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In Focus: Online roundtable discussion 1

Participants: Melinda Gemza, Ádám Cziboly, Edit Romankovics, Zsuzsa Hajós, Tamás Jászai, Viktória Végvári, Gábor Takács

G. M.: Hello everybody! I welcome you all to Csokonai Youth Programme's first conference on theatre in education and theatre pedagogy. We intended to organise a programme series that would provide some reflection on the situation that we have been experiencing for a year. This is why tonight's focus is online TIE activities. TIE, just like certain performing arts, has transferred to cyberspace and thus completely new forms have been created. Perhaps this is one of the positive aspects or outcomes of this situation. The other might be that apparently, despite all our difficulties and the fact that we cannot meet in person in classrooms and theatres, TIE is alive and well, and to prove this we only need to look around: there are so many of us here tonight. Over a hundred people have gathered here to listen to this discussion. I shall now give the floor to Ádám Cziboly, who is going to chair the session.

C. Á.: Before we plunge into it, I would like you to bring examples to the floor. First I am asking you, Tamás. You amongst us knows the past year's international and domestic theatrical harvest best. What is the international and Hungarian context that we find ourselves in, in which TIE must react to what is happening around us? Are there any practices that can make a performance more interactive?

J. T.: It is not at all impossible to summarise the past year in five minutes. In fact, if I had to sum up everything that has happened in theatres in the last year, I should use the triple timeframe of past, present and future. As far as the past is concerned, it was exactly a year ago that many of us teachers were glad to see the opening of theatrical archives, where the entire world and his wife uploaded footages of performances in bad, worse and the worst qualities,

which could then be used for teaching by those who kept their eyes peeled. This is still going on, and perhaps rightly so. It is exciting to see the time dimension, because whatever the theatres shared a year ago free of charge in their first act of desperation and/or enthusiasm is today worth thousands of Forints, which is alright I think. I don't really have anything against that. As for the present, there are inescapably pieces and productions that reflect upon what we or the creators find ourselves in. So there are strange new genres coming to life, if they can be called genres at all, dubbed things like 'theatre of lockdown' and 'lockdown drama'. Somehow all these pieces are about isolation, loneliness, depression and other similarly cheerful topics. They have cropped up in Hungary, too, if not in great numbers, but definitely evidenced by productions such as *Scenes from a Marriage*, which apparently is a Covid-proof mini soap opera. In effect, it records the life of a married couple in five or six episodes. A more recent one, which reflects on the same in a more indirect way, is the series *Contemporary* from Katona József Theatre, especially the last three episodes. János Háý's *Poetry Recitation Competition* is one where the creators are talking about the actual present: we see unfolding before our eyes different adventures of a poet under lockdown, while the show also casts a light on the pains of writing poetry. This three-episode series was directed by Márk Tárnoki, and I think it's really exciting to see him experiment: it's neither theatre nor film but is both at the same time. As far as the future is concerned, many people have tried to optimise performances for online platforms. This is going to be the main topic of tonight's discussion. We'll include some productions originally prepared for Zoom, and some that have already existed with the creators adding some elements to make them compatible with Zoom. Of the latter it is definitely important to highlight *The Case of Mihaela*, which you'll be able to see here tonight. We could also cite countless examples from abroad. A bunch of these have been put on by Trafó. What Trafó are doing is exceptional and exemplary in this period, because in the first instant they communicated that

they would not upload live streams of performances, as that's no challenge whatsoever, but rather they thought hard on new ways for online theatre, and that approach sparked off most of their projects. I personally have doubts about the whole thing: namely, I wonder about the functionality of the format, if we are watching merely the footage of a performance, or if there is something more the creators want from us. What I deem evidently fruitful is the fact that it at least got people thinking. The online portal of *Színház*, the theatrical journal, published a series in which theatrical creatives and theoreticians discussed their ideas about and theatres' solutions to the situation.

C. Á.: Can you give me an example from your own practice of the past year, in which you adapted a theatrical or complex TIE production, or any other kind of TIE programme, to the online space.

H. Zs.: Our first attempt was a production called *Blue Island*, the online version of which we mounted in November. There were several problems with all kinds of things. One was that forty minutes of theatre had to be put out there for children and young people. We thought about streaming, but it soon became obvious that we could not get that done. We thought we'd record and show it. Finally we decided on making a film of the theatrical production, the narrative structure and timing of which became entirely different. It needed a new location: it wasn't shot in the open space of a theatre, but in a flat, with the cooperation of a film director friend, Zsófi Szilágyi. The film was made and the question arose: what should we do with interaction? *Blue Island* is unique in the sense that it experiments with what few TIE productions experiment with: we play it for a 12+ age group, and in a relatively long interactive part the children stay in character with the two drama teachers. How can you realise that via Zoom? This part takes place in a camp, and there was a severe dilemma about whether we should include an online or a live camp, whether we should, in those little windows, all pretend

being in the same place? It would have been so fictional that we didn't want to undertake that.

R. E.: I want to talk to you about a long-term project that I have been participating in over the past year and which had started earlier, even before the pandemic. As a matter of fact, it was a production of Sajátszínház [Own Theatre] and Szívhangok [Cardiac Sounds] Company, *Long Live Regina*, where women from Szomolya told their own stories. This group was joined by health care specialists and birth activists. We wanted to create a production of 'forum theatre', which would have been put on last year. Very soon we realised that it wouldn't work and the whole company had to go online. We faced a lot of difficulties. First of all, profane technological problems like how we can provide everyone with devices to ensure that they can participate in the group's work. Several of these people are disadvantaged Roma women, living in rural villages. The devices had to be purchased, there was also a process of education, and in the meantime we all learnt about Zoom. Then we invited a film specialist, who made cuts of our Zoom sessions. The plan was to use these short films to present a workshop, a performance or something to the public online. The first public presentation will be in Trafó on 16 April. We call ourselves research theatre at the moment and are going practically experimental. The long-term programme has this advantage of really securing the possibility of trying out different formats with the group.

V. V.: We, the entire institution, also gave a lot of thought to what was worth doing in the online space. With respect to our TIE programme we decided to make ourselves useful: secondary school students were locked into the digital distant education, so we tried to adapt a programme that was made for secondary school students and which a secondary school teacher could simply adopt and insert into the morning teaching routine. This is how the *Double Lesson to Move You* programme was born, which consists of adapting one-and-a-half-hour sessions. We had to retool these so that we could use footages

of the performances in our sessions. These occasions are basically popularising sessions, currently we have a material made for the production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It seemed appropriate for Zoom, as the original version was an escape room, too. Because, if you think about it, what is *The Tempest* about? There are all kinds of adventures to engage in, and the location was evident already at planning phase. We would build an escape room at the theatre, obviously with thematics from Shakespeare and *The Tempest*. The plan was to construct the framework for the performance, which would have a lot of characters with complicated names and statuses. So kids would already get to know these by the time they would start watching the performance, and of course it was a priority that they would have a good time, too. Now, however, there was another goal. We started talking about Shakespearean theatre, what it was like, and what our puppet theatre looks like. The basis of the dramaturgy is that we are locked in and there is an evil wizard who manipulates people: this remained a basic element in both productions. In the original we don't have Prospero, we only refer to him, but in this Zoom programme he is there, he doesn't speak and he can't be seen, but he uses the chatroom and plays all kinds of wicked tricks on participants. We lifted the puzzles and tasks from the original programme, and made up new ones, too, so that we could have a little Super Mario, an actor, who runs around the theatre and gives a sort of backstage tour to people. He takes the participants via the camera to places where the audience are forbidden to go. This was a practical change. For me, visuality is really important, and since we originally had had a built environment that we had lost somehow we had to replace it with something.

T. G.: I wanted to talk about the difference in skills this new kind of theatre requires from actors and actor-drama teachers. We also had to take a decision about which way to go. We had to come up with a new strategy, give a new kind of reaction to this whole situation. This happened in the second wave,

because during the first one we tried to make it meaningful by having rehearsals and everything else, hoping that the wave would pass, and in the autumn it would all be different. Our opportunities were quite scarce. By the time streaming technology had become available to us at the theatre it was already autumn, and winter even. We didn't have a film specialist to help us, neither did we have the financial means to create high standard video material. For these reasons we adapted only two complex theatrical productions for the online space. One is called *Labyrinth*, for years 5-6 of primary schools. Another show was made for secondary schools recently, called *Let It Shine Upon Him*. Both had their offline premieres in the autumn and in our planning phase we had specified making the online version, too.

At our theatre we do another important activity, which is to adapt complex drama classes, or as we call them, 'ars drama classes', to online environments. The first of these is called *Playground*, which is about contemporary violence. The piece was set on a playground, where a kid is constantly humiliated. The show examined how the child experienced it and how he could make a move away from that place. We made a simplified version of that, which we attempted to adapt to online environments first. The roles are played by all participants, in different casts, with the help of two actor-drama teachers from the company. We had to change the structure, the dramaturgical decisions, and obviously the format, too: we used laptop and mobile wizardry. This all needs to be added to the mix, the technological opportunities they present. Now I won't go into the kind of exposure and vulnerability this presents. It's not only about our technological conditions, but also about the schools' facilities. Primary school students, staying in the schools, had not retooled to digital learning for a good many months, but we were not allowed to go in to meet them any longer. Thus the first version we made involved the schoolchildren together in a classroom and us in a theatre room with our

mobiles and laptops. There was another version where everyone was sent home and they were on their own in front of their screens.

C. Á.: This kind of operation requires different skills and competencies on the part of an actor-drama teacher: for instance, they need to know how to use this platform we are using right now. But do we, actors, drama teachers or programme instructors, need any specific skills to work in such a space with young people and children?

T. G.: I'm not sure I would call these special skills, or different from those that actor-drama teachers or TIE specialists already have, but of course there is need for some fine tuning. What I mean is if we are playing around with a camera, we inevitably enter a kind of film language, and acting obviously changes, too. It is, for example, a rather great task to ensure that you're not overacting, at least me and my colleagues don't have any experience with acting in films. The camera blows up and intensifies everything to a large degree; the smallest gesture will be different from what you're doing on the stage.

V. V.: As for programme instructors, I think those that have worked with secondary school students in the past period know exactly what I mean by the horror of black squares. Mobilising and motivating people to participate simply doesn't work. It is a problem for me to make distant calls to the audience to participate in the game, which I can handle easily when live because I have a million different solutions for that. I would also highlight the filmic aspect: I am not a cinematographer, but I need to be consciously aware of what I'm doing lest participants should only see speaking heads in a session. What do you have instead? What functions are available? If I show something, how do I do it? Do I take full shots, or follow movement with the camera, do I zoom?

H. Zs.: The majority of actor-drama teachers are positively tuned to the moods and circumstances of the participants in their sessions. However, you can't do that via Zoom, in my opinion. I think I am a very sensitive person, but ten times out of ten I would blunder trying to work out why the given person is uninvolved.

R. E.: In our case the most important task was to be able to provide a communal experience via Zoom. To my mind, communal experiences are very visceral. By the way, all forms of theatre and drama are extremely sensual, people participate in them with their entire being, not only their verbal or intellectual sides. This is what is lost online, and it is really difficult to make up for. The ways of making contact are terribly scarce on these online platforms. What I realised was that verbal and linguistic skills are too much in the foreground. Working with young people from juvie or the Szomolya women in online form, I had to find ways of basing our communication on something other than these verbal-intellectual skills. By not being able to look into each other's eyes, how will you secure that tension, that mental stimulus, that ties the group together? That something that makes it a communal experience and not an individual experience for everyone in their own reality, which is specific and wholly uncontrollable?

J. T.: Last week I watched four or five TIE performances via Zoom, and I made a new and very interesting realisation. In one of these performances, in one small group, one of the kids, who had a large pair of headphones on, nodded his head constantly as if to some beat, so I was absolutely sure he was involved in another story, either listening to something on Spotify or whatnot. In spite of that, he had by far the most intelligent remarks and comments, and it seemed he could focus on more than one thing at the same time. My other formative experience was that whatever doesn't work via Zoom is very bad, but what does is very good. Meaning that the platform intensifies some

aspects and suppresses others. As for timing and dramaturgy you have to make decisions that take this new kind of space into account.

T. G.: I would add another new skill: patience. Just today I was talking to a younger company member, an actor, who said it was a serious challenge for them in these productions and games to enhance their tolerance and not lose their patience very early on when they had to wait for something. This waiting, incidentally, is there in normal working, too, we constantly wait for things to be born, but it presents a greater challenge online. The other thing: using space. Those performances where the actors are in home environments, and the participants see prerecorded scenes, in the intermissions the actors log in and lead improvisation sessions or a game with the children participating. There the use of space and, indeed, the actors' presence are very exciting. When you need to stay in character for two hours wearing a track suit in your own living room, when you tumble into a radically different situation, you need to cross some barriers and thresholds so that it can work smoothly.

C. Á.: I am picking up a dominant theme here: the differences concerning forms of theatre and formal idioms of acting, and the different ways of operating in this new space. Also, the attention to participants, the sensation of participants' vibrations is different in this space. We have a question, too: Eszter asks us how willing you find adolescents to show their faces in the online space.

V. V.: Now we work with adolescents and we can detect their fatigue. Whatever was okay and funny in January is much more difficult now. We sometimes tell them it is really important for us as humans that they switch on their webcams, so that we don't have to talk to empty squares, and I regard the increasing number of switched-on webcams during a session as a measure of success. Because it's really difficult for them, too, to exist in this situation. It's different when they come into the theatre, we can see one another, meet

up and say hello, but on the Zoom screen you only meet totally unknown faces.

T. G.: Relationships with the schools and the teachers have utterly changed. We have a deeper relationship at present, because it is motivated by necessity on both sides. The necessity to make it work, and the teachers escorting the groups of participants have a much greater role in this. We provide teachers with quite a thorough briefing in writing and via the phone. We systematically call every teacher on the phone prior to the performance, and they get a guide on what kind of assistance or help we expect from them.

H. Zs.: Many times we play in places where children don't have a webcam. This situation presents us with the opportunity to play in places where we haven't before. We are tolerant of switched-off cams as much as we can be.

C. Á.: But how can you facilitate involvement in this case? How can you motivate participants to be more active?

R. E.: I worked in long-term programmes, and one of these was *Artravaló*¹, where we experimented and continuously checked what was working with young people and what wasn't. What worked best for us was when the participants could come forth with their personal stories, in self-knowledge games and group activities, storytelling techniques. The other thing was creating something together or on their own, then presenting it to the group. This sparked their interest and that special mental tension appeared in the group.

T. G.: Using chat functions, for instance, was constructive, something a little bit different from a simple webcam. It makes the session more interesting if they can draw or send photos. Students are used to sitting down and watching one another. This is the basic function of the webcam, but if you break it up

¹ An untranslatable play on words combining 'send-off' or 'provisions' and 'art'

or mix other things in, it can make moments of theatre or improvisation a little more interesting.

H. Zs.: We still mix the two: in an online camp everyone shows the others an object they would have taken to a real camp. And they also share very personal things, which is okay.

T. G.: When you pose a direct question to someone online, it's less conspicuous or rude. Of course, a professional of appropriate sensitivity handles the technique with reasonable caution in normal operation, as well, and doesn't go around shouting into ears asking what people think. Still, participants can sometimes get the 'Jesus, why me?' feeling. In an online space I feel that direct accosts are less rude.

H. Zs.: Rule-learning games and competitive games are at the top of the list in Zoom as well as offline.

R. E.: I wish to talk about the choice of subject matter, which of course is of primary importance offline, too: what is the topic, what is the question in focus, is it crucial enough, is it something that interests young people? In this online period the novelty of the question is assigned special significance. Offline I can present all kinds of forms, and perhaps participants don't even find the subject matter so important, but being and playing together are enough. Online it comes to the fore very soon. I was made to realise this when we finally found a topic that sucked the kids in. It turned out there had been very few occasions when they were genuinely interested, when the problem dealt with really mattered.

C. Á.: So sometimes the whole thing is just very advanced technologically, and at other times the subject matter just steals our attention even though we can only see speaking heads. What I want to know now is if there are aspects that you feel work better via Zoom than offline.

T. G.: We have a show that already included a game which children could play with the help of their own mobile phones. And they were also allowed to chat, which was all projected onto a big screen, and they liked it a lot.

V. V.: We have some creative tasks that we don't do offline, for instance, internet-based collages, which have been set up expressly for this period. Or something I like very much, when you are the host and you go into hiding, and playing the role of Prospero you manipulate the players. For instance, the participants are selected for different chat rooms, but if they progress with their tasks too fast or too well, then they are reassigned to different rooms. It is lightning-fast and has a very sudden dramaturgical effect, too.

J. T.: I was especially thrilled when as a participant and observer I noticed that the host had rewritten the names and practically put words into my mouth I would never have said. After that happened, many people got a taste for it, and they started rewriting their names to look like the others' and total chaos ensued, which was extremely entertaining. Judging by the quantity and speed of the reactions, it was very inspiring for all involved.

H. Zs.: I saw one session which integrated an art exhibition. I had never been to a virtual exhibition yet, but this one was interactive, too, which you can't do in an offline space without spending millions on. I was able to comment on it the topic, pose questions, provide answers, contribute to the art show.

R. E.: This reminds me of another game where we used paintings. We worked with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, and offline it would be practically impossible to get the picture, even a high standard reproduction. Here we could highlight details. We used minute details to make up stories and virtually entered the painting through the computer screen.

C. Á.: How has the relationship with teachers and schools been transformed in the past year due to the simple fact that students 'come' to online programmes?

T. G.: Another big question is how you can enhance the relationship with schools. How you can make them more organic, and communicate so, too. I am talking about database building and setting up Facebook groups when I say that the relationship was reinforced. Many times there is a kind of joy in seeing something different happening in a period that schools experience as a terrible burden, as it is for teachers, too. Encountering theatrical programmes that deal with the kids a little differently, setting different requirements, is a double joy. We get much more feedback than in the offline period. Many more people reflect on the performances, and I see that as a reinforced relationship.

V. V.: We, too, usually establish contact in person prior to the sessions, which didn't always work here. In general what you have is a teacher staying after the performance, and we talk. Often this is a therapeutic chat, about how they are doing, how the children are doing. The relationship is much more intimate.

C. Á.: Anna brings an exciting question. Will you keep online pieces in your repertoire when schools have opened or will you revert to previous operation?

H. Zs.: My guess is we won't keep them. We will go to schools physically if there's a chance.

T. G.: There's a basic wish to escape from this situation. We won't throw away the new shows, we will be more careful than that, but we won't create emergency performances like this when there is no reason to do so.

V. V.: We don't like the whole thing either, but will keep certain elements or make them optional, and there are practical reasons for that. Luckily now we have schools coming to the shows that are not so sure to come due to physical distances or simply because it is not accessible to them. We wouldn't like to take away that option in the future. On the other hand, theatrical performances have an audience of 400 people, and offline we can only serve one or two

classes with TIE programmes. If people want to come from faraway places, it is easier for them to do so online, and so we will undertake to have that in the future, too.

C. Á.: Do you think, in the long run, our field of expertise, our profession will be reorganised by this momentary situation? Has it created a new genre perhaps?

J. T.: I think it wouldn't be wise to rule out this format entirely, as it is probably not wise either to worship it as an absolute and exclusive solution. During this one year we have found, developed, tried out and cast away a lot of new items that we found either useful for the future or useless. I believe in the value of parallel workings, in preserving these new tools and skills, too. The theatre can address new people, new communities via these platforms. I am not so sure that a new genre has been created, I think that remains to be seen.

R. E.: I also think good practices found during the pandemic must be preserved, and in Marosvásárhely we are going to have online workshops with Szívhangok Company, which will be terribly difficult to organise live. However, in the case of TIE, there looms the danger of politicians starting to think that such shows are a great educational service and the simplest way to preserve them would be to supply online performances throughout the country. I feel this is a real danger: I really don't want to hold two hundred online performances from a studio with a professional set-up. Live personal presence cannot be withdrawn from theatre, drama or TIE.

T. G.: Are you hinting at the Déryné 2 programme?

C. Á.: Yes, several programmes were created, and many were adapted to online environments. On what grounds will the profession have later on to prove that such activity should really remain offline and that online operation should be done away with? This is only a rhetorical question to finish off

with, as unfortunately out time is up. I thank you, the panel, and the participating audience for tonight's discussion.

In Focus: Online roundtable discussion 2

Participants: Zsuzsanna Madák, Dániel Golden, Beatrix Kricsfalusi, Júlia Neudold, Viktor Szivák-Tóth and Bálint Villant

M. Zs.: Welcome, everybody, to the closing discussion of In Focus: Online Conference on TIE and Theatre Pedagogy. I am glad to see so many of you here all joining in this discussion, in which we'll think about and perhaps even debate interactive productions, games, TIE programmes, and community programmes whose natural medium is some kind of online environment. Turning now to my guests I would like to ask you to tell me a favourite word or expression that you have added to your vocabulary in connection to online performances, games or TIE programmes.

G. D.: My favourite expression is 'Zoom room performance' and I will also tell you why.

K. B.: My favourite thing, which I am very intimate with, is the game entitled *Rename yourself, or we'll rename you*, which presents the players with a lot of possibilities during the game as well as before and after.

N. J.: I was just reminded of Zoom, as simple as that, because in an online space there are some really interesting ways and options for focussing your attention.

Sz-T. V.: My favourite expression is offline, which refers to everything that used to be called life.

V. B.: My favourite has nothing to do with IT, but it's hot drinks, because there is a routine for these rehearsals to include hot chocolate and tea with honey.

M. Zs.: We are at the end of four really busy days, with lots of presentations and programmes, and I am very curious to know how you see our field.

V. B.: According to my experience, those that do creative work online in this field were confronted with Zoom in March and have been slaves to it ever since; we haven't really used any other applications. We probably all had the same experiences but at different times.

Sz-T. V.: My impression of this festival and the previous one is that the tools we work with are staggeringly varied. I have tried almost all of them, and I'm expecting to see them return, but they don't often return. On the other hand, I like to see TIE programmes integrate the interactive parts rather than use them as preparation and something to process. Zoom can easily enhance that. No-one dares to screen longer footages for fear of the students leaving the session.

K. B.: If the question was about how the scene is doing, then I think it is alive and kicking, which is good news, especially considering the impossible circumstances under which we are working, living and kicking. TIE specialists have found their feet nicely in this Zoom environment and the greater cyberspace, where we can see a lot of productions use online platforms in a dazzling way. These platforms, Discord, Twitch, and the like, had all been very familiar to gamer communities. People who are not involved in these subcultures had to look them up on Google. As for questions, I have found answers rather than questions. Answers to what you can do in this intermediate field called theatre in education.

N. J.: I am really intrigued by this field and can see a lot of possibilities. We sometimes tend to forget that we fill much of our lives with our mobiles and online presence even when there isn't a lockdown or curfew. Much of our social life takes place in the form of messages and pictures. I am interested in what TIE can bring to this online space.

G. D.: I choose the expression ‘Zoom room performance’. Zoom room performance invokes classroom performance, it’s a pun if you like. If a decision is made and it is absolutely clear that you cannot do theatre in the classroom, but due to some mission or commitment some people have devoted themselves to the task, then what you have is an extremely unique experimental space. Those people then start to explore this unknown continent out of a commendable will to creativity and humility.

M. Zs.: Bálint, Viktor, Juli, how is adapting an already existing production to the online space different from making a programme or production expressly for an online environment?

N. J.: Working with something we originally intended for an online environment is easier to do owing to the dedicated subject matter. There are some topics that work better online: media or the news, obligatory distancing, fathers working abroad, meeting people online. Something that this conference doesn’t deal with, but would be nice to have programmes about, is online bullying, which is an acute problem. Naturally, all of that is true of format, too: you wrack your brain to twist and cram something that used to work well into a new framework, a narrowed-down zone of communication.

