

Theatre in Budapest, Budapest in Theatre:

*A Narrative and Dramatic Account of a City,
its Stages, and an Interloping Writer*

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What makes Budapest a city particularly ripe for theatrical expression? And what makes theatre in this city essentially “Budapestian”? And how have I, a writer, a performer, an observer, and an avowed non-scholar, attempted to process my countless impressions into a narrative/dramatic structure? Good questions, all. As a means of mental organization, I have developed four “senses” to connect Budapest to its theatre, four guidelines around which my informal but detailed study has concentrated. By filtering my impressions through these senses, I have gained a deep understanding of both city and stage. Furthermore, I have understood how I can structure a dramatic text that I hope illuminates the complete Budapest experience from a personal perspective. The four senses are: a sense of culture, a sense of practicality, a sense of struggle, and a sense of historical irony. What follows is a narrative and dramatic account, a “reader’s guide”, to my last seven months, and a short selection from the still-in-development Things to See and Do.

Contents:

Prologue: Cabaret and Identity Crises

Part Nulla: Why Budapest? Why Theatre?

(Includes two movements)

Part One: Cultural Exposure

Part Two: The Metro Repertory

Interval

Part Three: Non-Stop Virág

Part Four: Too Much History

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

TS ELIOT, LITTLE GIDDING

Introduction

Theatre in Budapest, Budapest in Theatre: A Narrative and Dramatic Account of a City, its Stages, and an Interloping Writer

Prologue:

Cabaret and Identity Crises

Recently, I met a Hungarian actress after a Hungarian-language cabaret performance at the Merlin Theatre, the most prominent international venue in Budapest. She asked me why I could speak a little Hungarian, and I answered that I was a guest student at the Film and Drama Academy (my shorthand answer). “Why???” she asked, exasperated, as though she is daily meeting Americans who have made this same mistake. “It’s crap here. I went abroad to study, to Vienna and then to London. Don’t get your degree here, just vacation for a year and then go back to United States.” She then returned to the stage to sing a Liza Minelli medley in barely-accented English. I would say that I am

thankful this interchange came well into my grant, long after it could have sparked a crisis of confidence, but sadly this sentiment (although not so virulently) has been expressed by many theatre people since I came to Budapest in August. It is possible that my Hungarian Liza suffers from the same “grass-is-greener” syndrome experienced by those in any field, in any country. It is also possible though, that her attitude itself is integral to exactly what I have come to study. Part of the psyche of the theatre community here is its own shaky self-confidence, which manifests in both the work and the structure of the theatre system. The cabaret singer did not break me. I continue to believe, naïve or hopeful though it may be, that Budapest theatre has something valuable to teach me.

My task, when I arrived in Hungary, was two-fold. My first goal was to become a member of the theatre community here, to make a contribution wherever I could, and to actively observe every influence, trend, commonality and tension that this scene might contain. My second goal was to convert those influences and stories, as well as the broader personal experience of living in such a dynamic place into a piece of theatre.

Theatre is my medium, and Budapest, past and present, is my material. Or at least, that is the equation with which I began.

I should put forward the caveat that few of the “facts” presented in this paper can be documented, cited, or checked, except possibly through hypnosis of the author. These are impressions; however, they come from a prolonged and intimate contact with the subject. If you were to walk for miles around the city and sit for hours in its theatres, you would certainly emerge with your own impressions, different from mine. I can offer no apologies for this – theatre is an art form which constantly struggles between being a

form of individual expression and a communally-shared experience, and throughout the writing of this paper I have struggled in a similar way. I cannot prescribe your experience, and I do not intend to. I can only report on my own. I am a writer, not a scholar, and I make no pretense otherwise.

Part Nulla: Why Budapest, Why Theatre

After that lofty introduction, what follows now is a more useful two-movement introduction. (I know: get on with it, already.) First, understanding how the infrastructure of the theatre system works here is both necessary to follow the paper and an interesting topic on its own. Second, I will outline the method of the madness around which I have organized my analysis. Good luck to me.

