

Experimental Theatre in the Hungarian Countryside During the 1970s. István Paál's Productions of Jarry's *Ubu* Plays in Pécs and Szolnok

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Abstract: While at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s the traditions of the avant-garde could only prevail in amateur (or alternative) theatre in Hungary, by the second half of the 1970s, the conception of theatre as an experiment began to permeate some of the performances of the official theatre as well. However, this only affected the provincial theatres, and the theatres in Budapest did not show any movement away from the canon. The essay analyses two such experiments: the 1977 premiere of *King Ubu* in Pécs and the 1979 premiere of *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok. Both are linked to the name of István Paál: he is the only Hungarian director who staged two *Ubu* dramas in two places. I am looking for an answer to the question of what political overtones the two productions were saturated with in the theatre culture of state socialism, and how they employed the dramaturgical procedures of the classical avant-garde.

The most famous Hungarian production of Alfred Jarry's notorious *King Ubu* during state socialism was staged by Gábor Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theatre in 1984 and ran for 191 performances in Budapest and 39 abroad over ten years. Its outstanding success somewhat obscures István Paál's productions of *King Ubu* and *Ubu Enchained*, created a few years earlier, whose significance I address in this essay.

Paál staged *King Ubu* in Pécs in February 1977, and its "sequel", *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok in December 1979. Although the programme announced both as Hungarian premieres, *King Ubu* had already been staged at the College of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest in 1968, and also by the Miners' Theatre, an amateur company in Tatabánya. However, the play was performed by a professional theatre for the first time in Pécs. The production of *Ubu Enchained*, on the other hand, was indeed a Hungarian premiere, and in fact the first performance of the play outside France.¹ It was also extraordinary that Paál directed *Ubu Enchained* separately, since it is usually staged together with the preceding play (*King Ubu*)—as did Peter Brook, for example, who presented the two plays under the title *Ubu aux Bouffes* in his Paris theatre in November 1977, and the Hungarian Television showed excerpts from it at the time. Perhaps this is what drew Paál's attention to *Ubu Enchained*, but even if not, it is rare to find such consistent thinking on theatre as Paál's, who completed something he had started in another production in another city two and a half years earlier. And let us emphasise: in two provincial cities. According to my thesis, in the second half of the 1970s, provincial theatres became a testing ground for experiments that had previously been characteristic of amateur and alternative theatre collectives, and that professional theatres in Budapest avoided. A major trend in provincial

of Henri Béhar's *Le Théâtre Dada et surréaliste*, published by Gallimard in 1979.

¹ The information comes from BAJOMI LÁZÁR Endre, "Übüvölet Szolnokon", *Színház* 13, No. 2. (1980): 25–28., 27. based on the latest edition

theatre-making in the 1970s and 1980s resonated strongly with the neo-avant-garde, because artists who had started their careers outside professional theatre were increasingly becoming involved in institutional theatre-making. István Paál was such an artist: he was the first director in professional theatre who did not gain a degree at the College of Theatre and Film Arts. *King Ubu* was Paál's fifth and last work in the National Theatre of Pécs, and together with his production of *Kőműves Kelemen (Clement Mason)* in Szeged (1973), *Caligula* (1976) in Pécs, and Mrožek's *Tango* in Szolnok (1978), it was mentioned three decades later as one of the highlights of his oeuvre.²

Paál linked Jarry's "horror comedy", as the playbill called it, to the performance of Camus's drama when Pa Ubu introduced himself in a stentorian voice with Caligula's last words in Pécs: "I am still alive." (Immediately afterwards, the sound of a toilet flushing could be heard.) *King Ubu* thus continued where *Caligula* left off and (in Paál's words) started "a counter-revolution against mediocrity, lack of talent and corruption."³ It is worth noting that in this definition, Paál uses the term "counter-revolution" differently from the political discourse of the time, which used it for the October events of 1956. In fact, according to Paál's logic, it is the state-socialist power that is waging a counter-revolution against the people. The production of *King Ubu* sought to portray this by oscillating between the specific and the general, avoiding depicting a recognisable figure of Ubu, and exploring the nature of "Ubuism, the ever-possible social contagion" instead.⁴ In his

