

# A Trilogy Of Budapest Plays

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*How to best construct a narrative that deals with Hungarian history, culture and present circumstance in a dramatic and stage-worthy manner is a difficult question. The writer must answer the demands of two unforgiving masters – the people in question, who call out for truth and a balanced portrayal, and the audience, who call out for excitement, drama and the magic of the theatre. The final results of the undertaking will be judged when the house lights go down and the actors speak the lines, but the process by which these plays came about is one marked by noteworthy collaboration, education and expanded artistic reach. The following paper investigates that process: how *A Trilogy of Budapest Plays* went from imagined possibility to concrete production.*

## 1. Act One: Beginnings

It is written that Hungarian theatre suffered two juggernaut steamrollers in fifty years: nationalization in the late forties and commercial television in the late nineties. It is said to have profited from the first... and god only knows what will happen as a result of the second.<sup>1</sup> In America we never knew the first, and are firmly in the shackles of

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<sup>1</sup> A Shabby Paradise. Fabri, Peter. Ester Press, 2004.

the latter. Without exaggeration, screens – both big and small – dictate how, when, where and why we get our information. Increasingly, we are drawn to anything that rings of Hollywood glitz or has the laugh-track reliability of a sit-com.

While theatre struggles on, the subtleties, or humanity even, of complex issues gets lost amidst the car chases and exploding buildings – the large breasted heroines and mustachioed villains. This is nothing new, nothing that hasn't been shouted from the rooftops of regional theatres across the United States for fifty years. But it means that a generation in the U.S., my generation, has been inundated by media in a simplistic form that has highlighted the Russians – and only the Russians – as the default communists, the sole face of the Eastern Bloc. From politics, to athletics, to war, the hammer and sickle of communism have meant nothing but Moscow, nothing but a big, cold country somewhere way East of Paris. And Hungary was, and perhaps continues to be, all but ignored as we envision the world as a spy-novel confrontation between super-powers. The subtleties of the Hungarian state of affairs, with or without communist governance, has been largely absent from our consciousness – and stage.

This playwriting project, then, was born out of a relative ignorance, and aims to remedy the conditions that created it. The world over, good theatre artists are engaged in a crusade for quality and are charged with tackling some of the more nuanced topics with fresh and creative approaches. The Budapest trilogy was conceived in this vein.

When I began, with the lofty and naive goal of enlightening both my generation and myself, I wrote the following: *I intend to write three plays, linked by chronology and character; that will use the historical events in Hungary as a backdrop to the drama found therein. The plot and specifics are purposefully vague at this juncture, because I wish to remain open to what my research and experience will dictate.* Although the wording is indefinite, my explicit intention was to write some serious *Historical Drama*; I would stay close to the events of the 1989-1990 conversion, give a sense of scope – including the 1956 revolution... and tell the story of a family in Hungary, Budapest specifically, during that time.

As I set off on my research and settled into life in Budapest, that stratagem changed significantly.

## 2. Act Two: Middles

### 2. 1. *A Problem Arises*

Shortly after my arrival in Budapest I began paging through history books and visiting the city's museums; it was lovely, but it was then that I was confronted by the first of many obstacles. As with any country, there was an inordinate amount of information to deal with, and even if I carved out the time frame around 1989, there was still a lot of contextualizing that would be needed. History books struggled to cram it into hundreds of pages – without the burden of characters, scenery or stage directions – and so squeezing it into a hundred-page play was going to be a serious challenge.

As my integration – or acclimatization – began, I encountered another difficult realization. The faithful reportage of historical events calls for a certain, perhaps valuable, academic distance. Not so for playwriting. People can write accurately about the ancient Greek economy, for example, without having lived in Athens in 400 BC, and playwrights *can* create theatre out of the ancient Greek economy... but unless there is an immediate, emotional connection for the playwright, the product will be a textbook on stage... and people will fall asleep, uninspired and unaffected. My emotional connection – initially historical and external – began to change. As I gained confidence with my nascent Hungarian language skills, attended social events, and formed strong friendship bonds, I was more drawn to the here and now, and less and less comfortable with the emotional gap that a historical drama might need.

I also began to admit a certain, somewhat vain, flaw in my plan. I've always maintained that the act of writing is a very presumptuous undertaking. When someone puts pen to paper, they perform an act of ultimate vanity, with two wild assumptions – one, that they can tell a story other than their own, and two, that someone will give a damn. Until my arrival in Budapest, I'd held firm to a conviction that a writer, if good enough, could write anything, *anything*, convincingly; the assumptions were just part of the exercise. But now I was faced with telling the events and the stories of a strange place and of an unfamiliar people... and suddenly I was having doubts. How was I, as a foreigner, going to write anything deep and honest about

Budapest, a city in which I'd lived only for a matter of weeks or months? Perhaps this was a little too presumptuous....

