

The Urban Theatre of the Present. The 40 Years of the Katona József Theatre

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Abstract: Katona József Theatre closed its 40th season on June 16, 2023. Director Gábor Máté said that “the entire staff at the Katona József Theatre can be proud that, despite the ongoing economic difficulties, the 40th season was completed in a manner worthy of the institution’s roots.”¹ During the anniversary celebrations, I watched the performances and was haunted by the thought of taking a look at the Katona (as the people of Budapest call it) from the outside of its cultural framework and creative idiom. For forty years, the Katona has provided a most intensely stimulating discourse on artistic creation in Hungarian, with a specific theatrical idiom and a continuous self-reflective redefinition of its own status. In search of such ideas as “roots” and “worthy manner”, in this paper I juxtapose the 1982 and 2022 seasons to evaluate this complexity as it can be understood and perceived from the perspective of European urban theatre cultures.

Company-narrative

The history of the Katona József Theatre is a relatively well-known story with a relatable meaning and a narrative substance² that is easy to represent. Since its first day, the

¹ Katona homepage, last download: 30.08.2023,

<https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/43692-jubileumhoz-melto-sikerek-es-eredmenyek-lezartuk-a-40-evadunkat>. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

² Frank R. ANKERSMIT, „Truth”, in Frank R. ANKERSMIT, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, 102–126 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 124.

Katona’s directors have regularly articulated what kind of theatre they wanted to create. These formulations have taken the form of interviews and, in recent years, a multitude of retrospectives and public discussions. With precise and sensitive insights, the first leaders of the Katona, Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki, understood professional theatrical discourse not as a revelation but as a way of communicating ideas and using clear statements. Their third collaborator, the theatre’s all-time director, Tamás Ascher, also stands out with his analytical attitude, both in his public utterances and his non-public ones, preserved as anecdotes of the company, which define the narrative of the Katona and therefore also its aesthetics. It is due to the narrative skills of Székely, Zsámbéki, and Ascher that the Katona is able to convey a direct historical experience that confronts the past in a sensual way. The theatrical representation of historical experience initiated by the three of them is at the core of what the Katona József Theatre is: the only Hungarian theatre for many decades that has been able to weave its own events into its own narrative.

To understand this narrative, in our analysis, we should consider Székely’s and Zsámbéki’s shared college education until their graduation in 1968, their shared National Theatre *debut* in 1979, and their shared founding of a company. The political-historical process of the transformation from the National to the Katona Theatre has already been explored in a multitude of studies.³ Now I

³ RING Orsolya, *A Nemzeti Színház-kép változásai és változatai a késői Kádár-korszakban* (Budapest: Opitz Kiadó, 2019); RING Orsolya,

will follow the process of the development of the theatrical and aesthetic phenomena⁴ that can be perceived around the transformation between the two institutional paradigms, from that of a national theatre to that of an urban theatre. In what follows, I will mainly summarise the reflections of the three directors who founded this narrative.

Urban Theatre

Let's start with the recognition that the Katona is a successful embodiment of the European urban theatre model. Its repertoire and its working procedures are familiar from all the big cities, where theatre has become a significant communal space for national and cultural movements and thus has a theatrical tradition of at least two centuries. The notion of urban theatre has been brought back into focus with the 2018 manifesto of Milo Rau and the Ghent Theatre,⁵ although Rau and his team are taking stock of the commitments of the urban theatre of the future, which prefers a multilingual, multicultural, travelling theatre practice that uses literature as inspiration rather than as a score. The

„25 éves az önálló Katona József Színház”, last download: 30.08.2023,

https://www.archivnet.hu/politika/25_eves_a_z_onallo_katona_jozsef_szinhasz.html; IMRE Zoltán, „Halleluja: A késő Kádár-kori szocializmus és a (nemzeti) színház keretei – A Nemzeti Színház 1981-es *Halleluja* előadása”, in IMRE Zoltán, *A nemzet színpadra állításai: A magyar nemzetiszínház-elképzelés változásának főbb momentumai 1837-től napjainkig*, 208–218 (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2013).