"free verse" written in the programme, Paál described Ubu as "the hero of our time" and referred not only to those who usurped power and those who served them, but to all subjects—"Are you Ubu? / Or is he?... / Perhaps even me?..."—thus interpreting "Ubuism" as the situation after the revolution (of 1956) and discovering it in the prevalence of "hissing lust for power, boundless stupidity and characterlessness, unbridled selfishness and greed, lack of principles, routine betrayal and ruthless indifference".⁵ The metaphor for this situation in the performance was rat life: the characters appeared as rats, and the stage design was also created on a rat scale. The set formed a huge street corner, with large rain-water and sewage pipes, a metre-high pavement in front of them, huge cigarette butts and chewed apple cores, and two sewer openings at the front of the stage-road. The actors' hairy, lumpy costumes also evoked canal creatures, so the external aspects of the performance were entirely defined by "sewer aesthetics".⁶ Accordingly, the plot was presented as "a skirmish between a rabble reduced to rats,"⁷ with countless allusions to symbols of power and historical events familiar to the audience. When Ubu encouraged the Polish soldiers, who were terrified of the Russian army, by raising his body baton (*baton-à-physique*) and phynance hook (*croc à phynances*) above his head, they were recognisable as symbols of proletarian solidarity: the hammer and sickle.⁸ Protests against Ubu's actions were started in the auditorium, where the lights came on, Ubu and his soldiers left the stage and intimidated the spectators with loud noises, singling out the dis-

² Cf. DURÓ Győző, "Az életmű csúcspontjai", *Színház* 36, No. 8. (2003): 6–10.

³ MAGYAR Fruzsina and DURÓ Győző, "Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal", *Színház* 11, No. 10. (1978): 32–35., 34.

⁴ MÉSZÁROS Tamás, "Magyarországi bemutató Pécsen. Übű király", *Magyar Hírlap*, March 15, 1977, 6.

⁵ PAÁL István, "Korunk hőse: Übű", in *Alfred Jarry: Übű király (King Ubu)*, programme of the production at the National Theatre of Pécs in 1977, n.p.

⁶ MÉSZÁROS, "Magyarországi bemutató Pécsen...", 6.

⁷ NÁNY István, "Külföldi kortársaink itthon", *Nagyvilág* 22, No. 9. (1977): 1394–1397., 1395.

⁸ DURÓ, "Az életmű csúcspontjai", 9.

contented and executing them. Ubu and his henchmen then left through the doors of the auditorium to take away all the peasants' possessions.⁹ Experiencing this, the older members of the audience could hardly think of anything other than the deportations, the reprisals after 1956, the attic sweeps during the Rákosi Regime, and the violent collectivisation. Those who disliked the performance objected to these "jokes" and the historical and political references, claiming that "the pamphlet, peppered with many absurdities, offered a poor lesson."¹⁰ Others emphasised those characteristics of Jarry's play that stem from its interpretation as a parody of Shakespeare, linking Paál's work to such taboo-breaking contemporary productions as Yuri Lyubimov's *Hamlet* (Moscow, 1971) and Peter Zadek's *Othello* (Hamburg, 1976). Indeed, it was thanks to these characteristics that the criticism of Ubuism, formulated from the ethical point of view consistently underlined by Paál, could not be translated entirely into the language of political cabaret, and the analysis of rat-like behaviour had the power of forcing the spectators to confront themselves. This was encouraged by both *The Song of Brainwashing*, included as a prologue, set to music and performed by Tamás Cseh,¹¹ and by the unique behaviour of the actors when the audience was applauding them. While the actors did not come out to take their bows at the end of *Caligula*, at the end of *King Ubu* the actors dressed as rats knelt down in front of the audience, began to applaud, and left the stage one by one as the spectators filed out of the auditorium—as some "distorted reflections" of the audience.¹²

⁹ MIHÁLYI Gábor, "Übű király, az avantgarde klasszikusa?", *Színház* 10, No. 5. (1977): 24–28., 27.

¹⁰ FUTAKY Hajna, "Pécsi színházi esték", *Jelenkor* 20, No. 5. (1977): 449–454., 451.

¹¹ Tamás Cseh (1943–2009) was a Hungarian composer, singer and performer, famous for his poignant, often critical songs with poet

All five of Paál's productions at the National Theatre of Pécs took the form of highly intellectual yet extremely sensual performances, which were based on the duality of tangible elements developed in the spirit of realism and surrealistic moments. *Caligula* and *King Ubu* continued the "train of thought" begun in Szeged with *Kőműves Kelemen* (*Clement Mason*), while also completing a trilogy.¹³ Despite all their resignation, doubts and tragic undertones, they were conceived in the belief in the "permanence of revolution", assuming that "some kind of honest, self-confronting society could be created" in 1970s Hungary and that theatre could offer a starting point for this, helping people to "challenge the status quo".¹⁴ This is why Paál began to explore the manipulability of individuals in Szolnok as well, forming a new trilogy with his productions of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit of the Old Lady* and Yordan Radichkov's *January*.