Added to this was that I had been doing a lot of reading – fiction, poetry and plays – that were either penned by Hungarians, or dealt in some way with the country. I came across a play by British playwright David Edgar called *The Shape of The Table*. It happens to be the first in a trilogy (although I don't know if he initially envisioned the three plays jointly), and it deals with the crumbling government of an Eastern European communist regime during a relatively peaceful transition to Democracy. It is meant, as far as I can tell, to be set in either Prague or Budapest... perhaps both. The play is a series of negotiations between competing power brokers as they hammer out who will lead, who will go to jail for past offences, and who will quietly fade into the background. One reviewer called the exchanges, "convincingly bitter", which I can readily agree with... there certainly was a whole lot of fighting. The problem was that the play fell into a dull black hole between innovative drama and gripping historical realism. It was a little of both, but nothing very interesting came out in the mix. It wasn't specific in reference – to time and place – but it wasn't abstracted enough to be enchanting. As I set off to cover similar territory, I considered it a well-timed warning...

With these and other doubts playing on my mind, I began the messy job of letting go of my previous plan. A linear, chronological, family-focused trilogy went to the cutting room floor and a new blend of influences began to take hold.

## 2. 2. *The Plot Thickens*

As planned, I began to conduct interviews of people in the Budapest area. As I had hoped, these proved very helpful in gaining a first-hand picture of what life was like for a cross-section of people in different decades. My notes include things like, “*My dad lay in a ditch while tanks rolled past*”, “*I tried to learn to play Beatles songs on a guitar... but mistakenly told my kids that I was learning Beetles songs*”, “*living independently is strange – your parents worry*”, “*I don’t really feel any hope*” and “*I always skipped Russian class and went to Margit Island*”. These were instrumental in helping me to begin to formulate an idea about the characters who might inhabit my dramas, whatever shape they might take.

Equally important, though, were my informal interactions. Everything is potential material for writing, and in this new environment story threads and useful snippets of conversations were constantly bombarding me. At my gym, I learned that one woman thought that almost all American teenage girls had fake breasts. In a coffee shop, I heard that for the young people of Hungary African-Americans are generally held to be either fabulously rich stars of music and film...or lawyers and doctors. I heard anti-Semitic comments, anti-gay comments, and anti-Budapest comments. I heard lots about New York... and about the war in Iraq. The old ladies in the market elbowed me, a former world champion canoeist offered me cheap beer and sad stories, and more than one hospitable Budapesti sought to introduce me to Palinka. Each time I sheepishly half-pretended that it was my

first encounter – so as not to lessen the pride and joy that accompanies the ritual.

But from my formal interviews came a story that would not leave me alone. It became, in some ways, the benchmark against which I measured many of my subsequent discussions. It literally haunted me. The events of this young man’s life were at turns quite ordinary, at turns hardly believable... and I was hooked.

The problem was that I had entered the interview phase of my project with the intention of using the gathered information as merely a palette from which to combine colors and materials; I was looking for the pieces of a whole, not the whole itself. And yet, there it was. And so, after much deliberation and unease about telling an individual story, off I went.

The first draft of the play came quickly – and is perhaps the best first draft I have ever written. I have tentatively titled it *Lest You Drive An Angel*, from a quote by William Blake. The narrative is held together structurally by four funeral speeches, given by four different characters, across three different generations. It makes use of the history of Budapest in an atmospheric sense, and the “real-time” present of the play is set in Budapest in 2005. The central conflict deals with the rapid erosion of a *traditional Hungarian* existence (as the mother character conceives it) as western media and influence penetrate ever deeper into family dynamics – separating generations and altering values. The clash erupts between a mother and her son,

a relationship that I find fascinating in general, but all the more so because of what I perceive to be a particularly close, and therefore volatile, bond between Hungarian mothers and sons. The play strays deliberately, and necessarily, from the life story of my subject; his narrative,

though stirring, did not do me the favor of fitting neatly into a two-act drama. The dialogue, obviously, is completely of my own invention, and much of the “real-time” scene material came from my own first-hand observations. Here is an excerpt:

*Lights come up on Daniel, working at the dining room table.  
After a beat, Margit comes down with a McDonald’s wrapper. She throws it on the table.*

» MARGIT:

» Is this why you couldn’t eat lunch?

» DANIEL:

» Mom - please... not -

» MARGIT:

» McDonald’s?

» DANIEL:

» I was in a hurry.

