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HUNGARIAN THEATRE: Unchanged after the Changes (A Subjective Theatrical History)

László Magács

I. Introduction

A. Prologue

The history of Hungarian-language theatre goes back barely more than two hundred years. It was not until 1789 that a Hungarian company was officially given its own building. It is typical of the Hapsburg Empire years that only 40 percent of the citizens of Budapest spoke Hungarian as their mother tongue. The other 60 percent was made up of German and Jewish tradesmen and craftsmen, who already had a German-speaking theatre of their own. Under the circumstances, it is understandable that the growing Hungarian middle class should have a pronounced need for performances in Hungarian. Accordingly, having a permanent building for a Hungarian theatre became a *cause célèbre* for the bourgeoisie. Then, as now, whenever a major cultural initiative was undertaken, culture became entangled with politics, national self-determination, and the problem of identity through a national theatrical life, with aesthetic considerations being pushed into the background. Naturally, the existence of the new building exerted a profound influence on national playwriting as well, for the intermittent dramatic efforts of the previous centuries never made it beyond the gates of academia. The first part of the nineteenth century, however, produced such masterpieces as Imré Madách's dramatic verse epic *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember tragédiája*), Mihály Vörösmarty's fairy-play verse epic *Csongor* and *Tünde* (*Csongor és*

Tünde), and József Katona's *Bánk Bán*. The production of these plays poses a challenge to any serious theatre even today.

B. Act One

By the mid-1800s, a generation of playwrights had emerged with the capability of satisfying the appetites of several Hungarian-language repertory theatres. Almost every major poet, too, tried his hand at drama. Sándor Petöfi (*The Tiger and the Hyena* [*Tigris és hiéna*], 1845) and Mihály Vörösmarty (*Treasure Hunters* [*Kincskeresők*], circa 1839 and *Blood-Marriage* [*Vérnász*], 1833) were perhaps the greatest of these. This period also saw the first important translations of Shakespeare, first and foremost by the great nineteenth-century poet János Arany, who translated, among others, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. These translations not only made Shakespeare available to Hungarian audiences (between 1864 and 1878 the Kisfaludy Society published Shakespeare's complete works in Hungarian), but also exerted an influence on the new generation of dramatists. Also, by this time, some writers could actually make a living, however modest, exclusively from playwriting.

The 1867 Compromise with the Hapsburgs, which made Hungary into an independent kingdom within the Empire, removed the last hurdle to the growth of the Hungarian middle class. The structure of Hungarian society underwent swift and dramatic changes. There emerged an educated middle class that to this day forms the backbone of Hungarian theatre audiences. Concurrently, small towns were turning into big cities where permanent theatre buildings were springing up like mushrooms—just as in the Hungarian capital itself. Practically speaking, 90 percent of the theatres in operation today were established at that time. Their designers were the two illustrious architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer. Thanks to them, between 1855 and 1920, twenty-four theatres were built along the Vienna-Prague-Budapest “line.”

C. Act Two

By the turn of the century, the theatrical structure that would be in operation until the Communist takeover in 1949 had already

emerged. There were theatres with their own company and repertory. Three of these were fully supported by the government—the Opera House and the National Theatre in Budapest, and the National Theatre of Szeged. Also, side by side with these government institutions, which had a progressive program policy, there were some outstanding private theatres, foremost among them the Vígszínház. This was a brilliant period in the history of Hungarian culture. In Budapest alone, there were more than twenty theatres, not to mention the literary cafés and cabarets. These theatres produced plays by foreign playwrights such as Hauptmann, Chekhov, Ibsen, and Pirandello, as well as Ferenc Molnár and Melchior (Menyhért) Lengyel, Hungarian dramatists who became famous worldwide thanks to Hollywood. Other “regulars” for whose latest works Hungarian theatres vied were Dezső Szomory, Ernő Szép, Lajos Barta, and Lajos Zilahy, whose dramas are still very popular today.

