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# CENTRAL EUROPEAN THEATRES IN TRANSITION

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Daniel R. Keyser

## I. Introduction

Twelve faculty members from Macalester College assembled in Budapest for a three-week seminar on the topic of "Transition and Globalization in Central and Eastern Europe." We had a rare opportunity to observe firsthand the movement from a communist form of government to a democracy and to investigate the nature and purpose of that momentous shift. What is happening to the social, economic, and political structures that have governed people's lives for more than forty years? This was the central question we asked ourselves.

As a scene designer and teacher of theatre, my personal focus was how the changes in Central Eastern Europe have affected the fine arts, especially theatre, and how the theatre arts are responding and contributing to these changes. The seminar was based in Budapest, which meant that greater emphasis was placed on changes in Hungary than on the rest of Central Europe, although the speakers did give a general view of events occurring in the other countries of Central Europe. The scholars/artists interviewed were very open with their views of the changes that have taken place in Hungary over the last five years. It is from these interviews that I will reflect on the state of theatre in Central Europe.

A question I keep asking myself is, What do "transition" and "globalization" mean in the context of theatre? A transition from what to what? Does globalization mean the integration of Central European theatre with Western styles and themes? Central European theatre has evolved from the same foundations as

almost all Western theatre, that of the Greek and Roman traditions. So as we look at the question of "transition" we may only be talking about an opening up of what the theatre artist can show on stage. Prior to the late 1980s, the type of plays seen on the Central European stages was almost always confined to the classics or to socialist realism. Often the intendants of the theatres — who we in the West would call the artistic directors — were able to barter with the Ministry of Culture to produce a contemporary Western European or American play in exchange for producing an approved play by a Soviet or other communist writer. In the 1990s, theatre productions no longer have to be approved, and they can range from the experimental to popular Broadway style, which Mr. László Magács of the Merlin Theatre calls the "boulevard theatre." As to the question of "globalization," the visual images that are created by theatre already have a global meaning. Theatre artists and critics use a common language when it comes to the elements of design — line, shape, scale, space, texture, and color — as well as the principles of composition — balance, rhythm, contrast, unity, and emphasis.

Before the Budapest seminar, I had the opportunity to attend the Prague Quadrennial '95 with its exhibition of designs from forty-five different countries. As I moved from one country's exhibition to another's, I found that the visual vocabulary of elements and principles of design is indeed a universal vocabulary. When talking with other international designers about their work we were able to communicate about the visual messages and themes within the design. The differences were in the style of the design and the effect of the culture on the execution of those visual messages and themes. An example of cultural differences, as experienced through these exhibitions, can be seen in the use of color. In a Brazilian production of a Shakespearean tragedy, the color scheme utilized bright primaries, whereas in a Japanese version of the same play the color scheme was somber earth tones with only highlights of bright primary color. Yet, both designs may be perceived by the viewer as rendering the same visual message or theme, that of man's insignificance in nature.

Outside of Central Europe, the Czech and Polish theatre traditions are well known and frequently taught. The theatre of Hungary is rarely studied in American college and university theatre

departments. The Czech Republic is known in the West for its innovative design and technology and its rich theatre environment. The Polish theatre is well known for the playwrights Tadeusz Rósewicz and Sawomir Mrożek and the director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski. The Hungarian theatre tradition was discussed by Magács, and commented on in interviews with the director Katalin Lábán, scene painter Istvan Köteles, dramaturg Sándor Herceg, and technical director and designer Èva Szen-drényi. Hungary has a theatre history that is rich in tradition, but it is a tradition that has borrowed from others and has not made any major impact on Western theatre.

## II. Background

In world theatre prior to World War II, Czechoslovakia and Russia are the only countries of Central and Eastern Europe to have any substantial impact on the West. However, during this same pre-World War II period in Western Europe, we see many countries contributing new movements worldwide. In Italy, futurism was developed in this period by the playwright Filippo Marinetti, with the visual images of futurism designed by the scenographer Enrico Prampolini, along with the psychosocial drama of Luigi Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*). In Spain, surrealism was exemplified by the playwright Federico García Lorca (*Blood Wedding* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*). In Russia, the prewar era heralded the beginning of socialist realism through the acting theories and productions of Konstantin Stanislavsky. At the same time, Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold denounced socialist realism as the ruin of the theatrical art and developed the theory of constructivism. In part because of his anti-Stalin theories, Meyerhold was arrested in late 1939 and executed in 1940. The French theatre produced the director-actor-theorist Jacques Copeau with his emphasis on improvisation through the use of mask. Finally, German theatre developed the school of expressionism and gave the world Brechtian theatre.