» MARGIT:

» In a hurry to get where?

» DANIEL:

» I don’t know.

» MARGIT:

» Don’t lie to me, Daniel. I can tell when you’re lying. I’m your mother.

» DANIEL:

» Okay, fine. I wasn’t in a hurry.

» MARGIT:

» But you went into that... that... place, anyway. Do you know what is in these sandwiches?

» DANIEL:

» No.

» MARGIT:

» Exactly - now if you lived in a home where there wasn’t any food to be had, where the cupboards are bare or the

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» DANIEL:

» I like it. Okay? I like the hamburgers there. They taste good. So I ate one. So what?

» MARGIT:  
 » You didn't used to like it.  
 » DANIEL:  
 » We didn't used to have it!  
 » MARGIT:  
 » But even when it came - you said you hated it - and the billboards  
 - and that Burger Kind place and -  
 » DANIEL:  
 » I do! I hate them! They're terrible - but I still eat there.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » But even when the - even when it opened, and everyone went to  
 line up, you never -  
 » DANIEL:  
 » I ate there, okay? The second week! I went and ate there -  
 » MARGIT:  
 » You did?  
 » DANIEL:  
 » Yes. I sat by myself in a corner, my back to the door, so that nobody  
 could see me.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » But you said all the kids in there were just blindly following -  
 » DANIEL:  
 » They are! We are. I hate the place. I hate everything it stands for,  
 okay? Happy? I think it sucks. I honestly do.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » But you still eat there.  
 » DANIEL:  
 » But I still eat there.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » And then you can't find room for my soup.  
 » DANIEL:  
 » I - look, mom, please. I'm sorry about lunch. Okay. Stop.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » I'm just asking -  
 » DANIEL:  
 » Yes. Okay? I had a big mac, fries, a coke, a sundae... and then I  
 got another hamburger on top of all that... because I wanted it. I  
 wanted it, so I got it.  
 » (Beat.)  
 » I mean, christ, what are you, the fucking food police? And then you

can't find room for my soup.  
 » DANIEL:  
 » I - look, mom, please. I'm sorry about lunch. Okay. Stop.  
 » MARGIT:  
 » I'm just asking -  
 » DANIEL:  
 » Yes. Okay? I had a big mac, fries, a coke, a sundae... and then I  
 got another hamburger on top of all that... because I wanted it. I  
 wanted it, so I got it.  
 » (Beat.)  
 » I mean, christ, what are you, the fucking food police?  
 » MARGIT:  
 » I'm not trying to run your life, Daniel. I'm only saying that maybe  
 you could think a little before you do something like this. Eat at  
 McDonald's all you want. It seems to be what the kids are doing  
 - so fine - do it - but don't waste food in your own home. I pay  
 for the groceries in the fridge and I pay for the gas in the stove  
 and I pay for the light above your head and I certainly pay for the  
 soup - with my money, my daylight hours and my labor - and I'm  
 just a little bit surprised that with such a big smart brain in your  
 head you wouldn't stop to think about that. About the waste.

In the play, a healthy suspicion of American consumerism, often voiced by the mother, butts up against a job offer from Duke University in the US. The fertile middle ground, where all of these things mix – tradition and innovation, immigrants and emigrants, business and family, foods, heirlooms, younger generations and older ones... and languages – is where this play takes place. The story aims to crash Hungary's history into its rapidly changing face, to give a sense of scope, but also a sense of the immediate and remarkable experience of being in Budapest in 2005.

My earlier worries about being unqualified to write anything honest

or worthwhile about my topic were allayed, strangely enough, by another play: *Copenhagen*, by Michael Frayn. In it, Frayn takes on an amazingly important historical event – the 1941 conversations between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg concerning, among other things, the creation of the atomic bomb. Frayn's handling of the event is at times an intellectual thriller, at times a historical question mark, and, above all, a brilliant character study. He won the Tony for *Copenhagen* in 2000, and deservedly so. The play doesn't pretend to be absolute historical truth, but rather a fusion of fine story-telling set against a wonderful historical backdrop. You go to the play for

a good story and a peek into the situation at the time, not to learn how to split an atom. *Copenhagen* was not going to make you an expert on physics or the Second World War, or even Bohr or Heisenberg, for that matter. For that, you needed something way beyond a night at the theatre. This was an incredibly liberating realization. It seems elementary, and it is, but Frayn told the story he wanted to tell, in the manner in which he wished to tell it... and I could do the same. I would leave the business of history writing to historians, and the business of Hungarian cultural definition to Hungarians. What I could write about with authority and emotional truth, though, was the intersection of the above-mentioned factors. As an American living in Budapest, I was experiencing their turmoil everyday, albeit perhaps in reverse. I was living at the messy meeting point of so many inspiring cultural clashes, international questions, changing landscapes, awkward experiences and new languages and I came to realize, after a bit, that it was from *these* that my plays needed to be born... and it would be two of these things – new languages, English and Hungarian, and changing landscapes, which would provide the impetus for my next play.