Ubu Enchained also fit into this series of theatrical studies, and a phrase from a newspaper article about it offers a clue to its reconstruction: "the comedy of consolidation". (It is worth mentioning that the first 5–15 years after János Kádár's coming to power at the end of the 1956 revolution are known as the consolidation of the Kádár Regime.) Not emphatically, and posed as a question, this phrase appeared in a coordinate structure in the criticism of József Vinkó, arguing that "the production in Szolnok is sparkingly witty, displaying the familiar characteristics of Ubuism, and it is difficult to decide whether it was intended as a farce or a comedy of consolidation? Or both, and the horror comedy hides a

Géza Bereményi, and his role as a chronicler of his era.

¹² NÁRAY, "Külföldi kortársaink itthon", 1395.

¹³ Paál's own words, in MAGYAR and DURÓ, "Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal", 34.

¹⁴ BÓTA Gábor, "Be kell épülni a falba? Találkozás Paál Istvánnal", *Magyar Hírlap*, February 11, 1995, 4.

bloody joke?”¹⁵ Vinkó doubles the question, making the possessive structure—which occurs *en passant*, far from being accusatory, but quite explanatory for us—even less striking. Let us examine how *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok referred to Hungary in the 1970s, while not updating the play, at least not in terms of the external aspects of the performance. In fact, it was as if “the constraints of space and time had disappeared” and “the floodgates of history had been opened”,¹⁶ revealing a kind of historical chaos on the stage designed by István Szlávik. Updating would have required relatively specific correspondences, but Paál (in the spirit of Jarry’s pataphysics) obscured clarity and suspended meaning, making it difficult to read anything into the production. At the same time, Paál kept in mind what “can be used from a drama that castigates and caricatures bourgeois democracy and all kinds of militaristic attitudes”.¹⁷ So he looked for the “timely content” of the play, which “should be noticed by all means”.¹⁸ Knowing Paál’s habits, values, previous productions and thinking on theatre, he could not have drawn a caricature of bourgeois democracy, but rather that of existing socialism. Therefore, what characterised the “primitive welfare state” on stage, “where everyone strives for general security and material goods, and where freedom is compulsory, whether you like it or not”,¹⁹ was more reminiscent of 1970s Hungary than either Jarry’s France or the France of the director’s own era. (The play is, in short, about Pa Ubu now wanting to be a slave and rule as a

slave, so *Ubu Enchained* serves as a mirror drama to his prequel, *King Ubu*.)

The performance in Szolnok did not focus on a person who turned sadistic tyrannical desires into a masochistic servile spirit, but rather on someone who “strives to thrive *within the limits* of freedom”.²⁰ In other words, a person living in a world where “even obedience is permitted” and where the servant becomes the master²¹—which, in the shadow of proletarian dictatorship, is full of irony. “Ubu, who is usually referred to as a type of bourgeois stupidity”, wrote a reviewer, “has this time become a model of petty bourgeois cunning and gumption. Does the world belong to Ubu enchained? asks István Paál’s production with threatening despair.”²² Another review also noted that in the earlier production of *King Ubu* in Pécs, the title character “became a nightmare of petty bourgeois existence, forcing the philistine to flee”.²³ Let us highlight the adjective *petty bourgeois* in these two quotations, bearing in mind that it does not refer to the Kleinbürger (or Spießbürger) who was presented as the opposite of the socialist man, nor to the philistine existence that the socialist man wanted to leave behind. (If that were the case, Paál would have reduced Jarry’s play to a piece of state-socialist propaganda.) Paál’s Ubu resembled the petty bourgeoisie that the Hungarian version of socialism had produced during its thirty years, and their caricature was put on stage.

Paál was analysing the “Ubu of our time” again, who seemed to be an “almost disillusioned, world-weary figure” in Szolnok,²⁴ and whose astonishing narrow-mindedness ele-

¹⁵ VINKÓ József, “A láncra vert Übű. Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház”, *Új Tükör* 16, No. 50. (1979): 3.