⁴ FÖLDÉNYI F. László, „A színházművészet minősítésének csapdái”, in *Színházművészetünkről*, ed. ANTAL Gábor, 180–185 (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983).

⁵ Milo RAU, Stefan BLÄSKE, Steven HEENE and Nathalie DE BOELPAEP, „What is ‘the city theatre of the future?’”, last download: 30.08.2023, <https://www.ntgent.be/en/news/wat-is-het-stadstheater-van-de-toekomst>.

Katona is the urban theatre of the present, helping us to be “fairer to the unfortunate,” “teaching us to endure” in the face of adversity, and “working on our education” while “feeling passionate,” thus “showing us the way to civic life.”⁶ It is no coincidence that we still hear most of Schiller's premise for the operation of the municipal theatre, albeit in a hushed tone, but it was basically a municipal theatre in Mannheim in the 18th century that tried out how to speak publicly about ideas within the political-power framework of the city-state.

Urban theatre in the 20th century also uses theatrical effect as a moral tool, and the Katona is a real urban theatre in this Schillerian sense. Located in the centre of Budapest, it belongs to the downtown and the nearby Danube; a geographical advantage it exploits as much as the Odéon in Paris exploits the hill, and as the Berliner Ensemble exploits the river. The Katona carries the pattern of the functions (and possibilities) of state socialist big cities, a pattern that is built on a routine of state subsidies and licencing processes of the Party and the cultural context in which artistic-aesthetic considerations tend to transform into ideological battles. For decades, the Katona has been distinctly apolitical in their manifestations, while their performances have been staging the absurdity of state socialist reality, and the repertoire is characterised mainly by the Schillerian task of *showing the way* and *teaching to endure*.

The founding of the Katona can also be seen as one of the results of the struggle for creative freedom in the secondary public sphere from 1968 onwards, since by 1982 the spread of samizdat literature was already uncontrollable and the islands of cultural

⁶ Friedrich SCHILLER, „Theater Considered as a Moral Institution”, trans. John SIGERSON and John CHAMBLESS, last download: 30.08.2023, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/trans/schil_theatremoral.html#related.

freedom⁷ were becoming visible. The foundation of the Katona, the breaking out from the National Theatre, thus seems to be an exercise of freedom, and the reaction of the urban public is understandable: they expected a kind of aesthetic avant-garde from a company that, breaking free from the state-controlled protocol, choosing its own repertoire, idiom, and independent communicative intent, wanted to be different from the National Theatre.⁸

The gesture of breaking free would also imply the abandonment of the expressive idiom of the National Theatre because the claim of independence seems incompatible with the simultaneous yet different motivational and metaphorical urge to fulfil the task of a national theatre. However, the Katona formulates itself in terms of a company and not in terms of aesthetics—a company that wants to become a working community that is free of ideological impulses and informers.⁹ Legally, only Székely, Zsámbéki, and 32 actors left the National Theatre and moved to its Chamber Theatre in the city centre, but they were not following the pattern of the legendary splits (in Meyerhold style). The Katona became the National,¹⁰ and the National functionally ceased to exist.

When the repertoire of the first season was being set up, the old successes were included among the new ones, so it is spectacular that in terms of programming policy, the

Katona put together a National season of the Székely–Zsámbéki era, which was fairly familiar, “responsibly passionate” in a Schillerian way, and which had two striking peculiarities. The first was a specificity of the founding company, which brought together the skills of three generations of actors, proving that the Katona was not a generational theatre. The other was the alliance of directors, which was not the result of power positions but of unusual and rare human relationships. The Katona is characterised by a constant willingness and desire to analyse and to create and maintain a working community through it. This continuity is a source of secure functioning and also a stylistic characteristic of the Katona: the directors keep the performance ever-present because they do not handle their work as a single instance of an event that is being prepared for premiere but as a recurring event that can be revised and reformed several times.