M. Zs.: Is it painful for you to create things this way?

N. J.: Painful? Not really. I have found that young people and myself, too, have a certain sense of safety when we are at home. Somehow you can be more personal and more present. Many young people are more active and more laidback in this situation and it’s a plus.

M. Zs.: Viktor, the production you have made expressly for the online space, *This Stays between Us*, is a show without any online topics, still it works well in this Zoom room format.

Sz-T. V.: I am much more inspired by making something for an online environment than adapting something to it, because it is a challenge to use the new opportunities. In this piece the characters meet online, via a video chat. But it is a very simple format. In contrast to that we have made a piece with multiple characters, too, which we adapted to the online space, there we had to rewrite the entire script, in fact we only kept the characters and the basic setting and re-improvised the whole thing.

V. B.: I have had two experiences of adapting live performances to an online environment. In both cases there was a phase of resignation and letting go. I found we had to simplify. The ninety-minute Zoom framework corroborated that. We made a consensus of fitting everything into this framework, so that involved cutting entire blocks and it was painful.

M. Zs.: What can make the online space become a natural medium for a performance, an interactive production, a TIE programme, an interactive game, or other community building programmes?

G. D.: Time limit is one big paradox. What is the tolerance level as a viewer or a creator? What is the limit of efficient communication via these channels? One of the biggest stumbling blocks is involvement. We should as much as possible become involved in this joint story even if it is interactive. Many times I felt there is no time for that due to the ninety-minute timeframe, and the whole programme can go awry. It is a strange paradox because we have a natural impatience when we are online, we would like to proceed, quickly get somewhere, but this is the place where you can't.

K. B.: I find there is a dividing line between creators who regard the technology as an opportunity and others who see it as something imposed. The whole thing starts with the basic truth that digital theatre does not work by a simple translation from analogue theatre, it is not an adapted version. With successful and excellent performances people tend to realise that

digitalisation uses the written and visual planes rather than the verbal one. On these platforms you need to write and vote and animate pictures, because these are much easier to do in this digital universe than in the analogue space. What is more difficult is verbal discussion and dialogue, when we confer and consult, partly because of the time lag. Then there are those subject matters that lend themselves to digital processing much more smoothly. Incidentally these are subjects that the theatre has always wanted to discuss. For example, the phenomenon of cyberbullying, the overabundance of images, the plethora of information we share about ourselves, comment culture, the right to our own face and image. I don't really remember any TIE or traditional theatrical performances that have mastered these problems before. I can, however, remember one in which we awkwardly tried to pretend using Facebook in the analogue space. In the meantime these tools have always been at hand and have been a given in the lives of young people and children.

Another thematic has to do with being locked down or being locked in. To me it seems evident that most TIE performances, somehow owing to the characteristics of the age groups, sooner or later arrive at family matters, and that is another problematic that appears more severe now that families are confined together with the lockdown. It may come to the fore, and processing it could be somewhat simpler, while it is also more problematic. How can these Zoom spaces be made safer, especially when we are discussing sensitive subjects?

N. J.: When we talked about how much time you can spend intelligently on Zoom, I was reminded by the sessions at Örkény where we use a creative task, usually something imagistic. When the group breaks up and leaves the screen, we all have to do something in our homes, an installation, and everyone creates something on their own, something that reflects on the situation. Most of these image-making or video-cutting tasks need time, and there is no time to finish them in the ninety-minute group session. I think one advantage is

that it might teach people that they can do something useful when they are on their own in the room. They can choose between boredom, surfing the internet senselessly, or really doing something creative.

Sz-T. V.: I have read Jusstina's comment, that's where I am going to begin. She wrote that this constant acceleration, the excess of Zoom functions doesn't always facilitate immersion. I have the suspicion that she is right, online activities are indeed accelerated but I also feel that TIE managed to cope with this relatively easily because interactions are not devoid of some dramaturgy. Zoom blows up and simplifies certain things. You have to design each stage consciously. Of course, you need to allow for some spontaneity so that the activities show some diversity. But if a small group procrastinates, then things are over. You need to construct procrastination in a way that it becomes something like an experience, because interaction keeps this genre alive.

N. J.: I will recourse to Betti's comment on what makes a programme such as this safe. When you're on Zoom, the contract becomes high priority. The agreement that we usually make with participants in advance, about why we are there, what will happen, what the goal is, what people should or shouldn't share, how they should participate. When there's a rush, the majority of this briefing is sometimes skipped, but it should be allowed a little more space, so that everyone involved will know about the framework and what they can expect.

M. Zs.: We received a question from *Ádám*: would you say that programmes developed for online environments constitute a different genre with different characteristics, which requires partly different skills from the creators?

Sz-T. V.: I'm of the opinion that it's not a new genre. But I can see the possibility of a new genre being born. I don't know if there will be a demand for it. I'm not sure it can aesthetically and conceptually compete with

theatrical experiences that I regard very highly. I liked online performances but they very rarely give you as complex an experience as does TIE. I would gladly try out a longer piece with more characters and more techniques involved.

G. D.: We partly touched upon the topic of opportunities granted by the digital environment and that it opens up an interdisciplinary field akin to film. I would distinguish between three courses: one is when there is a real film director involved and there is genuine adaption, conceptualisation, and an adequate translation, which will become all the richer for its being a translation. There are some points where you need to make compromises and they might be experienced as losses, but they add a lot. This is what I found about the film version of the production *Echo*, as well as *Nowhere* and *Blue Island*. But it is film, so you cannot move the camera about randomly. The camera leads the eyes, directs the attention much more substantially than when you are watching a live show. And when someone is an expert of that it can work to your advantage and can largely support TIE sessions. Another possibility is the film language of *Labyrinth* with its virtuoso, real-time cuts. There this pictorial storytelling leading participants through the plot is the result of a very serious planning process. The third way is that of *Unavailable*, where we get the Zoom experience as it is, as we have known it for a year now, and the visuality manages to create a very simple but also very evident experientiality. In the latter, the question might be reversed: can we picture the production being adapted as a live show? I can't, to my eye it's obvious that it needs to be like that.

K. B.: Listening to this genre theory it occurred to me that we should define 'genre'. What do we mean by genre in this respect? To my mind another word is more fitting here: 'form' or rather 'format', coming from media studies and not from the terminology of traditional literary theory or theatre studies. Using the term 'format', I would say this is a new format as this new media

space needs to be inhabited, enacted, and people need to move and be moved in it. I fully agree with this trial typology considering film invading the field, which had not been present in TIE before. But with regard to digital theatrical formats a more relevant parallel would be live footages. One of the basic assertions of film theory is that the fundamental aesthetic mode of film is montage. A film is made in the cutting room, it is completed there. I prefer theatrical productions where the creators play around with the live cam. For this reason I enjoyed KÁVA very much. They didn't try to pretend not having a camera around. They did not try to get away with tricks redolent of the theatre of illusion. The camera is operated by somebody, somebody who has a voice, and sometimes appears from behind the device, and it's a game that can be played really nicely, and of course demands different actor's skills.

Sz-T. V.: Other generic comparisons also came up, for instance, with video games and the like. I always warn people that financing is quite different for those. A film runs on an incomparably larger budget, video games have astounding technological solutions exactly because there is great demand for them and big money is paid for them. Public education never garners such a great demand. I have the same problem with Zoom, what a poor platform! I'm sorry to say, but it's too simple, with low resolution, low functionality, any video game is much better than that.

M. Zs.: What dangers does a Zoom room have?

Sz-T. V.: On the one hand, I think there are indeed a lot of dangers that we don't know about. These are, of course, new kinds: screenshots can be taken of anybody in any situation. That's something you can't control. However, it's an illusion to think that when you are live and direct you can understand the situation better. Maybe we are only behaving a little more politely. So there are a lot of dangers; I'm not sure there are more than you would have in offline environments, but they are definitely different.

M. Zs.: We've received a question from Máté: through these online productions did you ever reach groups that you hadn't really before?

V. B.: Yes, we did, owing to last week's festival and this week's, too. We still don't have any kind of residency, so we are happy for all opportunities.

N. J.: To my mind there's a kind of distance that's insurmountable: it's the distance that's between those who have laptops and internet access and those who don't. Because Zoom room performances are surely a form of entertainment available to a privileged social stratum.

M. Zs.: When Vekker Műhely shared photos of their sessions on their Facebook page, we saw ten to twelve children in the pictures. We asked them whether school classes in Slovakia were so small. They said classes were not small, but only half of the class can take part at a time.

V. B.: We are planning to break up classes into smaller groups. Another option is to start with breakout rooms immediately after welcoming the participants. Then we can specify different points in the story where we regroup, then carry on in small groups.

M. Zs.: There is a very important theme which I would like to bring to the discussion lest we should neglect talking about it. How will this situation impact our future? What will TIE and interactive theatre be like in the future? What roles will online platforms play in the life of a theatre, a company, and do you think they will be required to arrange productions and programmes for online environments for educational purposes?

N. J.: At Örkény there is a theatrical free school (something like a community college) which has several hundreds of students. We have made different programmes for them which they can choose from as they like. There are long-term groups but also shorter courses. We expended a lot of time, energy and creativity to come up with activities that can be done in a Facebook group

but in other online areas, too, and so I deem this to be really fruitful. It's important for community building to be able to continue on online platforms, since we spend a part of our life online. It was really liberating to brainstorm all of that – imagine the kinds of channels this can open up!

Sz-T. V.: Living online was not only intriguing for its specificities, but also because it was a general phenomenon in the entire country and the whole world. I think there is now a spontaneous demand for communal experiences, but I hope that the new audience we drew in will be more open to interactive forms. You just have to carry on in some form. Luckily with Szkéné we have developed a lot of programmes that can be taken to schools and I think we'll keep these, as we will do so with KB35.

N. J.: What I found was that I really enjoyed doing activities online. It's all been structured, there have been different preset options for reflections and follow-up discussions, somehow it has worked much more smoothly, and everyone has been much more open. Perhaps it's because the participants have had more equality.

M. Zs.: Right, because the stage/audience binary opposition is dissolved, and everyone has the same size of square, star actors and viewers as well.

K. B.: There is a definition of theatre: it's periods of time from people's life that the audience and the players spend together by breathing the same air. When the offline time comes again, something we used to call life, maybe we won't have to worry about these things getting so much space. Also, do you think these programmes will be financed? I wonder if the municipalities and financiers will regard such work as something important enough to finance, since it involves purchasing or securing devices.

N. J.: I am really curious about one thing: a lot of theatre professionals have been using cameras and phones now. I wonder if this has enhanced a certain

openness towards the genre of documentary or towards drama groups using video techniques.

M. Zs.: As a final question, please tell me, when our offline life is back, will any of you participate in online interactive or TIE productions as a member of the audience?

V. B.: Absolutely.

K. B.: Me, too, definitely.

G. D.: The great opportunity in this is that when at 11 pm you have replied to all your emails, you can finally catch up. As a curious viewer you can access a lot of things digitally.

Sz-T. V.: I am of a similar opinion. Students, but even adult audience members, use get up from their seats in row zero when they don't like the show: suddenly there's an 'empty square', and they have vanished into thin air. This is harder to do at the theatre. But I would encourage audience members not to be so honest because it's worth waiting for the exposition.

N. J.: What I like about using this online space is that you are not defined by the place you are in: you can go abroad, too, even for a longer time, and yet not lose out on anything.

M. Zs.: Thank you all very much for your comments, and thanks to our viewers and listeners for their questions.

In Focus: Online roundtable discussion 3

A Discussion about *Socially Distant*

Participants: creators Chris Cooper and Richard Holmes, the talk is chaired and interpreted by Ádám Bethlenfalvy.

B. Á.: Chris and Richard, thank you for accepting our invitation and joining us at this conference which focusses on how Theatre in Education is coping with the pandemic and the situation. So, tonight we'll be specifically looking at how Big Brum is coping with this situation and how you are dealing with this new world that we are all trying to somehow get acquainted with. First of all, I will share the video with the subtitles. Meanwhile, we might get questions in the chat.

[the chair shows the footage of *Socially Distant*]

C. C.: I think the idea for *Socially Distant* came out of a process that we were already in, actually. And it's part of a trilogy. But the reason why it's part of a trilogy is because the initial plan from Big Brum was for me to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* for them to begin work on. And then I sort of foresaw this coming and I said to Rich, this was not going to happen before the pandemic would really hit. But I worked a lot in China, so I was getting feedback every day. And my colleagues in China were saying: it's on its way. So that's when I started to talk to Rich about what we could do in response to it, and that's when I proposed the idea of working together on a monodrama which is connected to *Romeo and Juliet*. In a sense, the father in the monodrama is actually a composite of all the male roles in *Romeo and Juliet*, so I'm trying to find the contemporary connection to, I believe, the centre of *Romeo and Juliet* through this monodrama. But I set it in the present, at that time of the heat of the first lockdown in the UK because of the pandemic. It was

conceived over phone calls in March and it was written within two weeks. And then Richard and I got together in June, we had a week together, and then Richard worked with a filmmaker turning into a film when we realised that the pandemic was not going to go away and it wasn't going to be a simple case of just going back into school with it in September. The reality was it probably wasn't going to go into school for at least another year, and that proved to be true.

So, we conceived an idea of what we've called the *Monuments Project*: part one is the monodrama *Socially Distant*, part two is the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which I've done, and part three will be the third element of the trilogy, which will focus on the people who are referred to in the monodrama but un-present. That's the overarching idea, and of course what we really wanted to be focussing on is something that connected to the present experience of kids' lives in the UK, of having an experience of the pandemic, of lockdown – but also connected to the world of *Romeo and Juliet*, which of course was written around the time of a plague. Also, something that looks into the future, with the kind of post-Covid world we're heading into, which is a world of monuments in a way, monuments corrupted and ideologized. So that's the basic story behind it, and of course we really wanted to bring the impact of the pandemic into the classroom. But not necessarily focus simply on that but the bigger questions, as I see all Covid has done is it has accelerated the isolation and fragmentation of society in culture.

R. H.: *Socially Distant* is a TIE programme designed to support teachers. The activities have been designed to be used for any year in secondary schools. The emphasis of the material is on drama, but also on PHSA, which is social studies and well-being. The aim of the programme is to provide students and teachers with materials to fully explore the content and context of the situation we have all been living through over the last year now, isn't it? So, it is there to provide a stimulus for thinking and reflecting on their own lives, their own

experiences, but safely through the fiction of the story, the drama. It is also part of a larger exploration, which is called the *Monuments Project*, which eventually will be a trilogy of *Socially Distant*, *Romeo and Juliet* and a third part, which will be taught with the two plays, set slightly in the future, containing some of the characters from *Socially Distant* who you hear about but don't meet. So, we'll be exploring the past, the story of Romeo and Juliet, which happened four or five hundred years ago, and how the experience of the past affects the present, and how the present will affect the future. So, at present, the programme will be used by teachers in possibly three ways: one will be with myself in the school, facilitating, possibly performing the play; another version of the model is that it is recorded and young people will see the video, and elements of the recording will be done by the company asking the young people to engage and help the situation, particularly the plight of the father – trying to understand how to help him in these present conditions, particularly through the building of some sort of monument that a local community group has asked to be reacted, created, to reflect the times we live in. And then the third version is the teachers just having the TIE material, the play, the programme, and doing it themselves. We have created the material so that it could probably be done over about ten to twelve weeks. So, it is quite a substantial amount of work with teachers perhaps, you know, exploring it for an hour a week with a several different classes.

C. C.: First of all, I'm supposed to say that I think monodrama is very useful for theatre, full stop. I think it is particularly useful for TIE as well, because it is so actor-dependent. And what I mean by that, if you think about our working together, Adam, I wrote my first monodrama for you, which was *Benched*, and I've since written five. And as far as I'm concerned, it's a new form of drama. I don't know if this translates well into the Hungarian context, but what we talk about in the UK is a monologue. I got the word 'monodrama' from you, because you referred to it as a monodrama, because there is no

distinction in Hungarian, as I understand it. Whereas, for me, it means something very different in English, because ‘monologue’ comes from the Greek word ‘mono’, to be alone, and ‘logue’ from dialogue, meaning to speak alone. And in most theatres monologue is about direct audience address from the actor speaking to the audience, which I’m not interested in. I think far too much theatre is dependent on that. I think it puts the writer and the actor way too much in control, it puts a false consciousness between the theatre and the audience.

What I think is very powerful about monodrama is that, to use the word ‘mono’ again, it is ‘doing alone’, because ‘drama’ comes from the Greek word ‘dran’, which means ‘to do’. So, it’s about ‘doing alone’, it’s action-based. It’s happening in real time and space. It’s enacted – and that’s why I’m saying it’s actor-dependent, intimate, it’s flexible, and the basis of it as an art form, I think it is a dramatic art form, is that it’s very much focussed on the relationship between image, action and object in time and space.

I always knew that *Socially Distant* could be worked with very quickly, put on its feet very quickly and put into performance context very quickly as has been the case with all the monodramas that I’ve written since 2014. I think because it’s based in action, it makes it very graphic. And if the actor can really struggle with enactment rather than acting, I think, it opens a gap. And in that gap is where the audience really can meet themselves on the stage. And I think that’s very useful for pedagogy, for learning, for that kind of approach to drama with young people.

R. H.: The conditions for the company at presents are precarious, as they are for, I think, anybody working not only in the arts but anybody at the moment. So, the future of the company isn’t safe. However, I think, the method, the practice and the principles of the company will find a sharper way, will be much more needed and much more coveted. I know that we have found that

schools are contacting us in a way that we hadn't had them contact us in the past. We've thought several different ways of connecting with schools and young people to enable some sort of reflection post-lockdown.

The heart of the company is the need to give young people a space to talk about themselves in the world in which they live. So, the company isn't particularly interested in profit, it's not particularly interested in capitulating its principles just to get into schools and make money. What drives the company is young people, and that, I think, always stands in good stead, so any decisions that we're making in the moment is about how to engage them. We've created online film material, we've ventured into making films, over lockdown we've created three films including *Socially Distant*, a couple of books which contain a lot of plays and resources for schools. The next process that we are going through is a combination of online and live theatre. I think at the moment we're surviving, and we're surviving with the connections of friends we have internationally – like this event where we are at the moment.

B. Á.: There is a question coming, which relates to what you said, Chris, about a culture that is morally corrupt and fragmented. You said that in the video. What do you mean by this exactly?

C. C.: I suppose, I think probably I got 'morally' from Socrates, as he talks about how a society loses its moral compass. And once it's lost its moral compass, it loses its purpose. And I think that this process has been well on the way in the last fifty years. It's been accelerating rapidly since the financial crush of 2008, and now Covid is merely accelerating the process, and I think we live in a completely morally and politically corrupt situation where all the institutions that we have come to rely on are proving themselves to be not only inadequate but actually fundamentally part of the problem. And I think the problem is accelerating the species over the edge. So, I think that we are staring into the abyss, and that's what I mean by morally corrupt.

R. H.: I think we're globally dominated by the lexicons of mere realism and post-modernism. And I think the combination of those two economic and philosophical principles has created a strange gap in our humanity. In many ways, it has perverted what it means to be human.

B. Á.: Rich, just latching on to that, but taking it a bit towards the dynamic, Virág here is saying that the film that we used in the workshop, the first part of *Socially Distant*, brought on more thoughts for her: she is thinking about the role of teachers after the pandemic situation, post-Covid. And it seems to me that you are also thinking about the situation, and not only thinking about what Big Brum can do now, but what Big Brum can do after that. What is the role of teachers and what is the role of theatre in education after the pandemic?

R. H.: A concept that has been at the heart of Big Brum's thinking for a quite a long time was coined by Ian Yeoman: he talked about young people as being displaced. Either displaced literally from their country or from their homes. But he was also referring to a sense of displacement, even in their own homes, in their own lives. And it's a concept that the company has taken on and developed and reflected in relation to teachers as well as displaced people. So I think the crisis that we have been living through over the last year we were also living through before the lockdown. I think the Covid situation amplified it. And I found that teachers are very good at teaching if they are given the space and the time to do that. They are very skilled at that, actually. And I think, the situation they found themselves in has given them the ability to ask and reflect on those things that were making them feel displaced.

I think these times have been very difficult for teachers, but in part it was liberating, because they've had to find new ways of engaging their young people. And I think particularly in the UK, I can't speak about other parts of the world, teachers have been working throughout the last year with young

people, the most vulnerable young people, actually. Teachers have been politically undermined for the last fifty years but certainly over the last twenty years, asking questions about the way the British government has been treating them. And I think the way the company works about engaging young people with themselves in their own lives, in their own world, I think teachers have found that as a way to really engage the young people's well-being at the moment but not just young people's well-being, but also teachers' well-being.

B. Á.: How does this process of supporting teachers work?

R. H.: Just in November we'd built a network of teachers that we were going to test the play or the film and the TIE programme with, when we went into the next or third lockdown, which I think you are having in Hungary just now. So again, external peripatetic teachers stopped going into schools. So, our attempt to engage with displaced teachers was to have three teachers test the TIE programme by themselves using the film with me as an external agency seeking the help of young people. And of course, all that stopped. So, I tried it once in a university with some students to test the programme, but we haven't had much chance. However, the process that I have just described is going to start post-Easter. We also did a version with year 6, which was about 10-year-olds in a school: we changed this from a teacher to a 10-year-old girl. So, I played a 10-year-old girl in that drama.

B. Á.: There is another question coming up: are you planning to use these online forms – the films you've created, not only one but three films and videos – use these post-Covid as well, keep them in the repertoire?

R. H.: Yes, we created them for the sole purpose that the teachers could have access to them whenever they wanted, and *Socially Distant*, as Chris said earlier, will be part of that, the *Monuments* trilogy, and be accessible for teachers as part of the *Monuments* project. We also resurrected a piece that

you and I did actually, Adam, so many years ago, called *Giant's Embrace*. All we actually ask for is a small donation that goes towards our next piece that we'll get written, any donation will go to the next commission to producing the next piece of work.

B. Á.: Chris, you talk about image, action and object in monodrama. How do you see these three as important elements to be used in drama work in theatre and in Theatre in Education?

C. C.: Richard and I've come up with the idea of *Monuments* trilogy because if you look at *Romeo and Juliet*, obviously the love between two young people is important but the play is actually about politics and about public space. And it's about ideology in so many ways. So, the question of narratives, the question of ideology is right at the centre and I think it's the biggest question we face as artists and educators because we're in a culture war and in this culture war we're facing the most toxic kind of chemistry that the mind can produce, and its distorted narrative is about history. So, I think that within recognition of that, you recognise the language itself is saturated with ideology and there is no such thing as a neutral world, and narratives are constantly constructed for us, if you like, and I think what the trio of image, action and object does is it offers an opportunity to create gaps in drama through enactment where we can, if you like, lift the veil of ideology from our situation and really begin to explore who we are in that moment. It's not that you don't have language, it's not that language isn't important, but you need to undermine its authority. And I think that this is how image and action, dramatising and enacting experience, really works.

I think *Socially Distant* begins with that: an action, using objects and time and space that we recognise, occupying a social narrative that becomes part of contesting public space, because when it was first introduced into the culture, it was a celebration, it was an act of solidarity towards workers who were

risking their lives for us. And what happened over a period of time is that it became ideologized in the state. We showed the photograph of the conservatives' Boris Johnson's hideous hypocrisy, standing on the doorstep of Number 10, taking ownership of our celebration of fellow workers. So, you see immediately there's an ideological clash. And I think what the play, the dramatic action tries to do is actually use the action over a period of time to begin to try and open that up.

It sets up a dramatic convention from the very beginning of the play that never goes away. The knocking, the tapping, the repeating, the stuttering go both into the language but also into the recurring images and actions and the use of objects, so you've got tearing, you've got stamping, you've got all of those things – dabbing, painting, splashing – that are beginning to develop a motif that hopefully begins to expose the language we use.