But Hungarian-language theatre at the time joined the mainstream of European theatre not only with the speedy production of foreign authors in the local vernacular. Since German was the second language of the educated middle class, German companies were regularly invited to give performances. Soon, Max Reinhardt’s company became something of a fixture on the theatrical scene. The brilliant dancer-choreographer Isadora Duncan and scene designer, producer, and actor Edward Gordon Craig, who brought with him his own unique conception of the theatre, also graced Budapest’s stages repeatedly. At the same time, Hungarian actors were being invited to work abroad. For example, Max Reinhardt, whose company was the most interesting of the time, had a number of Hungarian actors join his troupe for one or more seasons. (Concurrently, the likes of Gustav Mahler, Otto Klemperer, and Sergio Failoni were at the Hungarian Opera House.)

It should be stressed that until the 1980s, the National Theatre was the country’s most progressive theatrical workshop—the major field of battle for the clash of viewpoints on cultural policy. Sándor Hevesi, who was at the theatre between 1901 and 1937 and was finally dismissed after lengthy intrigues, had among his circle of acquaintances the likes of George Bernard Shaw.

D. Act Three

In 1949, the theatres were nationalized (along with everything else), and the structure that is still in evidence today was formed. The response to nationalization was for the theatre to go into opposition to the state, becoming the main forum for the fight against political oppression — a position that went unrivalled until the free elections of 1989.

This position of opposition also meant that the progressive character of Hungarian theatre became determined less by aesthetic considerations than by the need for hidden messages with which the artists could express the dissatisfaction of the Hungarian intelligentsia; therefore, it also went hand in hand with the not infrequent radical reinterpretation of a given play. (Naturally, this was not a Hungarian specialty; every free-thinking Eastern European intellectual realized that in face of the massive lies that flooded the media, it was the elemental duty of the artists to bring truth to their audiences.) Indeed, many premieres were held at this time whose only real value lay in the fact that they were being held in the first place. At some of these premieres, in fact, what happened off stage was more important than what was happening behind the footlights, i.e., what the functionaries sitting in the most frequented boxes near the stage would have to say. The first intermission, especially, was decisive, for this is when the “important people” first voiced their evaluations of what they had just seen.

Luckily, scandal was at a minimum. But then, the directors of the theatres had learned to censor themselves. Sometimes, too, the plan to put on a certain performance was “leaked,” and if the reactions of the cultural policymakers were not overly negative, the director or artistic director then felt it safe to introduce his plan to the Theatre Department of the Communist Party at the Ministry of Culture. In most cases, these discussions must have resembled the kind of bartering one sees at a marketplace; in order to receive permission to stage the work of a Western European or American contemporary piece, the theatre would “offer” to produce one or two “masterpieces” by a writer from the Soviet Union or some other country belonging to the socialist camp. (Naturally, I do not mean to imply that nothing of value was written in these countries. However, along with

Western plays, these plays were blacklisted and could not be produced.)

The first significant breakthrough that gave Hungarian theatre professionals a chance to become acquainted with progressive European theatre came when Peter Brook's National Theatre of London presented *King Lear* in Budapest as part of its world tour. The influence of this production was so overwhelming and intricate that the Vígszínház, where Brook's *Lear* was performed, immediately changed the costumes of its own *Lear* production to resemble those in Brook's version. It is a shame that such enthusiasm—shared by all the theatre professionals in the country—had no influence on the basic problems of Hungarian play-acting, which is based on an outdated pseudo-Stanislavsky realistic-naturalistic style—a misconception of the Stanislavsky method. (Neither the social climate nor officially approved aesthetics would allow any experimentation that might lead to basic reforms in technique.)

At the same time, cultural policy was generous in its financial support of the intelligentsia — for which it expected a certain loyalty in exchange. Its expectations were not frustrated. The upper stratum of theatre professionals enjoyed the limelight. Their wallets were full. And since, for all practical purposes, policy was concentrated in the hands of one man, it was very easy to know what was expected. If someone wanted to gain a certain high position and was gifted enough (not much, just enough), he could build his career according to a clear-cut choreography. How to act with policymakers and, once one had passed a certain rung of the ladder, how to go on from there, was an open secret. This does not mean that everyone was corrupt or that there were no outstanding talents; the previously mentioned Vígszínház and the National Theatre, for example, staged first-class productions. And yet, the present-day crisis has its roots in this situation because, by degrees, the theatre lost its ability to respond quickly and sensitively to the world around it, by which I mean the ability to transform the outmoded theatrical vernacular.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, something new began in Hungarian theatrical life. The change took two separate and, to this day, irreconcilable directions. One was the foundation of troupes who, at the time, were called amateur theatres, and who