The communication strategy for the 40th season also reinforces that the Katona’s time is the present. And in this present, the Katona’s actors are very special, as no one else in town is surrounded by 40 years of company history anymore, so all their personal stories can be lived as company history. When in the season’s celebrations the actors recall their own events, they shape the Katona’s time and position in the city to be almost exclusive. It is not the content of these narratives, but their presence and their endless flow is what draws together the endpoints of the beginning and the present, and these rhythmically edited materials declare that this company has a path, and the task remains “to walk the path, to play honestly, to work honestly and deeply.”¹¹

The Katona is an urban theatre that plays every night if possible, like the Bulandra in Bucharest, in as many venues as possible,

⁷ From Tamás Fodor’s vocabulary, in SÁNDOR L. István, *Szabadságzigetek: Fodor Tamás és a Stúdió „K” története 1978-ig* (Budapest: Selinunte Kiadó, 2020), 35–37.

⁸ SZÉKELY Gábor, „Még egyszer ilyen nem lesz”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *A Katona*, 40–55 (Budapest: Pesti Szalon Könyvkiadó, 1997), 45–46.

⁹ ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A mai magyar színházról nyolc tételben”, *Mozgó Világ* 13, no. 3 (1987): 87–95, 88.

¹⁰ NÁNAY István, „Indul a Katona: Egy színházalapítás háttere”, *Beszélő* 4, no. 2. (1999): 112–114.

¹¹ SZÉKELY Gábor, „A körülmények hatalma”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *Kulisszák nélkül*, 80–89 (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1978), 85.

like the Odéon in Paris, and maintains a huge repertoire, like the Schaubühne in Berlin. In its 40th season, the company's programme included nine new productions and thirty old ones, making the whole company a constant source of entertainment. Of the 540 performances in this season, several actors appeared in a third of the performances, so they were on stage every second night. For the 40th season of the theatre, even the youngest actors of the original company members turned seventy. They were chosen by each other,¹² while the newcomers came from the University of Theatre and Film Arts, most of them from classes led by the founding directors and from a familiar background. The start of the 40th season was marked by the Critics' Choice Awards announcement in October 2022. The Katona won ten prizes in eight categories, with *The Dead of Kál* and *Melancholy Rooms* dominating. The theatre critics duly recognised the entry of a young generation.

In the meantime, from 2020 on, more and more political decisions are scratching the surface of artistic creation in Hungary, and after the dictatorial overtaking of the University of Theatre and Film Studies, another way of transferring knowledge must be sought. The loss of government funding puts the cost of maintaining the theatre on the city and its residents, and in this financial environment, the framework of ethos and 'core characteristic' [*milyenség*]¹³ will change. This change will be spectacular, as it has not happened so far. It was not noticeable either with the change of the regime or with the leaving of Gábor Székely in 1989 or with the retirement of Gábor Zsámbéki as director twenty years later. Many of the performances, even some of those from the last few seasons, e.g. *The Genius*, *The Politicians*, *The Secretaries General*, built on the existence of a shared historical consciousness and the belief that the experience of history could be

¹² SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 45.

¹³ Gábor Zsámbéki's vocabulary.

understood through a shared effort. The other award-winning performances in the repertoire, however, abandon the notion of right or wrong systems of notation (Gombrič's term) and explore the possibility of diversity and multiplicity in dramaturgy, in staging, and, by extension, in theatrical composition. The milieu of the Katona continues to be built on the artistic fulfilment of the company, the acting-creating work, since its director, Gábor Máté, is also a leading actor and a member of the community.

But the 40th season's ambitious summaries, new look, professional marketing, and attractive and informative community platforms also fill a gap. The 40th season is faithful and worthy, and as such, it brings the Katona's story to a close, leaving it *in the process* of rethinking the Katona's place in the city and the questions of the future of the present urban theatre for the (perhaps prepared) coming seasons.