R. H.: Monodrama is not mono-theatre and I think that's really important, because I think that moment or moments that Chris is talking about, they allow the audience to bring their story into the situation, onto the stage. So, the knocking, that's in all of us actually... Because I think we live in the most repressive of times and it's repressing our humanity, actually. And I think those knocks are literal knocks, but also those knocks of the needs to connect, the need to express, the need to be connected, and that's the knock that we all know. Because all young people know the sense of loss whether that's literal, the loss of a loved one, or loss in all those other ways. I think that's what they're experiencing, the need of an adult in this world, who feels, who can't connect, can't express himself, can't talk, just can't communicate and in part that relates to the character's own son's death, and I think that's really important because in many ways the pandemic sweeping this nation is our fault. It's capitalism's fault. It's not nature teaching us a lesson, it's not God teaching us a lesson. We did it. Humans did it.

B. Á.: There was a question before from Zsigmond, who's wonderfully translating the text for us: The video is fascinating from the aspect that it depicts the fragmented mindset of people experiencing the loss of a loved one. But how do students who have never had to deal with that before react to the show? Certainly, there is a difference in understanding how you can cope with them while working with them.

R. H.: The work that we've done is by giving the students the role as it works. We asked the students to be themselves and offer advice to an organisation who want to create a monument to both the son but also the times in which we're living in, in which the son died. And so, they're acting on behalf of a family that's been changed forever. So, I think young people do know loss.

B. Á.: Another question from Juli: What is the difference between the live drama work and the film with respect to handling time?

C. C.: The film version is nearly twice the length of the theatre performance. So, it completely and utterly transforms time and space. And it's because of the logic of the camera. Having said that, I still think there's something very theatrical about it: it's not like watching a film, in my opinion. However, I think that the camera, if you like, as a mediator, demands its own authority and it transforms this piece of work. So, I think Rich became very aware of that as he was doing it. I think a piece of theatre is live theatre. It's very intimate. And what the film does really well is find its own way of trying to, if you like, breach that screen, that gap in the best way it can. But I think one of the consequences is that it's a lot longer.

R. H.: It does make it longer and I'll come back to the chance in necessity of that. But also, it makes you look older and it makes you look larger, I noticed. And it's a strange experience watching this today because I've seen the film and then the video we did online, and I've seen my beard grow over the last six months which was a strange experience, as well. But the chance in

necessity is that what myself and Chris had conceded would be a two-hour TIE programme with an hour-long play and an hour's workshop with young people in school, actually became much longer: the film was up to twelve weeks' work and the workshop and programme that I sent you could be done over in twelve-sixteen hours, which we'd never get the chance to do. And then when *Romeo and Juliet* and the third part of the *Monuments* trilogy are added, I think schools will have a whole year's work.

B. Á.: I'm sorry, we've run out of time, just quick last question. Viktor is asking whether Walter Benjamin has been an inspiration for you, Chris, in what you were saying about object and the clash of narratives.

C. C.: Well, in general, Walter Benjamin's always an inspiration. But in particular no, not really. I think the two inspirations were Edward Bond and Vygotsky for different reasons.

B. Á.: I'm just thanking our participants, our audience for their questions and their thoughts, comments. I think a last question could be, Virág was asking if what you are creating in the *Monuments* project will be accessible for others as well.

R. H.: Yes, and we'll make it accessible for you and anybody that wants it. As I said, we'll tour in the UK and it'll be part of a package that goes into schools, but it will be accessible for a small donation which could be 10 euros, just that we can commission other writing. The other things that are accessible are the *The End of Reason* material, which is on our website, five plays by Mr. Cooper, all set during World War I. But although the plays are about WWI, they're really plays about the world today, and they come with teachers' resources, as well, which are there to use.

B. Á.: Thank you so much and hopefully we'll see you soon.

C. C.: Thank you very much.

R. H.: Next time you see me, I'll have a very long beard.

In Focus: Community theatre

Roundtable discussion 1: What is the impact of community theatre on the group and the greater community?

Participants: Zsuzsanna Madák, Tamás Jászay, Noémi Herczog, Zsófi Pénczvártó, Kata Horváth, Zsanett Horváth, Gabriella Kiss, Dániel Golden

J. T.: Let's start with the question of what 'community theatre' means to you.

G. D.: The 2013 Cziboly-Bethlenfalvy national survey founded a typology for these genres, which we more or less try to stick to at university. This can be one point of reference. The gist of the matter is that community theatre, any variant of it, takes theatrical devices to places where the community doesn't really think they have anything to do with theatre. So it is an initiative of theatre professionals from outside the community. In fortunate cases it is a fertile encounter between theatre specialists and – for want of a better term – civilians, for whom it may well be a first time trying to express what they think about the world in the language of the theatre. This is exactly why the process is so exciting: it takes the knowledge amassed and tools developed by theatre over centuries, that is, the tools for talking about a problem effectively, to those that have something to say, and hands these over to them. This is what I find so special about this genre.

K. G.: I wish to mention three further aspects. Firstly, I think it's a theatrical form that, according to the definition, brings about some kind of real change in the life of the given community. It's a measurable or specific shift in the life of an individual, a person, a nameless, unknown actor, a civilian and secondary school teacher called Kiss Gabriella. This is somehow connected to self-actualisation and self-representation. Secondly, civilians, by way of being such, can try their hand at resolving a situation which they don't

necessary and don't often find themselves in. Talking from experience, having done it for the first and probably the last time in my life, I think we are not only official and everyday experts of Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne and civilian theatre, but also – with respect to student theatre, too – of those areas that we wouldn't think we are experts of. Sometimes we don't even think about what messages of importance we might convey to others through our expertise.

H. K.: I would add that community theatre is a means to different ends; I primarily think about it that way, there are ends for which it is an adequate means, and it can be readily combined with other tools. I am coming from the area of social interventions: what it is good for, what type of change can be caused through it. I think yours is an important aspect, Dani: it is a set of devices by which a given community's ideas about the world can be articulated, amplified and effectively voiced. But it is just as important to have a theatrical community working together that can teach us a lot. Doing theatre is a group technique that has therapeutic and other uses. Different subject matters can be addressed, not only made visible and audible and intelligible, but also communicated to the group to clarify whatever it is that worries or concerns us. In other words, I am looking for the uses of this device.

J. T.: Many catchwords have been listed which I hope we'll reflect upon later on. Now I just have to ask Zsanett, Zsófi and Noémi, 'the other side', so to speak, those who have participated and are still participating in such projects: what drives somebody to want to do community theatre? How do you get involved in a project like that? Since we are talking about something that is brought in from the outside by creators of theatre, something that does not originally exist in the community.

H. N.: Our situation was different, as all of us here joined of our own will. I got a call from Bori Sebők, who was looking for mums that have recently

given birth and would like to work together with their babies using techniques of community theatre. People signed up on their own. Originally it wasn't anything public, and the show was only put on for the family. Then the group decided they wanted to carry on and add new participants, that's when I joined the process. When you have your child, you might get lonely, there's nowhere to go out. Of course, there are different programmes for babies, for instance, *ringató*², but there aren't many options that could be interesting to mothers, too. This is a market niche that has been exploited by Bori: how can we be together with our children in a way that is intriguing for us, too. I was the odd one out, as the dramaturg, because my child wasn't present.

P. Zs.: I can only tell you about my personal experiences. The whole thing started with a workshop before Covid and lockdown. It was around Christmas that my family had just moved back home after living in the US for long years. Hungary had just become very stuffy for me. I got pregnant and the pandemic hit. Everything was about saying no to things, we were afraid for ourselves. The baby was over half a year old, and this was the first option I have found. I was going insane sitting at home and becoming invisible, because I think women understand that they are only visible in patriarchy and capitalist society as long as they are young and have no children, and when you start getting older and you have children, you suddenly become transparent or disappear altogether. And then I had this opportunity: to do something that's not about the baby, but I could have my child there, and I was not ostracised because I was taking my baby with me. This was the chief reason why I went. After the workshop there came the idea to mount a performance, too. Somebody said this state that we were in was something to show people, something that might be intriguing to others.

² A session where mothers rock their babies while humming and singing traditional songs and lullabies.

H. Zs.: I'll be very brief, getting back to your words, saying that you are a mother and when you have your child you become invisible. Me too, even though I don't have a child. So why do I like doing this? It is a form where I can address people, where I can show and say out loud what I think and what I feel to be true while I know there's a safety net that can catch me. I can address people who have problems similar to ours, and who dare to talk to us about them. This is why I like doing it.

J. T.: This is a genre that might be misnamed, but the name kind of fits. It has had a sort of disadvantaged history in Hungary. What I mean is participants, the audience, indeed the creators, need to learn about methodology, which gives rise to very naïve and simple questions concerning the creative process: how does it start? I am interested in your personal experiences, for instance, Kata, do you start out by arranging an introductory session for the participants? Based on your articles and our discussions, this field has a serious methodology, a sturdy theoretical basis, that births something purely practical. Where is the transition or the passage? Where do you start and where are you headed?

H. K.: Speaking for myself, I start out from the mission. I am a person with missions, and my experience is that the people I can collaborate with are usually like that, too. And then the mission brings up a lot of brainstorming and practical tasks. Actually, in connection to the Sajátszínház-SzívHANG work, we had a fundamental question (Marci Oblath and me have backgrounds as social scientists, we cooperated in KÁVA, too) about how it could be done better or differently. We had worked a lot with groups that were not notified about opportunities like this. It was exactly then that a Norwegian tender was advertised which was expressly about art and the integration of the Roma people. Then the project automatically turned out to be doable. Knowing the village of Szomolya was really important as well as knowing Roma women who were not together with their children any more, because

they have grown. From earlier attempts we also knew that it was very problematic to work with local subject matters because they would engender a lot of conflicts. So what is the institutional context that could be important to women? Then we realised it could be health care. We started brainstorming a method that could work in an environment like this: sociodrama, digital storytelling... From that point on the only tasks were being present, connecting, taking our own work and each other seriously. From then on it's always the relationships that drive the process, and knowing about methods and experimenting with what is feasible and what isn't, how far you can go and stay human, or if the group is transformed, who will leave, and who can join. Theatre sometimes appears at some stages of the work: the idea that the work is becoming important or progressive.

K. G.: In our case, too, everybody volunteered on their own (I am trying to take into account the fact that I joined KÁVA not as a theatre historian), and from the first moment, there was a tangible feeling of mutual and immeasurable respect. We were story owners, everyone had to join by bringing a story entitled 'me and public education' or 'being a teacher'. Then we had the first encounter, where the most beautiful part was that we played. It was very important at that point to play, I think, because you could try it and see whether you really wanted to do this every Wednesday from five to eight.

J. T.: After that initial activity, were there any people who said, 'no, I'd rather not do it'?

K. G.: No, there weren't. If I remember correctly, there was someone who wanted to do it very much but she couldn't. In spite of this she stayed and played. Then two more people joined. But it was a game and not everyone likes to spend their free time doing drama games and improvisation activities. The other thing was that they showed us some scenes from their civilian

theatre KÁVA projects, but I honestly don't know if anyone had any idea about the methodology or not, because luckily we didn't have to watch the whole thing. It appealed to me that they just let it all go, but next came meeting other civilians such as ourselves, who had once participated in civilian theatrical projects. We sat down together, and they started telling us all about it, looking back at a time one or two years earlier, and how the project enriched them. They exhibited a lot of respect towards togetherness. Then there was a certain richness of stories. From the first moment it became clear – we had drama paper (wrapping paper), something you always need – that we had to use not our expertise but our everyday perspectives. It was really difficult for me to believe, even until the last minute, that everybody could bring something to the table: something they didn't know they had and yet they did. And that *invisibility*... When we started, the state of public education was not as it is now, and then it started escalating, but I still believe that each profession and each life stage has their overly visible problems, which get hyped by the media, but there are some invisible ones, too. Looking back, I think I can pick a word to articulate what I experienced and what I got from this: there is an absolutely invisible problem, namely, that every profession that deals with people should need systematic *supervision*. That's something I have never seen in any teachers' demonstrations. What we participated in there was, after all, supervision, and supervision is not the same as ventilation, it's not the same as abstract theorising. No, it's supervision.

P. Zs.: If the question was about methodology, I would like to only add, the organisers must have had a lot of work that went into organising the programme, but none of that was apparent to us, other than the fact that it was a terribly safe environment where you could totally let go. And those people coming from all those different places, all competent in their professions, even in leadership positions, but there they were just people who played and

fooled around. And an extra difficulty was presented by the ten toddlers or even smaller kids, who you had to take into account, too. Sometimes they bawled continuously throughout the two-hour sessions. So I don't know how the organisers did it, but they made the participants feel like real players and not the responsible personalities they were. That was a really good time.

J. T.: Zsanett, do you remember your first encounter with Kata and company? How did you find the courage to build trust and make friends?

H. Zs.: In those days I was working as an employee of the Hungarian Roma Association of Szomolya, and Kata got it into her head that she would do theatre in Szomolya. I became the organiser, went with the women, helped them with administrative duties, from travel to catering. Then the moment came where I had to decide if I stayed or left, to define my role in the entire programme. Then I decided I wanted to become a member of the group. It felt so wholesome that I didn't want to be left out. I felt if I couldn't become a member, then I would miss out on something very good. So I decided to stay. Kata and Eda didn't have it easy, well, nobody did.

J. T.: Tell us about it!

H. Zs.: Trust needs to be earned. It is difficult for us to let other people in, especially people from Pest. But they managed to do it. I don't know how much time was needed. But we also needed Irénke, who acts as a kind of safety net in Szomolya, and it helped to have known Kata for a long time. There are some people in the group that still have a relationship with Kata as if they were Kata's mothers, and she their daughter. This acceptance helped us open up towards them, to ensure that we would undertake this whole thing.

J. T.: Kata, do you have the same kind of memories of those early days? Did it come as a surprise, a shock, a slap in the face as a researcher, a theoretician, to play these games and fight these battles with living persons rather than pore over documents at home?

H. K.: For me that wasn't such a big change. By profession I am a cultural anthropologist, and have already played all of these games. Even when I was living in Szomolya I could see how poignant these games were. But life itself is rather poignant there. I don't see this as playing games at all, as nothing is taken lightly there. With respect to this, I was interested in finding ways to change things and to change myself. For example, you mustn't be left alone with your guilt and shame, hiding away from others, because then you become exposed and vulnerable. In this work the shift involved finding ways to have an impact on that. Not by conforming to an external norm, but initialising a change from the inside, making visible whatever is valuable, and in the meantime being able to cooperate and work together as a group. The other big shift involved stepping over into the theatrical phase after finishing the therapeutic, sociodrama process. In our work method approximately half a year goes by and then we repeatedly ask the participants the question where they see themselves at that moment, if they want to stay or want to go. At that point it's possible for the group to open up and let others in. The context is always different, too: when there is a tender, we have funds, when there is no tender advertised, we have no funds. And when it was time to enter the theatrical phase, we had our biggest row. We proposed a theatrical idea, which was immediately swept aside as a whole. On the next occasion we proposed a new idea. The deadline was tight. If you don't have a tight deadline pressing down on you, but everything proceeds at its own pace, these conflicts can be resolved in a very positive and constructive way.

J. T.: Noémi, Dani, when is a community theatre performance considered successful? I'm asking the critic and the scholar now. You write about it in *ÉS* and *Színház*, and that's it? How does it work? What is the yardstick here?

H. N.: First I would like to answer a question raised earlier. We also had some special ramifications in the production: the ethical and aesthetic ramifications of having babies in a performance. Those women that came back after the

first workshop were open to making a public performance. But the framework... of course, one given framework was MU Theatre. But we had other questions to discuss, too, later on during the process: how many performances there could be, what to do with the footage, how to organise the work. The children took naps, some of them twice a day, which narrowed down the choice of rehearsal options. Each day on dress rehearsal week, for example, we had a rehearsal in the morning and one in the afternoon, too, while in between we put the kids to sleep side by side on the stage. This would be a natural situation at a nursery, but here it was something that defined not only our work organisation but also something that we wished to show in the performance rather than conceal it. Since the decision to leave the babies in the performance was not an accidental but a group decision (there were some contrary ideas, too, as it would have been easier to work without the small ones playing). But that stage of life and that situation was exactly about them, even though it sharply conflicted with the inner workings of the theatre, so we wanted to find a way to reshape the theatrical framework to ensure adequate coexistence.

The second problem was presented by the two people who joined us as actors. They were mothers, too, but they had a different kind of stage presence, of course. And anyway, there was the problem of the kids' consent and approval. After all who had the right to decide about that? That was a big question, as it always has been in mother-child relationships throughout human history: how do mothers' and children's rights relate to one another, are they biased or balanced? Does a mother have the right to decide that their children will be present on the giant stage of MU Theatre for a night? There is one more example: Eszter Kállay has a poem that was made in a way that each day both poets wrote a line (both mothers with a small child), and I don't have to overemphasise what it means that the poem was made like this. Each day both poets gifted a single line to each other, and that line posed a question which

got a reply. We wanted to do something like this, so that this life situation wouldn't become a prison for the rehearsal period or the production in an ethical or aesthetic sense.

J. T.: As a critic, do you watch a show such as this with a different eye now that you have been involved in a way?

H. N.: I am absolutely not sure that a community process needs to be finalised by a performance. But here we felt that it was a motivating force and the people involved wanted it to become a reality. And if that show is ever presented, then it is really important for the participants to be able to appear self-identical and well and that the audience catch a hint of that somehow. From this perspective, kids present a rather special situation. Because if a fly gets into a real theatrical space, it will become a distraction. So the question is how you can ensure that they don't become a distraction but represent exactly that unique situation as it is.

G. D.: Tamás, you asked something similar: you asked when a community theatre project was successful. I believe the most dangerous moment in such a project arrives when an external perspective, an external expectation appears. In many ways I see the methodological challenges involved here to be parallel to my narrower field, school plays and student theatre. There, too, sometimes the audience unwittingly become involved in a context which had not existed before. It brings new viewpoints to the togetherness of the group that can endanger the innocence of the idea. And the big question is how you can survive this situation. Because the problem is the audience. I would like to emphasise that the audience who unwittingly sit down to see a community theatre performance don't have a neat idea about what they are going to see. And such an encounter can go quite wrong when the average audience member doesn't receive from the theatre the experience that they were socialised into. As it happens, I saw all three performances that we are talking

about now. For me as an audience member I remember all three as great and successful productions. But who is a good audience member for such a production? What did you expect about the audience that came to this show? I think the solution is to expand the concept of community. I think a community theatre production should sample their audience from a wider population of the same community. In this sense, I'm afraid this sample does not include theatre critics.

K. G.: I think what is interesting to see is that the people involved in this field have a natural expectation of theatre, as they are members of some audience, too. The intriguing thing about our case was that from the very first minute we carried a kind of model in our head and deemed ourselves inferior compared to Katona, Trafó, or MU Theatre. This is what we kept feeling, that we were less than those places. Indeed, what did it was the concept of being an audience member, but looking back I must say that András and company handled it very nicely. They were really strict when strictness was needed. Then I realised that teachers are tough people that exist in Excel, who would feel safer inserted in the rock-hard hierarchical structure of an artistic theatre. It is such a superficial opposition to say that in community theatre you have some kind of great big safety while the other one is rock hard. It is of course much more complex than that, and there was a really delicate dynamic involved so that we wouldn't slip over into all that Excel-based communication. In the end everyone was rehearsing in secret, but that was something they didn't want: they needed to make us believe that we had some spontaneity in us. These projects of course go on and from the first moment on we have brainstormed a lot about who we should show it to. It was always a question, and now I'm not sure that it should be shown to teachers. Today I am absolutely certain that the film and the project should be shown not to teachers, not to players of public education, but people who comment on what happened.

J. T.: Zsófi, did your company have a critical edge like that?

P. Zs.: Not really. We had great solidarity since the whole thing was tied together by mothering. We hadn't known each other previously, at the outset we didn't exist as a community, and so there was a little distance between us. My memories are different from Noémi's: we *didn't want* to have a performance. There was the initial workshop, which resulted in a private performance observed only by our significant others. Then the idea to carry on came up. People in the initial group were conflicted: we didn't want to let go of the community but did we really need that performance? That was a compromise most of us had to make.

H. N.: Listening to Gabi, I find there are certain motives involved in community theatre: for instance, the need to carry on, the need for continuity. The programme is all the better for not leaving a community by the wayside. Then there are further fundamental questions such as whether people are speaking on their own behalf. You mentioned that Juli wrote the lines and sometimes you had to learn them by heart. We didn't have that, but Zsófi, you sometimes recited your lines this way, sometimes that way.

P. Zs.: Finally I read it all out, because I didn't manage to get to the point of remembering my own half page of lines.

J. T.: The more you speak about it, the more we consider it, the more parallels and similarities I find to the field of student theatre. Apart from that, a question has popped up kind of like an underground river breaking to the surface: how should we reproduce the performance? It's superb to show our significant others and 20 people in Szomolya, but when we, say, play this at MU Theatre at 8 pm every fourth Thursday of the month, then what?

P. Zs.: In our case it was evident that we couldn't put on a public performance due to the babies. The footage that you'll see can only be accessed via an encrypted link. Making it a scheduled show wouldn't have been feasible. The

babies knew the words by heart even after the first rehearsals, and they also ruined the performance a little bit. But as you'll see we had our own tricks to avoid that. There was one scene when a little boy picked the dirty nappies from the dustbin during the performance. The audience were laughing, and the little one looked up, and because he was rewarded, he did it four more times. So you couldn't have made a scheduled show with them.

H. K.: I don't feel having or not having an audience is such a big problem. As for our *Regina* performance, first we intended to present it in three steps. First locally in Szomolya. We had imagined that would be the easiest, but it turned out to be the hardest. Then, second, in a nearby town, in Eger, at the university there was an opportunity, in a Roma vocational college. Third, in Trafó. Then we thought the project would be finished and be over. But there was much interest in what we were doing, which was very surprising to see. People were intrigued, and then we thought the best venue for this was not Trafó at all, but the villages, with communities of Roma women. This is what's really difficult to fund, even if it makes the most sense. In villages we find the audience, find the venue, battle against resistance, no matter what kind. In one case the mayor refused to give us the room at the last minute, so we had to move the performance over to another village and book a special coach to transport the audience from one village to another. It is much more difficult to do in every way. Also, a lot more is riding on these performances: in the villages the debate was about whether we can show and put that feeling of shame on the stage. What we could reveal about the Roma people and what we couldn't. These were very acute discussions. There were places where people said they wanted to be involved in a theatrical group and that we should arrange for them to have one next year. This turned into the Nyíregyháza project. Then there came another circle, deriving from the same thing: we were criticised for being biased and not representing health care employees, only patients, Roma patients. That was strong criticism, so we decided to try and involve

people who could bring that to the table. Also, there were mothering groups who said they wanted to be in the show because they couldn't reach out to Roma women whereas their problems were really similar. Then the childbirth rights activists joined, too. Today we still feel this new production would be really nice to take to local Roma communities, and we are looking for opportunities. In the meantime we are seventeen and the show is a little hard to move around. There is a certain rhythm to it, we meet once every two months, then we rehearse it, and we play it only once. This is an internal rhythm, and we are looking for places that would invite us bimonthly. In addition, we invented workshops, which are not theatre but games and sociodrama, but with the same stories as in the production, in a more interactive group format. I only want to say that audiences are varied, and somehow I have the feeling that if we believe in this internal logic, then the programme will find its own environment and community.