The First Movement of Part Nulla: How It All Works Here

Budapest theatre has, on one hand, a very long tradition, while at the same time it is undergoing major reinvention. The theatre system is organized around two concepts more or less unknown in the United States: the ensemble and the repertory. The latter term refers to the current offering of plays produced by a theatre. Instead of performing one play for several months (the “en suite” system used by most U.S. theatres), Budapest theatres play their entire repertory simultaneously, giving a different performance almost every night. To illustrate, a Broadway theatre doing *Hamlet* will do *Hamlet* eight times a week until ticket sales drop or another production moves in, perhaps several weeks or several months after its opening. After *Hamlet* finally closes, the set is typically destroyed and the theatre will not consider performing *Hamlet* again until a brand new production with a new audience in mind comes along. A Budapest theatre doing *Ham-*

let will only perform it a few times each month, storing the set in between performances and keeping the show on offer indefinitely, as long as ticket sales stay decent. In between its *Hamlet* performances, the theatre will perform other plays from its repertory. A typical U.S. theatre would play five or six productions a season, one at a time; a typical Budapest theatre might play ten or fifteen productions over a season, in rotation. This repertory system offers both advantages and disadvantages. It precludes, as a local dramaturg explained to me, both major successes and major failures. If a show is getting rusty, no one really notices so long as it only plays three times a month. On the flipside, an audience member may recommend a show that she saw several years ago, and her friend might easily find it still on that theatre’s repertory. Some shows, such as *The Attic* at the Vígszínház, which has been running for more than five years, draw the same audience members again and again. They return to relive their first experience seeing the show. New casts are occasionally brought in (several shows outlive their original actors) but the shows are almost never redirected or redesigned after opening night.

The other pillar of the theatre system is the use of ensembles (or “acting companies”), which do exist in the U.S., but typically not so rigidly as is found here. The majority of actors in Budapest are members of a particular theatre, their artistic home for that season. They can request permission to play guest performances elsewhere, but their home theatre “owns” them, similar to the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s. Most unbelievably to their American counterparts, a theatre’s actors receive a base monthly paycheck, just for being members of the company. They then receive additional money for each night they perform and each day they rehearse. Although more

young actors prefer to be freelance artists (the arrangement almost all American actors have), some older ones have been with the same theatre since graduating from the academy thirty or forty years ago. The two systems – ensemble and repertory – serve each other. Because of the complex repertory scheduling, actors have little say in where they perform on which night. An actor may perform in five productions at “his” theatre, and give two guest performances elsewhere. His schedule is determined months in advance in a meeting of the theatres’ artistic secretaries, who hammer out the monthly schedule in accordance with a mutually understood hierarchy among the theatres. Because of these systems, being an actor is potentially secure and viable profession. It can almost be like a tenured professorship. (This system also greatly affects the systems of casting and actor training, which I do not have space to elaborate on in this paper. Suffice it to say, whereas in America the actor’s life is unstructured, here in Hungary it is more formalized, and individual advancement is far more difficult to generate.)

Security is an outcome of the third major factor in Budapest theatre, the public funding system. After the theatres were nationalized by the Communists at the end of the 1940s, artistic directors became cultural state employees. In 1989, after four decades of well-funded, and, as time went on, less strictly censored theatre, shifting immediately to a market-driven theatre would have been unacceptable. Theatres today continue to enjoy extremely high public funding (by American standards), which allows them to keep ticket prices low and worry less about quality and competition. This has served well some of the larger theatres, who can rely on their reputations, and has made the situation extremely difficult for fringe or alternative companies. One famous case is that of the Krétákör (Chalk Circle) Theatre,

who, despite selling 99% of their tickets and receiving dozens of Hungarian and international awards, receive more funds from abroad than from the Hungarian government. While this public patronage of the arts is admirable, funding will decrease before theatres and audiences consent to higher tickets prices and private donations, and this makes the current situation untenable. The only Budapest theatre that has succeeded with the American model, more or less, is the Madách Theatre, considered Budapest’s “most commercial.” The Madách performed the Hungarian premiere of the *Phantom of the Opera* nearly en suite (200 performances a season) and charged the equivalent of about \$50, the priciest theatre ticket in town and still only a fourth of what a Broadway show could cost.