brought the kind of progressive thinking to an otherwise staid theatrical life that the official theatres neither could nor would adopt. There were four outstanding amateur groups. The Térszínház, founded in the district where the largest concentration of Budapest's working class lived, brought its audiences revolutionary, experimental productions. They were the first to produce works by such contemporaries as the renowned poet Sándor Weöres, which have since become a staple of professional theatre programs. The Hurka Színpad put on hugely successful productions of plays by the "angry" young English playwrights. The Utcaszínház encroached upon the most protected space of the government of the time: they improvised on the street from previously sketched ideas, thereby making it impossible for the cultural policymakers to interfere in their usual sly manner by choosing programs in advance. Stúdió K, the fourth member of this group, stood closest in character to professional theatre. (The head of this group, Tamás Fodor, later became the director of a major provincial theatre in Szolnok.) Their best-known production was Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which portrays man's agony and existential loneliness with such elemental force that the audiences could not free themselves of its effect for days. Some of the young artists who first worked with these groups have since joined professional companies, but the productions they have staged in their new "environment" have not attained the force or artistic level of the work they had produced under "amateur" conditions. It took cultural policymakers approximately five years to realize the influence that these groups, originally held in contempt, were exerting. Consequently, by the mid-1980s their funding sources had dried up.

Apart from Budapest's amateur theatre, the larger university towns also initiated important workshops of their own and have produced people who are presently helping to shape the country's theatrical life. However, Hungarian cultural life is so exclusively centered on the capital that the performances by these out-of-town groups have reached Budapest only in the form of legends.

The other breakaway direction taken in the late 1970s took shape in the gradual appearance of major professional workshops outside of the capital. The theatres at Kaposvár, Szolnok, and Kecskemét, in fact, had the above-mentioned Budapest-cen-

teredness to thank for their success; these new companies, avowed experimenters, avoided interference by cultural policymakers from the very start. Their growth, the spreading of their fame, the formation of faithful audiences were not under such close scrutiny. Paradoxically, though, these theatres had taken up arms against the very mode of thinking they had to thank for their existence. The most famous production of the Kaposvári Theatre was Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, which won first prize at the prestigious BITEF festival in Belgrade. However, as a result of the well-planned expansion in 1978, two leading directors, Gábor Székely of Szolnok and Gábor Zsámbéki of Kaposvár, were hired by the National Theatre. (Their stay there, however, was stormy and short-lived. The acting at the National was so outdated that the new directors were helpless against it. Luckily, it was then decided to give them the newly renovated chamber theatre of the National, the Katona József Theatre, where they brought together a brand new company that, until recently, was the best in the country.)

Although the cultural policy of the communist era tied the hands of the artists, the advantages the sanctioned theatre people enjoyed led to a loss of initiative. But the structure functioned very well, especially from a financial point of view. Salaries, in comparison to an average worker's wage, were high, and the more talented actors and directors were given many other opportunities apart from work in the theatre. They worked in radio, television, the dubbing studio, and film, which, at the time, was enjoying worldwide renown. In effect, until the 1990s, a significant percentage of actors enjoyed a high standard of living.

In exchange for this relatively high standard of living, actors gave up their freedom. Those who rebelled were well known enough so that they could not be sidelined without a scandal. But many scientists and artists were veritably forced out of the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

II. Today

A. Act Four (post-1989)

Within a couple of years after the change in regime, it became painfully clear that the mode of thinking that had been forced on the artists had also left its stamp on the new generation that was shaping the face of the future. Everyone was euphoric over the disappearance of hidden censorship, but until then few seemed to realize that their activities were based on opposition. Now there was nothing to hide between the lines. Directors, too, had lost the ability to read plays for what they were. Instead of stories about human beings, they were still looking for “messages.” Furthermore, although the small group that for fifteen years had single-handedly determined the character of cultural life had now been swept away by the new middle-generation, substantial changes were nowhere in sight. For one thing, the new leaders were incapable of bringing about real structural changes; for another, it soon became apparent that they had also been infected by the mode of thinking that had spread a pall over the previous years. They still wanted to show how “responsible” they were, although now there was no one looking.