H. Zs.: There were one or two villages where we performed for Roma communities. We had some players who had shorter than knee-length skirts and some people in the audience commented that as a Roma woman you shouldn't do that. We had an audience member who just couldn't identify with this honesty on stage and she stood up during the performance. But she waited until the end and then she came back to tell us her opinion: she could not identify because the problem didn't exist in her community. Several of us asked her what she meant and she said: it didn't exist because if she had admitted so, she would lose her job. She wouldn't be accepted by Hungarian society if she dared to say that the situation was humiliating for her. Because she had a position, not a mere cleaning lady but also someone who was allowed to print documents for the lady mayor. The show confronts people with these ideas: 'yes, it is happening to us, too, yes, I didn't dare to speak out either, but yes, now I dare to go up on the stage, and yes, I dare to speak my mind before the audience'. Because that's the truth and you don't have to

be a Roma to see it, it's enough if you're a human being and it is happening to you. That's the point. But in most places we were received quite favourably, we got praises for not being afraid and they were proud of us, Roma women, for daring to do what we do and say what we say because it's the truth. A great many people said, politics aside, we should take it to Orbán in Budapest and perform the show in front of him because then perhaps something would change. Maybe something would change in health care. There would be some advancement and women could get proper treatment. Not Roma, Hungarian, Arab or any other women, but *women* could get proper health care treatment.

K. G.: I created these personal categories to classify things that caused problems. Some people among us had a heightened experience of being story owners. Initially we, too, had two or three instances where story owners didn't dare to put their stories out there. Some story owners did not want to let go of their stories. Then there was a quasi-director who couldn't let go of their scene ownership.

H. N.: I would just like to come in here with two failures and dilemmas that we had. These are both connected to continuing putting on the production. If we had to carry on playing the piece, one of the scenes would surely be cut, which was found to be uncomfortable for the players. For instance, there is a scene where a baby is bundled in a diaper, and in the first recording Regi was lying on her back and waiting patiently for getting done. By autumn she had stood up and this might as well make a scene better rather than making it more difficult. However, since in the scene she was being bundled, she was naked and her sexual organs showed more than we had expected, and this divided the audience into two parties. After that we talked a lot about how you could identify with that. On our side it was a strong argument for mingling with other people when you have a small child.

J. T.: Zsanett, your case is also special for this reason, because it wasn't just a one-off project. When did it become a fact that the programme would be continued?

H. Zs.: I remember when it was over, we embraced, weeping tears of relief because we had made it. We couldn't even believe that Kata and Eda had been right, that it would really become a play. Then came the other shows: Szomolya, Eger and Pest. After that it was us who told Kata and company that we wanted to carry on doing it because there was demand for it, and we could provide the audience with something that they needed. We felt that if we managed to open even one person's eyes to the truth, only one, it was worth it, and so we should carry on doing it. Now that we are playing our second piece, the situation was similar: unfortunately many people had to be let go, people who couldn't go on doing it. We took in new participants, health care workers, MA members. We have been joined by a group of Szomolya-based young mothers. Young parents have the need to move out a little bit, so that they have someone to talk things through with. To tell someone about the traumas experienced, or anything else, so that they don't have to repress it all. People know one another in Szomolya, but they don't dare to open up to one another, and they already knew us from *Regina*, they knew there was an atmosphere of trust. They wanted to belong in this group and luckily we managed to take them in. They, too, are playing in this new production. They, too, feel what they say is important, and that's why it's worth doing it.

J. T.: As a closure, I will read out the title of this discussion: What is the impact of community theatre on the group and the greater community? Let's hear your thoughts.

H. N.: The members of the group were shaped into a community. All throughout the summer we had the option to meet on Margaret Island, and I hope this will stay the same.

P. Zs.: I hadn't watched the footage until last night. Last night, however, I did, and I realised that it was edited in a way that it 'intrinsically' bears and includes whatever was the hardest to show with regard to our situation, the fact that the babies demand ninety percent of your attention all the time, and you can't even think anything over or say a simple sentence. There wasn't a need to make it perfect. I was already happy if my child didn't soil themselves during my scene. Everyone had biscuits in their pockets, so that any emerging problems could be managed immediately. It made me feel good to see this apparent in the performance, because anywhere you go with your kid you are required by society to manage your kid to a hundred percent and they become invisible. And this works not because the society is open to the fact that children are persons and members of society, but because mums and dads expend a terrible amount of energy to make their kids remain invisible. This absolutely showed and the performance was so much more effective for it on a social plane.

H. K.: If I had to say one thing, it would be connections created in the group between the people, and the cease of isolation. When the audience see your work, another kind of connection is forged. This all means a lot of new connections that would not otherwise be made, because in this way frontiers are crossed more easily.

H. Zs.: What does theatre mean for me? It means a community where I feel safe, where I can be myself, where I can say what I think without fear of retaliation. Even if I am judged for my words or if my opinion is not shared, I am not stoned for it. I found my self-confidence with the group's support and doing theatre, which had been sorely missing from my life. It taught me to dare to speak my mind, not to cower in the corner but to believe that what I thought and felt was important. I can be a member of a long-term family in which you can be yourself.

K. G.: The fact that we stood there on the stage six times, directed by a director and playing in the crossfire of strangers' eyes, gave us teachers the realisation that we must be more forgiving towards ourselves, that we can't make our vulnerability and shortcomings invisible. And this leads to the realisation that we should be more understanding towards actors, because I would never have thought that self-care is such a tough act. So we should be more understanding and forgiving and more proud of what we are doing.

G. D.: I want to highlight one thing, the most important aspect for me in these situations: self-interpretation. I mean this is an opportunity to be granted an external framework that helps you order the chaotic feelings and passions whirling around in your soul. Such a process offers the possibility to provide answers, and in an ideal world there can be some answers that can be justified by reality.

J. T.: That's a perfect cue. Thank you all for coming here and speaking your mind.

In Focus: Community theatre

Roundtable discussion 2: What impact does putting civilians and civilian stories on the stage have on a theatrical company?

Participants: Zsuzsanna Madák, Ádám Bethlenfalvy, Tamás Jászay, Petro Ionescu, Doru Talos, Gábor Takács, Péter Gemza, Júlia Neudold, Beatrix Kricsfalusi, Panna Adorjáni, and from the audience Márta Schermann and Lilla Turbuly

B. Á.: This morning's discussion is about how community theatre is connected to theatrical institutions, why theatres undertake staging and arranging theatrical events in cooperation with amateurs. The discussion will expressly concentrate on the creators' point of view. It would be really interesting to start with our Romanian guests here. Can you please tell us a little about how Reactor works, what is the context?

D. T.: Reactor is primarily a theatrical studio that was set up in 2014 in Cluj. This place is open chiefly to the new and ambitious generations, and is interested in new dramaturgies and community theatre. In the first seven years we adapted stories and subject matters from the immediate past that were important for the local community. Reactor has a young audience, whose members are between 20 and 35 on average. Since communal thematics are really important for the theatre, it is nice to involve the community in the work and the processes. In addition, there are productions that involve non-actors as producers. Further, Reactor has two important projects, one is called 'Fresh Start', a kind of summer residency programme for new drama graduates. 'Drama 5' is another similar summer residency programme, lending support to five dramaturgs for creating a new text.

B.Á: How did the brainstorming start? What was the first project where you decided to bring in creative people who are not theatre professionals?

P. I.: There are two kinds of projects, one that involves civilians in the research phase, and another that works with amateurs to create a production. The first project like this was *Teen Spirit*, in which we met teenagers in Cluj and set up different workshops. The materials from these workshops yielded two shows. In the meantime, we realised we wanted to do more research and research sometimes means interviewing people about a production. As Doru said, it was important to process local or national stories from the near past in this project. I wish to mention one production of this kind, called *Refugee*. In this show we talked about forced evictions, more specifically about the state of Patariti, the community of Roma people living in segregation on the outskirts of Cluj. Another similar production was *The Miracle from Cluj*, about the Caritas project. It was a pyramid scheme that scammed people in Cluj in the early 2000s. The first production that involved civilians, too, was *The Ballads of Memory*, directed by Nicoleta Esinencu from the Republic of Moldova. Doru also played in this one, where we tried to interpret the problems of retired and elderly people. Ionela Pop plays the leading role.

D. T.: The really important thing is the way of financing these productions, as that obligates us in some way to adopt subject matters significant to the community. *The Ballads of Memory* and another one, *99,6%*, were created in the centennial year, which put great emphasis on looking back on great events of history. We, however, wanted to stress smaller, more local events, as well as communities and categories that were for some reason more marginalised. As the theatre has strong ties with the local community, we deemed it important to have a relationship with our audience through not only our subject matters and research, but also, after the performances, by talking about the shows and organising events around them. This also means that the audience has access to our in-house workings. For instance, we organise

workshops where the audience may learn about how we write and work, how we create productions. And this is why it's really important for us to ensure that people joining us from outside find comfort and safety, so that they may feel they can bring their problems to us, they can work well with them, they can come up with anything they sense to be problems. *The Ballads of Memory* featured Ionela and two other old-age pensioners in the beginning, and it was really important to ensure that they felt comfortable, and were granted visibility, so that they would be presented as the treasures of the performance.

B. Á: It appears evident that this work is deeply embedded in the community. Very briefly, could you reflect upon your position, role, acknowledgment in the Romanian theatrical milieu?

P. I.: We are an independent theatre and that is a big difference in the Romanian theatre scene. Without fear of sounding pompous, I can say that as an institution we are quite visible in Romania. I think our work is justified by the opportunities we get to develop projects with the association. But out there I can still sense some aversion to our work methods.

D. T.: The past nine years have seen a great development in Reactor, we could also say we were allowed into the mainstream. It has an own environment, the profession is interested in the projects, we are no longer an obscure, marginalised independent company.

P. I.: As for funds, we have too little as compared to the demands of the community, or what would be necessary for a socially positioned theatre. Also, the impact we have is quite small with regard to the number of people that regularly go to the theatre.

N. J.: Are you the only company like this or are there others present in the country?

D. T.: We are not alone with this effort, but many companies have disbanded in the past period, because people have grown tired and haven't managed to invest as much energy in their projects. Considering the Cluj scene, there was the Fabrica de Pensule [Brush Factory], which went on for ten years, and it was a much greater institution than Reactor but with similar goals, as well as the Váróterem Project [Waiting Room], with Hungarian-language productions. In Bucharest there is Replika, who also draw a young audience with lots of educational and communal programmes.

B. Á.: Let me now turn to the leader of a Hungarian independent company, Gábor Takács. KÁVA is a prestigious independent theatre that has been around for a long time, with the credentials of a TIE company. Why did you deem it necessary to realise community theatre projects?

T. G.: The answer is both evident and perhaps not so. The company are twenty-five years old, that's the age of KÁVA Cultural Workshop, whose main profile is TIE, that is, theatre in education, or as it's called in Hungarian methodology, complex theatrical productions for educational purposes. The target group for community theatre performances is basically adults, while TIE programmes address children and young people. To answer your question, we were very young when we founded KÁVA some time back in '97, and I wouldn't say we were terribly aware of what we were doing. The line of theatre that today could be called 'socially aware theatre', that is, community projects, is fundamental in the genre of TIE, but we might not have made full advantage of that in the first five to ten years. Being involved in TIE, it is not at all surprising that all of a sudden we turn towards community theatre, as we have been working with civilians in TIE projects, too. Each weekday children come to these performances, and since we offer a chance of active participation, there is complex creative work going on with their cooperation, so they become participants of the performances through their thoughts and actions or by expressing their emotions. In a sense it was

logical to extend that to adults, too. On the other hand, and let me go back here to a certain conscious level or awareness, we had to mature for that. Around ten years or something like that had gone by when we started to deal with more concrete problems of local communities beyond TIE's general humane or ethical or age-related problems. From that point on, practically two kinds of repertoires were being developed at KÁVA: on the one hand, traditional TIE performances; on the other, projects targeting adults. I don't think we would be where we are now in this field if we hadn't met the members of Parforum Participatory Research Group, without whom we wouldn't have started at all. Their cultural anthropological and sociological interests were crossed with ours and that created a kind of symbiosis throughout the years, in which either we launched a project and involved them as partners, or vice versa. In 2010 we made the project entitled *New Spectator* together with several colleagues from Parforum, Retextil Foundation and Krétakör. From night to night we mounted shows in Borsod County villages that dealt with the problems of the local community. That was the first initiative of this kind that we were involved in. Then came field trips: we encountered partners abroad, and found they were even more consciously working in the field. Today there is a theatrical project for adults in almost every season.

B. Á.: *Missing Classmate* was a kind of transitory piece, too, where you created a performance for kids and youth in cooperation with civilians.

T. G.: That's right. We made a performance with young Roma kids about the topic of selection and segregation in schools, and we exclusively played it in Budapest-based and rural elite grammar schools, asking the students why they thought they did not have any Roma classmates. The question, of course, was not direct like that, but that's what the production explored.

B. Á.: What are the benefits of community theatre productions for a TIE company?

T. G.: There are many benefits. Firstly, they help with directing our awareness, so that we can better interpret our mission, to understand what we have to do on the Hungarian theatrical scene. Secondly, we can put into practice the principle represented by TIE, too, namely, that theatre belongs to everybody, it is a democratic art form. We deal in raising democratic awareness: we communicate that everyone has the basic right and chance to be present at the theatre, that everyone can be a creator on the stage. Getting back to maturation: this afternoon the performance *AZISKOLÁJÁT!*³ Is ours. In 2022 we finally grew up to the task of putting on a community theatre production with the involvement of Hungarian teachers. The people sitting here probably feel the weight of that concept.

B. Á.: In comparison to an independent theatre, a rural repertory theatre is the opposite end of the spectrum. Now I am asking Péter Gemza why he allows such things to happen at Csokonai. Or rather, why he supports them.

G. P.: We started to engage in TIE at the theatre in 2014, in a preparatory period for setting up Csokonai Fórum. We needed a long-term plan with a vision of theatre in Debrecen. There was a TIE programme that started to improve and slowly but surely became stabilised, then turned into an important pillar of Csokonai Theatre. More and more creative people gathered round to show us how it's done, introducing us to the practice, and already then we could see that it was a very valuable form. As the children became animated, as the young people were moved by this thing, we realised we had hit a spot that turned out to be a most valid form. Then this branched into community theatre. As part of the vision we took another step forward

³ An untranslatable play on words that includes the Hungarian word for 'school' but is an exclamation with a meaning similar to 'by golly'.

and went in this direction. Let me just go back to 2014: it was then that I described this platform where we are sitting now. It was in that period that we dreamt up auxiliary processes that could support the operation of this national and regional theatre. Of course, we are not independent, we are funded by the municipality, yet this 9000 m² of theatre space had to be buttressed by 15 sub-projects. I pictured these projects to yield a more conscious theatrical structure in the end, a national theatre that could become a regional centre, translating canonical works in Hungary into two languages, creating forums such as this, supporting the development of amateur theatres in the region. We have four sub-projects that concern visiting places or bringing those communities here, working with them, assisting the amateurs as actors, and helping the management with administration, with tenders. We go around amateur theatres in the region on both sides of the border and draw them into this community. Realising the community theatre project was also carried out in two phases. Because first nobody said there would be a performance, but after a time the assembled group decided they wanted to present something, and slowly a story was born.

B. Á.: What is the function and the impact of the közTér performance on the theatre, which is a first in the life of Csokonai?

G. P.: For the time being it's hard to predict its impact. There are mini-impacts already: some negative, others positive. One negative impact is that when something like this enters the workings of a theatre, it becomes the odd one out. Then the audience appears... The system tilts a little. A great many small details hinder the operation, which demands an awful lot of tolerance on the part of the employees. Operation is at full capacity as it is, and we inserted this new project into this fully exploited system. This inescapably overstrains the framework.

B. Á.: After hearing these three speakers I feel that TIE is a kind of gateway drug to community theatre. Örkény Theatre had the same, where IRAM very quickly developed into ÖrkényKÖZ. The *Top Employees* project was a milestone in Hungarian theatrical life. I am yielding the floor to Júlia Neudold, leader of Örkény Theatre's KÖZ programme. Why is it important or exciting to mount a production, which includes you as a producer, on the main stage of a Budapest-based 'art theatre', and not in its black box?

N. J.: Before I reply to the question, I will say a few words about the evolution of this whole production. We have been doing the youth programme called IRAM⁴ at Örkény for eleven years, and it originally targeted teachers, too, but now it's called Örkény KÖZműhely, because we make programmes for adults as well as having an own repertoire and theatre space. Even at the very beginning we leaned towards community theatre because – and this may be a difference between me and the speakers who went before – the programme at Örkény was initially based on art popularising events connected to the main stage's repertory productions: talks, workshops for young people, but primarily in connection to the shows. In addition, a theatrical free school was launched right at the beginning, which was called KAPTÁR. We worked with young people for a year in this, and a production was created, and shown to specially invited guests once or twice in accordance with their decision. The difficulties mentioned by Péter are well-known in all repertory theatres if they take this gateway drug, but throughout the years everyone learnt to love this programme and it simply made its own room with its administrative and technical workers and its own infrastructure. Until these projects find their own place at the theatre, they strain at a system that is already overstrained. *Top Employees* had a place because both the creators and the technical workers and company knew about the goal of these projects and knew their benefit. But let me make a distinction: *Top Employees* was not made in a

⁴ IRAM translates to 'pace' in English.

community theatre creative process, as it's documentary theatre on the main stage, where timing is essential and it's not as flexible as, say, working with young people that goes on over the course of a year. Of course, the production doesn't include theatre professionals, and the research phase involves brainstorming, and the tone, the methods, the approach are basically the same. But the goal is different here. To really simplify it the goal here is to put on a play that will be included in the repertoire, while in those other projects the emphasis is on the working process, the participants' experiences and learning.

B. Á.: From the perspective of theatrical working, KÖZműhely's projects, or *Top Employees*, for that matter, presented new situations for the actors. What extra benefits do these projects have and how do they change the environment and processes of Örkény Theatre?

N. J.: The way I see it these challenges and experiences lend positive feelings to a theatre and a company. It is beneficial for the employees to see that the theatre where they spend a great amount of their life does good and useful things and is likeable. So it definitely looks good for the company, but of course they were open to and curious about the entire process so we had it easy. *Top Employees* and other projects where the company's actors collaborate with civilians are definitely new adventures and challenges. Actors that participate in it were also enriched in their work or in their roles in the company and the theatre, because they snapped out of their old boring routines. In the beginning there were fears such as they would meet real people with real stories. The main topic and focus of the production was the crisis of care systems, and it involved experts working in the care professions, geriatric nurses, nurses, social workers, playing alongside the actors. It was exciting for the actors to learn about their stories, and they even had a fear whether they could put on something that would live up to reality and play real roles alongside these life stories. But they were very supportive of the

working process. From the outset, only those actors were selected who had expressed their willingness to participate.

B. Á.: I am asking Beatrix Kricsfalusi: we have heard of a lot of different interpretations of the term ‘community theatre’. I think we should reflect upon the multitude of meanings we attach to the term, and the multitude of ways theatre works with different audiences. In addition, I genuinely wonder what you, an outsider, somewhat out of the profession, think the popularisation and application of community theatre would provide the Hungarian theatre scene with or what it already provides now.

K. B.: You said we had heard a lot of different interpretations of the term ‘community theatre’, but I would take a step backwards and say we all have different interpretations of the term ‘theatre’... The basis of the problem is it is not at all clear what we mean when we say ‘theatre’. To give you a definite example, if KÁVA’s mission is based on the idea that theatre belongs to all, then I suspect Taki’s⁵ interpretation of that is quite different from, say, Madách Theatre’s annual advertising campaign. We should take a moment to think about the supposed homogeneity of the concept of theatre, and what part community theatre projects may play in breaking up that homogeneity. The construction of this panel was successful because on it there are representatives of theatres with very different institutional statuses. Moreover, they are all creatives who have played a pioneering role in this process. Launching a project like this, it does count what institutional background you have. I think that creatives with histories in a repertory theatre might have to struggle harder because community theatre is as much a curse as it is a blessing: there is an institution in the background, there is a space, there are technical employees, there are people involved, etc. On the other hand, we know that these spaces in which repertory theatres operate in

⁵ Gábor Takács

today's Hungary were not designed for creating such projects. In these traditional theatre buildings, constructed in the late 19th century, we rarely find space for such projects. One more thing: theatre is a form of culture, art and entertainment linked to a certain social milieu.

B. Á.: Do you mean to say that it is primarily an activity for intellectuals of the middle-class?

K. B.: Exactly. I am not convinced that these community theatre projects can reach different social strata, that they can offer the gift of theatre-making to other social groups. I suspect sometimes they commit the potential and mostly unintentional 'fallacy' of choosing an alternative form, an alternative context, but offering it to the same old middle class. I think repertory theatres have more to worry in this respect as they are institutions with most notably bourgeois audiences and it's hard to find spectators who have not already been linked to the theatre in some way.

N. J.: I should add something to my earlier reply to the question what added benefits these projects can have alongside the operation of the theatre. I forgot to mention the two most important things. Firstly, that these projects create the possibility of addressing new audiences and of reinforcing social responsibility. Even though a Budapest-based theatre has its own profile and its own target audiences, when they have the opportunity, they must definitely pay attention to whom they invite to the stage. And when such a studio is already in operation, in our case we have our own space, then it must be done. Secondly, the beneficial impact on the life of a theatre: it offers a live connection to the present and to the audience. Because these projects are always about reality and real problems and real people, this naturally has its own benefits for the creative group.

G. P.: Credibility is a very important aspect and they can lend that to a company. As we connect with these people and really hear what they are

saying, there is a strong reciprocal impact on the company: what is it that we are doing actually, and what difference does it make? In our TIE company my colleagues travel to small towns and meet children who have never seen a theatrical performance in their lives. These young people have astounding experiences that naturally have a backward impact on the actors and professionals. Evidently we can't be there everywhere and always, but if we could at least kindle small fires, spark some interest in some places, we could have a greater impact.

T. G.: An independent company has a hard enough time coping with this, as much as a repertory theatre, considering the social groups it can draw. Conversely, if the community theatre project is created by an independent theatre, it does not follow automatically that it will be wholly credible and functional. Now we keep statistical data on what groups come to us and the result is of course evident: we tend to be contacted by grammar schools, middle-class schools. But this knowledge helps us make decisions to change that. These are the facts and we can move away from them. In the case of community theatres there is no such deliberate planning; however, I mentioned Parforum to show that we played about the debt trap in Hungary's deepest recesses for Roma communities, who encounter the problem of debt on a daily basis. This is why I mentioned deliberateness: what will we do about this, can we go beyond the community experience to do something about these performances that will move the milieu? And choosing your target group is an artistic decision.

G. P.: The direction we have taken recently is instead of telling our business partners to give us money to do this or do that when we don't get enough support, we propose taking the show to places where no theatrical production has been before. This is a much easier way to get them to provide some support. We are trying to put all the funds towards strengthening this regional role.

B. Á.: Márta signalled her wish to comment on that, so I am hereby opening the floor. If you have questions, comments, opinions, or wish to participate in the debate, please do.

S. M.: My train of thought started with theatre being a playing house, basically a house. And community theatre is not necessarily connected to the playing house itself. I'm not so sure that you have to bring something in, but rather take the theatre out. The space-oriented approach is organically connected to the problem. So concerning community theatre the question is always why the audience will come. Because when they are there they usually have a good time. This is about communication, too. How can we communicate to or teach people how to watch what they watch? Does having some space make community theatres interesting and exciting? Or by pushing those proverbial walls outwards, can we somehow shift audience reception away from the concept of space?

K. B.: If a community theatre project is in operation at Örkény or Csokonai Theatre, it becomes a spatial problem. Of course, you can leave the building and take it outside, but these institutions would also like to ensure that people who have never visited them actually appear as audience members. There are millions of people in Hungary and around Europe who have never been to the theatre. In a rural town like this it is absolutely essential to see who has the cultural capital to visit a museum or a theatre and who never thinks to do so.

B. Á.: My call has been successful: several people in the audience have signalled their wish to make a comment. Next up is a fleeting thought from Juli, then from Péter and Lilla.