So the scene is set. In Budapest, we have “mainstream” actors with secure jobs performing in 100-year-old theatres for tickets under \$7. We have avant-garde fringe companies performing in classrooms and clubs for higher prices because they receive less of the publicly-funded pie. We have a wide variety of shows on offer, from Shakespeare and Chekhov to classic Hungarian tales (often re-written or re-envisioned) to contemporary German, Russian, British, and American playwrights. There is a never-ending search for new Hungarian writers, but unfortunately many theatres must settle for Hungarian translations of popular international fare. The best component of the theatre scene here is the variety of what is on offer. When you include opera, operetta, musicals, puppet theatre, children’s theatre, contemporary and classical dance and touring companies from abroad, the broader theatre scene expands from wide to massive. The cabaret singer at the Merlin might call it all “crap,” but even she would have to agree it comes in an impressive number of forms every season.

The Second Movement of Part Nulla: Four Budapest Senses

Now that the infrastructure of Budapest theatre has been explained, I can attempt to explain the admittedly bizarre system around which I have organized my thoughts. But first, another anecdote. A very popular fringe company here, Béla Pintér and Company, is known for combining pop culture and Hungarian history and folklore in dark, comedic, and musical performances. One of their trademark shows is *Parasztopera* (lit., *Peasant Opera*, but with the English title *The Cowboy*), a folk-opera-fable set in rural Hungary. The final line goes something like, “Oh Lord! It would have been better for me not to have been born at all than to have been born a Hungarian!” How “Hungarian” indeed! Pintér ended his dark comedy (which also contained an dream-like American cowboy with a massive fake phallus and a rendition of John Denver’s famous song about West Virginia, its lyrics adjusted to, “Take me home, country roads/to the place I belong/*Transylvania!*”), with such an unexpectedly nihilistic sentiment! Somehow, sitting in an “fringe” theatre on the top floor of the technical university, a dusty black box in the upper reaches of an ornate palace, this juxtaposition of joy and sorrow seemed completely appropriate. When I first saw it, I recalled a quote from István Bart’s cultural dictionary of Hungary, “*Sírva vigad a magyar*,” which translates to “the Hungarian makes merry by crying.” It seemed obvious at first: pessimism is the second thing that the guide books discuss concerning the Hungarian character, topped only by paprika. This is usually followed by the statistic about the Hungarian suicide rate (highest in Europe, apparently, after its language cousin, Finland.) However, I decided to look closer. I asked myself, What makes *Parasztopera* (or anything) “Hungarian”? Is it simply short hand for “something which took place

in Hungary”? Could the same event have occurred in the Czech Republic? I think not. What happens here happens specifically *here*. I believe this is true because of the uniquely symbiotic relationship between Budapest and its theatre system – a relationship as idiosyncratic as the city itself. But how can this help me as a writer? How do you write a place?

Using as my source material both the dozens of performances I have seen in Budapest – including all of the categories I mentioned above, from “experimental” theatre to good old traditional Neil Simon – as well as the countless encounters I have had with the city and its inhabitants, I have focused in on four themes, which in my view, define both Budapest and the theatre culture it fosters. These themes, or “senses”, have proved useful to me as an observer of theatre, a temporary citizen of Budapest, and a dramatist. The four senses are a sense of cultural awareness, a sense of practicality, a sense of struggle, and a sense of historical irony.

Of course, these senses are more like magnetic poles than rigid boundaries, guidelines around which things (whatever these “things” may be) tend to orient themselves. They overlap, they shift in and out of one another, and they sometimes contradict each other. However, after some study and metaphorical acrobatics, these categories represent four distinct windows through which we can understand what happens on the stage, what happens on the street, and how they are inextricably connected. They have proved very useful as a writer. Instead of describing all four, which would take too long and is also a little boring, I will explain two of these senses, cultural awareness and practicality, and just when my deconstructionist tendencies become overwhelming, we will read some dialogues to cover the other bases.

Part One (Finally!): Cultural Exposure

My first impression of Budapest when I arrived was a sense of the significance of culture. One major reason why theatre is inseparably bound to Budapest, and vice versa, is an overarching *awareness* of culture shared by Hungarians. It manifests for Budapesters in the cityscape itself: you are never far from a marker memorializing a noted composer, author, or poet. It also appears on stage in an almost self-reflected devotion to Hungarian “classics” – those plays and writers they cannot seem to get enough of, for even the act of producing one is to take part in its undeniable significance.