The aesthetics of the 'core characteristic'

Rethinking, to use the Katona's own vocabulary, refers to 'core characteristic'. The search for 'core characteristic' is the basis of the processes of creation and reception and primarily refers to the performance style but also to the construction of the narrative. In watching the 40th season of the Katona, I sought to isolate this phenomenon in its regularities.¹⁴

The 40th season promised three main-stage productions, one of which, the heavily symbolic *Twilight of the Gods*, was suddenly replaced by *The Cherry Orchard*. *Ten Eskimos* is a contemporary Hungarian drama—a well-crafted conversation piece. Kriszta Székely's *Hedda Gabler* is the only interpretive-positional piece that, while bearing the potential

¹⁴ Raymond ARON, „L'histoire de l'homme: La recherche de la vérité”, in Raymond ARON, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire: Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique*, 423–431 (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

for great feats of acting, continues to reflect on the complexity of Ibsen's present time, obscured by the routines of social practice. The Kamra (Chamber), which opened in 1991 as an underground venue for experimentation with Péter Halász's legendary newspaper theatre, has become an Annex Theatre (not a studio) for the 40th season. Ascher's *The Genius* is a four-person play. Tarnóczy's promising *Lonely People*, instead of Hauptmann, struggles with the confinement of the black cellar. In Zsótér's Witkiewicz *Vízityúk (Waterfowl)*, the inspirational drive of the two guests playing the lead roles is combined with the local knowledge of the company members. And the third venue, Sufni, belongs to students learning the theatrical idiom. Even in its 40th season, the Katona continues to explore the framework of ethos and spirituality that can be expressed in its performances, taking the nation, the language, and the culture as a given and not as a reference to be defined. This is why it puts together a truly national programme every year because it is the process of the company, the community, and history that arouses its interest, and it is the reordering of this triple relationship that makes it a passionate creative workshop. Each of the forty seasons shows that the organic cohesion of the company is primary and that "overly heterogeneous companies"¹⁵ are dysfunctional.

The Katona's strength is the Company. At the time of its founding, its unique ability (or superstrength) was to fit the self-determined artistic practice of 1968 into the existing state-socialist framework of 1982. Consequently, the international recognition of the Katona was aided by the fact that the psychological realist mode of communication originated in the Soviet era, but the language of freedom was rooted in the European Enlightenment. The theatre's greatest touring successes, *Three Sisters* (1985), *King*

¹⁵ ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „Csak a kidolgozott előadás érvényes vitaalap”, *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, no. 36 (1981): 12–13.

Ubu (1984) and *Coriolanus* (1985), carry the idiom 'core characteristic' that, according to the director's statements, consists of the following: the Katona builds on an understanding of the "ownness of the work"¹⁶ and does not aspire to involve other stylistic features in its performances. Therefore, no major change has occurred in its aesthetic preferences and commitments in forty years; the playing idiom favours the "ironic, bitter, and ironic" theatrical framework, this particular kind of "truth-telling."¹⁷ This logic brings about the analytical-pedagogical realisation that what happens to the actor on the stage is manifested as truth; everything else is just an illustration.¹⁸ This manifestation is inherent in the *core characteristic*, since the *core characteristic* is formed within the framework of the "mentality, ethics, and taste"¹⁹ shared by the company, and for this to happen, agreement on "things of the world, life, and the theatre" is indispensable.²⁰

A further defining element of the *core characteristic* and part of the narrative construction of the Katona is that contextualization, or direct political interpretation, always comes from the viewer and is almost expected. For example, the overwhelming success of *Revizor* in 1987 is due to its metaphorical report on corruption, while the director Zsámbéki was interested in "the so-called tendency to subjugation"²¹ in the performance. The Katona does not want to be political, says Zsámbéki; theatre is political, says Székely, but it contributes to politics through its performances, so it is political in its relationship with society, not in its relationship with the actualised story.

¹⁶ ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A szemlélet a fontos”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *A Katona*, 9–39 (Budapest: Pesti Szalon Könyvkiadó, 1997), 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A mai magyar színházról...”, 92.

¹⁹ SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 29.

The feeling and functioning of the *core characteristic* seem to have already been formed in 1979, when Székely and Zsámbéki declared their programme for the National Theatre,²² formulating their artistic intention in a manifesto-like manner: “In our time, the character—the profile—of the theatre is most comprehensively reflected in the spirit of the productions. This means, without questioning the importance of the repertoire, that the choice of plays can only be conceptually consistent and successful in relation to the theatre’s overall ambition.”²³ Thinking about conceptual consistency, however, has been dissolved in (pseudo)debates about the national mission,²⁴ even though the technique of representing spirituality and the *core characteristic* had presumably been formulated by the young directors earlier, during their college years. This is documented in a manifesto published in the journal *Színház* in 1969, written by Péter Molnár Gál,²⁵ a theatre director who graduated in 1961. He summarises the script of the taking over of the Ódry Színpad as a manifesto of the young directors’ theatrical vision.

