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Hidden or Forbidden. Spatial Occupation as an Avant-Garde Gesture

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Abstract: In 2025, it was one hundred years since the Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey) Theatre held its first performance in Budapest, marking a century since avant-garde theatre became part of Hungarian theatrical culture. Despite this, it is still widely assumed that in Soviet and Soviet-occupied states, following the death of Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1938, experimental theatre became a forbidden theatrical practice. According to this assumption, prohibition itself functioned as the primary determinant of aesthetic decision-making, and avant-garde events emerged chiefly as communal political gestures defying censorship, with resistance serving as both catalyst and inspiration. This study seeks to complicate this view by examining two Hungarian avant-garde theatre formations: the Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey) Theatre in 1925 and the Kassák House Studio in 1973. Through an analysis of their spatial practices and the social responses they provoked, the article explores the mechanisms of cultural control operating before and during Sovietisation. The comparative presentation of these two cases makes it possible to identify avant-garde form not merely as a reaction to prohibition, but as a mode of thinking inherent in the practices of theatre-makers themselves.

In theatre historiography, the avant-garde and the experimental are often treated as interdependent categories.[1] In what follows, however, I deliberately set aside both this interdependence as well as questions of theatrical aesthetics and dramaturgical structure in order to gain a clearer understanding of the context of these experiments. The analysis proceeds along two complementary paths: first, by examining narratives related to naming, freedom, and adaptation; and second, by circumnavigating the spaces occupied by the two theatre groups, demonstrating that prohibition and obstruction consistently function as tools of state power.

Terminology and Conceptual Frameworks

Before turning to the Hungarian examples, it is necessary to review the terminology used to describe non-canonical theatrical practices. Avant-garde theatre has been characterised by a wide range of adjectives—countercultural, underground, avant-garde, amateur, and independent—terms that appear most frequently in retrospective historical narratives. At the beginning of the Soviet-occupied era, in the 1950s, the dominant adjective preceding the noun "theatre" in Hungarian usage was *amateur*. This term referred both to an activity conceived as learnable rather than professional, and to an untrained yet instinctive mode of creation. In the 1970s, the adjective *alternative* gained prominence, designating aesthetic forms that diverged from authorised styles and employed artistic languages distinct from those of institutional theatre. The closest English-language equivalent to this phenomenon is *anti-art*, a concept famously mobilised by Hans Richter in the title of his 1965 book *Dada: Art and Anti-*

[1] J. L. STYAN, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, I-III. (Cambridge: CUP. 1981).

Art,[2] where art and anti-art are understood as simultaneous and interdependent.

In the 1980s, the term *independent* was added to the word "theatre," referring not to aesthetic differences but to financial and organisational independence from formal institutions. In the early phase of the independent theatre movement, the term *underground* was used to describe the literal occupation of space rather than a metaphorical cultural position. When the official cultural public sphere is controlled, a new public sphere—a new space of expression—must be sought. This space opens up underground, both conceptually and physically. It is precisely this underground existence that allows theatrical events to dispense with established conventions: from institutions, companies, fixed texts, theatre buildings, conventional speech, linear logic, and audiences accustomed to normative forms: becoming free.

It is important to emphasise that in Hungarian usage the term *amateur* focuses on the creator's training, *alternative* on the aesthetics of production, and *independent* on the mode of operation. Experimentation, however, can characterise all of these categories, which are often used interchangeably. For this reason, it is worth stressing that the multiplicity of avant-garde theatrical events is created not against something, but for something, even if historiography tends to position them in opposition to the canon. While dominant Anglophone historical narratives reserve the term *experimental* for movements emerging in the 1960s, in Hungarian discourse the term is most frequently applied to Anglophone and Western European practices.[3]

Activism, Presence, and the Politics of Space

In Soviet-type states, non-official theatrical practice signified freedom of both creation and existence. In narratives of freedom, the merging of cultural and political fields appears as a common strategy. Consequently, discussions of the avant-garde often prioritise the social dimensions of activism over the aesthetic dimensions of artistic production. This emphasis is reinforced by the fact that avant-garde theatrical events frequently articulate themselves through manifestos and proclamations. The manifesto functions as a tool for groups operating without institutions and may be interpreted as part of the ritual vocabulary of revolution. It is therefore hardly surprising that the practice of activism and the ethos of creation merge.[4] As Ödön Palasovszky, one of the founders of the Green Donkey Theatre, recalled: "the poet was pushed into the background by the performer."[5] In this formulation, the performer emerges as a creative agent and, by extension, as an activist.

