

SZFE: The Bigger Picture

by Noémi Herczog

I can't recall a more powerful or uplifting sign of political dissent in Hungary in recent years, than the resistance of the students at SZFE: University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest. Young actors, future theatre educators, directors, cameramen, film editors and dramaturgs are standing up for their rights and squatting their university, blocking entrances to ensure that the government-appointed new trustees cannot enter. With the blockade, the students give hope to many of the rest of us in this country right now.

The German reader may be aware that the student's blockade comes after the resignation of the entire leadership of the institution, and more recently the university's teachers have also handed in their intention for a strike. They are all demanding autonomy from government control, they consider the forced *restructuring* (let me rather call it takeover) of the university as the total loss of autonomy. You may also already know, that while celebrities all over the world are expressing their sympathy with the protesters, recently the Berliner Ensemble has also rightly cancelled its invitation to the Hungarian MITEM festival. A festival, whose artistic director is the same Attila Vidnyánszky, who is the politically-appointed leader of the newly established foundation, tasked with the management of the university, that violates the autonomy of the institution with its very existence.

Attila Vidnyánszky (*1964) currently holds the most amount of power within Hungarian theatre (he has accumulated roles as a head of six major theatre organisations and institutions). He comes from an ethnic Hungarian community in the Ukraine, and studied theatre in Kiev. Thanks to his training, his theatre is largely different to the Hungarian theatre scene dominated by psychological-realism; his 'poetic' or 'total' theatre is much less centered around text. He founded his first company in Transcarpathia (Ukraine). While he was appreciated by Hungarian critics, some of his most important works didn't win prizes, or got even selected into the competition program of the main Hungarian theatre festival, POSZT at the time. He often explained these with his mafia-concept behind the positions and prizes in Hungary. Meanwhile, he also got interested in cultural management: in 2004 he became the chief director of the Hungarian National Opera for a year, and between 2007-2013 he was the artistic director of the Csokonai Theatre Debrecen. In 2013 Vidnyánszky followed Róbert Alfoldi at the helm of the Hungarian National Theatre. The commission deciding on this appointment was then already assembled according to Vidnyánszky's directions. This was also the moment when he started to undertake cultural political roles in addition to his artistic ones. As well as being the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, he also played an important role in cultural finance: he was both the artistic director of a prominent theatre, while at the same time chairman of a committee whose task was to give proposals to the funding body regarding the structural subsidy each theatre should receive in a given year. This accumulation of the incompatible roles is what he is often criticised for. His son, Attila Vidnyánszky jr. (*1993, actor, director), a former SZFE-student, who also worked in his father's theatre (among others), is now among the protesters.

Yet Vidnyánszky as a character is not the most important part of this story. I doubt it is possible to fully understand the present situation without understanding how it fits into a

particular pattern present in Hungary for some time, not only in the cultural field. In a nutshell, there is a seemingly legal judiciary system, where on surface level everything looks perfectly legal, outwardly pretending a constitutionality. However, it is the ruling party (FIDESZ) with a parliamentary two third majority that makes law, fitting it in accordance with the party's personal agenda. In Hungary the most important laws (e.g. the electoral law, or most importantly the constitution, that is called The Fundamental Law) can be amended with a two third majority. With this the two third majority, for instance entitles the government to amend the electoral law at will. In a country with a party effectively ruling with the abuse of this two third majority rule, the truth is that we are still very much living according to the now-expired „coronavirus” law, which gave power to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán for an indefinite period to rule by decree. As – unlike how the world press has interpreted it – this law (which is no longer in effect), was not an extraordinary act: only the expression of the ‘normal’ status quo. In Hungary, everything is always legal that Fidesz needs to be legal. *The takeover of SZFE is part of a bigger pattern where the rule of this Hungarian hybrid regime is never there formally, yet it is always present in the background.*

This is why it is of utmost importance for Fidesz to keep their parliamentary two third majority. This necessitates information control and lies and a crack down on critical thought. The political attack against SZFE is also far from being the first cultural takeover in Hungary. After a prolonged fight, this September the Central European University previously based in Budapest started the school year in Vienna, after the institution had been forced by the Hungarian government to move its main campus. In April 2017 the government passed a blanket law on foreign branch campuses¹ however we must consider this law as a personal and targeted attack by the government against the honorary board charman and founder of the university, George Soros.² Last year, thousands of Hungarians again rallied on the streets in support of the academics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA – founded in 1825), another political grab by the government proclaiming the prestigious institution a ‘Relic of Communism’.³ And just over the last weeks during the time of the blockade, far from the spotlight and the squatting theatre students, a new law was passed. The financial support of three organisations all engaged in running integrated schools, working with underprivileged – mostly Roma – children has been seriously cut with immediate effect.⁴ The first victim is Gábor Iványi’s church, the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (MET) which was also among the first – together with about 3000 religious institutions – to be stripped of its legal status as a church in 2011.⁵ The government now quotes a lack of ‘concrete financial return’ of the MET-schools for the poor, and from 2021 they completely suspend their financial support. Nőra L. Ritók’s Real Pearl Foundation and the Ámbédkár School located in a remote part of Hungary