### 2. 3. *The Language Barrier*

It is perhaps not surprising that I began thinking about language – both my native English and Hungarian – a lot. A whole array of new encounters led me to puzzle over the power inherent in words, or more exactly, the necessity of understanding certain words in order to gain access,

power, and whatever else one desires. This is true in theatre – think only of the great speeches by Shakespearean characters that convince others to murder, steal or abandon themselves to the brutality of the battlefield.

In an effort to master supermarket exchanges and drugstore needs, I enrolled myself in a night class in Hungarian and also met twice a week with an actor from the National Theatre to do a language exchange. The class was the usual difficult, stumbling progression toward competence and the “exchange” amounted to him teaching me words in Hungarian and me correcting his already decent English. But while I was going about accumulating a necessary vocabulary in Hungarian, I also noticed a tremendous desire among the young people in Budapest to learn, practice, and perfect English. This phenomenon will come as no surprise to anyone who has ever traveled anywhere at all – English is the language of business and tourism, and Budapest is quickly becoming (or has become) an internationally recognized center for both. But the acquisition of English went well beyond the enticing words mouthed by the alluring ladies of Vaci Utca, or the mangled lyrics of pop-song karaoke... in fact, I found it just about everywhere, including the theatre.

I was lucky enough to forge connections with Kretakor, perhaps the country’s premiere performance group, and began teaching them English – with a focus on Ebonics, of all things. I also had the wonderful and strange opportunity to write a short play for a group of English

students from ELTE; they were all Hungarian and all very interested in putting on amateur theatre in English. I then began to direct at Pazmany Peter University in Pillicsabba, where a formal group had been assembled and given credit for taking a class that was entirely devoted to producing an English play destined for a country-wide competition. As I worked with these three groups, and had my weekly sessions with the actor from the National, it struck me that success for Hungarians who wanted to reach a market beyond the borders of the country was mostly, sometimes entirely, dependant on their English skills. In years prior it had been German, then Russian – and now it was English. My actor friend from the National dreamed of New York – something that was out of reach without a command of the language. This desire would form the basis of one part of my next play.

The second, third and fourth parts were pulled directly from the world around me. As the winter approached I was struck by the growing number, and sheer hopelessness, of the homeless population living in the subway station areas in both Lehel Ter and Kalvin Ter. Almost every day I would pass one group or the other. I cannot pretend to understand the larger forces at work in this situation – from health care, to addiction programs, to soup kitchens and housing projects – but I will say that even in New York, a city renowned for its homeless, they are not as visible. This of course doesn’t mean that New York is treating the homeless in a more humane way, but they are certainly

more effective at pulling them out of the public eye. I found myself wondering who these people were... where they came from and how they ended up at desperate ends.

At the around the same time I made the acquaintance of two men just edging into their late twenties, who were from Britain and the US. They both drove big, expensive cars and they were both in real estate. They clearly worked hard – and pulled down salaries that would have enabled them to live handsomely at home, but made them kings in Budapest. It was hard to reconcile the set up: foreigners were making a lot of money developing Hungarian properties and then selling them back to Hungarians... and then heading home with the profits, leaving housing prices inflated and people living in the subways. It’s a simplification, but it’s not entirely untrue.<sup>2</sup>

The last piece of the puzzle that went into my second play was the focus of Hungarian theatre itself. It’s a tradition that, as far as I can tell, is heavily slanted toward auteur-directors. Writers have a revered place in poetry, less so in prose, and playwrights occupy an anonymous shelf somewhere below that. When asked about the country’s playwrights, people will inevitably trot out *Bank Ban* as a masterpiece...but it’s almost two hundred years old. The current roster of dramatic writers is thin, at best, and

<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s Hungary had the most foreign investment per capita among the Eastern and Central European countries. Someone I talked to recently said, rhetorically, *thanks for the help – you can go home now.*

the main training ground for all things drama-related, The Academy of Drama and Film, offers *screenwriting* as a major, but not *playwriting*. Directors are the export and pride of the country. Arpad Schilling and Bela Pinter are two good young examples – they devise pieces, usually drawing on the zeitgeist around them, but also pulling frequently from the classics. They are not alone in this. While in Budapest, I saw *Phaedra*, *Oedipus* (several) and *Troilus and Cressida*, among other classical or older texts that had been reworked. So what did that mean for me? Well, strangely enough, I began looking into the past, both literary and literal and I began thinking about revolutions – in Hungary, where there have been at least two of note (1848 and 1956) and in Greek myth. The only real revolution in

Greek myth (to my admittedly limited knowledge) was when Zeus led the Olympians against his father Cronus, king of the Titans.