To make things worse, financial support was drastically cut back. Though the disappearance of the Iron Curtain lifted the obstacle to new thoughts, no production to date has been born that has truly broken with outdated local theatrical tradition. Interest has also dwindled. The extra energy, which had fed on relative financial security and which had sent the general public to the theatres during the previous decades, is spent today on the struggle to make ends meet, while the rather narrow stratum of the nouveau riche is more interested in signing up for package deals to exotic foreign lands than attending than the theatre.

Money is at a minimum. The government has tried to keep the price of tickets down by supporting the theatres and reinforcing the previous subsidy system (which functioned quite well for forty years). But an even more serious problem is that the artists stand helpless in the face of what is happening in the global theatre world. They do not speak other languages. They are not properly acquainted with and do not analyze thoroughly

enough theatrical experiments being carried out in various parts of the world. They are isolated by language from the people who are concentrating all their attention on the role of the theatre in the twentieth century. In addition, the actors cannot free themselves of the realistic-naturalistic traditions demanded of them for so long. They do not take quality seriously enough. They are not open to new ideas and are wary of new talent. The number of opportunities in theatre are progressively dwindling, and those who are in important leading positions are concentrating on one thing only: preserving their status. (One sincere gesture: At the height of its celebrity in 1990, one of the leading figures of the Katona József Theatre left. Why? He never told anyone. Perhaps he felt that he was incapable of doing what he felt was called for. He got up and walked out. For five years he did not direct a play in Hungary. He taught directing at the Drama Academy, and, in 1994, he was asked to head a theatre with some of his students. Perhaps they will succeed where others have failed.)

Again, as in the 1970s, new developments will come from outside the established theatrical world. During the past five years a relatively homogeneous alternative theatre movement has taken shape. New companies have appeared and, with renewed energy, the established alternative centers are trying to create opportunities for the formation of yet newer groups. Without trying to be exhaustive, a few words about some of these groups is appropriate.

Since 1979, the Székéné Színház has been one of the centers of alternative theatre that tries to help new groups primarily by guaranteeing them space and an infrastructure. They, in turn, are supported by the Budapest Technical University, which does not ask for rent for the use of its auditorium. The university also foots the bill for the theatre's minimal administration. The productions themselves are partially supported by various foundations. One of the most important groups affiliated with the Székéné Színház is the Arvisura Színház, which has won recognition at several international alternative theatre festivals. (Their most important productions have been Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the play *Magyar Elektra* [*Hungarian Electra*].) In the mid-1970s the

Szkéné also began inviting foreign companies to play on their premises, insuring that they get to tour other cities as well.

The MU Színház was formed in 1991. Like the Szkéné, it too functions primarily as a theatre without its own permanent company and as the showcase for the new theatrical trends that have been emerging since 1989.

The R. S. 9 Színház, which was formed in 1990, is one of the first experimental theatres to have its own theatre building. Katalin Lábán and Dezső Dobay, who head the group, have established a workshop where they train young people who will eventually join the company. The R. S. 9 holds a performance almost every night of the year. Their repertory includes the adaptations of works by Gombrowicz, Beckett, Wyspiański, Witkiewicz, Maeterlinck, and Kafka, which they also present in towns outside of the capital. They have also played abroad (Amsterdam, Malmö, Bath, Warsaw).

The greatest change since 1989, however, has been brought about by the appearance of various dance theatres. One of the tangible reasons for their establishment has been the nonlinguistic nature of dance, the fact that dance companies can appear on the stages of the world without having to overcome linguistic barriers. Of these companies, Yvette Bozsik's dance theatre is perhaps the most interesting and has been hailed in countries around the world. *Az estély (The Ball)* won a special prize at the Edinburgh Festival. Yvette Bozsik is, at present, the only truly internationally known dancer in Hungary.