N. J.: Communication is very important for a repertory theatre, too. It is a responsibility. Örkény's Facebook page and all of its social media pages are visited by a great many people. In the evening a lot of people gather in the foyer, where we have the flyers and the schedule. In a sense it's a form of

power that you must manage somehow as you should manage the attention to such information. What the audience thinks about theatre can be moulded in my opinion. The image must be communicated. Our motto is that the theatre is a community space, don't just watch it. This is written under all our posts simply because we want the audience to think more broadly about theatre, including all the auxiliary programmes alongside the productions. Those people that come into the building and take part in a community theatre project, even if they have never been to the theatre before, start coming back regularly.

G. P.: Let me say another half sentence: promenade theatre, window theatre. We are trying out new forms. Not to mention our TIE productions. In a sense we are lucky because this space has been created in a way that it is suitable for something like this.

B. Á.: Lilla Turbulu, the floor is yours.

T. L.: After all the theorising I would like to cite a factual example connected to both Debrecen and *Top Employees*. I saw *Top Employees* at the Debrecen Stadium, projected onto a big screen, at Deszka Festival. Some months later I was back in Debrecen, shopping in the market. I was chatting to a middle-aged lady peeling garlic, waiting for her buyers. She asked me about my occupation, I said I was a theatre critic and she told me she had seen *Top Employees* at the stadium. She got the ticket at the school where she cleaned, and this was how she got to go with many of her colleagues. There were some people who left during the intermission, they felt it was far from being theatre and had expected something else. She, however, had been deeply shaken by the performance, and since then she couldn't get it out of her head. After that we talked for an hour about caring for our own old-age relations, about their death, about grieving.

D. T.: I think it's very important to develop our audience and to try to shape the meaning of theatre today and its meaning in the next twenty years. I believe theatre will exist in the future, too, but there's a risk of it becoming irrelevant. It is important to reach an audience but it is even more important to reach an audience that doesn't share our views. It is imperative that the audience is not in perfect understanding with what we are doing. In working with exactly these kinds of audiences do I see the possibility of reaching out to people of different predispositions. Two examples: Ionela Pop, lead of *The Ballads of Memory*, aged 71, called Doru just this morning, because on Facebook she had seen the pictures of Reactor's latest production that Doru had not invited her to, even though he always sends her invitations. She asked him when the next show would be and when she could see it. I think Reactor is a progressive institution, and Ionela is a conservative person, but it is a fact that she and her family keep returning to see the performances and they are starting to understand and esteem what they are seeing, and this is somehow an answer to the question of how you can reach out beyond the audience you have at arm's length. And vice versa, for instance, by dealing with grammar school students in workshops, we managed to somehow draw them back to our other performances, for instance, *The Ballads of Memory*, which is of course about old-age pensioners. This is to my mind the point in working with the audience, these bubbles can be blended a little, these bubbles that are becoming increasingly specialised. One more thing, in Cluj there is no 'critical mass'⁶ any longer, because if there is, it's broken up and locked into smaller and smaller bubbles. It is pivotal to develop such a 'critical mass'.

P. I.: One of the most important preconditions – with regard to social classes – is that people have the opportunity to go to theatre and cultural programmes free of charge. It would be imperative for those involved in culture to start

⁶ By this play on words the speaker here means 'a crowd or an audience of crucial size or importance'.

thinking about free access to culture. And somehow free access to culture would result in blending these bubbles a little more. That ‘critical mass’ could be created more easily and perhaps theatre itself would become more relevant to society. Unfortunately funds remain to be a serious problem not only for independent but also for state subsidised institutions, human and financial resources are always a subject matter of the highest priority.

B. Á.: Perhaps the fact that we make people aware of the differences between social classes is an important step towards handling and dealing with them somehow at the theatre. A dedicated handling of free access is something very much to my liking. Tamás Jászay has signalled his wish to make a comment.

J. T.: I would like to go back to the catchwords ‘house/playing house/threshold/pioneering institution’ a little in relation to KÁVA. KÁVA have had an own space at MU Theatre for ten years, but this is not a simple case of tenancy, you can all see for yourselves the impact it has had on MU Theatre. MU, in its slogans, is a communal and inclusive theatre. This is a pioneering act, an experiment, something that Balázs Erős and MU are trying to do: reset an entire institution that was not created for this. I am cheering on, but still serious questions arise in relation to communication and who can be drawn in to become part of the audience or whether the programme needs to be drawn outside.

B. Á.: Is it better to have a dedicated institution for such projects or does this theatrical concept organically belong to the operation of theatrical institutions in general?

T. G.: Let me answer that by citing an example. I have heard a lot of inspiring thoughts here, and they invoked a story, especially in relation to our consciously checking out the composition of our audiences, as I have mentioned. This again is an example from TIE, I have fewer examples from community theatre, but let’s stick to the concept of the gateway drug, because

these two are connected. In TIE, too, there exists the problem of the audience, and this is why I said that in Budapest we are mainly invited to grammar schools. But, to give you an example from the other side: the company members, too, have constant scruples about who to play to. They all would like to reach out to disadvantaged social groups who have few opportunities to come to the theatre. In the meantime, we are slapped in the face by reality: my colleagues go to do TIE or drama lessons in an elite school and at the end of the session the teacher thanks them for coming and doing the performance because those kids have a great need for such experiences as they will become the future leaders of this country. Don't misunderstand, he wasn't being pompous, it was simply another aspect of the same thing: do we really reach out to people that we know will be in the position to lead the country in the future? This is at least as important as going to play in the most hidden hamlets in Borsod.

B. Á.: So is there anyone who would like to set up a drama group for politicians at the Parliament, so that they might learn about one another and be introduced to a different kind of communication and thinking? Such an exciting suggestion!

N. J.: Not to mention the fact that oftentimes an elite school environment can be just as problematic, and a lot may be gained from such communal activities and thinking together.

B. Á.: When is it beneficial for an institution to launch a project like this do you think?

T. G.: You should launch a project like this at a time when the creative members of the company are committed to make changes to the society which they live in. And theatre is suitable for that, community theatre also.

G. P.: If we believe that theatre can act as a catalyst in our small local environment. Only then, this is what is important about this.

N. J.: When you want to ensure that theatre doesn't become boring and worthless.

K. B.: As a matter of fact, I believe that Hungary's TIE specialists and community theatre experts are far more aware of methodology than most employees of art theatres. This methodological commitment can be very educational for companies of art theatres. For instance, in a repertory theatre milieu perhaps it is only through such community theatre projects that you can reach to the revelation that professional actors can only make theatre in a safe space.

D. T.: I agree with everything that has been said. It is also important that such work creates a lasting connection between the institution and the audience. We must have this intimate connection so that we don't go to the theatre like we go to the mall or to the cinema: I bought the ticket, I am entitled to see something. This kind of adherence can generate the power and unity of this critical mass, the creation of which I deem so important. We must realise that theatre cannot operate without state support, it is also very dependent in a political sense. It is imperative that we have an audience that thinks theatres are important and can speak up in their defence.

P. I.: In this increasingly individualised society people who start to lose their belief and trust in politics should have a place where they belong, where they are represented and where they can find solidarity. Those that cannot believe in the strength of churches or religious institutions any longer can perhaps still find their bearing at the theatre.

In Focus: Community theatre

Roundtable discussion 3: What new challenges are there for creators of community theatre projects in working with civilians?

Participants: Ádám Bethlenfalvy, Martin Boross, Edit Romankovics, Márta Schermann, András Sereglei, Eszter Vági and from the audience Júlia Neudold

B. Á.: We are back with the discussion, and again I would like to encourage the audience: this is a friendly circle and it's useful to have a conversation. This discussion will be about the creatives' and producers' perspective. It is exciting to see what difference it makes to participate as a creative in a community theatre process: as a director, an actor, a dramaturg, organiser or coordinator. How different is it to direct non-professional actors from creative processes where you have professional actors?

S. M.: The most basic difference is time. A professional production is preceded by a lot of research, reading, inspiration. However, when we actually get down to work with the company, that usually lasts six weeks. In contrast to that, with civilians or non-professionals the work always takes much longer. These projects need a minimum of half a year, but certain projects can take up as many as two years. So how can you keep these people there for such a long time, in some cases even for two years? We start working with them, processing their stories, the subject matters that interest them, then after two years or even two and a half, can you still see them, are they still there in your group? In a professional environment the actors are contractually obliged to turn up for all the rehearsals throughout the six-week-long process.

B. Á.: What makes the members of the community stick to the project?

S. M.: I can think of two things. One is obviously the topic. If they find the topic so important that they want to talk about it at all costs. If there is a ‘expectant mother’, that is a very important moment, and she has this internal connection. Or a trauma that was very severe. The other thing, in my experience, is that the group members or producers are emotionally linked to those they work with. So, for instance, Eda⁷ is going to do some work tonight with the company, in which the women have a special connection with Eda. Eda cannot be replaced by another identically competent professional half a year later, as the people have special ties with her.

R. E.: I don’t think they have a bond to me chiefly, but rather to the group, the community. People staying in these projects largely depends on their dedication to the topic, but mostly to the group or this form of theatre itself. It depends on how strongly they can believe in the use and purpose of joint work. In our case, despite my strong ties with the group members, Szívhangok Company would not necessarily cease to operate if I were to leave it. Certainly there would be a lot of changes. I want to answer the original question, too, about the differences involved in community theatre. Another thing that is different about a community theatre is the level of responsibility for your work. My experience and learning taught me that a director’s greatest responsibility is towards the artistic and aesthetic standard of the production. In the case of community theatre my responsibility is towards the community, the group itself, to ensure that they feel safe throughout the process. Theatre is just a means to tell a story, to find a voice, and a performance is not a goal in itself. I’m not saying that the quality of the performance doesn’t matter and that it’s immaterial, as obviously it’s best if that turns out great. But it can only come second in rank, as opposed to a professional theatre, where that is priority number one. And there you can sacrifice your safe space, your safe techniques, because everything gets overshadowed by the success of the

⁷ Edit Romankovics

performance. We have a very different practice here by creating a safe space: making the performance both safe and artistically effective all lies in the methodology. To refer back to the previous discussion, people who make community theatre must be aware of the method.

S. A.: The leader of a communal creative process is a kind of guide. Those who have already produced a show, been to rehearsals, worked in a group know exactly that it gives you a high. It's not an everyday activity for people to talk about themselves self-reflexively through fictional narratives. This is not their natural condition. And the high of the story, the stage fright, the success are something that they must go into gradually and slowly and severance must be exercised in the same way. Because these people will not put on performances each month and will not become theatre company members, they need to get back to being a sales assistant at a tobacco shop or a nurse at the hospital, where things are rather different. Leading them into this world and leading them out of it is a great responsibility of the project leader.

B. Á.: So that responsibility must be there on a personal level but also in the structure of the project: just as the warm-up phase and cooling down phase are structured and designed in the process.

S. A: At a professional theatre, with a professional company, people have got used to that occupation, that job, that way of life, actually. Professional actors are not offered the option to say, even on premiere night: 'I thought about it, and I wouldn't like to show it'.

B. Á.: What is this communal creative work like in a Budapest-based 'art theatre'?

V. E.: We are now doing our second greater community theatre project at Katona. First there was *Leave*, which ran for several years in a small village in Heves County, realised in cooperation with Autonómia Foundation. That

was a long-term project which involved practically the entire community. Our work focussed on children and young people. Now we are in year two of a project carried out in a juvenile detention centre for girls in Rákospalota. This 11-12-member group of young people are linked to an 11-strong group of adult women who have all volunteered to be in this project. They include theatre professionals, social workers and others from different fields. Anyone could apply, but we could only accept women. An actor, too, is present throughout and already it shows how profoundly such an encounter impacts the work, the thinking, the presence of a young actor – the encounter with these people, these situations, the different types of tasks. Concurring with Eda's opinion I must say the most important aspects here are a safe space and a safe group and the relationships between the participants. The aesthetic quality of the production can only come second.

B. Á.: Martin, you work with various communities in many different ways. How is your directorial style different in one case and in the other, and what compromises do you make in these different roles?

B. M.: I never define our productions as community theatre. There are certain aspects that can be seen as communal either because they deal with some kind of political or communal subject matter or because they have a documentarian and/or autobiographical basis, or they are true stories. And there are those projects, too, where the participants themselves constitute the documentary material and the participants are civilians. This doesn't have a name in Hungary; in German this aesthetic, genre or method is called Bürgerbühne, that is, 'civilians' stage' or 'citizens' stage'. In these projects the people are on stage due to their life experience or as experts of a field or as members of a community. They represent something that is utilised in the dramaturgy, and in an ideal case the participants also benefit from the production. This form can bring such a specific credibility and unique quality to the stage that actors, by nature of their function, cannot. In the past years I turned towards this latter

form, and almost all of my productions involve civilians alongside the professional actors in the creative process and/or on stage. One difference lies in how they are accepted for the work. There were times that the civilian participants themselves contacted the theatre, looking to make a production, as in the case of *No Address (abode-adventure-game)*, our interactive theatrical game about homelessness and the housing crisis, in which social worker Réka Szenográdi and housing activist Gyula Balogh contacted Mentőcsónak and STEREO AKT with a board game that they wanted to transform into a production, potentially similar to *Sociopoly*, but not the same. Now, *Top Employees* involves a more classic method: we make an announcement, one hundred and twenty people apply, and then we jointly vote for the ten people who will be on stage. There are times when we contact a specific person, as it is their very own story that we wish to give room to. Such was *Colony: Escape Stories*. There are some productions when the participants have no say in becoming participants, like in Parforum's community documentary-making project, when we worked with 'found footage' as did the youth who lived there and had to make do with us. And there is a fifth kind, such as my latest performance on activism and the character of activists made in Germany, *Hotel of Change*, in which we created a fictive burnout clinic, to prevent or treat the burnout syndrome. This is terribly difficult to do in a foreign city without proper embeddedness and suitable connections. Our usual methods proved to be useless here, so we started bombarding communities with information, such as organisations supporting migrants and climate activists, communities concerned with feminism or LGBTQ topics.

S. A.: So is it you who selects the people for the roles of the performance or is it done by the group?

B. M.: It varies. The decision is mostly made by me and the dramaturg, since it's our responsibility and task to create that dramaturgical arc that provides

everyone with the most appropriate space, time and opportunity to present their case and their story in a dignified way. I'm not sure it is an actor's responsibility to ensure that two stories brought in by two characters are not redundant, or that we don't put people on the stage who could easily fall into discredit because they don't know anything about what they are saying, because that sometimes happens, too. In many cases, of course, it's the interaction with actors that reveals a lot of things, therefore they, too, have a say directly or indirectly.

B. Á.: In what way can you motivate people to expend energy and time on putting on a production, channelling that energy away from their families and other important matters? Is it a pedagogical or artistic problem?

S. M.: What is community theatre? What is documentary theatre or docuplay? When you work with real people, civilians, you are unintentionally developing a community, otherwise you can't put them on the stage. These things are different.

R. E.: I agree they are different. Do you need to create a community to do it, or can you only call it community theatre if you have done so? If I bring civilians to a production – films are done in this way, so this wasn't invented just yesterday – I won't automatically have community theatre. For me the precondition of community theatre is to find an existing community and start working with them, or we come together through the joint work and joint project, which can have an objective like mounting a performance. But underneath that process there is a community building course in progress. I think doing theatre is collective work. It is not like the director has an individualistic idea and scheme and they need to actualise themselves by telling the world what they think about homelessness or health care, and then they get some civilians to represent these ideas. I don't think this is community theatre.

S. M.: I don't think so either. Even when you work with a community, such as homeless people. But at the same time the production is communal in the most basic sense. It becomes a communal production together with the audience. Others would probably call it interactive theatre. The way the scenes and movements happen there creates a one-off community.

J. N.: One example from abroad, reflecting on Dresden and Bürgerbühne. There Bürgerbühne is a branch of the state theatre. Under the auspices of Bürgerbühne they also do club activities where civilians work together and often they also specify the subject matter and whether there should or shouldn't be a performance. Professional productions, on the other hand, have producers and a director with personal visions and concepts, but not in an individualistic way: they are looking for people to play it, but they have questions and recede from the classic director's role. So they make interviews and research and surrender processes to the participants since they are the experts and the goal is to make them get used to the stage.

S. A.: I have a similar opinion. Often I start in fright when I hear the word 'director'. This should be a person who conducts the work of a theatrical creative process, the outcome of which is a production, but actually the goal is for the participants to get to know each other and become acquainted with the topic as fully as possible. The performance can be regarded as a bonus, some kind of essence pulled from what they have learnt about themselves and the world. How one handles that I think depends on the school they belong to, the masters they have had, what they think about theatre and their own character.

B. Á.: Let me cite a problem of terminology in connection to the international examples: we talked about the English and German names of this thing. 'Community theatre' is not the same as 'devised theatre', there is no succinct Hungarian translation available for joint or communal creative process. These

are all different and not necessarily mutually interchangeable categories in English terminology, either.

R. E.: I think the objective here is not to specify one single definition of community theatre. The projects we have already cited alone show that the target groups, the structures, the forms, the institutional backgrounds are all different. So probably what is so exciting about this field is that there is such a wide diversity and choice of projects. These projects cannot be generalised and pigeonholed because what is exciting about each project is its ability to develop its own structure and method.

S. A.: What is the thing that brings and binds a group together? Is it the subject matter or community building? In Szőlő Street, when we worked with young convicts, we thought they would tell us episodes from their lives and we would make a nice production from those. But these youngsters were prisoners under trial and anything they said could be used against them in court. So they didn't tell us anything. Okay, so then why not do community building? But each day when we left the building, there was another kind of community development going on in there: who belonged to whom, because prison life was really hard in there. So that didn't work either. What were we left with? When we started working, the one thing that drew them in was classic improvisation, so I, who can't stand improvisation, had to do a show based on improvisation with my colleague, Gergő Kovács, because we just couldn't leave the whole thing like it was. We had to show something to the other inmates of the institution that would elevate this selected group a little. So I retrained myself to become a kind of improvisational showman. But the kids enjoyed it very much and the performance was realised.

B. Á.: How do you choose your subject matter as directors and creatives? Where does it start?

B. M.: Usually it starts alone before a laptop, writing up tender applications, then as a creator or producer your task is to make some connection with the material and start to have an emotional link to it.

B. Á.: But how do thematic choices relate to the situations that we find ourselves in?

B. M.: *Colony*, the production about migrants, for instance, started with a commission. Trafó was organising a festival about the Greek ethnic minority and Greek refugees. We were free to choose the location, the topic, the characters, the form, everything. Then me and dramaturg Bence Bíró started thinking about whatever we had in common with Greek refugees. We couldn't ignore this new age of migration crisis, which we all have something to do with, and we had to find some kind of parallel. So basically the thematic was developed during the research phase. Obviously it's nice to have some personal approach, some frustration to work through, or a story that moved you.

S. M.: Tenders are really good in my opinion, because there are really nice announcements. My laptop is full of ideas, and then I open it and see which one I can in some way draw in to use in any of the tender applications. It's a very good method, by the way. When I started to work with homeless people, I had just come back from the Netherlands, where I had spent years working. I returned and was shocked by the underpass in Kálvin Square, and that shock developed into a two-year project supported by the Norwegian Fund resulting in a book, a film, a community project. I know what I wanted to do in the performance, I was sure about the venue and wanting to work with civilians. When I worked with migrants in 2008, one day I was pushing my child in a pram in Fűvészkert, and I realised that was the best theatrical location. I typed in 'migration' and a hit with 'immigrant plant' came up. There is this Latin expression, and lo and behold, I had my concept for the production. Another

interesting example: *Orphaned Dream* was about child prostitution and prostitution. There the break was brought about by a piece news I read: minister of the interior Sándor Pintér had an official statement about child prostitution which pissed me off and I had terrible rage boiling in me. Then the Norwegian Fund was still here in Hungary, I got the support from them. This became the *On the Road* project, and *Aunt Anna*, which was later financed by the ministry of the interior. So they ended up financing my critical approach, and this tension yielded an interesting discourse. Finally, *Artravaló*⁸ is a very complex and long-term project with young people in state homes. When we were doing *Oxytocin* with Krétakör Theatre, then Süsü⁹ was experiencing a personal and creative rebirth, and he invited a lot of people: three women theatre professionals, and I took a lot of pregnant women and an obstetrician and a midwife. I was so excited about it all that all of a sudden I, too, became pregnant and gave birth to my second child during the term of the project.

B. Á.: You must be careful when picking a topic.

R. E.: I don't work by having an own concept and then trying to realise it. Sometimes I am invited to do something and there they have the subject matter and the group. Other times I am interested in long-term projects where there is the possibility of letting the group find their own interests and what is important for them. There are these two different ways for me.

S. A.: I am selfish in this respect, and use it as a therapeutic technique. Whatever doesn't interest me I can't deal with. When I get the topic, first I filter it through my personality, then look at how many people are involved. School. I have traumas about school, and everyone goes to school or takes their children to school at one point. Housing. Everybody needs to live

⁸ An untranslatable play on words combining 'send-off' or 'provisions' and 'art'.

⁹ Árpád Schilling

somewhere, and I also had problems with that. The most interesting time was when a 70+ group applied for funds to make a production about '56. I couldn't refuse it even though I was not so interested in '56. Since they had support from both Mária Schmidt and the Soros Foundation, I had to work out how to make a 100% show about '56 (in memoriam László Dózsa), so that everyone would bring their own stories and it would be about remembrance.

V. E.: In my experience choosing a subject matter is different. Directing doesn't even take place in the classic sense. Primarily because I am not a director. The starting point is mostly the group itself. In the Rákospalota project we collaborated with an actor. At the first moment Dávid was so sure of what he would be a part of that he immediately went off about the topics that could be included. It was very difficult for him to accept that you didn't need to rush ahead in that project. In that special situation in Rákospalota it was evident we couldn't ask the girls why they were in juvenile detention. But there were some who came in and started telling us immediately. And that was the way of things. The point is for all participants to find potential connections where they can draw in whatever they want to tell people through the production. Either a sentence or a full scene about them hitting an officer. Another dramaturgical task at this time involves having twenty participants who all want to tell twenty-one different stories, and the audience will have a hard time interpreting the plot. Towards the end you need to find some organising principle despite all.

B. Á.: I would like to dedicate the remaining quarter of an hour to a topic that is very intriguing for me as a drama teacher: problems. What are the dead ends that you meet sometimes? What would you warn one another about and what can you learn or utilise from these?

S. A.: When someone thinks they know a lot about how groups works, that's a trap. I was working with a children's group in the period before Christmas,

and I posed the question of religion. This is a totally evident thing, and they told me about their religions. There was a Muslim girl too, from Azerbaijan, and we talked about what she said. The next day I worked with a 70 plus group, and put the same question to them, and the whole rehearsal went to the dogs. What I did was not take into account their age, the cultural heritages connected to religions in this country, and the fact that some people were incarcerated or deported for what we now think of as religion.

B. M.: I chose three examples. One is when, say, the project is successful, like in our theatre, *Untitled*, which has had seventy performances already, and it brings calculable monthly fees to the participants. It is a dilemma to design the next season without this show. What is my responsibility here? Should somebody ensure that these people have an alternative income, or that they have developed their network of relationships, which is a next step. The second example is that participants often have their individual ambitions, but they are unaware that they have to take responsibility for other people's stories, too. This problem almost always crops up. And it can have personal, political, emotional reasons or those of conscience. For instance, the problem of cultural appropriation in Germany, especially in Tübingen, which is a university town and sometimes seems a little too woke to our Easter European thinking. It was there that we had the question whether a white girl with dreadlocks could appear on the stage. Or if somebody could wear a Palestinian scarf, if a white girl could do Capoeira on stage, or if a white actor could sing this or that. Finally, my third example is that people sometimes share provocative, sensitive, enraging stories. In *Top Employees* an old carer told us about a day at their institution, like it was an open day or take your family to work day, and there she said a lot of incriminating details about the institution, the state, her bosses, and later she was made to confront what she said and finally they made her life a living hell. Ultimately she resigned from her job and managed to land a new one, but it is a great question whether the

responsibility to assess the damage she would be causing was hers or if it was the producers that should have protected her from herself.