Avant-garde activism[6] is far removed from the Romantic model of theatrical revolution based on mass movements. Instead, it seeks to heighten awareness of social presence.[7] In

[2] Hans RICHTER, *Dada. Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson. 1965).

[3] Günter BERGHAUS, *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[4] SZOLLÁTH Dávid, *A kommunista aszkétizmus esztétikája* (Budapest: Balassi, 2011).

[5] MOLNÁR Ágnes, "Palasovszky Ödön színháza", *Színháztudományi Szemle* 17. (1985): 155–188. 158.

[6] Matthias WARSTAT, "Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy", *Peripeti* 20, 38. (2003): 66–75.

[7] Hannah ARENDT, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution", *The Journal of Politics*. 20, 1. (1958): 5–43. És ERDÉLY Miklós, *Pénz az utcán. 1956-os performance.* (2025.december 1.) https://artpool.hu/Erdely/kreativitas/gyakorlatok.html

producing this presence,[8] avant-garde theatre renders social and artistic rules visible and dynamises its environment by introducing irregularities. Examining such events, it becomes evident how difficult it is to abandon the regular form dictated by theatrical space and how challenging it is to find a functional space that is free and irregular. Many avant-garde artists recognise that they operate as irregulars within regulated spaces, and that only by stepping outside these frameworks can they discover spaces with their own irregular coordinates.[9] In state socialist cultures, such practices of spatial occupation inevitably provoked prohibition.

Prohibition affects theatrical events that fail to comply with regulations, while simultaneously forcing cultural authorities to explicitly define the parameters of those regulations. In theatre, this control focuses on a limited set of characteristics. Archived reports by secret police informants on avant-garde theatre events[10] reveal that censors were primarily concerned with four factors: the venue of the performance, the composition of the audience, the number of performances, and the script being performed. To avoid prohibition, avant-garde artists seeking and public and community visibility employed various strategies of adaptation. They performed in recognised theatre spaces, in front of students or workers, sometimes only once, and sometimes without a fixed script. In each case, practices of *mutual compromise*[11] within specific communities enabled the avant-garde to articulate not only opposition to dominant discourses of power, not only elitism, but also forms of freedom cultivated within prohibition itself.

Spatial Patterns of Avant-Garde Theatre

Using the histories of two avant-garde theatre companies, this study identifies the spatial patterns enabling the creation of free, independent theatre in the 1920s and again, fifty years later, in the 1970s. Workers' social clubs, university stages, private apartments, and urban spaces hosted the artists who had abandoned the officially sanctioned performance spaces.

1. Houses of Culture and Workers' Social Clubs

In 1925, one hundred years ago, the Green Donkey Theatre, led by Ödön Palasovszky, performed for the first time in empty spaces and cultural clubs.[12] The apparent neutrality of workers' social clubs was animated by the contemporary paraphernalia of the labour movement. The company worked with experimental recitation choirs, whose members also constituted part of the audience; for this reason, these events may retrospectively be described as an early form of participatory theatre. The ethos of workers' self-education circles permeated their performances.[13] An examination of the company's repertoire at the time reveals that they presented different works on "experimental stages" and different works in workers' social clubs.[14] On experi-

8 Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: SUP, 2003).

9 FORGÁCS Péter, "Epizódok MF tanár úr életéből", *Filmvilág* 30, 10. (1988): 13–16.

10 JÁKFALVI Magdolna, "Antigone's Brothers. The Soviet Reburial", *Theatron* 18. 4. (2024). https://theatron.hu/theatron_cikkek/antigones-brothers-the-soviet-reburial/

11 KAPPANYOS Ilona, "Zománc fürdőkád és fateknő. Csecsemőfürdetési tanácsok a 20. század eleji magyar gyermekápolási irodalomban", *Korall* 83. (2021): 59–83.

12 Georges BAAL, "Hungarian Avant-Garde Theatre in the Twenties and Three Unknown Surrealist Plays by Tibor Déry", *Theatre Research International*, 9, 1. (1984): 7–16.