All of these factors, language, revolt, real estate, Zeus, Cronos, homelessness and the changing face of the riverfront in the 9<sup>th</sup> district coalesced into a play. I have tentatively titled it *The Third Revolution*. It begins with Cronos' early ascent to power (the character's name is Ron in my play), accompanied by his wife, Rhea. They are an English-speaking (American, British, Irish, whatever) couple who are quickly building a real estate empire in Budapest. With the help of his assistant, Laszlo, Ron is erecting shopping plazas, condominiums, hospitals and schools – he diverts the commuter rail and rips up the slums.

*The lights come up on the Ron and Laszlo, both with hard-bats on. They are looking over architectural drawings. He snaps the plan.*

- » RON:
- » O - kay. If we build in the 9th district -
- » LASZLO:
- » The 9th?
- » RON:
- » Yes... right along the river.
- » LASZLO:
- » Not good.
- » RON:
- » Why not?
- » LASZLO:
- » It's a mess. The water-main is broken. Bad roads.
- » RON:
- » I'll tear it down and build new ones.
- » LASZLO:
- » There are slums.

- » RON:
- » We'll get rid of them. Everything new.
- » LASZLO:
- » It's not going to be cheap.
- » RON:
- » I've got money.
- » LASZLO:
- » You're spreading yourself thin.
- » RON:
- » So. There's enough of me to go around.
- » LASZLO:
- » Perhaps.
- » RON:
- » Did I not build the university? Did I not? In the face of all nay-sayers and hefty doubters, did I not restore the facade and bring the interiors to life?
- » LASZLO:
- » You did.
- » RON:
- » And you said I was stretched too thin at that point, too.
- » LASZLO:
- » Yes.
- » RON:
- » And now the building is a living heart, pumping knowledge into the streets of the city.
- » LASZLO:
- » So, perhaps more public works?
- » RON:
- » Of course. Of course. Above all, I wish to help.
- » (Beat.)
- » A new hospital?

The language employed by the three English-speaking characters is often elevated, overly-floral and delicate. They wield words like weapons; the suggestion is that there is a whole lexicon that is only accessible to a privileged class of foreigners. The initial meeting scene between Rhea and Ron adheres to this style, so that they appear to be competing in a poetry contest, not falling in love.

- » RHEA:  
 » And he won't come looking for us?  
 » RON:  
 » No.  
 » RHEA:  
 » Can you be sure?  
 » RON:  
 » No.  
 » (Beat.)  
 » He's old and sad and humiliated. A crook in his back prevents him from running. We're young and swollen with promise.  
 » RHEA:  
 » In the early April of our lives.  
 » RON:  
 » The cut of my brain devoted to you is beyond measure.  
 » RHEA:  
 » The bulk of my body is here for you.  
 » RON:  
 » And I will honor every spare inch.  
 » RHEA:  
 » We seem to have landed with both feet firmly on the ground.

But there are other characters who soon penetrate the refined and lucrative world that these foreigners inhabit. Turo, Juice and Common are three homeless people who start the evening begging for change on the street outside the theatre. They are meant to mirror Ron, Rhea and Laszlo – 2 men and a woman – but they, by contrast, speak in short, simple sentences... and at the start of the play, they speak only in Hungarian. Common is helping Juice to learn English, in hopes of securing him (and herself) a job at some point in the future... Turo is skeptical and discouraged throughout most of the play, a theatrical version of the men from *Lehel Ter*. The contrast between the two groups is meant

to be stark – in terms of dress, language – or manner of speaking – and housing and food. But as the play progresses Juice and Common secure work in Ron and Rhea's home, as housekeepers or servants. As one might expect, they become "integrated" in various ways, the most important of which is through language. They begin to speak more and more English, until by the end of the play, they've dropped Hungarian entirely. That conversion begins below. I have left the English translation intact in the following, but everything in italics is intended to be spoken in Hungarian, by native speaking Hungarian actors...