Culture in the City and in the Citizens

You can take the tram from Mari Jaszai Square (named after the popular tragedienne around the turn-of-the-century) to Lujza Blaha Square (after the prima donna around the same time period, more noted for comedic and heroic roles). If you take the metro (changing trains under the would-be site of the Budapest National Theatre, now a parking lot) to the Great Market Hall, you will find yourself near Ferenc Molnár Street (named for the most famous dramatist to come out of Hungary). These three points make a triangle that includes almost all of downtown Pest. It is true that the revolutionaries loom largely in the Hungarian brain (Lajos Kossuth Square is the site of Parliament and Szechenyi Bridge connects the center of Pest – the Science Academy, in fact – with the foot of Castle Hill). The Hapsburgs still (or rather, once again) give Budapest its skeletal frame (Teresa, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Francis on the larger Ring Road and the Vienna-bound Danube cuts through the center). But the soul of Budapest, where you can buy a sandwich, where you can purchase flowers or sunglasses-

es any time, day or night, surely this is in Mari Jaszai or Blaha Lujza Squares. Every Hungarian – even those not involved in theatre – seems to know who these figures are. It is always difficult and dangerous to try to equate cultural figures within different communities (ie, So-and-so is our Robert Redford, etc.), but I think it is sort of a Hungarian parlor game. Unfortunately, the comparison only works one-way. So-and-so might be their Robert Redford, but Robert Redford is not our so-and-so, because most of us would have no idea even who our so-and-sos are, let alone theirs. There are about twenty Budapest streets, parks, and squares named after the revolutionary poet Sándor Petőfi, according to András Török’s critical guide to Budapest, not to mention a bridge, a museum, a radio station, and one of the “streets” inside the WestEnd Shopping Mall. (The fact that Petőfi’s name recognition outside of Hungary is about nil, sadly, does not stem this nomenclature-extravaganza. In terms of cultural exports, the Budapest city planners would do much better naming something Zsa Zsa Gabor Square, or at least Tony Curtis Park, but understandably and admirably there seems to be little interest in this. However, in St. Louis, Missouri, there is the Mark McGuire Highway but nothing named after Maya Angelou or Tennessee Williams, the baseball star’s fellow St. Louisans.) There is simply less of a sense of theatre (or other art forms) being “high art,” divorced from the “real work” of the city. Audiences are incredibly professionally diverse and full of the college students and twentysomethings typically absent from American theatres. Live theatre is here what a Hollywood movie might be at home. Perhaps this is because the city planners are brave or culturally informed enough to give cultural heroes their due in the cityscape itself.

Culture on Stage

When you look at the repertory of any of the major Budapest theatres, in addition to the Chekhovs and the Shakespeares, you typically find at least a few Hungarian classics – either in drastically new versions (such as *John the Valiant* at the Pesti Színház, set in Nyugati Station) or completely traditional (such as the production of Imre Madách's *Tragedy of Man* that opened the new National Theatre in 2002). Many theatres, in their various ways, try to be the torchbearers of classic Hungarian drama.

It is true that these plays are performed for their inherent worth, because the stories are good and Hungarian and illustrate some aspect of the Hungarian, and human, psyche, as *Death of a Salesman* does for Americans. But furthermore, they are done *because* they are classics. They are done because people crave the experience of hearing the words of Sándor Petőfi or Ferenc Molnár. Because of the repertory system here, which keeps some plays in rotation for several decades, even seeing a premiere of a new version of *John the Valiant* has the potential to be a historically significant experience. On the other hand, even if this production flops after four performances, it still becomes part of the canon of *John the Valiant* productions, a new chapter in a book that began a hundred and fifty years ago with its first publication. This is true even when a theatre breaks from the traditional way in which a play is performed. Part of the excitement, I think, about the Krétákör production of Ferenc Molár's *Lilium* is the director's handling of classic material in an avant-garde, expressionistic, and yet totally lucid way. The "classicness" of it becomes and remains part of the experience. When a popular actor plays a famous role on one of Budapest's major stages, the confluence of person, place, and thing itself

becomes a cultural institution – the kind of thing people tell their grandchildren they saw many years ago.