Let’s just declare that in state-socialist Hungary, the very appearance of this manifesto is unusual since it formulates the foundations of democratic theatre, and it is obvious at first reading that instead of matching ideas, ideologies, and even themes, the driving force behind collective creative work should be the mutual trust of individuals. Thus, the ‘immediacy of life’²⁶ can be

²² SZABÓ István, „Nemzeti Színház 1978–1982”, *Színház* 31, no. 1 (1998): 12–25, 20–23.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ANTAL, ed., *Színházművészetünkről*.

²⁵ MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, „Színház: csak 28 éven aluliaknak – 28 pontban”, *Színház* 2, no. 11–12 (1969): 27–30.

²⁶ FODOR Géza, „Közénk és az élet közé állt az ideológia”, in PETRI György, *Összegyűjtött munkái III.*, eds. RÉZ Pál, LAKATOS András and VÁRADY Szabolcs, 535–549 (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2005), 535.

reached without a network of informers and observers. It is in this respect that the points of the manifesto are worth following.

According to the young directors’ insights, the Ódry Színpad was given as a playing field, and the Béla Balázs Studio, founded in 1961, was a model of self-government. The name of this proposed theatre would be the College Theatre (Főiskolások Színháza; CT), and any director graduating within five years would be a member, the actors being “preferably from a single year of acting.” The CT would be based on the in-depth, exploratory work of actors, made possible by a five-year contract and “a significantly higher salary than usual.” Actors would be only allowed to work in the CT, and their training in movement, vocal technique, and theory would be compulsory. When not in a role, they would be responsible for the day-to-day running of the theatre. The directors would remain attached to their mother theatre somewhere in Hungary and participate in the work of the CT in their free time, without payment. The task of management, of which the actors would be relieved, is considered a merely administrative one since it is the responsibility of the entire company to evaluate the artistic results and the quality of the performance before the premiere, collectively, by majority vote. This theatre is free of the constraints of regular premieres; “the CT would operate on an annual budget.”

The Manifesto carries the momentum of the 1968 European revolutions and a belief in self-governance; in essence, the company is supposed to collectively develop the “good artistic reputation of the organisation.” It is therefore essential to note—and is explained in the longest of the paragraphs—who can be a member of the CT:

“[...] the management board should not include any external person (e.g., a representative of the college, a teacher, an ‘adult director,’ a highly respected actor, a theatre teacher, a ministry official, a critic, etc.), because this would

inadvertently break the democratic self-government and self-regulating power of the company's management." At the same time, "[...] there should be no participation outside the company, as this would allow the board to filter out careerism, protectionism, violence, and lack of talent. Open debate would regulate the antics of incompetent bureaucrats."²⁷

The Manifesto was published in 1969, and although it did not receive a significant publicly visible reaction, its operational framework was perceptible in 1982, at the launching of the Katona as a permanent community of equals, a non-hierarchical alliance with no established stars, inspired by the literary text, operating within the framework of the city, of the theatre, and, economically, of state socialist cultural funding. Almost all the above characteristics similarly characterise the starting up of the Théâtre du Soleil in 1970, the Bouffes du Nord in 1974, and the Berlin Schaubühne in 1970. While the Katona may have started ten years later than many new European urban theatres, it is almost concurrent with the artistic direction of the Paris Odéon under Strehler. And the gesture of taking up space by inventing and rebuilding the theatre is also evident: the Katona company immediately demolished "the stage portal, which architecturally separated the stage from the auditorium. The two spaces became one theatre space. This dismantling of the stage frame [...] became a symbolic gesture that determined the future."²⁸