13 MOLNÁR, "Palasovszky…", 161.

14 PALASOVSZKY Ödön, *Lényegretörő színház* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980), 184.

mental stages, they recited texts by Honegger, Tzara, Apollinaire, and Goll, while in performances addressed to workers they recited Ady, Bartók, and Mayakovsky.

It is well documented that Social Democratic organisations arranged performance venues in workers' clubs, which explains why this theatre company had the largest part of its audience in the industrial suburbs: in Újpest, on the northern outskirts of Budapest, in District IX, and in Csepel, all predominantly working-class areas. Given this context, it is understandable that Ödön Palasovszky, the founder of Hungary's first avant-garde theatre, was only able to hold public performances from 1930 onward through the framework of the Workers' Athletic Association. There are several explanations for this situation. Memoirs indicate that the group became too visible in downtown Budapest, where police repeatedly disrupted their performances in inner-city theatre spaces. Palasovszky notes that they were forced to terminate performances "because of the threatening behaviour of the police." In the 1920s, several avant-garde experimental groups were active simultaneously; "four left-wing squads," as Palasovszky describes them. These included members of the Workers' Athletic Association, Aladár Tamás's group known as *100%*, the Esperanto movement, and Alice Madzsar's movement and modern dance school. Although Palasovszky's recollections from later in life often constitute our primary source, they nonetheless suggest that conflicts arose not only between avant-garde groups and authorities, but also among the groups themselves. According to Palasovszky, even Lajos Kassák at times disrupted their activities. He writes that the Green Donkey Theatre ultimately withdrew from the city centre because "Kassák and his followers, who were in conflict with *100%* and with Tamás, protested loudly."[15]

The number of venues available for rent in the city centre was limited, and rental fees were higher than in the industrial suburbs, where costs were lower or, in the case of premises owned by supportive political parties (Christian Democrats or Communists), almost negligible. In addition, the working-class audience targeted by these performances was more readily accessible in those suburban districts.

In 1971, fifty-five years ago, the group led by Péter Halász likewise performed for the first time in empty spaces and cultural clubs.[16] In order to secure opportunities for public performance, Halász "signed a contract with the Lajos Kassák House of Culture to organise and lead an amateur theatre group."[17] The House of Culture, notably, bears the name of Lajos Kassák, who half a century earlier, as one of Europe's most prominent activist artists, had published the works of Tzara and Yvan Goll in his journal *MA*. A crucial element of this mutual compromise was that Halász could obtain a performance license only if he accepted employment as an "amateur theatre group instructor" at the State-run Popular Education Institute, with an income of 750 forints, considered average at the time.[18]

The Kassák House of Culture still exists today: a strikingly small, prefabricated concrete block surrounded by tall large-panel-system apartment buildings in the industrial suburbs, "in the middle of the District XIV housing estate … consisting of an entrance hall, a small office, two bathrooms, and a low-ceilinged, empty hall."[19] Halász's company presented their first performance within the institutional framework of Kassák at the Youth Club

[15] PALASOVSZKY, *Lényegretörő…*, 187.
[16] Eva BUCHMÜLLER, Anna KOÓS, *Squat Theatre* (New York: Artist Space. 1996).
[17] PÉCSI Zoltán, secret police informant, on 10. january 1974. https://www.c3.hu/collection/tilos/238.html.
[18] KOÓS Anna, *Színházi történetek szobában, kirakatban* (Budapest: Akadémiai. 2009), 58.
[19] KOÓS, *Színházi…*, 58.

of the Dési Huber House of Culture on Toronyház Street, located in a neighbouring working-class district. They rehearsed and performed at the Kassák House of Culture, built their community there, and—perhaps most importantly—subsisted on the salary provided by the Popular Education Institute. Their official relationship with Kassák, however, was severed following the Wilson-inspired performance *Rapid Changes II*, which premiered on January 23, 1972. The dress rehearsal was previewed by the head of the Popular Education Department of the District XIV Council, who annotated the production with the statement: "I do not authorise the performance of this play." In addition, he terminated both the company's contract and Halász's personal contract, thereby "terminating the legal basis for the ensemble's operation."[20] Apart from charges of obscenity and violations of public morality, only one concrete reason for the termination is documented, and this involved a serious breach of the law. Péter Halász and his troupe produced the promotional materials for the performance using the House of Culture's mimeograph, without authorisation. Under the state socialist system, printing, reproduction, and the dissemination of information were subject to strict monopoly, which Halász and his associates—perhaps unintentionally—violated. The advertisement for the performance, bearing the slogan "We are not frogs," was produced illegally on the House of Culture's photocopier. The ban was thus not justified on ideological or aesthetic grounds, but on the basis of unauthorised use of printing technology. On May 9, 1972, Péter Halász received a formal police warning[21] in connection with *Skanzen*, marking the definitive end of the group's activities within houses of culture.