The Connection Between the Two

The theatre tradition is part of the act of seeing theatre in Budapest. We see plays and we live among them. I do not know exactly how, but the cultural education here seems to be impressively rich. School groups attend all kinds of theatre, including some challenging pieces, from a very young age. Recently I saw a puppet-and-live-theatre version of *Don Quixote* at the Budapest Bábszínház (Puppet Theatre). I would estimate the average audience age was 10. From the first moment (when a female actor, dressed as a man, opens a locker decorated with swimsuit-clad women, makes excited noises about them, and takes a swig from a flask) to the last, the performance was totally inappropriate for kids. It contained explicit visual references to, among other things, prostitution, alcoholism, September 11th, the Holocaust (including a video sequence that juxtaposed Hitler's moustache and an erotic dancer's thong underwear), and so on. The kids loved it. The teachers seemed a little shaken, but no one walked out. When I later asked the dramaturg why they allow kids to see these obviously adult productions (and furthermore, why they play them on Thursday afternoons at 2pm, when it seems likely and reasonable that school groups might attend) she shrugged her shoulders. "We tell them, but they come anyway." Does this fall into the category of pop-sociology maxims under the heading "Europeans-mature-faster," akin to how French teens apparently never drive drunk because they begin drinking much younger and therefore know how to exercise responsibility? Or is this exposure to challenging theatre simply

part of the process of bringing up citizens who inherently understand art's role in society, the good, the bad, and the occasionally offensive? I believe the latter. The cultural significance of theatre (as other art forms) as an important output of "Hungarianness" is taught at an early age. By taking your 10-year-old to see a disturbing play, you invariably convey the message that art is more than pretty pictures, and culture sometimes may bring temporary unease but is still necessary to society and identity.

It seems especially true in this isolated culture, bordered on every side by a nation that can subscribe to some greater linguistic/cultural grouping (for instance, the Slavs, the Germans, or even the Romans). If the Hungarians forget Lujza Blaha, they seem to know, no one else will remember her.

Part Two: The Metro Repertory

Practicality in the City

Discussing practicality in a city where even the natives complain of the mind-numbing bureaucracy (mostly concerning the post office and the telephone service) might seem odd. However, the one area in which the notion of Hungarian practicality is most obvious is public transport. (Practicality, as I am using it, differs from efficiency. Practicality simply refers to a system's ability to accomplish a task; efficiency involves finding the best way to do so.) The transport system provides both a valuable individual service (getting from point A to point B being, of course, the primary function of a transportation system) and, I think, an irreplaceable social service. Because of parking and traffic, driving a car seems impracticable for even some more wealthy Budapesters. The result is a great moving melting pot on the blue line every morning and every afternoon. In addition to the commuters themselves, you

find hundreds participating in the "cottage industries" thriving in, on, around, or under the big stations. Moszkva Square in Buda is an entire mini-economy. The kind of Wal-Mart one-stop efficiency does not exist, but the people themselves seem to get things done in a no-nonsense way – they just do not balk at buying ladies underwear and gyros side-by-side on their way to work. There is also a wonderful practicality surrounding the wide variety of transport options available. I cannot imagine too many cities feature three metro lines, dozens of bus lines (including a special Castle Bus), a tram network, and a trolley system, and a suburban light rail, not to mention the night buses, the funicular, and two novelties: a children's railway and a cog-wheel railway. (It also includes an occasional Phantom Tram, which can occasionally be seen rumbling along the Large Boulevard at 3am on a Wednesday – long after it was supposed to be shut down for the night – with no explanation. There are passengers on the Phantom Tram, but it doesn't seem to stop at any stops. I think it might be a shadow service exclusively for spies and nightclub bouncers.) Almost all of it is integrated into the same ticket scheme – your month pass permits you to ride the system almost in its entirety. Budapest is not a massive city – inevitably there is some overlap. Do commuters find the mode of transport most suited to their mood? Or do they ride the routes where they are less likely to be stopped by evil kontrollers? The Number 2 tram and the Number 15 bus run parallel just two blocks away from each other between Mari Jaszai Square and Fővám Square. The bus weaves through some imposing buildings, including some connected to the Hungarian military. The tram rides along the picturesque riverbank, making two stops in front

of Parliament and offering unbeatable views of the Danube, the castle district, and Gellért hill. Why would you ever take the bus? Perhaps it is to avoid tourists like my father, who rode the Number Two from terminus to terminus (even down to southern Pest, near the National Theatre, where there is admittedly less to see) four or five times during his visit. Practical but inefficient.