B. Á.: This is what my next question is about: would you have had her consult you on the matter? Would you have made that decision for her or let her?

B. M.: We continuously consulted everyone about everything. But if she took it into her head that she would do it, and it also worked as theatre, because after all that was why she was there in the first place, and she wanted to tell it, you couldn't take that away from her.

R. E.: I want to go back to what I said at the beginning, the responsibility of the creators of production, who have a better understanding of the outcome of someone sharing their personal stories in public. Especially if we have vulnerable and exposed people in the project, who are either traumatised or are living under social oppression. We have had that. It was a great story, would have been very exciting theatre, the person wanted to undertake telling the story, too. But we had to go through the motions in our head and realise it would have been too dangerous to take it out into the public realm, it would have had serious ramifications for the person. We need to prepare a lot more and make the group more aware of the potential consequences of stating and sharing things.

B.Á: This is that safe space you mentioned, but are you now saying that you must extend that to the performances, too, moreover, provide a vulnerable group with such knowledge as they can work with and use beyond the project, too?

R. E.: Precisely. Let me cite another thing very briefly: personally it took me a long time to realise that a director's role, something I learnt about at university and something that I grew into, had to be continuously rewritten, and that I needed to find my own place and reinterpret my own role as a director in the group and the process each time I took on a new project.

V. E.: In our company this is something you need to relearn from time to time, and everyone is aware of that. This involves the project leader as much as any participant. It is also really important to secure professional supervision for the project. In Rákospalota with the inmates we couldn't influence that but we knew that it was being handled by professionals. However, with people arriving from outside the company, it is absolutely our task and responsibility. The last thing is, how do we close the project? Where is the point of closure? Because perhaps it won't be after the last performance, and in our projects it definitely would not suffice to let everyone go at that point. But let's say we close it – what happens then? Where do the people go? Do we keep in touch or not? How can you keep in touch? Who is responsible for that?

S. M.: Just like the red light blinking in the theatre and in the radio studio, responsibility is the word that lights up constantly here and then we either fall or remain standing. The other point is something much more selfish: as a producer or director, an artist, I have my own goals and desires in relation to an artistic product. Sometimes, as we mentioned, it is two or three years or half a year until something that you have worked hard for is realised. There is a profound exposure as the production can be potentially destroyed even on the last day: at the dress rehearsal the lead character can say, 'tomorrow I'm not coming back'. This possibility is always there, whatever you do. And it makes the work very painful.

N. J.: Something occurred to me: how adaptive are tenders to projects such as these? In theory you need to describe the project in your application in advance, but what actually characterises the project is that it changes flexibly throughout its term. How do you solve that conundrum?

R. E.: The way we do it is as follows: let's say, there is a project that has been going on for six years, and when the term of the tender is over, we look for a new tender, but obviously this can only be done with a long-term project. We

stop and ask ourselves, do we want to go on? What do we want to do in the future? What possibilities do we have? This is how we can keep track of permanent changes.

S. M.: I can describe what I am planning to be doing, and stake out the methods, the important questions, and will not completely rewrite the basic pillars of the project. For this reason we must describe details as broadly and vaguely as possible so that it will allow wiggle room for almost anything.

B. Á.: And at a certain point they stop caring about what is happening out there provided there is a sufficient number of articles published on the project. This is evidently also an organic part of our life and of this modus operandi, as presently there are no earmarked funds and these are all challenges we have to face. Challenges the producers have to face. Thank you all for the talk!

IN FOCUS FIRST LOVE

First love: Intimacy, dates and first relationships

Roundtable discussion

Participants: Anna Eszter Szabó, Júlia Spronz, Anita Patonai, Fanni Kucserka, Julianna Faludi

Sz. A.: The topic is first love, and to introduce the topic, Julianna Faludi will be giving a little presentation.

F. J.: Welcome everyone. This was a rather unusual invitation to speak, as I have never talked about first love or love in this manner. First of all I wish to share with you some theories that we will strive to dismantle here. The most popular misconception about first love is that it is the first. Another one is that there is only one first love in a person's life, but what I realised was that love is a dynamic thing. We can experience a lot of kinds of first loves throughout our lives. All of these have different depths and impacts, as love itself is not something we can pin down either. It's a biochemical process, a neurological process, a psychological experience and a lot of other social processes, as well. In general when we say first love, we think of the experience that was the most definitive and the most complex one in our youth. There is yet another big myth: that the first love can last forever or define how we are going to fall in love again and how we will build our relationships. This, too, can be refuted very easily: few are the first flames that flare up again. No problem if it doesn't happen like that – that's a really important message to take away from this if someone cannot process disappointment or the demise of an intensive experience. Incidentally, first love is usually traumatic. In general, if we remember our first love to have been tragic, that is a tragedy deriving from external circumstances. As it is normal for any relationship,

first love can present you with inadequate partners and dynamics that are best to avoid later in the future. The other important thing is that people tend to think in dichotomies and extremes, as they do in other walks of life: your affair is either very happy or very sad, but never both. We are full of hope or have fully lost hope and it's all a lost case. In my literary studies I have seen several examples. We love to lose ourselves in these feelings and thoughts. Reality is not black and white, however, but it's always some in-between hue. Oftentimes people examine certain events from a static, individual perspective. Psychologists and social scientists only started to interpret and scientifically define love in the 1970s. What does it mean for people? How can we measure it? How can we express it in numbers? In 1986 scientists distinguished three dimensions: passion, intimacy and commitment. It was found that the dominance of each continuously changes throughout a person's private life. I wish to talk a little about aromanticism here: it's when someone can't experience romantic feelings, and their attachment is more neutral. Social order and norms are also very important. I wish to make it clear that our culture has different narratives about love, on the one hand, and marriage, on the other. Marriage appeared in prehistoric communities simultaneously to the appearance of ownership. There hadn't been any marriage or monogamy prior to that, women and men lived together in communities defined by some division of labour. As ownership, land and a more organised division of labour appeared, monogamy and marriage followed. Most societies became male-centred, so women were practically a kind of asset in the deal, and the dimension of love didn't really play into it. Finally, by the 20th century society had democratised love and romantic marriage, and it was a widely accepted fact that people married for love. Scientific research into love was launched around mid-century, too. This is a relatively novel development, so love is depicted romantically.

Let's go back to antiquity and the Renaissance. Obviously, everyone knows *Romeo and Juliet*. These two skeletons that you can see in the picture are called 'the lovers of the town'. They lived six thousand years ago and died when they were about 20 years of age. That's how they were found in the 1980s near Verona. So the cult of Romeo and Juliet had its own roots, there were lovers and there were people who were interred together in a sort of ritual. This is the Neolithic, so this might be an age before non-romantic marriages. This is passed down through the centuries, and as first love is not included in the dimension of marriage, it is depicted tragically, as a true form of honest affection between very young people. The concept has survived as a trope, and today we interpret first love according to that trope. Antiquity also dealt with passions, tragedies, stories connected to love, but looking at these works more closely – for instance, Homer – the affection felt for a woman, the love that can unleash a war, is only a decorative element in the story, a narrative device for making the heroes even larger than life and making the plot more intriguing. This returns later in Romanticism: the relationship between a man and a woman, with its beauty, passion and hopelessness, facilitates the telling of a heroic and intriguing story. I couldn't drop Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as an illustration of how romantic love appears in the Romantic period. This book is exciting because it was written by a woman, but she couldn't transgress these conventional limits of the conception of love and used them to say things about the social order. Turgenev's classic *First Love* was made into a movie in 1970. It tells about a triangle, but again, love is only a device that emphasises the relationship between father and son, and the narcissism of the father.

Let me give you an example from Hollywood: *First Love* from 1939. The Cinderella story dressed up in Hollywood props. This is another cliché: the role of redemption, love as a chance to escape from poverty and enter

prosperity, where love and marriage are connected. It is a long-lasting stereotype in connection to love.

Let's look at our time and age. All my examples are from Japan. We have a lot of data from Japan concerning aromanticism and the reinterpretation and refutation of traditional love affairs, the pressure of conventional marriage patterns. A lot of films have been made about first love in the past 10 or 20 years and are still being made today. Netflix's current series is also called *First Love*.

It's interesting to note that our first love is often seen as a narrative, coupled with a kind of nostalgic plot, and many times our memories are not even about the love affair itself but the locations, the smells, the songs that used to define it. Most people I have asked about their memories of their first love told me about a place, a certain summer or a certain company of people.

To finish, I would like to say a few words about aromanticism, which was also depicted in a series. It's about two people who cannot fall in love, again from Japan, from 2021. To understand aromanticism you can't start out from a dichotomy of super romantic people at one extreme and another kind of people who are not at all romantic at the other, just like asexuality doesn't mean that some people don't want to have sex at all. It's somewhere between the two extremes. I think that is important: you don't have to conform to social norms, but only agree with your partner. If you are okay with that, as some aromantics are in love with love itself, then the same people may fall in love with a given person at another stage of life, and these are all possibilities lying in wait in this beautiful, exciting and sometimes painful realm called love. Thank you for your attention.

Sz. A.: Thank you very much. As a warm-up, let's all articulate what first love means to everyone here. I have a little game: picture that first love under today's circumstances. I was always afraid of phoning my first boyfriend lest

her mother should pick up the phone; we didn't have mobiles at the time, so it was all quite different back then. Even though that wasn't the Neolithic.

P. A.: I had my first love affair with a classmate and it was a formative experience. It started out as a Platonic romance, then we went as far as holding each other's hands. That's what I think of as my first love, and it took a really long time until I could fall out of love with that person. I won't tell you how it affected my life, but it's really interesting to see that whenever we bump into each other, there's still that look in our eyes saying we know that we were the first for each other and that's a really good feeling.

S. J.: I had it good, too, but I was the exact opposite: I finished these relationships much more easily than my partners did, which was characteristic of my later affairs, too. I didn't have a problem with chucking my emotions, and at one point I thought perhaps that was a kind of personality flaw. I was always able to change my partners really easily, but they weren't. Apart from that, yes, the phone... I don't even know how you said hello anymore.

Sz. A.: You had to be prepared for more than one scenario in case somebody else picked it up, the younger brother, the dad, the grandma...

K. F.: A couple of days ago I went to a Kispál gig and the last time I had been I was 16. I was so sorry for those people in the first rows who tried to enjoy the concert through their mobiles. We didn't use to have that. We were engrossed in the moment, we didn't take pictures or videos, we didn't have our mummies come for us, we didn't have to write messages to her that we were still alive and when we would be back home. We didn't have to text to the others to see if they were there in the crowd, too. At the gig I was thinking, my poor kids, they will never ever experience that. Otherwise, I had a big love throughout grammar school, and I went to gigs with him. How difficult it must be for young people today to experience these situations wholly and

not be in a divided place all the time, forever needing to check what is going on in their other lives!

Getting back to the topic of love, first love is such a formative experience that in therapy we ask the patient about it because this is the first relationship pattern that many people stick to later in life. If your first love left you, then very often you will be afraid of being left again or it will be hard for you to be committed. This is something we ask about in addition to the father and mother's relationship, because this basic model is something that's imprinted.

Sz. A.: I find this interesting, because by the time I had my first love at 16, I had been carrying a heavy burden: I had been harassed by classmates during primary school in many ways, adults too, even a relative. By the time I got to my first love I was terrified of all men and boys, regardless of their age. This poor boy had to court me for half a year, what is more, by offline methods. Then we went through a lot of moves to make me feel safe. Finally, after two and a half years, he cheated on me, so we travelled the whole spectrum together.

F. J.: For me it's hard to pinpoint my first love, because at primary school I liked somebody very much, but the first mutual relationship was at grammar school. It was very beautiful and lasted only one week. It was too beautiful not to end tragically. It is indeed true that we are traumatised and have certain experiences of relationships even before we consciously know that we are playing by a pattern. For instance, as a young girl I was always an outsider, I was small and was bullied regularly. Afterwards I never trusted those that courted me at full tilt, because I never felt that to be mutual. People who are very intense about wanting to achieve something, that's always suspicious for me.

Sz. A.: Love has been around in many guises since humankind appeared. And the world has always been in a flux. There have always been changes, now

we are living in the age of crises, with a pandemic, an economic crisis, a climate catastrophe, wars and so on. Our prospects are not the best, we don't make long-term plans anymore or just plan differently. What do you think young people or children today expect from love? Do we want to hang on to each other, or are we planning for the short term, because who knows what's ahead of us? There are so many things to be anxious about, how is that reflected in love?

K. F.: The basis of the whole thing is who I am, who I am attracted to, what my identity is. So first it's practicable to find answers to these questions, and then you can think about what you expect from a relationship. We have these fads now. Am I a boy or a girl, do I like girls or everybody, or is it very important for me to show the world that I am an independent woman? There are a lot of expectations encumbering a young person today. There is a kind of inequality that I feel today, and basically we have the same brain as one hundred or two hundred years ago. Young people are hungry for intimate, long-term relationships and they suffer greatly because they can't find them. At the therapists' offices a lot of people talk about how they hate Tinder, but what can they do, they must use it. There is this dichotomy of suffering from what you're living in but there are not many alternatives.

P. A.: My daughter said she didn't want to talk about the war. She wanted to live a normal life in which she was happy. She said she wanted to be a happy fourteen-year-old and I thought hard about that. For my parents also talked about a lot of things, yet they did not involve us in the conversations as much as we are involving our children. She has a need to be able to daydream in peace. I have been the homeroom teacher of a seventh-year class since September and a love affair just sprung up in the class out of thin air, it was literally born before our eyes. It was nice to see that it derived from the same kind of need that we used to have. In another class it happened, too, but it is over now. The community can be severely affected by such a shift: the class

is now divided into those that agree with the boy and those that stuck with the girl, and the entire community has a different dynamic now due to someone else's first love. As a drama teacher, how can I take part in this, how can I assist this dynamic? Do I have to? Or the class will work through it, while of course we are doing theatre and it would be nice to be able to work together, yet the hatred is there in the background. So I wanted to show the communal side of these first love affairs, because they influence the group as much as the relationship.

Sz. A.: Juli, you have written about being a woman and living in a kind of abusive relationship with the establishment and society. How can that influence our first love? How can we protect children from this oppression?

F. J.: There are two important aspects. One is the experience of breakup and coping with it. I always feel we are alone in these moments. The other is the fact that I, too, am an example of the statistical data of abusive relationships. Back in the nineties I had no means whatsoever to help myself, we didn't even have the language for it, I had no idea who to turn to and what was happening to me. What helped me was to understand and acknowledge that this phenomenon existed. It's not about you, you're not to blame, you are just thrown into it, because there are people that want to hurt you, but you don't realise it in time because that's how they present it to you. My message is you have to talk about it and not be ashamed. Shame is part of victimhood, you're afraid to tell anyone. Probably this is why I became a sociologist: I wanted to understand what social dynamics might engender such situations. It happens in the same way as a war does, you have the same patterns there. If I went back in time, I would be happy to have a homeroom teacher that could develop and foster a community that presented good models and schemas. Because we bring many things from home. A great part of socialisation takes place at school, and a good community, good behavioural models are important.

S. J.: You cannot cut yourself off the social context. I usually call it a patriarchy where first loves and second ones and so on are generated in this way. This is exactly why we have our sessions: to make girls and their parents and their teachers aware of the fact that it is a real problem which both boys and girls are exposed to. Because we might be kind and sensitive in our family, trying to protect our children, but their peers may not allow it. On the other hand, we must do something about the world wide web and the information overload. Unfortunately we can't raise our children in a bubble. This has never worked, not even before the internet, and it's even more useless today. What we find a big problem in our own professional activity is porn culture. As we have seen in the introductory presentation, romance can be very tricky and people cling to false images of love that are really about violence, harassment, bullying. All the fairy tales suggest that we should accept abusive courting as a form of romance. The only thing we can do is to open our children's eyes to this thing and call it what it is. I have been dealing with domestic violence since 1996, and I am glad to be able to say it's a personal success that we now have words to describe this, we have available information and groups, and people can get help.

Sz. A.: Porn is of course the most extreme form of these that a small child can come across today. According to a survey, the average nine-year-old has already seen some kind of pornographic content and it is usually something brutal. At the same time, what reaches a wider audience is films and series about hierarchical relationships, which have sprung up in multitudes, and which show violent and nonconsensual acts. *Fifty Shades of Gray*, for example, or *365 Days* on Netflix. Even without pornography children can see love affairs with abnormal dynamics. In fairy tales the fairer sex needs to be saved, the girl lying in the coffin is simply kissed by the prince, and upon waking she says, 'hi, there – yes, I do', and nobody thinks that's strange.

F. J.: I wanted to cite the series *Ginny and Georgia* here: fortunately there are some film series that try to provide good examples. They show teenagers and other generations as well how you can build up a consensus-based, emotional relationship, so I welcome this trend. Getting back to the bad models, in a relationship rape or physical violence are not as common perils as micro-interactions – fine-tuned, violent dialogues reinforcing subordination and a hierarchical relationship. I am talking about dialogues about, for instance, who chooses the night's film, how a young woman is positioned by her boyfriend in a house party, or she can only identify herself as 'someone's girl'. A long time ago people said, 'Juli is this guy's girlfriend', and there was nothing else to ensure that you could be fully yourself. As for porn, I also think that's a tragedy, and I don't really know what could be done about the fact that all kinds of shock and horror are available at the click of a mouse. There are, however, porn channels and films that depict a more delicate cooperation between man and woman, that position women as actors, and show sexual relationships beyond violence. But if someone just searches for porn on the internet, they will meet something else first. This is one of the greatest dangers as it really gets ingrained and defines not only sexual habits but also relations between two people and how they situate one another in a relationship.

P. A.: Do you think the situation was any better in the first generation? I would think it was more like the blind leading the blind. Our parents were raised in the hippie age. It wasn't so obvious then, but now you can't say things that you could back then, at least it's not polite to do so. We've progressed but then we've also devolved. At least today we have words and the underwear rule, but my parents didn't have an intimate or personal space, it didn't even occur to my father not to come into the bathroom when I was in there at the age of thirteen. In his hippie way he thought, 'everyone is naked at the party, and it's fun because we are free to do what we want'. I didn't get too much

help from my parents in saying no to things. We didn't know the limits of our own bodies. As for porn, whether soft or not, the biggest problem with it is that it doesn't allow for an authentic fantasy to establish itself in which the self's own dreams and the person's own body can slowly and naturally mature. Instead they get these readymade images and boys learn they have to be machos. They probably have a problem with it, too, thinking, now do I really have to enjoy this? Even if parents tell them it's not real, they still think it will happen to them. The age at which children experiment with sexual activities has drastically dropped, too. Today it starts at the age of twelve, which is quite strange considering those children are in their fourth and fifth years at school. And some thirteen-year-olds are already in a solid relationship with their slightly older boyfriends.

Sz. A.: I wonder if our children will become overanxious and overeducated: we always tell them 'don't do this, underwear rule, no means no'. We constantly educate our children, so what will come of it?

P. A.: I don't know how this is going to end, but something just occurred to me in connection to your comment about hierarchies. I think first we need to understand the origins of the process. In the 19th century with the birth of the middle-class women began to wake up. But only 120 years have passed since then, which is not such a long time all things considered, it's not even long enough for having been able to fully reshape these processes. Because we carry them in our guts, and our environments reinforce them. A family is created in a hierarchy, so what is my role in the family? I personally was born into a very good family, my grandmother was president of the local council, a leader, so my grandfather raised my mother and her siblings. What I got from home was that it was natural to have a man staying at home. I had a boyfriend who asked me what we would eat for lunch. I looked at him, asking him the same question. That was the moment I realised our paths would

diverge. It didn't even cross my mind that I should make lunch. It was nice to realise that early on.

I had a drama lesson in one of the schools where I work, and we talked about hierarchies. The story was from the 19th century, that of *Colette*. There was a film about her, too, and I was really moved by the story: a sixteen-year-old girl and a thirty-five-year-old man fall in love and it's working. It turns out the girl can write, and the novels are published under the guy's name. I was most intrigued by one instance in the plot when the woman couldn't break away, couldn't leave the man. In the lesson the woman is writing at home, and then she says, 'I'm not doing this any longer', and she wants to get out, but she realises the door is locked. I turned to the ninth-year students asking what the heroine should do. It was just terrible to hear their answers: they told me to sit back and pretend that it hadn't happened. That I should consider the good life I had: a roof above my head, a living, and anyway, writing was my job. I countered by asking, 'okay, but what if I don't want to do it any longer?' They had an idea: if I didn't want to write any more, I should break my hand rather than tell my husband about the closed door. This made me think deeply about the ideas that fourteen- and fifteen-year-old people had about what a woman could or couldn't do. We live in the 21st century and we have really good words to use, but how can we change our gut instincts that we have been carrying with us for centuries, how much more time do we need for children to have real insight into these situations? That's why they we need to assist and encourage them in this. For example, by thinking together about hierarchical relationships, and perhaps later on they can say no to someone.

F. J.: This made me think that the woman internalised the abuse by breaking her own hand, so practically the guy broke her hand by publishing her novels under his name. The key word is saying no, but you also need to know what you can expect after that. Here you are still judged according to your biological sex and your gender and social status. It is the 21st century, and I

go to these Christmas events at publishing houses and people say things like ‘she wrote such a cute little novel’. These are the soft mechanisms that are really hard to fight against. Unfortunately the wider context, the greater narrative doesn’t help either, so we must reinforce that confidence through grassroots movements and via drama groups. We must impart a lot of courage as well as empower ourselves.

In my head I am still stuck in the sixties: it wasn’t a time of a great sexual revolution at all, wasn’t about the liberation of women, but instead about losing the stigmas in marriage. No sex before marriage – that had been the social norm. Then, in the 1960s people could select their own partners, but women were not prepared for the fact that they were not really liberated and autonomous but had to act in service of this selection rather than participate in it as autonomous partners. So the sexual revolution had a double edge, without providing equality.

Sz. A.: This is not the first time we have mentioned how important communities are for children, how deeply they determine relationships. But today’s children now have cyberspace. I wonder how well they can tell real human relationships from superficial chat partners? How can they recognise a contact that might later become a normal relationship?

K. F.: In short, I don’t know. We have social media, we have mobiles. They can do clever things, too. But with social media everything depends on the quantity and the quality. The problem is not that young people use Facebook, Insta, Snapchat, TikTok. The researchers examining these trends found great differences in the amount of time young people spent on these platforms and their degree of loneliness. If a child is not accepted but ostracised by their original community, they can easily turn to these means, and they can talk to anyone in the whole wide world. But this is where the real danger lies, as they spend too much time with their unreal friends and a constant comparison is

the order of the day. Everybody is posting their handsomest pictures, which has a bad effect on self-esteem. These children then become all the more exposed to the danger of hankering after connections and letting perilous processes into their lives. They start sending pictures to one another and some people might misuse these images or send these kids contents that they should not see, abuse them, and so on. In the US there are several research findings that prove the correlation between teenage depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm and time spent on social media platforms. Nobody knows if it's the cause or the effect, but 5 to 7 hours a day of active participation in social media has a direct connection to severe depression and confidence crisis.

S. J.: I am a simple solicitor of family law, but I also have kids. I have a daughter who's in eighth form, an older son and a smaller daughter, too, so I can speak from my own experience. Don't be afraid of overeducating your children, that doesn't exist. You can't overinform them either, you can flood them with information that is too much for them at the given moment, but all in all knowledge is power. You can't overdo the dissemination of information – you can, however, time it badly, or say too much. The method can be botched, but the principle itself is commendable. This alone won't make them walk around expecting the end of the world.