For the nonprofessional troupes, the Petöfi Csarnok, a large entertainment center that hosts a variety of events mostly, though not exclusively, for teenagers, could provide the needed space for large-scale productions. However, since Hungarian alternative theatre is not yet ready to stage large-scale productions (and not merely for financial reasons), at present the Petöfi Csarnok is the scene mostly of foreign productions. Most of these are dance productions (there are approximately thirty dance productions a year), although there is an occasional theatre evening. The organizers of the Petöfi Csarnok have recently set up the Műhelyház (Workshop-house) Foundation, which, in 1995, decided to create a wholly independent cultural center whose aim is to foster the foundation of as many workshops as possible. It hopes to create a set of conditions that would

encourage the birth of new productions. According to their plans, side by side with the center's by now traditional role as a venue, the foundation hopes to help finance two major productions a year. If their plans are successful, Budapest will have a center that could unite the energies of the country's best theatre people.

B. Numbers

At present, the Hungarian theatrical structure is based on the thirty-five theatres that have their own permanent companies. Together, these theatres hold approximately 300 premieres per year, with nearly 12,000 performances. These theatres are still being financed either by the government or other budgetary institutions of the state.

Including the outdoor theatres, there are altogether forty-six theatrical institutions currently functioning in Hungary. Aside from the thirty-five theatres that have their own companies (seven being puppet theatres), there are five institutions that function as venues and six independent outdoor theatres. Of the theatres, thirteen belong to the local governments of Budapest and twenty-eight to the local governments of various country towns. Five theatres are supported directly by the Ministry of Culture and Education. Generally, the theatres operating in the larger towns have several divisions—prose, opera, and/or ballet. There are also nearly thirty alternative theatres that the government helps through minimal financing. The lion's share of their support, however, must come from foundations and sponsors.

Money spent on supporting culture makes up, on average, 2.1 percent of state expenditure. In 1992, this came to 44,329 million forints, 16.4 percent of which was spent on the support of the arts. The theatres were allotted the following amounts:

Theatres outside Budapest:	2,232 million forints
Theatres in Budapest:	1,020 million forints
Outdoor theatres:	115 million forints
Opera House:	834 million forints
National Theatre:	288 million forints

Although this amount increases yearly, it cannot keep up with inflation.

During the traditional theatre season, which runs from October through June, the theatres in Budapest offer 200 different productions. This very high number of shows springs mainly from the fact that every theatre—whether prose or musical, professional or alternative—is still a repertory theatre. It is during the summer months that productions work on the staggione system, but these temporary companies rarely produce quality performances.

The country's population is approximately 10 million. For years now there have been, on average, 5 million tickets bought for shows (both prose and musicals). Of these, half (2.5 million) have been purchased Budapest, whose population is around 2 million.

Apart from the permanent theatres, two important festivals add color to Hungarian cultural life. One is the Autumn Festival, with its concentration on musical events, and which in 1994, also gave significant financial support to the writing of two contemporary operas. The other is the Spring Festival, supported by the National Tourist Board, which, apart from musical events, also organizes theatrical and dance performances. This year, for example, it brought Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theatre to Hungarian audiences. Its two productions, *Carnations* and *Café Müller*, were highly successful. On the other hand, it is telling that appearances by Martha Graham's troupe had to be cancelled because of lack of funds.

C. Training and instruction

Currently, the Academy for Dramatic and Cinematic Art (Színház és Filmművészeti Főiskola), founded in 1865, is the only official school for training Hungarian actors and directors. The academy graduates ten to fifteen actors and actresses a year. Since the 1990s, however, private drama schools are mushrooming everywhere, but the quality of instruction they offer is, to say the least, below par. Scenic and costume designers are trained at the Academy of Fine Arts, which means that they are cut off from their director counterparts.

D. Companies

1. Outside Budapest

There are eighteen major theatres functioning in the provinces, fourteen of which have their own permanent companies, each made up of various departments (music, etc.). Since each town generally has only one theatre, the program must take the preferences of a wide variety of people into consideration. Of the five to eight new productions yearly, there are operettas, comedies, and classical and modern plays. However, at the moment there are no theatres that offer the challenging productions that hallmarked the 1970s. Perhaps the Csiky Gergely Theatre of Kaposvár (the Kaposvári Theatre) is alone in sustaining the quality of its productions which made it one of the country's most important theatres from the mid-1970s on. The Szigligeti Theatre of Szolnok, the other theatre which was known for its fine performances, is currently experiencing a major crisis. Its director, the writer and dramatist György Spiró, brought young directors to the theatre whose work was not to the local government's liking. Consequently, Spiró was fired before his contract was up.