Practicality in Theatre

The system I discussed above of ensembles and repertories is the essence of practicality (not, the distinction must again be made, efficiency). The public funding allows for practicality without cutting too many costs. The Vígszínház, for instance, can have dozens of complicated stage sets in storage at once without worrying about renting space. The theatre actually owns several covered courtyards and basements in its neighborhood. It also has the manpower to have one complete set up for a rehearsal that ends at three o'clock and an entirely different set up for a performance at seven. There is a similar practical inefficiency surrounding the internal leadership structure of the theatre companies. Rather than, as in the typical American system, having the theatre's leadership shared between two people (one on the artistic side and one on the executive side), the Hungarian theatres (perhaps remembering their negative experience of another Dual Monarchy) are led by one person, usually a theatre director crudely recast as a businessman. During the years nationalized theatres, this made indirect government control of theatres simpler; today it serves to protect the status quo (referred to euphemistically as "the tradition") of a given company and (sometimes) the career of the director himself. This top-down leadership system helps "things get done," but sometimes bruises egos or sacrifices artistry along the way.

Another manifestation of practicality in the theatre can be found by looking at the theatre community as a whole. More so than, in my experience, New York City, America's largest and most important theatre community, in which there is a deep schism between Broadway (commercial) and Downtown (artistically relevant) theatre, Budapest theatre is all of a kind. Artists from the fringe sometimes direct at the major theatres (Sándor Zsótér and Béla Pintér, two of the most prominent "fringe" directors in Budapest, have directed this season at the Vígszínház and the National Theatre, respectively), and the same is true in the other direction (the studio theatre of the Madách – Budapest's most "Broadway" company – is becoming an independent art theatre named after István Örkény). All of this on offer for a large, but still finite, audience requires a fluidity of thinking for both producer and consumer. The system of artistic secretaries determining schedules for both actors and theatres is the practical solution for this need for fluidity. Becoming an actor in Hungary is a relatively straightforward process: you basically need to get accepted into the Drama Academy, and be fortunate enough to be a star student in a class with an influential teacher (you will have the same one for all four years) and after you graduate he will invite you into his company. (By the way, the use of "he" is not gender shorthand. Every acting faculty member is male, and all but two artistic directors in Hungary are men.) Once you are in a company, in theory, your employment is secure until you retire or die. The notion of actors starving to death while waiting tables and auditioning thirty times a week – so common in America – is foreign here.

The Connection Between the Two

Here in Budapest, you can utilize the overlapping and over-complete transport system

to attend a practical but inefficient theatre. (The ironic exception is the out-of-the-way National Theatre. You can take the Number Two tram on your way *to* the theatre, but occasionally a production ends after the tram stops running. Good luck getting home from its industrial war zone southern Pest location.) Getting things done is highly valued, but, in keeping with what I've heard obliquely referred to as "the previous system of government," as long as people are working all day, productivity is perhaps less of a concern. As I heard said in the Czech Republic, "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." In Hungary, though, they expend huge amounts of energy on the pretending. To again connect this to public transportation, imagine how much more money the city could make if they employed a system of gates in the metro (like in the London tube) that required a valid ticket before entering. The spot-checking system employs more people, but draws in less revenue. Similarly, switching to an "en suite" theatre system, with theatres producing one play at a time, would sacrifice some of the impressive variety on offer, but would almost certainly improve the quality of each individual performance.

Interval

The next two parts are excerpts from the still-in-development *Things to See and Do*. The basic story involves Ben and Julia who move to Budapest after their college graduation. Julia was born in Budapest and moved to the States when she was ten. Ben is a self-described "American mutt." Over the course of their time in Hungary, Ben connects to Hungary in a way he never expected to and Julia is no longer able to. They each have

various encounters – with other American interlopers, with figures from Julia's family's past, and, in Ben's case, with Árpád, the Magyar conqueror from the ninth century A.D.