Sz. A.: Adolescents often think that only whatever is the opposite of what their parents say can be true. I'm afraid that's when our good intentions have the opposite effect.

K. F.: What matters is the kind of model you provide and the example you set. I think this is the only way of conveying valid arguments in addition to flooding their minds with information. Recently I had to go back to Facebook because I go to a training, and I have to use it if I don't want to miss out on anything. But I have a fake profile and I advertise that at home.

Sz. A.: I work on my phone and I have a laptop and mobile lying around all the time. More and more people find themselves in this situation, working on electronic gadgets, especially since the Covid pandemic. We have to educate ourselves, too, while educating our children. Unfortunately, in the meantime the world is changing, but there will always be people in love, won't there? How can our children experience love in a way that they should? Not virtually and in some extreme way, but free and without any traumas?

P. A.: It was nice to have those literary examples listed in the introduction, because I was just reminded of my seventh-year pupils. Also with fifth-year pupils, when we learnt about Petőfi's *John the Valiant*, they were completely shocked to find out that Iluska died in the end. I think that through art, literature and poetry the subject matter of love can be experienced fully. These are the kinds of stories we work with in children's or students' drama groups. In a conventional school environment, pupils are flabbergasted by literary works. Obviously, you need the parents or teachers who take them to the theatre or bring the players to the school. Children have a desire for experiencing these things.

K. F.: Already there are parents who are looking for summer camps that don't allow mobiles. This is an extreme setup that is good for advertising: we have a no-mobile environment. For children to finally start talking and connecting, it would be great if they didn't always have some device in their pockets. They have FOMO, fear of missing out, they have to look, and it distracts their attention, and they cannot exist in the moment. You should listen to Annamária Tari, this is her main area of expertise, existence in the digital world. She thinks it's the end of the world, we are drifting towards total collapse. You have two young people who are enjoying themselves, but they can't stay in the moment, and so they quickly snap a selfie, and then they will have a memory of snapping that selfie and not the activity itself they were doing in the meantime.

Sz. A.: Maybe they need to snap those pictures exactly because they are not present, and they won't remember, so they have to record it.

K. F.: Julianna asked people about their memories of their first love, and they remembered smells and places. Now that alpha generation (born after 2005) have grown up. Somebody should ask them what they remember of their first love. Perhaps they would start looking on their phones. This is another thing: they do not simply describe an experience, but show you the pictures.

Sz. A.: There is now something called #aftersex. Recently I read an article on that: it's a trend; you click on the # and can observe all the satisfied, happy faces. Just imagine that situation: how present was that couple in the moment?

F. J.: The word 'trust' has just crossed my mind. I think here we have two different levels: one is the cognitive level, we make aware, we enlighten, we educate, which is just great. I would like my daughter to belong in the group of overeducated young people, because that increases my trust, and I just need to trust her and acknowledge there will be moments that I would not prefer to see. But it's her life and she has to grow up with her own memories. The other level concerns the binary of digital/analogue, which you cannot separate any more. The generation that exists in this environment make different memories, and for them a selfie doesn't have the same meaning as for us who queued at Sziget Festival to be able to make a phone call because there was only one booth. Obviously there are extreme cases when this becomes pathological, and some people lock themselves into social media. It seems they now need more and more safety zones where they can create freely, not only digitally. Anything as long as they can post it and be satisfied with it. These hashtag games are really entertaining, but the problem with them is that you can't delete these posts. Whatever you have uploaded will forever stay there, and this can have dire consequences, but I feel they don't take this seriously enough.

Sz. A.: It would be really unfortunate to neglect the subject matter of artificial intelligence. Today if you don't have a partner there is a way to ask an AI to write a love letter to you. I wonder if we have to be afraid of AI satisfying our need for romance so much so that we won't be not needing it in our physical relationships.

P. A.: I don't know if cyberspace can replace that or become a pathological activity. Of course, it all depends on how often people use it. I've just pictured receiving a love letter like that. I would think of it as a form of creativity. This again is about testing the limits. Do I like it, do I not like it? If we use the digital world appropriately, I think we can learn a lot. I regard a lot of things as a kind of game, and it's really nice to live like this.

Sz. A.: You can also ask for advice. Some teenagers already ask ChatGPT's advice on who they should go to bed with. I tried to check what ChatGPT would say, and it warned me. So it is nice that ChatGPT encourages safety and consensus-based relationships, it appears to be quite enlightened and extremely PC, and it seems that for the time being it is on our side, but the problem with that is it's something humans are developing. I don't think anything manmade can ever be safe, because there might be problems sooner or later. But let's get back to our topic of love. If you could determine what inspiring works young people should turn to for definitions of first love, what would you recommend? What films, what novels, what plays?

K. F.: I am okay with canonical world literature: I think those texts that were added to the canon and textbooks fifty years ago are quite good in this respect. The question is, of course, if anyone will still read them today.

S. J.: I'm sure I would not direct those unhappy souls towards literary sources. They should rather go out into the world and take a look around, open their eyes. Study people and their interactions. Other than that, as long as we're

talking about films, my favourite director is Almodóvar; I like how he depicts genders. I can recommend him wholeheartedly.

P. A.: I would tell teenagers to go into their rooms without a phone or a TV and stay there for an hour. They should just think about what love means for them. I would suggest spending some time on their own to go over all that they have experienced.

F. J.: I think everybody knows what it's like for them to be in love. Love for me is not text-based at all. For me it was always music that helped me get over some difficulty or that supplemented my great experiences which I knew to be important and used the word 'love' to describe them. Love is a lonely condition in which we must be independent and find out if in the long run or in the short run that condition is good for us or not, anything else is of secondary importance.

Sz. A.: Perhaps that is what's so difficult, that love is a lonely thing, but there are fewer and fewer possibilities for us to be on our own. At least in the sense that we are continuously on the roll. And it's really hard to pull the brake, to switch off. And there could be a break here, as we replace our devices every few years and everything is disposable. Our relationships, too, are like that: this boyfriend's gone, but soon comes another one. And perhaps we can't really cope with this loneliness, with our feelings. I turn to Juli Spronz now. Your area of expertise is violence. These two things, love and violence, they are in opposition, but at the same time they aren't. How common are violent relationships for young people? Can it appear in the case of young adolescents, or even children?

S. J.: It's just as characteristic of them as it is of older people. Violence is really democratic, it doesn't have any psycho-social features, cannot be tied to any financial status or religion. But, for instance, in deeply religious communities, violence and domestic violence are quite common. Violent

relationships can occur with children, too. The relationship may be a first, but it can be as violent as for the twentieth time. This is why girls must be sent to Rebel Girls' camp, so that they can readily tell if it's an abusive relationship. Incidentally we work in District II in Budapest, which is a highly well-to-do quarter. Victims here realise much later that they have become victims. Sometimes it takes years until the penny drops about their abusive relationship. Even if they are a woman with several university degrees, a lecturer, or make good money and do well in their careers.

Audience: What ages are some of the youngest people that call the self-help services?

S. J.: Not so long ago an eighteen-year-old girl contacted us saying that when she was eight, her older stepbrother had raped her. Unfortunately by that time the case was time-barred, and there was nothing we could do about it. But talking about young people, this is the most common age. Children don't really come to us, because we are a legal aid service. I suspect children are most likely to call NANE, but mostly the blue line, because that's more well-known than the children's line. Still it is very common to have young people at the dawn of adulthood who want to do something about an abuse suffered in childhood.

Audience: Do you ever have secondary-school girls who have experienced their first love in a bad or violent way turn to you for help?

S. J.: I think there are a lot of these cases. Cases flood the legal aid office in the festival season, after class trips, after freshmen's week (of course, the latter is not about children anymore but adults). It was in my own child's school that I was invited to talk to the students because a girl had been raped at a school-leavers' house party. The rapist and the victim were both classmates. The entire class stood by the rapist and the victim was left on her own, and at this point the school thought they, too, should do something about

the case. Unfortunately, these one-off prevention sessions don't really have any lasting impact. So we were able to handle the situation and we showed the teachers and parents the appropriate ways to deal with that. These sessions should be repeated, but I have never met a school that wanted to continue our programmes or organise a systematic series.

Sz. A.: And we have arrived at the state of sex education in Hungary today. You have the problems of the LGBTQ community and teenagers that struggle with such thoughts and problems. They are left completely to their own devices and have no possibility of experiencing their true identities. They are pressured by the entire society, and not even the educational system tells them they're completely normal, they are just discovering who they are and what they want. What do you think first love is like for such a concerned child in today's Hungary?

K. F.: In short, terrible. But it's beneficial to have a lot of series on Netflix that can support them. There is a trend, too: in some milieus it's a hype to wear a Pride shirt from H&M. But I have no idea what an LGBTQ person who hasn't come out yet might think about that fad. It's a very difficult question, connected to abuse, patriarchal society, power relations. Institutions say LGBTQ is beyond their scope of competence.

S. J.: I know quite a lot about elite places. I hear children complaining about not being a lesbian or a trans person or an anorexic. They think they are so boring. We have fallen into the other extreme. Another thing is that if somebody has problems or discomfort in their lives, they immediately think they must surely be trans.

F. J.: Our mindsets are dissociated due to free social media platforms where we see all these identities to choose from, and we also have reality where society sends wholly different messages. Today's young people have to find their place and stand firm in this, which is terribly hard. It's different from the

challenges that previous generations were confronted with. I have moved to Wales, and the first thing I had to do in my new job was a training on unconscious prejudices, about equal opportunity and integration, which is so important I would make it obligatory in all institutions and all workplaces. Even as a sociologist I am sometimes amazed to find so many imprinted prejudices. Even if we train ourselves and learn and see good examples. I wish we acknowledged these and raised our children's awareness of them. If our external environment says otherwise, we need to steel ourselves. Preserve our mental stability.

Sz. A.: The topic of first love leads in many directions. Being in love is good, but we should try to experience it offline. Thank you all for being here.

Sexual education in Hungary and Romania

Roundtable discussion

Participants: Szilvia Gyurkó, Luca Szabó, Janka Cserháti-Herold, Gábor Lassányi

L. G.: What is official sexual education like today? Including theories about the body, the sexual organs, body boundaries? And how does it appear in the curriculum in Hungarian schools today, from childhood to adolescence? What is the practice?

Gy. Sz.: In the National Core Curriculum, and the pedagogical programmes of kindergartens, there is a basic biological approach and a moral, ethical approach. The latter includes the ethical problems involved in family planning and having children as well as the National Core Curriculum's concepts about family and related problems in the religious education, ethics and civic education lessons. According to the National Curriculum questions of sexual education can first be discussed in 11th year as well as 6th to 7th years. I will not use the word 'enlightenment', because that's a false term, children have a lot of information about sexuality from sources freely accessible online. And if someone types the word 'sex' in the Google search engine, they can acquire any information they want. According to the law, lessons on sexual education can only be organised for pupils of the above ages, but only those people can teach the lessons that have some kind of teaching contract with the school. So no independent professionals can do that, or they can only do so after notifying the parents and the parents have given consent. I wonder if it's not too late in years 6-7 to talk about these subject matters. Due to the acceleration of sexual maturation, sexual interest, the time of the first period and the first discharge take place earlier than that. According to EU Kids Online, 'porn' is the third most frequent internet

searchword for European children of ages 7-10, which means that the subject matter is there in primary years. As opposed to this, if somebody in years 6-7 goes to the kids and demonstrates how you need to put a condom on a banana, and that's the best case scenario, the worst case scenario is playing a video on abortion or saying, 'do not have sex', that's not proper sexual education and not even 'sexual enlightening'. One of the problems is the time factor, the second is the limits of professional training. Also, there is a predetermined content, these people say what they want, and not what the children are interested in. By the way, how can you teach sex ed in a heterogeneous school community? I have a lot of dilemmas here. How can you do that well in a community of children of different familial backgrounds, different knowledges, different sensitivities? What happens in the classes? What does the law permit? What does it provide for? These are three different realities. Can the school psychologist talk to the children about these subjects? As per the prevailing law they can't, or they only can if the parents have knowledge of such discussions, which is problematic from both a professional and an ethical point of view.

Sz. L.: In my experience the teachers feel that they should communicate something to the pupils and provide them with handholds, but they simply don't know how. There is a great need for teacher training but also for independent speakers and external organisations to get into the schools because teachers are not sure to be able to create an environment in which the pupils dare to put all their questions. They need an external figure, someone they know they will never meet again. Who can provide the children with an environment in which they feel much freer to talk. They kind of know where the boundaries are and by stretching them they embarrass their teachers, and they don't like to see their teachers in these situations so they don't even go to depths that otherwise intrigue them very much. In our sessions we have very profound topics: from the world of sexuality, the most detailed tricks in

pornography. They are very interested, as porn is unfortunately the foremost sexual educator of our world. They want to know if what they see is real, and what it has to do with sexuality in a relationship or in real life. Teachers won't go into discussing these in a Biology lesson.

Cs-H. J.: Basically they are not even qualified to do that. There aren't many training courses for teachers on the subject, or there are only independent trainings.

Sz. L.: Teachers don't get such qualifications. Currently it's such a shaky ground that I am really sorry for both teachers and social workers, as well as district nurses and children.

Cs-H. J.: Perhaps all I can add to this is fortunately I get feedback, teachers write to me and tell me they organised a screening of my video on period in the homeroom lesson and after that they could talk about it and that children know about my contents. Do you know the channel *I'm Learning Myself*? A lot can depend on the given teacher, the given school, the milieu. Does the environment make it all possible? Is the teacher brave enough? These things happen in kamikaze mode. The other thing that crossed my mind was kindergarten pupils... Today there is no law that specifies what should be done in kindergartens.

Gy. Sz.: Educating children on a healthy lifestyle is part of the unified pedagogical programme of kindergartens. It's specified that they need sports, health, nutritious food. We would have liked for the basic concepts to go into the curriculum, to lend the children words they can use. The parents play with their small children: 'show me your ears, your nose, your eyes', but they never ask them to show their 'boobies' or their 'birdies', or their 'behinds', or their other private parts. As if they didn't exist. There should be words with which to say if something hurts or someone has touched them or something else happened. This would be very important in kindergarten education, too, so

that body awareness can appear in games. By the way, children already masturbate at that age, too, but it is dubious how they react to that. They are curious to know what their peers have under their skirts or under their trousers. They play about this in their games, about whatever they see at home, not only porn. They live in this world, too, and this is an oversexualised world. Kindergarten pupils need different things to those in later ages, but some kind of connection to themselves and good reactions from adults to their age-adequate curious questions could promote their feeling comfortable with themselves and their own intimacy. Then this could be further improved, for example, with the underwear rule. The underwear rule is one of the most popular products of Hıntalovon Foundation. There is a donation shop where you can download it: 5 basic rules helping the children to say no if somebody tries to touch them there. This basically consists in the rule that nobody can touch their body parts that are covered by their underwear. Only when they give their permission. The other thing is when somebody tries to touch them there or take pictures, they shouldn't keep quiet about that, because there are good secrets but there are also bad ones. Good secrets make people have butterflies in their stomach, while bad secrets choke them or make them swallow a big stone. The next rule is to find an adult they can trust and tell them about it.

Cs-H. J.: These are the important aspects with small ones, quite different to the phantasmagoria of drag queens reading bedtimes stories at the kindergarten. In kindergarten sexual education usually doesn't involve any kind of sexuality. In the Netherlands three-year-old nursery school pupils are taught that you must hold out your hand and say, no, I don't want this. Loud and respecting your boundaries. This is a big thing to learn at that age, and it would help a lot with our adult life, too. With the older age group sexual education should be about giving quality information to children. Legally it's the parents' right to do that, but at the same time it's the child's right to be

granted quality information, even if the parents don't want to do that at home. Because the children have a right to know what is happening in their bodies.

Gy. Sz.: External professionals' sessions have a downside: they talk to the children about sexuality whenever they want to or can and not when the children want it. It's great to have people that you can put questions to, because then you can discuss the great dilemmas, but sex ed and sexuality are not only about sex, they also include problems of self image, body image, intimacy, relationship patterns. Talking about unintended pregnancy and STDs is an excuse for providing sexual education and really freaks out the kids, while sexuality is a source of pleasure. It's a nice thing to have a good relationship with your own body, nice to give pleasure to yourself and the other person.

Gy. Sz.: Since 1991 the law has provided each child with the right to information in accordance with their age and accountability. Any info, about the Coronavirus, about sexuality, or about Rákóczi's War of Independence. The prevalent idea in Hungary is, however, to protect children by not providing enough information: but how have taboos and concealment, denying people information, protected anyone of anything ever? I have worked with a lot of kids who became expressly vulnerable by not knowing anything about what adults could do to them. Adults who looked after them, people who they respected and loved, and whom their parents asked to take care of their kids, perhaps said, 'behave now, be a good boy'. Then that same adult said, 'come, sit here in my lap, do this and do that', and the child did as they were told. There was no information available on what they should or shouldn't do or if something like that happened they should tell about it at home. It's not the lack of information that protects you but knowledge.

L. G.: What is your experience with people who should provide information or people who are in the line of duty? How well-informed are they, how up-to-date is their info material?

Sz. L.: They are grievously behind. There is no proper training, no proper support that could prepare them for their work. In teacher training they have psychology, but this is a more specific, more profound branch of that. When we have workshops for teachers, they have a lot of doubts. And here is when self-knowledge enters into it. There is no single smoothly operating, developed system for that. Even school psychologists find it lacking.

Cs-H. J.: We can't leave the parents out, either. The law currently says that parents should speak about sex ed to their children. Under ideal circumstances this would happen in a way that parents should always be open to their children's questions from an early age. For instance, there are stockings at the till in the shoe shop, there is a silhouette of a woman, and a child may ask why the woman is showing her behind. These questions keep coming, you need to be there, need to remain open, need to reply, and it's a burden as a parent. You immediately have the problem of whether I am okay with myself, my own sexuality, my self-awareness. Often it's enough to just reply with another question: 'why are you interested in this? What do you know about this?' Sometimes the motive behind a question is entirely different from what a parent with a parent's perspective might think.

Gy. Sz.: Many times kids don't even need information about these topics but just a chat in a safe environment. In these conversations you don't necessarily have to be a wellspring of knowledge, but just an adult who the child can safely connect to. So it's a confidential relationship, where the adult doesn't disclose secret information, but listens attentively and empathically. In teacher training now there isn't a word about using the questioning technique when a child starts a conversation.

Sz. L.: Let's talk about parents, too, because they are very much left to their own devices here. Now it's the parents' responsibility to provide sex ed. But what can a parent do about this task? Some are more prepared to do this, and can speak about it better, but even open-minded parents don't know the techniques that you need to use to introduce a discussion like this. What is more, a lot of children don't even get sex ed at home, because simply they are in a parental environment where parents don't talk about these things. We are flooded with sexuality, but not even adults can talk about it properly.

Sz. L.: The world is very different, and children are exposed to totally different stimuli than they used to be 10 or 20 years before. Just look at the internet and media if you want to see where we are.

L. G.: What are those very characteristic and absurd misconceptions that masses of teenagers receive from unauthentic sources?

Sz. L.: What we usually encounter is porn. Technical questions related to this, misconceptions, questions about how normal it is that they see there. They are motivated by a desire to become good lovers, to be able to give, and to be successful in sexuality. We encounter a lot of misconceptions deriving from these desires, mainly about male workings, sizes, even with adult clients: how long a sex session should be, how long natural erection should last. In the case of women: can you and should you really expect six orgasms during a session, what is the role of foreplay? They have no questions about tuning onto one another, connecting, emotions. The emotional part would be just as important as the technical part! In the current situation what I can see is that for most people it's about the meeting of bodies. They are curious about that. Also, the proportion of plastic surgeries has rocketed. How can you react to that as a woman, should you talk about your needs, can you say no? Young girls don't really get any help about that. Because unfortunately sexuality is still mostly a male discourse. Women's sexuality is improving, too, but many people still

don't know anything about the clitoris and what you need to do with it. Then you also have the problem of orgasm: how can I induce it, does it count what kind of orgasm I have?

Cs. H-J.: After a training course we constantly get the feedback 'why didn't I know about this, why wasn't I taught when I was a little girl?' Many people are terrified of becoming pregnant for long years and then when they would like to have babies with their partners, they sometimes find it's not so easy after all. The same is true of 'clitoris believers' in relation to orgasm: when I made a video about this, I got a lot of feedback saying 'I have never had an orgasm'. Based on research, ninety percent of women will never have an orgasm without the stimulation of their clitoris. There's a mixture of two things here: sex scenes from porn films as well as romantic films, and you're ready for a disaster when you regard these as commendable models to follow. So there are a lot of questions, but technical and physical details are also important such as contraception and the menstrual cycle. In connection to using condoms I first made a funny video, I pulled a condom on my foot to show that it isn't necessarily tight. It always shocks me to see the several thousands of comments under my videos saying 'not using any protection is okay'. As a woman if I expect my partner to use a condom to protect my health, there is already a conflict and there is already a lot of tension.

Gy. Sz.: People have been saying for a long time that there are girls' topics and boys' topics. We talk to boys about condoms, girls about periods. In sexual education lessons the boys and girls are sometimes separated. Perhaps this is becoming more laidback now, there is a lot of effort to teach boys about menstruation and that contraception is not only the women's responsibility.

Cs-H. J.: I would add that there are very limited possibilities on the male side.

Gy. Sz.: One of the big problems with the Hungarian educational system is that it limits the right and possibility of experimentation, and in the case of

sexuality it's sometimes all about experimentation. The joy and normalcy of experimentation are denied. It's not included in the Convention on the Rights of Children, but experimentation is a very important right. It's closely connected to sex ed. I think the vilest and most manipulative thing about porn is expressly the fact that it connects separate things in children's heads and makes them synonymous: there are and should be many slight and greater differences between porn, eroticism, intimacy, sexuality, the body, love.

Cs-H. J.: I want to highlight intimacy and sexuality. We are talking about children, but even for adults these two are linked in relationships. Many times it comes back in situations after giving birth that intimacy and sex are organically linked, and how difficult it is to have intimacy without sex, when women are not yet prepared for it after childbirth.

Gy. Sz.: But children become adults. The paradigm I adhere to is non-existent sex ed educates people, too. When the parent doesn't talk, doesn't show you the way. Like in various other areas of raising children, educate them not with words but with actions. If a child doesn't get any help or support, in all probability the problem will be regenerated.

L. G.: I suggest we yield the floor to the audience.

Audience: I wonder what you reply to a teenage girl who asks if anal sex hurts.

Sz. L.: The questioning technique is important. There is a question from the class, and we don't answer immediately but throw it back in. Who has any thoughts about this? There usually a conversation starts. Any really extreme question we get, we always have thoughts, always have opinions, and we place the inquirer back into their community.

L. G.: Do these questions come directly from the audience or do you pick them from a box?

Sz. L.: Both. You have an option to ask during the presentation, but usually there is a little box placed there and anyone can throw in their questions on a slip anonymously.

Cs-H. J.: Are there any children in a community who dry up when certain questions come up?

Sz. L.: That's why both of us trainers are there, but we've almost never had kids like that. It is very rare that a child is left out of the class dynamics to such an extent that you can't connect to them at all. Unwittingly they, too, hear about these things.

Audience: Am I mistaken or did you really say that the topic of sex ed can be discussed only in PE, Biology or Ethics lessons in 6th and 7th as well as 11th years? So PE teachers can't talk about it in 8th form?

Gy. Sz.: It is not included in the National Core Curriculum. The framework is tighter regarding the time allotted for teaching certain subjects and topics, and it's overloaded in comparison to reality. Therefore, the most uncomfortable themes are dropped first. No attention is given to the topic because there are a lot of other things to teach: for instance, teachers of Hungarian literature and grammar can't talk about it because it's not included in the Curriculum.