Of the provincial theatres, four (Debrecen, Győr, Pécs, and Szeged) also have opera companies and four (Győr, Pécs, Szeged, and Veszprém) have their own ballet corps, while three (Eger, Pécs, and Kecskemét) have puppet theatres. Almost every provincial company also has so-called studio performances, which offer a chance for the experimentally inclined members of the theatre to try their hand at nontraditional theatrical forms. Three national minority theatres also function more or less on a regular basis: the German Theatre of Szekszárd, the Croatian Stage of Pécs, and the Serbian Theatre of Budapest. The provincial theatres also take their productions to the smaller settlements. These guest performances make up a significant number of these theatres' yearly performances.

2. The National Theatre

From the time of its inception, the National Theatre was one of the major centers of theatrical life. In the early years of the twen-

tieth century, it joined in the most noble of competitions with the Vígszínház for first place, and from 1945 until the early 1980s it negotiated itself brilliantly in face of censorship. Today, the National Theatre has completely lost its leading role in Hungarian theatrical life. Although the financial support it receives is still higher than that of any other theatre, most of the money is not spent on new productions but on further enlarging an already inflated company and paying the huge number of administrators. Where are the famous productions highlighted by the likes of Endre Gellért and Tamás Major? Where are the giants who, night after night, would insure packed houses? Although the crisis that came to the fore under the leadership of those who were appointed by the previous government (most of whom are still in position) plagues Hungarian theatre in general, in other theatres with more talented leaderships, the drop in quality has not been quite so glaring.

After nationalization in 1949, the National Theatre built up the strongest company in the country. Its directors and artistic directors contracted the best actors of the recently nationalized private theatres. From the pool of graduates of the Academy of Dramatic Art, they handpicked the best of the lot year after year. Until the early 1980s, being a member of the National Theatre meant prestige. The most radical change in the life of the National Theatre came in 1982, when the most gifted young members of the company were given the chance to form a new theatre. For all practical purposes, the gradual decline in the artistic level of the National Theatre can be dated to that time when the best directors left to head the new theatre. From that moment, too, the polemics of what it means (or should mean) to be the National Theatre took precedence over the real question of artistic quality.

Now, most of the almost 100-member company is made up of rather mediocre talent, while the quality of the productions is below average. In response, the Ministry of Culture and Education has announced an open competition to fill the post of the theatre's artistic director, but there is little hope that any serious director will take up the challenge: in order to effect any real change, a significant percentage of the company would have to be fired, a step that no theatre professional in Hungary today is ready to undertake. Consequently, the cultural authorities are

just as seriously stalemated in this situation as are the theatre professionals themselves.

3. *The Katona József Theatre*

When, in 1982, directors Gábor Zsámbéki and Gábor Székely left the National Theatre to head the Katona József Theatre, the so-called chamber theatre of the National, they were given the chance to handpick the actors they thought would most suit their artistic vision. The backbone of the new company was made up of a group from the National Theatre with whom the two directors had worked together successfully; furthermore, since both directors had brought together first-rate companies at Szolnok and Kaposvár, they also invited actors from there to join them at the Katona József Theatre. For the first seven years, almost every new production was hugely successful. In a very short time, the theatre also found a regular, devoted following among Budapest's audiences, and almost every night they play to a full house. Their style is based on the best naturalistic-realistic theatrical traditions, and one of Hungary's best directors, Tamás Ascher, works regularly with the company. Their most successful productions include Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, Gogol's *The Inspector-General*, and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which have also won acclaim in cities around Europe and the U.S. Recently, though, this theatre also experienced a period of crisis when two new theatres appeared on the scene, the Művész (Art) Theatre, which brought together the best actors in the country (but within the space of two years also managed to produce one major flop after another), and the Új Színház (New Theatre) under the direction of Gábor Székely, which is still too new to guess how it will fare.

The theatre has managed to survive the temporary crisis by bringing in an entire graduating class from the Drama Academy, then choosing productions with them in mind. The chances are indeed very good that soon this new generation of actors will take over the direction of the theatre.