¹⁶ BÉRCZES László, “Láncra verve és megszelídítve. Magyarországi bemutató a Szigligeti Színházban”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, December 21, 1979, 5.

¹⁷ Paál’s own words, in V.M., “Ősbemutató Szolnokon. A láncra vert Übű”, *Pesti Műsor* 28, No. 51. (1979): 52.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ VINKÓ, “A láncra vert Übű...”, 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ LÖCSEI Gabriella, “A láncra vert Übű. Jarry rémbohózata a szolnoki színházban”, *Magyar Nemzet*, January 4, 1980, 4.

²² Ibid.

²³ VINKÓ, “A láncra vert Übű...”, 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

vated him above the others. István Fonyó's everyday Ubu appeared without a mercilessly large belly and pear-shaped head, so he could easily become a "personal acquaintance" of the audience.²⁵ The actor shouted that "my belly is bigger than the whole world", but he did not evoke a supernatural monster at all—he sang Katalin Karádi's songs, danced, and charmed the audience; he cheerfully slapped Ma Ubu on the bottom and (thanks to Zoltán Jékely) spoke in cheap Hungarian.

The Ubu of Szolnok was therefore not from the eras evoked in the production zig-zagging through history: it was not the past, but the present, and in this way the *mise-en-scène* shaped "the grotesque play about freedom into a desperate farce about the ideal of freedom depraved by the petty bourgeoisie".²⁶ So Paál's petty bourgeois was not the communist enemy, not the philistine of Western democracies, but the Hungarian citizen who had come to accept the People's Republic as unshakeable and resigned himself to the loss of his freedom—an everyday survivor of the state-socialist regime.

Even though the Ubu of Szolnok seemed completely different from the Ubu of Pécs, he was essentially the same. In the programme for the production in Pécs, Paál identified Ubu as "the embodiment of the filthy and stinking rat-like existence of all sewers",²⁷ and this creature had not become friendlier in two and a half years, but merely refined his methods. In Jarry's play, Ubu himself claims that he has "grown wiser"²⁸ and has learned that if he were to kill everyone, who would pull the oars. "I still remain Ubu enchained, Ubu slave, and I'm not giving any orders ever again. That way people will obey me all the more promptly", he proclaims at the end.²⁹ Pa Ubu's realisation became the lesson of *Ubu*

Enchained: "You have to violate people's minds, you have to make them voluntarily accept, even desire and fight for slavery".³⁰ The stage representation of this gave the events of the performance just as ironic a tone as the grandiose announcement, made in the context of seemingly non-existent unemployment, that even a Pa Ubu wants to be useful to society, that he wants to work.

Most critics praised *Ubu Enchained* as a production full of amazing ideas and excellent humour, which relies on the audience's mental activity throughout. According to Paál, Jarry's play is "written in a much more sketchy manner than *King Ubu*, so [we] have to inflate it with incredible inventiveness in order to give it a stage presence".³¹ There was certainly no lack of inventiveness in Szolnok, with a critic suggesting a "Niagara-like torrent of ideas".³² If we summarise the moments mentioned in the reviews—for example, a groom using a bicycle bell like a clock, a cannonball caught in a butterfly net, flowers with nails as stems, a court operating with perfect mechanical precision and spring-loaded judges, pious women transforming into voluptuous bayadères, a rag doll-like Grand Vizier, galley slaves rowing with wooden spoons that also serve as masks—we can conclude that Paál turned Jarry's "student prank" into a "student prank" of his own, as a kind of homage to his past in amateur theatre. In this way, *Ubu Enchained* became a continuation (albeit in a different medium and years later) of what Paál had begun at the Szeged University Stage about ten years earlier. In terms of the spirit of the production and the way of staging, a straight line can be drawn from *The Giant Baby* (the stage version of Tibor Déry's play, one of the most important works of the Hungarian avant-garde),

²⁵ LÖCSEI, "A láncra vert Übű...", 4.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ PAÁL, "Korunk hőse: Übű", n.p.

²⁸ Alfred JARRY, *Ubu Enchained*, translated by Simon WATSON TAYLOR, 219–312 (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 247. (Ebook edition)

²⁹ Ibid., 312.

³⁰ BÉRCZES, "Láncra verve...", 5.

³¹ BAJOMI LAZÁR, "Übűvölet Szolnokon", 27.