- » COMMON:  
 » Hickory-dickory-dock.  
 » JUICE:  
 » Hickory-dickory-dock.  
 » COMMON:  
 » The mouse went up -  
 » TURO:  
 » Shut up! Fucking hell!  
 » COMMON:  
 » Turo, this is our routine.  
 » TURO:  
 » I hate your routine. I'm trying to sleep.  
 » COMMON:  
 » You know the routine.  
 » TURO:  
 » The routine is fucking bullshit!  
 » COMMON:  
 » We wake up.  
 » JUICE:  
 » Wake up.  
 » COMMON:  
 » And then we learn some English.  
 » JUICE:  
 » Before breakfast, a little English.  
 » COMMON:  
 » And then we start the day.  
 » JUICE:  
 » Start the day.  
 » COMMON:  
 » You can go somewhere else, if you don't like it.  
 » TURO:  
 » What I like is food. When are we going to eat?  
 » COMMON:  
 » There's a garbage can behind the construction site. Go look in there.  
 » TURO:  
 » Why don't you? Or why doesn't Juice go?  
 » COMMON:  
 » We're busy.  
 » TURO:

- » The only thing English is good for is getting tourists to give you money.
- » He sits up and holds his hands out.
- » TURO: (cont'd)
- » Hello. Welcome to Budapest. Can you spare some change? I'm very hungry.

Working in two languages and using native speakers for both is perhaps my most exciting new undertaking in terms of theatrical form. I love the idea of presenting an American audience with the unfamiliar sounds of Hungarian... and keeping them in a delicate balance between confusion and curiosity. It's been a challenge so far – for me in the writing and for the Hungarian actors who must speak in English during readings – but I have every faith that the final result will be electrifying.

The play follows the basic plot structure of the myth, with Ron standing in for the ever-anxious Cronos. His desire to build and own property is always undermined by his fear that someone (namely a son) will depose and destroy him. The play takes its central conflict from the clash between the two groups, and it comes about in the form of a revolution in the “house” that Ron has built around him. The plot details are too numerous to discuss, but it suffices to say that the play envisions a third “revolution” where these homeless characters eventually stage a quasi-Marxist comeback; they retake the land and recapture the language. In tone, it remains abstracted and mythical, but my vision of the play calls for a foul grime to inhabit everything – from the homelessness to the vain avarice

of the rich. Although it is a play that is as much about words as anything else, it is meant to humbly follow the director-driven Hungarian tradition of making political and classical theatre in a slightly absurdist or expressionistic style.

#### **2. 4. *Death on the Danube***

The third play has been a real test of patience. In fact, to call it “a” play is entirely incorrect. It's been two. Or three. Or none, depending on the month. At one time, it was even a film. I will not wander into the dark thicket of confusion that has surrounded my efforts on this third piece, but rather offer a brief description of where I find myself at present. The first two, as I will discuss in later, have reached first draft status and are well into the workshop process – not so with the third.

I began with an idea for a “museum piece”. Loosely defined, this means an audience-centered performance where, usually, one actor plays the “guide” and steers a group through an exhibit. The exhibit usually has some kind of theatrical narrative... wax-works come to life, for example, or some kind of crisis erupts and the audience is part of the action. My idea was to present a museum piece that focused on Budapest in 2005. It would be highly technical and visually quite complex

– including photos and video from the city. The impression would simply be a virtual tour of Budapest, conducted by an actor, posing as a native of the city. At some point in the presentation, however, major intrusions would begin. First, a laugh track, and then two new characters would enter and commence setting up a living room. As the “guide” continues to try to acquaint the audience with his city, couches and rugs are being wheeled onstage. Essentially, this “guide” to the museum finds himself living, quite suddenly, in an American sitcom. The two new characters begin acting, the laugh track continues playing, and the lights become uncomfortably bright. There are moments of indecision, but gradually the “guide” relents. He begins to play his role as the classic “dumb father” character made famous by Archie Bunker, Al Bundy and Homer Simpson. As the show progresses, with product-placement commercials now taking over the screens where images of Budapest once were, our former guide actually begins to be transformed into a piece of furniture... a table. The play would end with the other characters eating dinner off of his back.

After writing the first bits and pieces, and collecting photographs of things that would make up the visual portion of the show, I lost interest in this play. I began to feel that it had little to say on a human level. It was a send-up, a combination of stylistic tricks and campy comedy whose outcome would, I thought, eventually prove unquestionably empty. Also, I didn't think this kind of idea could support a full-length play. It would get boring to

hear someone talk about Budapest for the first forty-five minutes – and it would be boring to watch a sitcom for the second forty-five. So, for many months these scraps remained abandoned in a folder filled with bad ideas... until recently. In the past weeks, I have resurrected the concept, but this time as a short play and I am now working towards completing the written portion. With the right material, a speedy delivery, and a sympathetic character, it may just work after all. At this point, though, that's just a hunch.