In addition to the organisational model set out in the manifesto, it is the task of the theatre to prepare a model for the actor. Among the "strictly professional issues,"²⁹ the first is the talent of the actors, and beyond that, "the ability to work for the whole theatre and the whole production is a deci-

sive criterion."³⁰ The priority is "artistic enrichment"³¹ rather than one's own career plan, because "we wanted to live up to our own standards."³² It is clear from the statements that this norm, although it starts with the order of the masters, goes beyond it and that the basis of construction is the actor's inspiration, not the director's "mechanical plan," since the director's task is "to set the framework. What the purpose of a scene is and what weight that scene will have within the production. And he has to put the actors in a state in which they can find the solutions."³³

When talking of a Hungarian theatre, it is worth emphasising that, from the psychological realist tradition, it is the "spiritual content of the actor," rather than the psychology of acting, that is interesting, but all this is a "necessary starting point. Then one has to find the necessary set of means of expression."³⁴ Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the Katona has been aware that in the theatre structure of Budapest it is particularly challenging to develop *repertory acting* as a social art form. Most of the Western European theatres taken as models are based on an *en suite* system, while their Eastern European colleagues try to increase their power of expression by metaphorizing images,³⁵ which means that they have to find their own devices.

Acrobatics, flexibility, and constant readiness are the first among the means of self-expression, but a stable yet sensitive nervous system is also one of the requirements. The theatre's task is "to take possession of the worlds of the plays on stage, to build them up,"³⁶ and in this construction, it seeks ten-

²⁷ MOLNÁR GÁL, „Színház: csak...”.

²⁸ SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 46.

²⁹ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁵ Liviu Ciulei at Bulandra in Bucharest, Krystian Lupa at Sary Teatr in Krakow.

³⁶ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 34.

sion. The technique of working in tension is close to the as-if situations inherent in Stanislavsky's method of constructing reality with imagination, and the known side-effects of the realist technique at this time are the multiplication of nervous and mental symptomatology brought about by the techniques of "happening" and "living," so that it is part of the technique that "various nervous and physiological peculiarities" are revealed.³⁷ The relationship between working in tension and nervous stability is metaphorized in public discourse,³⁸ while techniques of reality construction can take the power of the will to the point of violence. The urban theatres of the present, including the Katona, attempt to resolve the confused coordinates of life and theatre resulting from the technique of the play by naming situations and theorising the phenomenon of who can speak to or touch whom, when and how; for the moment, the discourse is in a period of exploration, not analytical understanding.

The urban theatre is interested in "certain social issues and problems,"³⁹ and is looking for classical drama and contemporary plays. Gábor Székely is concerned with images of destruction, the paths leading to the end, and the total helplessness of the individual. Zsámbéki is interested in "the internal relations of communities, groups, [...] dramatic conflicts."⁴⁰ The Katona's own narrative is defined by "human quality,"⁴¹ and this means perseverance, loyalty, and devotion, when, in the words of Gábor Zsámbéki, the theatrical person does not separate "the life of the theatre from life itself."⁴²

³⁷ Ibid., 33.

³⁸ ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A színészképzésről”, in *Színészképzés: Neoavantgárd hagyomány*, ed. JÁKFALVI Magdolna, 306–308 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó–SZFE, 2013), 307.

³⁹ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 36.

⁴² Ibid., 37.

In forty years, *core characteristic* became a historical concept, which includes the long experience⁴³ of theatre in Szolnok⁴⁴ and Kaposvár, the three seasons in the National Theatre, the college with the common masters, especially Tamás Major and Kálmán Nádasy, but also European theatre practice. Due to Gábor Székely's realisation that the last ten years of the National Theatre lacked "the whole of 20th century theatre,"⁴⁵ Europe had become a part of the *core characteristic* for them, and the theatre concepts and company organisation routines of contemporaries such as Mnouchkine, Brook, Strehler, Stein, Ciulei, and Lupa turned into inspiring models in the Katona. The historical idea and the burden of theatre-making are presented in a European context; the artistic intent to speak of theatrical and lived-through reality as one thing is once again expressed in the language of European (and not that of Soviet) theatre; this constitutes the ideological framework of the *core characteristic*.