4. *The Madách Theatre*

From the 1960s on, under the direction of Ottó Ádam, the Madách Theatre gradually developed its own characteristic style. Cautiously and very gradually, it also managed to sneak so-called boulevard (commercial) pieces into Hungarian theatre — a revolutionary act at the time, since they represented middle-class culture from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Until the late-1980s, the Madách Theatre had one of the most faithful followings in the country. It was the first theatre in Budapest to produce a major musical, *Cats*, the success of which encouraged the management to fill the repertory with musicals of all kinds and qualities, both foreign and domestic, which pushed out the good boulevard pieces.

5. *New directions: The Merlin International Theatre*

The Merlin International Theatre was formed in 1991 under the directorship of two well-known actors. The original plans called for a structure with two separate parts — the summer theatre, which would be in English, and the traditional season, which would offer plays in Hungarian. However, the infeasibility of this division soon became apparent, and for some time now the character of the theatre has been determined by the joint efforts of the heads of the two sections.

The establishment of English-language theatre in Hungary had a number of objectives in mind. They were as follows:

- To translate and put on stage the best Hungarian plays, thereby bringing Hungarian drama to English-speaking audiences.
- To present at least one play in translation every year with the cooperation of English, American, and Hungarian actors under the direction of a Hungarian director.
- To create permanent close ties with theatres in England and the U.S., thereby paving the way for coproductions.
- To present the best contemporary English and American drama with an international company under the direction of foreign directors.

- To invite foreign productions whose quality and way of thinking differ from what is prevalent in Hungary, thereby giving Hungarian theatre professionals a chance to become acquainted with new theatre.

The first production of the new Merlin International Theatre in 1991 was Ferenc Molnár's *The Play's the Thing*, translated by P. G. Wodehouse. Other productions to follow were Ferenc Karinthy's *Danube Bend*, György Schwajda's *Anthem*, and Péter Halász's *Piero della Francesca Cabaret* in coproduction with Amsterdam's Consort Theatre. The Merlin also played host to, among others, London's The Kosh, the Balanescu Quartet, and Bob Kingdom in the one-man show titled *Return Journey*, based on works by Dylan Thomas and directed by Anthony Hopkins. The Merlin also organized two theatre festivals, Making Waves, in 1992, with twelve English troupes giving performances, and the Brouhaha Festival, of which it was part-organizer. The theatre was also the scene of a one-week fair by the city of Frankfurt. Beginning in September 1995, the Merlin will also be the official club of the Scottish Weeks.

Concurrently with the establishment of the theatre, the Merlin also began to operate a four-year actors' training workshop whose graduates now make up the theatre's permanent company of actors. The students of the workshop receive the same complex training offered by the Academy, but unlike the students of the latter, those studying at the workshop appear in productions during their freshman year, which is not a practice at the Academy. During the past four years, the workshop has been awarded two prestigious Hungarian prizes, while in 1995 they appeared in Cardiff in James Saunders's play, *After Liverpool*, directed by Andrew Neil.

Merlin's decision to act as a venue for outside productions has two objectives. On the one hand, it hopes to change the view that Hungarian theatre means Budapest theatre; on the other, it hopes to offer technical and financial assistance to those new theatre experiments that cannot fit into the traditional theatrical structure. Thus, during the past four years almost every provincial theatre has brought its productions to Budapest via the Merlin; furthermore, two young directors hired by the Merlin have since become prominent in their field.

Since 1991, the Actors' Training Workshop has put on six productions. In 1993, its *Tales of Péterváár* (*Péterváár meséi*) was awarded the first prize of the alternative theatre festival, while *Love You Must!* (*Szeretni kell!*) was awarded the special prize of the 1994 theatre festival.

The Merlin has produced seventeen independent shows. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* was awarded first prize at the alternative theatre festival of 1992, while Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* won first prize at the same festival in 1995. Apart from productions in English, there were also German, French, and Italian productions. During the past four years, Merlin was the venue for twenty-eight independent productions. During this time, the Merlin has also organized five festivals.

The Merlin currently receives no national state support. The theatre building is located on grounds that, until 1991, belonged to the local government, which supported the Merlin by not asking for rent and utility payments. Approximately one-third of its budget comes from the local government's independent theatre fund, for which the Merlin must apply yearly. The remaining funds come from sponsors and foundations. So far, it has pulled through somehow. It is hoped that it will pull through in the future as well.