2. University Exam Halls. (The Small Hall of the Academy of Music and the University Stage)

Avant-garde theatres have traditionally regarded universities as their natural milieu, since many of their members were students and a receptive audience was largely guaranteed. In 1925, Ödön Palasovszky performed at the Academy of Music in Budapest, which at the time rented out its examination hall for Sunday matinees. In a similar gesture, Alfred Jarry had earlier rented the stage of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre for the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. At the same time, the architectural aesthetics of university buildings often constrained avant-garde experimentation. The avant-garde of the 1920s appeared softened and somewhat dissonant within the delicate Art Nouveau space of the Academy of Music, which was considered contemporary and progressive at the time. With its Art Nouveau framework, excellent acoustics (the overall architectural effect having been slightly altered by the removal of two large chandeliers), and predominantly bourgeois audience, the space seemed to hover around the performance as a foreign body rather than merging with it.

The avant-garde of the 1970s found a site in the former Piarist chapel located within the building of the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. On this legendary University Stage, however, performers had to contend with the physical and spiritual authority of the space itself, which actively resisted avant-garde expression. At the time, the university also operated its own drama group, Universitas, in the same chapel.

Péter Halász began his career as an actor with Universitas on the University Stage. Consequently, when his later group began to "explore the possibilities of legal, public performance,"[22] they initially investigated performance opportunities within university-

[20] PÉCSI, on 10. January 1974. 6.
[21] KÖBEL Szilvia, "Aktív ateista propaganda", *Beszélő* 7. 9–10. (2002): 67–75.
[22] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

affiliated clubs. In Budapest, they were able to perform at the Kinizsi Street dormitory of the Karl Marx University of Economics, while the Communist Youth League Club of the College of Theatre and the Ferenc Münnich dormitory of the Budapest University of Technology also provided space for occasional performances. Because Halász's group had no officially registered place of operation[23] and did not even have a name, it proved difficult for contemporary informers of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as for later historians, to identify members of the ensemble other than Halász himself.

A troupe performing in university spaces is not necessarily a university troupe, despite the fact that Péter Halász was able to participate in European university theatre meetings with Universitas during the 1970s. It is striking how university spaces facilitated a form of international visibility for the group. They travelled, for example, to the Nancy University Festival, where they performed in bare lecture halls with bad acoustics, relying on spectacular gestures rather than speech. In these spaces, they encountered leading figures of European and American avant-garde theatre, including Tadeusz Kantor and the Bread and Puppet Theater.

3. Private Spaces

During the 1920s and 1930s, Ödön Palasovszky and his constantly changing ensemble performed almost exclusively in private venues. It should be emphasised, however, that private ownership of theatres and performance spaces was common practice at the time. Theatres, concert halls, dance schools, and similar venues were predominantly privately owned. Palasovszky's avant-garde theatre formations were able to secure relatively stable performance locations in privately owned spaces and apartments. The Madzsar School of Movement Arts, the most prominent dance school of the first half of the twentieth century, operated in a large apartment in a villa, and this space also hosted Palasovszky's theatrical evenings. The avant-garde performances took place there, at 8 Ménesi Road, Budapest, and until 1945, the milieu of gymnastics and dance was where avant-garde theatrical projects were free to experiment.

After losing access to the Kassák House of Culture in 1972, Halász's troupe was left with no alternative but to perform in their own private space: their apartment at 20 Dohány Street in Budapest, located on the fourth floor and consisting of two adjoining rooms. Most of their performances were conceived and staged here, although occasionally they were able to perform in other private spaces, as private individuals offered them hospitality. The painter Endre Bálint made his studio on Budafoki Road available; the writer György Konrád hosted performances in his apartment on Szilágyi Dezső Square; the painter Júlia Vajda welcomed the group into her home on Rottenbiller Street; and, as Halász recalled, "we were also able to take advantage of the hospitality of Itala Békés,"[24] an actor. In these private settings, the troupe repeatedly performed the banned production *Skanzen* for audiences of ten to twenty invited guests. It would nevertheless be misleading to conclude that private spaces were immune to prohibition under state socialism. Halász and his circle ultimately left Hungary in 1973 precisely because of the constant and increasingly unbearable harassment by the police.

