick-falling-on-the-head-death, suicide, cancer-death, tumbling-off-the-piano-death, and in addition, she survived her whole life.

She only did not survive her grandson.

The grandson, in turn, evoked his grandmother on the stage – step by step, hobbling and toddling along. In a long white night-dress and orthopaedic shoes, with trembling hands and benumbed thighs, the grandmother potted about in the room; slopped milk, took pills, had a wash, tried to sleep, tumbled down, staggered to her feet, clutched the back of chairs as she tried to read in the distant light of a lamp hanging high above, fell down, screamed, made arrogant demands, cried and laughed, threatened suicide, danced to Strauss' music, reminisced, and died.

Nothing of Villon, nothing of Rodin; still, she is the one who once was the helmet-maker's beautiful wife.

Looking back upon the history of Squat, one could believe that they had probed into everything to break down the border between the personal and the public, between life and theatre. With this piece, Halász provided evidence of his ability to sweep aside all sorts of dogmas, even those he had created for himself, and embark upon exploring the same fundamental issue time and again.

He performed a piece that was as much emotional as full of scathing humour – and that belonged to his most personal history.

With *She Who Once Was the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife*, as well as numerous pieces to follow, Péter Halász made his return to Hungary more than ten years ago.

Text by Can Togay
Translation by Andrea Szekeres

LUDWIG MÚZEUM BUDAPEST – KORTÁRS MŰVÉSZETI MÚZEUM
LUDWIG MUSEUM BUDAPEST – MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Budapest I., Szent György tér 2., Royal Palace, Building "A"
Phone: (+36 1) 375 9175, (+36 1) 375 7848 • Fax: (+36 1) 212 2534
info@ludwigmuseum.hu

www.ludwigmuseum.hu

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