³² Ibid.

produced in Szeged, all the way through *Caligula* and *King Ubu* staged in Pécs, *Tango* and *End Game*, staged in Szolnok, to *Ubu Enchained* and even *The Tragedy of Man*, produced at the beginning of the following season, as Paál's debut as chief director at the Szigligeti Theatre.

Since *Ubu Enchained* consistently revealed the entire mechanism of creating theatre and involved everyone in the performance from the prop master to the prompter, from the actors to the spectators, it built a bridge from the amateur theatre at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s to the "new theatricality" of the 1990s. From his first productions, Paál was interested in connecting the audience and the stage, which he achieved with techniques that can be traced back to the classical avant-garde, confusing the spectators and blurring the boundaries between theatre and life. As Paál liked to start and finish his productions with powerful images, these techniques were applied at the beginning and end of *Ubu Enchained* as well. Before the lights went out in the auditorium, armed men dressed in civilian clothes stormed the audience, roughly grabbed a spectator and dragged her away without a word. This action is as subversive as those suggested by the Futurist manifestos: putting glue on the spectators' seats, selling them tickets for the wrong seats (so that they would fight over them), etc.

The opening of *Ubu Enchained*—with an unexpected action, happening among the spectators here and now, characteristic of the genre of performance—aimed to make the audience feel unsafe, to feel no distance between their own world and the events on stage. Moreover, it alluded to the fear of being taken away by force by the current representatives of power. In 1979, the Kádár Regime no longer made people disappear in this way, but exercised violence in other ways. However, Paál evoked a not-too-distant era, the terror of the Rákosi Regime (i.e., the

prehistory of the Kádár Regime), when this could happen.

The end of the performance featured a similarly powerful breaking of the "fourth wall", and even a kind of offending the audience, when Soliman, Sultan of the Turks, remained on stage alone, spitting sunflower seed hulls on the spectators with indifference until they realised that the performance was over and began to applaud. Another perplexing moment that challenged the separation of theatre and life came at the beginning of the second act, when the choice between the slogans *Long live freedom!* and *Long live slavery!* was discussed on stage, and then all the actors turned to the audience and began to silently scrutinise them. The journalist (a critic of the guest performance in Salgótarján) who recorded this, immediately followed his description with a question: "Do they really want us to take a stand verbally as well? But this is extremely strange and unusual. The official theatre has never demanded this of us, the audience. And now that it has done so, our confusion is complete, and the actor—in an equally unusual situation—may experience it the same way."³³ There is something historically and socially curious and penetrating about this moment. On the one hand, it was one of the rare moments during state socialism, when in the production of an official theatre the audience was directly addressed, looked in the eye, and forced to take a stand. Amateur theatre had established this relationship before, but professional or institutional theatre had not. Gábor Székely's productions in Szolnok had already done away with the closure of representation, but they had not "provoked" the audience in a way Paál did. On the other hand, in a social environment where there was one leader, one camp, and one slogan, where it was always obvious who to vote for, this division, this duality was unexpected and shocking, and the article I cited also states that the performance

³³ SÜLYÖK László, "Színházi esték. A láncra vert Übű", *Nógrád*, December 15, 1979, 4.

in fact divided the audience in Salgótarján. However, Paál's staging was presumably aimed at this: not unity, but division, and according to two reviews, the audience in the countryside received this with greater reservations than the more select and largely professional audience at the guest performance in Budapest. The critic of the local daily in Szolnok, for example, mentions that after the first night, which elicited lively audience reactions and loud laughter, he saw another performance where the audience did not take advantage of the opportunity to participate, which undermined the performance.³⁴ The audience outside the capital did not prove to be the best partner for Paál's experiment: due to their socialisation in the theatre, they did not know what to make of situations such as the one I mentioned, with the student theatre jokes, and did not really go along with the performance. However, if the regional theatre and the regional audience hadn't existed, Paál's production would probably never have been born. Even at the National Theatre, led by Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki between 1978 and 1982, or in any other theatres in the capital at that time, it is impossible to imagine a performance that combines amateur and professional theatre like Paál's *Ubu Enchained*. Nevertheless, it slotted seamlessly into the varied programme in Szolnok, taking its place proudly three months after the season's sensation, Yuri Lyubimov's staging of Yuri Trifonov's *The Exchange*, and between the premieres of *Man of La Mancha* and *Ball at the Savoy*.

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³⁴ Cf. BÉRCZES, "Lánkra verve...", 5.