But this is only a framework, because the aesthetic surface of the performances of the three directors of the Katona is quite different, although the company presents the constructions of reality as conceptually similar. "According to its tradition and its present image, the Katona József Theatre is a realist theatre—but not in the narrow sense of stylistic realism, but in the outlined, overarching aesthetic sense of its relationship to reality."⁴⁶ This relationship to reality is expressed in the tragic seriousness of Chekhov's, Shakespeare's, and Pinter's plays, while the comedies, using the theatrical tools of irony,

⁴³ SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 46.

⁴⁴ SZÉKELY Gábor, „...a Nemzetinek elsősorban színháznak és jó színháznak kell lennie”, *Élet és Irodalom* 39, no. 10 (1995): 21.

⁴⁵ SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 41.

⁴⁶ Katona homepage, last download: 30.08.2023,

<https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/a-katona/a-katona-toertenete>.

sensitively but dominantly focus mainly on the phenomenon of provincialism.⁴⁷ The performances of the 40 seasons rhythm with the issues of European urban theatres of a similar status: certain plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Goldoni, and Molière are almost in conversation with each other in Berlin, Paris, Milan, and Budapest. But the quality of the Katona is in its actors, its playing styles, its patience, and its attention; the founders simply pass on to the others the company's knowledge, the quality of which involves matching role and status with talent and knowledge. As an urban theatre, the Katona creates the ideal company for a civic theatre of illusion: twice as many male roles have been written by playwrights as female roles, so half as many women are needed in the theatre. The roles are also shaped according to this repertoire of texts: tragic hero, tragic heroine, character actor, and comic actor, usually all with an allusion of character acting.

The Katona became a European urban theatre from the National tradition, and although in the early 1980s it found inspiration and refuge for its work only within its own urban community, it was also present in Europe for a few years after the regime change. It will be forgotten in a few decades anyway, but let us reiterate, at least when celebrating four decades of creativity, that the exploration of unknown depths in the context of state socialist culture could only begin with the discovery and expression of one's own pure, independent thought. The exploration of Far Eastern cultures (in the wake of Brook or Mnouchkine) is too noisy a challenge when in Budapest the task is still to separate one's own creative idiom from that of the official propaganda. Nevertheless, the urban spectators encode the message inherent in this separation, and it is impossible to escape from this metaphorization, which has become a mechanism of reception in which

everything is saturated with heavy meaning understood only by the initiated.

To sum up, let us repeat: the Katona's narrative is inevitably a story tailored to the National Theatre, because those who left the National Theatre carried on its mission and ideas, so the Katona functions as a hermeneutic exercise that is able to present to the nation the different perspectives of the past as a whole. Its four decades of urban theatre show the process of how the idea of the nation-state was transformed into a community practice, or how the urban theatre of the present represented in the most direct way those belonging to the same cultural and linguistic community.

At the end of May 2021, the last production of the founder Gábor Zsámbéki, *King Lear*, was staged as the premiere of the jubilee season. The title role was played by guest artist Géza D. Hegedűs, and this decision in itself triggered the metaphorization of reading, the mechanism of reception and creation that, for forty years, has been working to develop a shared interpretative matrix where the audience, including critics, were partners in the construction of meaning, even stimulating it. In season 40, the Katona's community equated the story of King Lear, who divides his kingdom among his daughters who truly love him, with the founder. This farewell to the King was the summing up of the last seasons, perhaps the last performance to articulate the 1982 nature of the Katona. And it is difficult to see it separated from Kriszta Székely's new production of *Hedda Gabler*, a situational interpretation and a new addition to the repertoire in the 40th season. Refraining from metaphorizing the moment of generational change, we nevertheless notice that Ibsen's enigmatic work thematises the understanding of history, and thus also the creation of the narrative, since Tesman and Løvberg are both historians, representing two different

⁴⁷ ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 27.

philosophical trends, one of them thinking about the history and the other about the course of civilisation.⁴⁸ And Hedda annihilates both.

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⁴⁸ Hayden V. WHITE, „The Burden of History”, *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111–134, 117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504510>.