Before 1940, Czechoslovakia was the only country of Central Europe to develop a movement or style that had an impact on Western theatre. A creative partnership among designers, directors, and actors grew out of a number of studio theatres that

developed in the theatre-rich environment of Prague during the 1920s. The principle artists of this time were the director E. F. Burian; the playwrights Frank Benjamin Wedekind (*Spring's Awakening*) and the brothers Čapek, Josef (*Adam the Creator*) and Karel (*The Insect Comedy*); and the designer Miroslav Kouril. Out of the collaboration between Burian and Kouril came the development of a production style that is now called action design. In action design neither the director nor the designer is the sole guiding force in developing the production concept.

In the late 1950s, Kouril, with Josef Svoboda, founded the Scenographic Institute in Prague. It is through technology and design, especially the work of Svoboda, that Czechoslovakia has made its greatest impact on Western theatre and on theatre worldwide. The same can be said about Polish theatre's influence on actor training as developed by Jerzy Grotowski in his theories on *Towards a Poor Theatre*. To a lesser extent, Polish drama redefined absurdism as through the works of the playwrights Rósewicz and Mrožek. In a typical Rósewicz play (*Card Index*), the main character is searching for an identity in a chaotic world. In Mrožek's plays we often see a world without purpose, one in which all action is meaningless. Mrožek's plays are not just parables on political power but reflect the decline of human values, as seen in his plays *Out to Sea* and *Tango*.

In Czechoslovakia, during the period from 1956 to 1989, theatre was vital because it functioned as an underground movement that allowed the theatre artist to make very strong statements about freedom, liberty, and the responsibility of the individual in a society, as long as the play was a classic or socialist realistic one. In 1972, when I was a graduate student at University of Wisconsin in Madison, a group of Central European designers and technicians toured the United States. The Czechoslovakian designer told a group of graduate students about a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that was staged just after the 1968 invasion. This play, which by Central European standards was considered a socialist realistic play, had to have a realistically designed set. The designer and director decided that the shape and type of the front door through which Big Daddy would enter was the Czech equivalent of our outhouse door and that the visual statement made by Big Daddy's entrances were

comments on the Russia invasion of Czechoslovakia. In other words, Czechoslovakia was “shit upon” by the Russians.

By 1991, two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many artists who were forced out of the country in the 1970s for their outspoken work were now returning and attempting to reclaim their artistic life in Czechoslovakia. They met personal and professional hardships. The Ministry of Culture was in chaos; one day it would announce that there would be no state support for the arts, the next day it would declare that the National Theatre would be receiving support, the following day it promised support for all the theatres in the entire county. At present, the state support for the arts in the Czech Republic is less than that before 1991, but it is still a healthy amount compared to the United States.

The Polish theatre, from 1956 to 1968, was not as restricted as the rest of Central Europe. That is to say, official political ideology exerted little direct influence on theatre. Polish theatre underwent a crisis when Czechoslovakia was invaded in 1968. Many theatre artists—critics, dramatists, playwrights, and others—protested their country’s participation in the Czechoslovakian invasion. The Polish army made up a large part of the Russian invading force that put down the Prague Spring. Many of the artists who protested had to leave Poland or give up their positions in theatre. The playwright Mrožek was stripped of his citizenship, while Grotowski just ignored the current events and continued doing what he had done before the invasion. Outspoken individuals were punished, but the direction of Polish theatre was not reshaped or modified by the protest.

Hungarian theatres were nationalized in 1949, and according to Magács, the structure of their management has changed little since then. In protest of this nationalization, directors, designers, and actors called for theatre to become “the main forum for the fight against political oppression — a position that went unrivaled until the free elections of 1989.” This meant that the Hungarian theatre became less focused on aesthetic considerations and more interested in delivering political messages.

### III. Recent Observations

While in Prague I attended several theatre productions that incorporated striking elements of action design. The basic concept of action design is that only those items most necessary for the action are placed on the stage. Every element of the set must have a function that relates to the physical or psychological action of the play. The production *Kouzelný Cirkus* was presented at the Laterna Magika, a theatre built for productions that incorporate films, slides, and black light with live performers. It is a very visual theatre with no dialogue. The scenery is provided by means of projecting films and slides on moveable draperies that are moved and manipulated to create different locations. This form of theatre dates back to Burian's 1936 production of *Spring's Awakening*, which incorporated films and projectors into the course of the action. It has been refined to its present-day quality by Josef Svoboda.

The Ta Fantastika Theatre's production of *Magic Fantasy* was also a combination of acrobatic skills, mime, black light, dancing, and vaudeville routines, all performed with minimal dialogue and no projected scenery. The setting as the audience enters is a bare stage with a coffin and a phone on a pedestal center stage. The phone has a spotlight on it. As the houselights dim, the phone starts to ring and ring until a group of people from the audience get up to answer the phone. There is no one on the other end. The actor who has answered the phone pulls on the cord of the phone, which goes on forever until he finds a large red rubber ball tied to the end. The group then begins to play with the ball, with the exception of the actor who does not find this to be as inspiring or exciting as the rest of the characters do. From then on, the audience is witness to all types of events that incorporate play in them. Only one character does not take part in the games; he must carry the coffin back and forth all night long. In the end an audience member, who is actually an actor, is hit and killed while jumping from his seat to stop an actor who is swinging from a trapeze over the audience. This death abruptly ends the play. The body is placed in the coffin and carried to center stage. As the coffin is put down, the phone on the pedestal again appears, and the setting is a mirror of the first moment of the play. In action design, the elements in the

setting take on meaning through the actions of the characters. The few basic elements—phone, coffin, pedestal—have no clear meaning in and of themselves. In the course of the play, these objects lead the audience to a variety of different conclusions. The play might be saying that as we grow older we forget the joy of play and company of others. Or it could be saying that we should not dwell on death but enjoy life. Or is the ringing of the phone symbolic of a supreme being?