4. Spaces Outside the City

The history of avant-garde performances also demonstrates how a theatrical event can acquire a media-like character. In 1931, Ödön Palasovszky wrote a monumental open-air choral work entitled *Zrí-punaluá*. He conceived the piece as a city-wide performance to be realised throughout Budapest, spanning the

[23] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

[24] KOÓS, *Színházi…*, 91.

entire urban space and giving "voice to children's yearning for freedom." *Zrí*[25] could not be performed in the city, however, because they planned to articulate the malcontent of the younger generation by marches and parades involving tens, thousands. A short excerpt was eventually presented on a conventional stage, but the envisioned artistic occupation of Budapest never took place. The plot of the choral work is as follows:

> "Zrí's sons and daughters rise up against the elders. They gather to leave the city. They set off for a new, young homeland. Zrí's songs ring out, on the streets of Budapest, on both banks of the Danube, on the bridges, and Zrí's games begin. The rebels march cheering through the city. Their steps are accompanied by the sound of drums, whistles, shouts, and the echo of radio mouths. The Zrí rebel anthem thunders from the mouths of the crowds flooding toward the Danube."[26]

The detailed plans for *Zrí-punalua* have survived, but the event itself could not be realised, as the police refused to grant permission for the occupation of the streets.

In July 1971, Péter Halász returned from Nancy to Hungary, and was granted two evenings to perform at the Rózsavölgyi Park Stage. He and his troupe began advertising their performance *Rapid Changes* in Budapest. As part of this promotional activity, Halász and the others walked through the streets of the city accompanied by the seven-headed dragon from Hungarian folk tales. A secret police informant reported on these actions in considerable detail.

According to the report, "although the action served no purpose other than publicity and ticket sales, it nevertheless caused unrest and completely unnecessary confusion, which the members of the group must have anticipated in advance. The dragon that frightened passers-by foreshadowed the violent and brutal elements that repeatedly appeared in the group's productions in 1972–73 and were employed with increasing irresponsibility."[27]

The city thus represents free spaces, free play, free audiences, and yet remains a site of constant threat in the form of police intervention and violence.[28] Spaces beyond the city—remote retreats such as the chapel in Balatonboglár and the nearby private locations used by Halász and his group in 1973[29]—temporarily concealed avant-garde artists from control and oversight, but at the same time removed them from the public sphere.

Hidden or forbidden, this dilemma accompanies avant-garde theatrical events as well as their historical narratives. The various performance spaces—houses of culture, universities, private spaces, and the occupation of urban space—reveal that theatre, as a mode of constructing reality, becomes necessarily radical in avant-garde practice. This radicality emerges because the theatre building as an institution normally provides a sense of familiarity and safety that renders events legible to the spectator. When the audience knows that the buffet is on the right and the cloakroom on the left, they observe experimentation from within the reassuring order prescribed by space. When this spatial security ceases to exist, the participants in the avant-garde theatrical event are enfolded in a new construction of reality.

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[25] Zrí is a slang term meaning quarrel, racket, riot, chaotic upheaval.

[26] PALASOVSZKY Ödön, *Opál himnuszok* (Budapest: Magvető, 1977)

[27] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

[28] Matthias WARSTAT, "Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy", *Peripeti* 20, 38. (2003): 66–75.

[29] KLANICZAY Júlia, SASVÁRI Edit (szerk.), *Törvénytelen avantgárd* (Budapest: Balassi–Artpool, 2003).

In the history of Hungarian theatre, both Palasovszky and Halász worked freely in open spaces for extended periods; or, to put it differently, they developed creative techniques that could be applied almost anywhere, with the will to direct and stage life itself. From this perspective, the inevitable rupture with institutions, the exodus from institutional frameworks, is freedom itself. Nonetheless, these nearly invisible practices far outside institutional frameworks often appear fragmented due to their lack of documentation, just as much as they had been forbidden.

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