Part Three: Non-Stop Virág

(*Night. Julia is in bed, and Ben enters and sits beside her.*)

Ben: Wake up.

Julia: Why?

Ben: Wake up, something happened.

Julia: What happened?

Ben: I got you flowers again.

Julia (*still half-asleep*): From where?

Ben: From the same non-stop virág bolt.
The one I went to last week.

(*pause.*)

Julia: I don't want any flowers. What's that smell?

Ben: Something happened, and I have to tell you about it. But first you have to take the flowers. Wake up.

Julia (*sits up, looks at him*): Is this something stupid?

Ben: It's nothing stupid.

Julia: What. (*takes the flowers*).

Ben: Ok. I got mugged.

Julia: What?

Ben: I got mugged. It's ok.

Julia: Where?

Ben: In the train station.

Julia: Why were you there?

Ben: I was buying flowers.

Julia: Why were you there? It's fucking dangerous.

Ben: I know. I just got mugged.

Julia: What happened.

Ben: A guy came up to me, and his eyes were going everywhere, and his jacket was tucked into his sweatpants, which I

guess is a sure sign of something being up—

Julia: Ben, Ben, please don't give me your psychological assessment. Just tell me what happened.

Ben: Well, he came up to me, and no one else was around, except some sleeping bums, and he put his hand on my shoulder, and kind of led me to the wall—

Julia (*under her breath*): Oh, my god.

Ben: —and it was sort of hypnotizing, and I knew I should have just bolted but I couldn't. And then I could see around the corner a little bit, I could see one of the other bums, a woman, was sitting up on a yellow mattress and was staring straight at us, and she made some kind of song or noise or something, and then the guy took out a knife, like a bowie knife, with grooves and a red handle, and it was really dirty and rusty, and he had one hand on my shoulder, and now his eyes were focused right on mine, they weren't rolling around. And he spoke in German to me. Which I thought was strange. He said *geld*, which I knew was money, and I just took out my wallet and gave it to him. He took the money out and put it in his pocket and then took all the receipts and shit out of the wallet and dropped them and the wallet on the floor. And then he took my jacket sleeve and sawed a little hole into it. See? And then he pushed me away. I mean, he was a homeless guy. I saw him go back to the woman and get back on the mattress under the blanket. And they both just laid back down and stopped moving.

Julia: So you didn't just go up to him and just take the cash back?

Ben: No.

Julia: You just left?

Ben: I stood there for a while. My arms were all dirty from where he touched me. He smelled really bad. I was kind of shaking. I almost threw up. Then I remembered that I had a pocket full of change, and so I bought you the flowers. Which is what I had come to do anyway. I love that store. And then I came home.

Julia: So he's still there.

Ben: I guess so.

Julia: So he just came up to you and freaked you out, and you gave him your cash. Go back!

Ben: Did I mention the knife? Look at my jacket. Like I'm going to go wake him up and ask for it back.

Julia: No, um, you did the right thing.

Ben: What would you have done? I couldn't think.

Julia: I just don't see how he could just walk up to you and take your money like that.

Ben: I thought he was going to kill me. I really did. I was vibrating.

Julia: Why were you down there?

Ben: I thought I heard music.

Julia: Why were you out in the first place?

Ben: I wanted to check it out. See the flower store again. I didn't think I was going to get mugged.

Julia: Check what out? You don't have to go down into the station to get to the flower store.

Ben: Ok. I wanted to see the station at night.

Julia: So you intended to go down there.

Ben: Well, I intended to go, and then I got scared and turned around, and then I

thought I heard music, so I went down to check it out.

Julia: And the guy came up to you.

Ben: He was already walking in my direction when I came down the stairs. It was like he was waiting for me. It was weird.

Julia: How much was in your wallet?

Ben: About twenty dollars.

Julia: Ok.

Ben: Ok.

Julia: Are you okay?

Ben: Now that you're done accusing me, which I knew would happen, I'm okay.