The other major false-start I had on the third play was something that – at some long ago date – I was extremely encouraged about. After a number of my interviews, I settled on what I thought was a brilliant and clever combination of ingredients for the making of the play. I would write a “monologue play” in the tradition of *The Exonerated* or even *The Vagina Monologues*, where characters would tell their stories, plainly and without fanfare... it would be story-telling at its most basic, at its most honest. I would simply be a conduit through which my subjects could speak about their experiences in Hungary, an Eve Ensler for the new millennium in Central Eastern Europe, offering shape and fine-tuning to the narratives of the wonderful people I had been interviewing. Great. I had a structure, now I needed a setting. To bring all of these wonderful and diverse characters together, I needed a place... and where better than the number 2 tram. I rode on it every day, could sing the chiming song that announced the stops, and could certainly justify having people from all



walks of life, not to mention nations, riding on it. Cool. I had a setting. Now I needed an event... and, luckily enough, the newspapers provided one. There were several (some real, some not) bombs from World War Two that were found lodged in various places, mostly underground, in Budapest during my stay. What if the number 2 tram ran over a bomb! Wow! An event. And an explosive event, to boot! And what if everyone thought it was an old bomb that had been dislodged accidentally by an overnight work crew that had been repairing pipes near the Danube... but *really* it was a bomb that had been purposefully detonated by a handicapped person who was trying to make a point about access to public transportation in the city? *Brilliant!* Now I had an explosion, *and* a twist.

I am sad and embarrassed to say that I actually spent a lot of time writing the monologues for these characters. They told their stories to the audience and then snapped back into the ride along the Danube, all the while heading for their fiery demise. The handicapped character had his own "space" and he, too, spoke to the audience... and then, *ugh*, they all ended up in some kind of heaven where... more ridiculous, terrible theatre ensued.

This play suffered from a number of obvious flaws. One is that nobody goes to the theatre to be *talked at*. We go to be entertained, engaged and to make communities in the dark. What I was writing was a prose-form personal narrative, something that belongs in a book. I was thinking like a documentary maker. Eve Ensler, for all her marketing

genius, can't write for beans – she's a documentary maker. And the theatre she makes suffers because of it, I think; at the end of the night, you've spent two hours being *talked at*. Secondly, the play suffered from the "do-good disease". When a play sets out to perform some kind of social good, I think it's largely doomed. It was true in this case. One of the young men I interviewed was handicapped, and I became fascinated by his story, and by the lack of facilities and legislation that had been put into operation to accommodate him. Public transportation, a necessity for most urban dwellers, was largely inaccessible to anyone in a wheelchair... not to mention many of the office buildings, restaurants and even schools in the Budapest area. Listening to him talk about prejudice and unnecessary difficulty was both enlightening and upsetting. I decided to use the play to draw attention to the inequality in the system...which is not a bad goal in itself, but it came to dominate my thoughts as I wrote. The play may have set out to *do good*, but it ended up just *being bad*.

I am still struggling with what to do with the monologues. Some of them are quite affecting and really deserve to be given a life on stage in a different format. The subject matter, minus the explosions, stays with me, which is always a sign that I will loop back and revisit it some time in the future. Until then, this play and its characters will have to sit patiently and listen for the chiming song that announces the next stop on the tram.

## 2. Act Three: Endings

The life of a play is necessarily tied to production. Plays can be famous on their own – or even win Pulitzers without major productions, as Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics* did – but there is usually a collective creative talent that brings about the successful introduction of a good play. Kazan's staging of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a famous example – starring a young Brando. This is why people bemoan the teaching of Shakespeare in the classroom – kids are only staring at the skeleton of what should be a magnificent animal... the stage is where it feeds, breeds and lunges about. And so the final question here is: where and how are these plays going to be given a life beyond the page?

The process from script to stage – or first draft to stage – is a long one, usually. The first two plays are beginning that journey now, through a variety of channels. During my stay here, I have had the kind blessing of an affiliation with the National Theatre. Two of the dramaturges there, Kesthelyi Kinga and Percel Eniko have been invaluable in their attention to my work, my process and my life in Budapest. Besides reading my drafts and making suggestions and corrections in terms of structure, they have also been wonderful in helping to maintain the integrity of my project in terms of its tone vis-à-vis Hungary. Beyond that, they have helped me to organize several readings of the plays at the National – for a small invited audience. These have

been meant largely to help me to *bear* the play, something that is helpful to most writers, but invaluable to me. One of the readings, of *The Third Revolution*, was quite special in that it brought together members of Kretakor, Pinter Bela, and the Nemzeti Színház with a visiting company from New York, PL115. Given the chance to collaborate artistically across international borders and creative company lines was a truly wonderful gift in itself, but the multi-faceted discussion that was generated afterwards was like a goldmine too... all in all, an afternoon well-spent. I view these readings as a first step towards improving the plays, but also as a tool to generate interest in them in the professional community, both artistically and commercially.