L. G.: What about the communion with nymphs and other creatures in the *The Odyssey*? Or *Romeo and Juliet* and the depiction of love between young people?

Audience: So the law says, when there is a question in connection to *Romeo and Juliet*, concerning what happened that night, the teacher can't talk about it, is that it?

Gy. Sz.: They can talk about but can't cross a certain line. And if you ask me about that line, I can't tell you what or where it is. Therefore, teachers stop

well short of the borderline, because you may never know what a pupil will take away from it, what they are going to say at home and what the parents will say on the phone when they call the headteacher, so that is a slippery slope. They can include nothing in connection to sexuality whatsoever. There was a version of the law that talked about propaganda, but what propaganda meant was not defined. I may be naïve, but I still believe professional standards are superior to laws. The situation is difficult, but if the pupils are open and interested and they pose questions... sometimes I tell the psychologist, the laws can be interpreted in a way that even though they can't be talking to the kids, they should. We advise that if teachers find pupils who are intrigued by a topic and want to talk about it then they should offer talking about it after lessons. It is very important not to talk about sex when we want but when the children are motivated by the topic.

Audience: Not even the homeroom teacher is authorised?

Gy. Sz.: Not even the homeroom teacher can hold a sex ed presentation or session.

L. G.: They have a right if they are granted permission by the parents.

Gy. Sz.: I think what we have today in reality is that when pupils come up with a topic before the class trip, the teacher will fundamentally address what the children are thinking and will not start to wonder whether that falls or doesn't fall within the scope of the law.

In the US, during the George W. Bush administration, it was encouraged that sexual education advertise self-restraint. So the main message to teenagers was: don't have sex. That was the time of the *Twilight* books, about the vampire who falls in love with the girl but they can't have sex. That was supported by different sources. The message had its cultural reinforcement. So you can tell children not to have sex all you want, but that is not the best way, as with this message you leave them on their own.

Audience: How does the relationship with a parent define a child's sexual orientation?

Sz. L.: Family patterns have a definite impact. For instance, about how parents handle intimacy. Not going into the topic of sex now, it's already important whether kids get an intimate hug or a kiss. If they don't get it from their parents, if they get prohibitive messages, those gradually get ingrained and then the children grow up to carry those inhibitions and anxieties they inherited from their parents. And perhaps the parents are not even doing this consciously, but they have inherited these, too, from their parents. These, however, lay the foundations of attitudes in teenage and adult sexuality. If they get stuck, will they dare to ask for help or talk to their partners about it? Many times I can see partners that have sex but can't talk about it and can't articulate their needs.

L. G.: What are the approaches and efficient platforms where we can give something to people from a very young age to a young adult age?

Audience: I have a related question. Today teenagers are affected by various influencers. Has there ever been an attempt to invite influencers on the intellectual side to advertise professionally established web pages?

Cs-H. J.: We had a podcast discussion with Gergő Szirmai. He has got streams in which he raises the topic for discussion. He gives recommendations about credible sources, because some people just talk about things but speak nonsense. For example, there was a private clinic that undertook to provide sexual education. It was awful. As a gynecologist that professional in the video went beyond their scope of authority terribly. They may be a professional in a given field, but there might be other subjects which they cannot address competently. But it was a nice thing to advertise a page like Yelon with the help of influencers or establish contact with professionals. Some time ago I was contacted by the director of *Six Weeks*, Noémi Szakonyi.

The film is about teenage pregnancy – how nice it would be to get into schools and talk about this topic! We sat down and talked about a lot of things, but we constantly hit walls. We found that such programmes would only be worth something if they were done systematically and with an own initiative and funding. The establishment does not support discussing subjects like that. Luckily you have grassroots initiatives and individual enthusiasm. But for these to amount to something and get somewhere the process would have to be reinforced on many points.

Audience: I am a drama teacher and I wonder if you can't still organise a performance of *Trigonometry* or a drama session even if the homeroom teacher can't do anything to help?

Gy. Sz.: This would be feasible from a legal point of view. By giving prior notice to the parents and asking for their approval. You need approval from the school owner, the manager and the parents. First of all, I would say, you have to go somewhere where there are kids, take programmes that discuss some aspect of sexuality to these platforms that children use: TikTok, Instagram, chat groups, video games. The other thing that works well is peer-to-peer education, when it's not adults that come to the children but their peers. Peer support works well and you don't have to label it because it's nothing but the a simple sharing of experiences, some chatting and making quality connections. If you can start to talk about safety and trust, that has the added benefit of their well-being concerning their own sexuality and boundaries. Now we have a programme on the sexual abuse of children online. There is an EU statute on filtering and notifying pedophile footages. Now we are putting the pedal to the metal to ensure that the law is passed in Hungary and the Foundation is planning to arrange a talk with a porn actress where she tells us about the fact that her job actually has nothing to do with reality. This actress is not active any longer and she is involved in a movement with several other porn actors to make a documentary and to somehow take

it to schools. So there are quite a few walls to break down, alternative ways to find, we need to talk about sexuality in a language the children can understand. Those are our only chances now. The retooling of the National Core Curriculum is probably a long-term objective, but it's important for children who live in the here and now to be well, because the goal of childhood is not to survive it.

Cs-H. J.: Currently the primary platform of this is social media.

Sz. L.: Young people should be contacted on platforms that they gladly use and enjoy. And this might well be the world of influencers, because they have a following of hundreds of thousands.

L. G.: Thank you very much for the discussion and the attention.

Young people and love in contemporary literature and pop culture

Roundtable discussion

Participants: Eda Romankovics, Dóra Gimesi, Luca Nyáry, Gábor Lassányi

L. G.: How many different conceptions of love do young primary school pupils encounter in the realm of compulsory reading materials, the world of children's books and on various other platforms?

R. E.: They mostly encounter classic love stories like those in folk tales. These have a patriarchal standpoint. It is obvious that the girl is eligible, she is commodity, while the eligible young man is a buyer. Due to the internet and social media children meet other types, too. Literature and young people themselves reproduce the schemes that reflect their society and culture. Here in Central and Eastern Europe this patriarchal and authoritative perspective prevails, and it obviously leaves its mark on perspectives about women, love and relationships in general.

G. D.: Yes, I think that folk tales are formative in this respect. We have an idealised view of folk tales, which is emphasised in primers for young pupils: the princess is waiting in the tower for the knight or prince, and only appears at the end. At the same time I am detecting a changing trend: nowadays more and more writers deal in the retelling of folk tales. Csenge Virág Zalka is a really good example: she publishes collections of folk tales that convey different images of women. Already in 1920 genius morphologist Vladimir Propp asserted that folk tales have two primary women stereotypes. One is the damsel in distress, but the other is a complex character. I am impressed by the fact that there are all kinds of folk tales, but you have to read a lot to see that, and I think it is a laudable trend that people are trying to convey these to the mainstream.

Ny. L.: I make books and contents for adolescents. For some reason a lot of content made for adolescents today has the emphasis on teenagers having sex and doing drugs all day, and almost all books and series for teenagers have a strong emphasis on that. I am interested in how we can insert the idealised, honest and innocent concept of love back into our oversexualised world and youth culture which is all about sexualisation.

L. G.: What kind of real conceptions of love do children encounter, how multifaceted is that image?

G. D.: I think they encounter a lot of kinds. I write storybooks with different types of love. Atypical love affairs: infidelity, separation, old-age love. I am convinced that you can talk about anything without any taboos, there is no such thing as too early, you can even discuss these things with young primary school pupils. Even with kindergarten-age children, in their own language, of course. The fact that relationships, or any kind of tie between people for that matter, can be complex and changeable is a valid aspect of children's literature, too.

R. E.: There is a great variety of different kinds of love affairs. TIE never states anything, it doesn't tell you what love is, but constantly asks questions, and in general poses questions about norms without conveying norms, like public education usually expects teachers to do. I always write plays which try to discuss the fact that neither love affairs, nor relationships, nor images of femininity are something that can be prescribed, but we all experience them in different ways.

Ny. L.: In my childhood I was not at all interested in love, and owing to this I rarely took notice of these schemes as friendships were always more important. Since that time I have been interested in depictions of love to see, rather than anything else, what kind of values we look for in another person and what that says about our psyches. To this day, Márquez has been one of

my favourite authors. Many different forms of love appear in his books. *Of Love and Other Demons* is about the relationship of a 12-year-old girl, who is considered to be a saint, and a thirty-something priest, who are not romantically involved but still have something that can be called love.

G. D.: My formative reading experience as a teenager was *Jane Eyre*, and I picked it up much earlier than it's recommended. Towards forty I realised that it practically determined my psychosexual development. I am attracted to men exactly like in the book. It was really liberating to read about a girl who is not beautiful but talented, full of ambitions and anxieties. And that both parties experienced terrible things and that even after a lot of horror people can still cling to each other, and there are wounds that can be healed in each other. Mr. Rochester is not a popular male ideal, but to me he was.

Ny. L.: At an early age everybody finds fictional characters that help them experience the first fictional love. My favourite was the cartoon *Atlantis*, in which there was a young linguist with glasses, and my current boyfriend looks just like him. I realised that my taste in men hasn't changed since I was five.

R. E.: These classic stories have moved something in me, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Stars of Eger*. Everything I read about love I resonated with. I had in my head an ideal male: someone that is not open, emotionally quite reserved, and who I can unlock with the dedicated key. Now that was a load of bollocks!

L. G.: How compliant are compulsory reading texts or compulsory options with 20th century perspectives, how enjoyable are they, how easy are they for today's teenagers to interpret? Can the patriarchal schemes and sometimes expressly violent interactions in these books be regarded as good models?

Ny. L.: I liked few compulsory readings because we had to read them at ages when teenagers are simply not interested. I liked *The Tragedy of Man* very much, where Madách modelled Éva after his ex-wife, who has tricked him.

You can see that Madách did not respect women at that point, but that is why I find Eve's character interesting, because she is not an innocent woman ideal on some pedestal, a damsel in distress, but is sometimes selfish and has her own motives. For this reason she stuck more firmly than those classic ideals. I liked Petőfi's *John the Valiant*, too, but I never cared for what Iluska was doing because she was such a two-dimensional character.

G.D.: Lucifer has a lot of lines in the play about Eve where he says he doesn't understand that woman. Eve is practically a mystery to Lucifer, and that says a lot about how human and how round she is as a character. I think she is more human than Adam from this perspective.

Ny. L.: I would probably have enjoyed compulsory books much more if I had not have to read about stoic male figures fighting for big goals, while random women wanted to engage with them but I didn't understand why. For instance, in *The Man with the Golden Touch* there is a man twenty-five years older than the two women, but they both want to spend time with this absolutely undistinctive guy.

R. E.: I hate even the phrase 'compulsory reading', because it is terrible that it is compulsory. At the same time, however, you can learn something from this, too: it is important to be reflective, to think about the situations and the women ideals. Noémi Szécsi has a superb book called *The Golden Book of Girls and Women*. This book traces women ideals in society from the 1800s, and the expectations that women have had to live up to. Reading the book you can easily understand why Jókai created characters like the ones he did. I don't believe in progress, that women are more and more liberated, I think it's conceivable that we may yet see the return of all kinds of awfulness and horror.

G. D.: Jókai has exciting women characters, too. For example, in *The Nameless Castle*, where you have the French female spy called Katalin, a

sexually active and compelling woman figure, and yet you have the damsel in distress archetype, too.

G. D.: To me the female figures of *The Odyssey* are very important because I am convinced that the work has all kinds of archetypal women, a versatile image. This epic and the myths can be read differently, too. At the puppet theatre I wrote a scene for *Decameron 2023*, in which all of Ulysses' women meet one another in a hospital waiting room, and they don't know they are waiting on the same patient. They discuss their boyfriends, and they realise it's the same guy. The relationships of these women with Ulysses are awfully complicated. You don't hear about that in secondary school. Or the fact that Nausikaa, a teenage girl, falls in love with an older man for his intellect. So this attraction is not at all sexual, and you could also talk about the fact that there is a man who tells spellbinding stories, and that it is a type of relationship, too. It's not necessarily consummated in sex, neither is it in *The Odyssey*.

R. E.: The problem is that in this public education system teachers have to complete the curriculum, because there are exams, and a school-leaving exam, and parents and headteachers exert pressure on them to do so.

L. G.: The reality is that very few children read actively. They mostly read works other than books, and there are a lot of books that have reached great popularity in the past few decades. What kind of image do they provide of love and its variations in addition to Disney series, Netflix series and others?

Ny. L.: Nowadays I have read a lot of books that have achieved international fame, for instance, because they become popular on TikTok. If they had any romantic thread, they were very gloomy, and the books only depicted real emotional connections between friends. *Bunny*, for example, is about women friendships that are a little toxic, of which I have had a lot. I always chose men well, but somehow I don't have a good taste in women. There is a

romance between the main female character and her best woman friend, which is not a love affair, but the way she describes it makes you realise that this is more than a simple friendship, the way they idolise each other. And there are these really strong, slightly homoerotic relationships between women, which is an interesting phenomenon, and I can only now find books that deal with this topic. In books there are more friendships like these between men, for example, the myth of Achilles and his bond with Patroclus. Alexander the Great also had a male lover, and they identified with Achilles and Patroclus. I have always been interested in these relationships teetering between friendship and love, and the multitudes of shapes they can take, and that they cannot be evidently delegated to this or that category.

R. E.: In general I can say that diversity is more beneficially depicted today, and since young people read less, and more people watch Netflix and streaming sites, series have replaced great narratives and big novels, and these depict a great variety of love affairs and I think that's good. I am an advocate of showing many types of bonds, because people can be connected to each other in a great many ways.

What is love, what is friendship, these are not neatly defined areas but are more like fluid categories. Love can exist between a girl and a boy, and there are other versions, but we live in a country where gender has become a swearword. Young people grow up in this dichotomy. In my bubble it's natural that we are of many kinds and we have many different connections, but since I work not only with the middle-class but also with young people fresh out of state care and rural Roma women, I know that many people think about this differently.

G. D.: It is very important to watch film series with our adolescent children or that they read. Discussions, even sex ed, can be much easier through

perspectives of fictional characters. It becomes much easier to talk about constructs like gay, etc.

L. G.: Discourses about emotions and sexuality diverge quite sharply, and the latter becomes something technical. Where do the two meet and can you cite positive examples? How much can reading or seeing something become a model for relationships and sexual attitudes?

R. E.: I think we take our models from films and literary works, too. We did that too when young, today's youth do the same. Films have as much impact on young people as parental models and relationship patterns that they see around them. Of course, the more neglected or lonelier a child, the more they will try to get their models from social media. If someone's parents talk about them, that's okay. My children are allowed to watch anything, even the wildest and craziest stuff, but after that we always talk about them. In the meantime we know full well what the mental state of a lot of families and a lot of children are like. They are left by the wayside and they can't ask questions and can't talk about these subjects. So models are important, but their sources can be very diverse.

R. E.: My parents had a relatively good marriage, but I was confronted by the ambiguity of romance, which is something beautiful, and the reality of relationships, which is always a struggle, so we should see that relationships are full of struggles but finally you can stay together. Of course, its mostly unromantic, and very hard, and perhaps it doesn't last until the end of your life, and perhaps it's only for a period. I think now we accept the misconception that love is romantic, and at the same time we see all the wrecked relationships. Somehow we should realise that the former is not true, and nobody wants the latter.

L. G.: In reality there are very few good quality, romantic, functional relationships, and children see this model, while pop culture and literature tell

them about partners that fall in love and then everything is the bee's knees. Where can they find models for an organic, quality relationship?

G. D.: Young adult literature reflects upon this. Classic teenage literature, like *Adrian Mole*, was already honest about a teenage boy's blunders and awfully hard struggles. The key here is humour, irony, self-reflexivity, which used to be important in my life, and still is. You can, with the help of these books, not only talk about these blunders and hardships but also laugh about them, and start again, these are all valid ways to do it.

Ny. L.: The problem may be caused by the fact that neither literature, nor any other form of narrative media shows the nuances of relationships realistically, and I think this is mainly because they mostly snap off the story at the climax. Lovers marry, but there comes a day after the happy end, people wake up and life goes on, so that's what happens in reality. This is why series are better. They are much longer and you don't have to drive the story to a closure in one and a half hour or two hundred pages, but you have years to build relationships. These plots feature much more breaking up and making up, conflict this and conflict that, and fictional relationships develop just like a real one would. But they have generic constraints, too: somewhere you have to halt the story. In the meantime I can see the impact: for instance, my sibling is a romantic soul. She reads fantasy romances and now she has unreal expectations concerning love. She says she should have what they in *Bridgerton* have or nothing at all. I can understand her but it also raises the question whether it will ever be like in *Bridgerton*.

Audience: We have not mentioned *Sex Education*. It gives a lot, it can heal, too, because it discusses a lot of things, like really specific details concerning sexuality. It's a cool series and young people watch it, too.

R. E.: My sons told me to watch it immediately. I didn't finish, but saw a couple of episodes, and yes, it is indeed good.

Ny. L.: I watch a lot of content made for adolescents, because I used to develop a YA series and had to watch a lot of them. What I found most useful about them was that they depict relationships really well, just like *Sex Education*. Another highly underrated series in my opinion, because it's an animation, and many people think it's silly, is *Big Mouth*. You get all kinds of characters and dynamics and it's funny, too, but they also explain things and it was made exactly for the age group that want to watch some animation made for adults even though they are only thirteen or fourteen. But it's not for adults at all, and it lures them in, which I find really useful. What I was disappointed about, especially concerning the depiction of sexuality, was *Euphoria*, because it is all the more apparent that the director didn't want to say anything about adolescents, but fetishises that age. And it is obvious that the show has teenage girls having sex not because the creators want to say something about the situation, but because they find it attractive.

G. D.: In the case of *Sex Education* I think it's also very important that they talk about the emotional side, too, and the viewer roots for the characters hoping they will at last realise that they have a valid relationship and they really are in love with each other. It switches on a romantic desire in the viewer. What is also wonderful about the show is that most of the excitement is about whether two boys will make a couple. Adam and Eric are one the most beautiful love story of all time.

L. G.: In the past ten years, of shows running in Hungary, perhaps the French film *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* was the one where the sexes of the characters didn't matter one bit to me.

Ny. L.: I think the romantic part is really good, but any woman who is attracted to other women or has dated other women find it obvious that the director fetishises the relationship, and the sex scenes also make it obvious that it was written by a male, it's how he pictures two women having sex. I

would recommend *Y to mamá también*. It's about two boys who are having a kind of sex competition, go to bed with each other's girlfriends, but gradually it is revealed that they are really attracted to each other but they don't dare to admit themselves. There are few films that are made by the very community that the film depicts.

L.G: Now that you're mentioning it, it was really the sex scene that stuck out, but the structure was really exciting and showed the many kinds of emotions. Does anyone have a question or comment?

Audience: Well, getting back to *Bridgerton*, I don't like it. But I find interesting the phenomenon of more and more costume dramas having remakes. *Jane Eyre* was remade, as well as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. These remakes have more open sex scenes. I can see an interesting trend, where leather jackets and bad boys cease to be interesting and the scales tilt towards mental patients and hierarchical, non-consensual relations. This has appeared in the realm of series, and costume dramas, too, are unabashed about sexuality now.

Ny. L.: In my opinion this season was very far fetched in comparison to the real story, but when I looked it up it turned out that, according to all contemporary records, they had an affectionate and passionate relationship. It really was a marriage based on love, and George was ridiculed for not having extramarital affairs.

G. D.: Now they only spend money on historical dramas. In Hungary it's a great mistake not to be producing remakes of the Jókai films.

R. E.: I have liked costume dramas forever, but isn't this a kind of romantic illusion, a kind of escape from the present? When we have so many anxieties about the future, perhaps this is our last resort. I don't judge such behaviour, because literature has always been my main refuge. But of course if we totally escape from reality, it will come back with a vengeance.

L. G.: It's so interesting to see that you have stories with 20th and 21st century narratives crammed into them, when it would be enough to reach back to the original sources, where you could find enough base material. Reality would be much more interesting than an artificial bedroom scene that doesn't fit in.

R. E.: Netflix series are strong in their dramaturgical methodology, making shows that will make people addicted. I'm sure there is a recipe: you need some costume drama, a pinch of sex, and a kind of narrative from the present time.

Ny. L.: Obviously a programme can be a quality show, but I will never regard it as valuable and intriguing when the main motivation for its production is the money it will make. This is why you must watch unpopular, bad shows, too, so that you may find a balance.

Audience: I am a teacher of Hungarian and English at a secondary school, and we have had a row about compulsory reading. For example, with Jókai many people said children will never read him anyway, so let's give them *The Yellow Rose* rather than *The Man with the Golden Touch*, because it's shorter, too. But it's hard for me to imagine a learned person who hasn't read these works. Somehow it should be made known that there are valuable books around and they are worth reading and it's never too late.

R. E.: We are not saying these shouldn't be read. They should, they are fantastic works, and really very important. I must add that the great majority of people did not read Dostoyevsky or Jókai in my father's and grandfather's time either. But making them compulsory won't make them more widely read; however, such a move will prove counterproductive and will result in young people developing a hatred towards literature.

Ny. L.: There are a lot of stories that are handed over to children when they are irrelevant, when they can't connect to them emotionally. I don't like a

great many things because I had to read them as compulsory reading, because simply I wasn't ready mentally at the age of twelve.

G. D.: I believe in adaptations for the theatre and film. Of course, it would be wonderful if everyone read *War and Peace*. I read it when over thirty, but by that time I had seen two film versions. There really are works which you have to mature for and grow up to.

Ny. L.: A lot of works that have been written for the theatre are compulsory reading at school, but it's not the way they should be enjoyed. I loved reading Shakespeare, but all my acquaintances that have been taken to see the plays as they were intended made a new and much better bond with the texts.

Audience: Now it's quite an awkward move to return to *Bridgerton*, but I will do it. The romanticising of sickness, madness, dysfunctions is present in 21st century film and pop culture: *Fifty Shades of Gray*, etc. I will say something provocative: the requirements for young men in films and books made for mainly young women are identical to the expectations of hardcore porn towards women.

G. D.: As a matter of fact, this is porn for women. It's suitable for satisfying your desires, but it has nothing to do with reality.

Ny. L.: Well, with women I think this is often quite ungraspable, because we don't watch *Bridgerton* for the direct sex scenes, but rather find the yearning sexy, before they really get down to it. Their hands touched for an instant, and they thought about each other. So for women this waiting is equal to porn.

Audience: Romantic films are all about pretence, the camera moves away and then we pull on the blanket, thrust twice and the pair have an orgasm at the same time. Women's and men's expectations are so different due to this conditioning that any encounter is nigh on catastrophic. As women we wish not to have to say anything, because men will intuit our wishes anyway and

everything will be magical, while at the same time men are indoctrinated by porn.

L. G.: What would you recommend for teenagers about love and connections, something that would be nice to have in the classroom or even youth drama sessions?

Ny. L.: There are those books that I would show to students at school and then there are those that I would recommend as home reading. Out of YA books one of the best today is *Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, which has all kinds of things about sex, love, and more serious topics. I would make them read *Lolita*, too, at a really early age, because we live in a culture where it is normal for adult men to hit on teenage girls, and I would recommend it as a deterrent. The book shows you the psychology of adult males who like these girl-children. I think it is beneficial for girls to read it at an early age, because it really changed the way I thought.

G. D.: They made a new Hollywood version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, called *Ten Things I Hate about You*, which is a great one I think. It depicts a kind of story in which an atypical girl and a similar boy adjust to one another, but they don't give themselves up, and it becomes a love affair only after they get to know each other.

R. E.: I was reminded of *Demian* by Hermann Hesse, which is basically not a love story, but it's about a teenager searching for his identity. Perhaps I am stuck with this male trope, and I was reminded of my sons.

L. G.: Thank you very much for your comments and your attention.

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