Julia: Well, I'm sorry! But it's just, it just . . . Ben! You ask for it!

Ben: I don't know what that means, so I guess I'll ignore it.

Julia: Fine. Do that. I don't know what it means either. Just don't go hanging out in the train stations at night.

Ben: Or, go, and just don't take anything valuable with me.

Julia (*mocking him*): Hello? Did I mention the knife?

Ben: Now I know, now I'll be more careful. Violent crime here is really low.

Julia: I can't believe this! Learn the lesson, shithead.

Ben: What's the lesson? That this city is dangerous? That's no lesson. I'm not going to hide in my room like there's a curfew.

Julia: Ok, do what you want. Go get cut up. Leave your wallet at home.

Ben (*dismissively*): Go to hell. (*starts to exit.*)

Julia (*equally so*): Thanks for the flowers.

Ben (*from off stage*): Screw you.

Part Four: Too Much History, Too Many Stories

(*A bus. Ben is looking in a book and up at the posted diagram of bus stops. Árpád, in a vest and tie, is seated on a seat behind him.*)

Árpád: Excuse me.

(*Ben hears, but ignores.*)

Árpád: Excuse me, young sir. What is it you are looking for?

Ben (*quickly*): Oh, I know where I'm going. (*Ben puts the book in his backpack, but keeps studying the diagram.*)

(*pause.*)

Árpád: Excuse me. Come here. Have you ever been to India?

(*pause.*)

Ben: No.

Árpád: Cambodia?

Ben: No.

Árpád: Malaysia?

Ben: No.

Árpád: In these countries, people don't help other people. Here in my country, we do.

Ben: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—

Árpád: I have been to these countries.

Ben: No, it's just that I

Árpád: In my country, it is different.

Ben: I've been living here for three months. So I know. I was just wondering about the street sign.

Árpád (*laughs*): Why don't you speak Hungarian if you are living here?

Ben: Well, I do. A little.

Árpád (*serious*): Well, should I speak Eng-

- lish or Hungarian? Which do you prefer?
- Ben: Hungarian. If you speak slowly. And only use infinitive verbs.
- Árpád: Because I speak five languages.
- Ben: Really.
- Árpád: I speak Russian, Italian, German, French, and English.
- Ben: And Hungarian.
- Árpád (*grandly*): Of course! It is my country, it is my language. Where are you from?
- Ben: America.
- Árpád: I was serving in the American army for thirty years. (*He mimes holding a machine gun with two hands and shooting a spray of bullets, while making a soft gun sound.*) You understand?
- Ben: Not really.
- Árpád: I was Black Hat.
- Ben: Oh.
- Árpád: You know?
- Ben: Um, I've heard of it.
- Árpád: I kill people.
- Ben: Now?
- Árpád: I am very happy. My God, He may decide later on. I am looking at you, and you might be my grandson. I am seventy-three.
- Ben: (*Trying*). I'm happy too.
- Árpád: You should be happy, you should enjoy your life, you should do what makes you happy. I had to kill many many people.
- Ben: I said, I am happy.
- Árpád: So when I try to help you, when I see you looking at sign and at map, I am not trying to offend you.
- Ben: Oh, I wasn't offended.
- Árpád: I am not trying to call you stupid.
- Ben: It's not a problem.
- Árpád: I have made a hard life, I have killed many people, and I am here in my country, in Hungary, and I am only trying to help.
- Ben: I appreciated it. I'm sorry if I upset you. I'm happy. You're happy. (*He holds out his hand. Árpád takes it and doesn't shake it in a business way, but holds it and pumps it up and down to accentuate his words.*)
- Árpád: I was here during revolution. Then I killed many people. (*He lets go of Ben's hand and repeats machine gun gesture.*) You could be my grandson.
- Ben: I could.
- Árpád: And I am happy, young sir.
- Ben: I'm glad you're happy.
(*Sound: the bus-stop arpeggio.*)

Bibliography

I have drawn, indirectly or directly, from dozens of sources while writing this play and this paper. Some of the most provocative have been un-citable, such as billboards, graffiti, free advertising postcards, Metro announcers, overheard conversations, and dreams. In terms of traditional sources, the following have been particularly useful:

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