Toward this end, there are meetings planned at the Merlin Theatre to prepare for an upcoming project that will possibly be held there in a year's time. Having already hosted the guest performance of my play, *God's Waiting Room* with PL115, the Merlin is a safe bet for more projects with this and other New York companies... and, probably, for something more cross-cultural. The script is still in development so there's no telling what may come, but *The Third Revolution* might find a home on the stage in Deak Ter, using both Hungarian and American actors. In any case, there are plans afoot to stage it in New York already.

One of the good friends I have made while here, an actor at the National Theatre named Pecz Otto, has always dreamed of going to New York to study at the famed Actors Studio. He's applied in

years prior, but has never been accepted. This year, I helped him with his English and guided him through the application process – and he got in. He is one of the actors for whom I specifically wrote *The Third Revolution* and it means that our collaboration and friendship will continue in Manhattan for the next two years while he studies there. A New York production involving Otto is a certainty, and the proposal at the moment is to stage *The Third Revolution* in New York and then bring it to Budapest.

As far as *Lest You Drive an Angel* goes, there is interest from at least one New York producer. Her preliminary plan would involve premiering it in New York and then touring it to places like Toronto, Chicago and Ohio, where large Hungarian émigré populations would have a chance to see it. Theresa Rebeck has requested that I submit it this summer for the Cherry Lane's Mentor project, a competition that would give it a great push towards regional theatres. It is a very easy play to stage – simple and cheap – and it targets a wide American audience. I have high hopes for having it produced on a large scale.

The process for these three plays has been fraught with frustrations and triumphs – and the writing and revising is ongoing. But no matter what actually happens to them, perhaps the wider, more important, outcome has been an amazing and profound collaborative experience for me, something that will continue for a lifetime, I expect. I have been asked to write Pazmany's entry for next year's English theatre competition,

and although I will not be back to direct it, I will certainly have to return to see it staged in the spring. As I mentioned, I will have the great fortune to continue to work with Otto in New York and I will maintain my affiliations with both the Merlin and the National theatres. Bonds between Kretakor and PL115 (the company for which I am the principal writer) have been formed and actors are already talking about possible future projects without me. There have been suggestions about translating some of my work into Hungarian, and a woman who is doing her Masters in Dramatic Studies has asked to make me, and my writing, the subject of her thesis. I have a script for a film, set in Budapest, already started, and have had initial conversations about a joint Budapest/New York production. My goal, as written nearly a year ago, was the following: *Through the natural collaboration in the theatre, and through the story these plays will tell, I think that a dialogue of artistic visions and cultural understanding can develop. Now, more than ever, the American theatre needs to keep opening its doors to new and wider influences, and I hope to be a part of a tradition that takes a decidedly international approach to playwriting and playmaking.*

When one sets off to create something in a quasi-academic setting – a painting, a song, a play – the end results are always a little unpredictable, difficult to gauge. They can't be measured with instruments or quantified with a head-count, and they may leave some people scratching their heads, looking for graphs and tables. Perhaps you judge them by the awards they win after completion, or the

trajectory of the artist's career post event. I don't know. But if these plays go on to win awards and gather fine reviews, I will be appropriately proud and more than a little bit grateful, but I will perhaps value the experience – the process – all the more if they don't. The widening of my artistic scope and cultural understanding will be the true reward... and as I prepare for my

return to a country that is often caught narcissistically navel gazing – artists and politicians alike – I count myself fortunate to have had my attention and efforts diverted to a vibrant little community tucked into the hills by the side of the Danube.

And, as a great great thespian once said, *I'll be back.*

# The Emergence of Modern Number Theory in Hungary

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*The goal of this paper is to present an introduction to the emergence of modern number theory in Hungary by recounting the lives of some of its most influential mathematicians, and examining developments in the mathematical life of Hungary in the nineteenth century. Special attention is given to the predecessors of Pál Erdős and Pál Turán, including János Bolyai, Gyula Kőnig, Gusztáv Rados, and Mihály Bauer, and to the mathematical publications and societies they were instrumental in founding.*

## 1. Preface

Hungarian mathematics became famous in the twentieth century due to the outstanding results of a handful of very talented and hard-working individuals, such as Pál Erdős, Alfréd Rényi, Pál Turán, and János von Neumann. The emergence of this group of mathematicians brought an onslaught of number-theoretic results, putting Hungary on