In Hungary the seminar participants attended two productions; one was classically staged and the other used minimal scenery in the style of action design. The first production was the opera *The Merry Widow*, which was performed at the Margitszigeti Színpad on Margit-Sziget (Margaret Island). This opera, by the Hungarian composer Franz Lehár, was first performed in Vienna in 1905. The production style had the look and feel of the art deco period, with elegant gowns and a grand, ornate set. However, during the course of the opera more eclectic uses of Hungarian folk art and Turkish images were introduced.

The second production was in the town of Szentendre about forty kilometers north of Budapest. It was a marvelous and unforgettable production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the director János Csányi. This production, like *The Merry Widow*, was staged in a courtyard behind the city hall. The acting area was a thrust stage; on the stage was a small platform on sawhorses placed up center. The audience sat around the stage in swings. The audience members in their swings became the forest near Athens. The production was considered the best production in Hungary in 1995 with the cast being selected from among the best actors in Budapest.

This production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a wonderful and exciting theatre moment even for those of us who did not understand Hungarian. In this production, the actors who play Theseus and Hippolyta reappear later in the guises of Titania and Oberon. The fairies are harsh, cruel, and mischievous entities rather than airy, spirited pranksters. This production presents a harsh, cruel, mean-spirited world, dominated by men and male rulers who control all the action. In the beginning of the play we see Theseus carrying a bound Hippolyta like a wounded and prized stag over one shoulder, his crossbow over the other. It is as if he has defeated the Amazon Queen or won



her in a contest. This is the first of many images that convey a harsh world, and it foreshadows what will happen to the other sets of characters in this play, Lysander and Hermia, Helena and Demetrius, and, finally, Oberon and Titania. Oberon is portrayed as a vicious, dominating, and controlling Fairy King who wants to punish Titania for not obeying him. He does this by making Titania fall in love with Bottom, who he has turned into an ass. In Shakespeare's text, Oberon has Puck fetch a flower and drop the sap from it into Titania's eye to make her fall in love with the first person she sees. In this production, Oberon passes on to Puck this power by raping Puck in a stylized manner and then has Puck in turn rape each character he comes in contact with. This represents the power that Oberon has over all who enter his domain. He takes joy from their discomfort. As the action returns to the night of the wedding, a kinder, gentler Theseus and a reluctant and hesitant Hippolyta accept each other as husband and wife. After the play-within-the-play ends, the characters leave but each with a different partner than the one they have been paired with in the play. Theseus leaves with Helena, Hippolyta with Bottom, Demetrius with Lysander, Hermia with Puck/servant. To the reflective audience members, the unusual pairings appear to be well matched.

How can this production be a comedy given the dark overtones and themes? The audience howled with laughter at all the right places, but the dark theme of the play was oppressive. Throughout the staging, men control other men and women through physical, mental, and sexual manipulation. This theme reflects many of the events that have happened over the past years in Hungary. Dr. Enikő Bollobás painted a picture of women in Hungary as inferior to men, where women are the victims of communism's totalitarian grip and are submissive to the more widely patriarchal traditions of Central Europe.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

So we are back to the question of where theatre in Central Europe stands in this period of "transition and globalization." In the Czech Republic, theatre is very healthy; its contribution to the theories of scenography are still altering how we look at technology and design. In Hungary the theatre is productive

and exciting, commenting upon abuses of individual and social power.

David Blaney, one of the Macalester College seminar participants, observed that Hungary is a country that has borrowed ideas and incorporated them into Hungarian society without much thought of change. I have reached the same conclusion about theatre. Hungarian theatre has imported ideas such as action design but has not expanded or modified them in any significant way. Why have the Czech Republic and Poland influenced the world theatre scene but not Hungary? Is it because Hungary has always turned to the West for ideas? Is it because Hungary has been ruled first by Western influences and later by Russian influences? I cannot say.

The fact that Hungarian theatre is not innovative does not mean that it is not stable. On the contrary, the number of theatres in Hungary is growing and theatre attendance is rising. Theatres are beginning to lobby city and community government for increased funding for the arts. Support from local sources means that theatre will grow to become more responsive to local needs rather than being influenced solely by the state. This will make theatre more relevant, varied, and democratic.