¹<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/05/new-law-imperils-central-european-universitys-future-hungary>
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/05/new-law-imperils-central-european-universitys-future-hungary>

²<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/12/04/central-european-university-forced-out-hungary-moving-vienna>

³<https://www.france24.com/en/20190212-hungarian-researchers-rally-against-government-attack-science>

⁴<https://hungarytoday.hu/govt-cut-support-organization-help-poverty-underprivileged-children/>

⁵<https://budapestbeacon.com/hungarian-evangelical-brotherhood-and-govt-reach-partial-settlement-over-church-law/>

also suffered serious financial cuts. This kind of financial censorship is one of the most efficient tools of the Hungarian government. Narrowing down now the focus to theatres: there are no more important performing art institutions in Hungary (apart from a few ones still remaining in municipal ownership), that have not been eaten up by Fidesz: they have all been occupied by the government's politically motivated appointments in their leadership. And the most recent ban: one of the last oppositional media channels, Klub Radio's licence for its frequency has been announced not to be prolonged from February 2021.⁶ The official cover story blames this revocation on the radio itself, claiming it had violated the media law several times.

The problem to date has been that whichever of these groups became the newest target, they always remained alone. There have not been any extensive, powerful forms of resistance. In this sense, SZFE is a first: it attracts attention, which is a novelty. This protest is stronger and appears more lasting. It is also part of a new phase of political resistance which started in August when the biggest oppositional online news portal, Index was occupied by Fidesz, which triggered the whole editorial staff to stand up and resign as one.⁷ A few weeks later the theatre university was squatted by its students. The question is, why does their protest trigger much more attention and give more hope than any such dissent in Hungary before?

One of the reasons may be exactly this power and stability (hopefully not tricked by corona virus later). Solidarity comes from more and more sectors: expressing sympathy, bringing food and other essentials to the squat, actors wearing SZFE-embroidered masks at the applause in the theatres. It is a common place but true: actors' faces trigger public attention – especially in Hungary, an actor-centred entertainment culture. This protest also shows more creativity than any other rallies of late, let me only mention when the minister mockingly told students in a formal negotiation, that he thought they would not debate but sing something instead. Which led to the students organising an ironic and symbolic 'singing' protest this summer in front of the parliament while in the house they voted about them, without them.

The 'SZFE-case' is just the last one in a 'murder row' against critical thinking in Hungary, against anyone who does not openly support the government. In today's Hungary to be considered for real positions in the cultural field one needs to start acting in accordance with Fidesz's policies, it is no longer even enough to remain neutral. *The restructuring of SZFE is actually a well-built political attack against its political autonomy while the slogan quotes 'systemic reforms' it has nothing to do with the professional issues.* Those – professional – topics were only discussed in the past, in more pluralistic times, when the politically attacked theatre makers and teachers – today made out to look like a homogeneous group – held evidently differing opinions, forming a pluralistic and diverse community. Today many of them, who used to criticise the prestigious, 155 year old institution, support the students' protest. One of the more vehement professional critics was the well-known Hungarian director, Árpád Schilling who today stands firmly beside the students and teachers, but whose former words of criticism as a director student at SZFE (along with that of others) are

⁶<https://hungarytoday.hu/national-media-and-info-communications-authority-revoke-frequency-license-of-klubradio/>

⁷https://index.hu/english/2020/07/24/editorial_board_of_index_resigns/

now exploited by the Hungarian media propaganda, and used as a kind of proof for the need for reform on professional grounds.

Schilling has indeed written several reform-proposals in the past, which were debated, yet neglected by former leaderships. Twenty years ago(!), as a student Schilling was missing contemporary theatre genres and artistic visions from the curriculum of the university, he felt that the students got a very one-sided picture of theatre – a point he also stated in a contemporary report with the Hungarian theatre journal, Színház. Attila Vidnyánszky has recently quoted Schilling's twenty year old words to the propaganda press. Vidnyánszky quotes different directors criticising the bad infrastructure, the student workload, the bad teaching methods and some serious professional deficiencies in 2001. He then raises the question whether they are now, twenty years on pleased with the progress? Schilling answers the question in a Facebook post, where he stresses that in recent years, a new generation, and with them, a new perspective has appeared at the university – he also lists a couple of names, eg. Ildikó Enyedi, Viktor Bodó, Csaba Hováth or Máté Gáspár –, and together with the older generation, they strengthened the professional renown of the institution. “The new approaches build on traditions, yet they have also transcended them: giving way to new, international tendencies and the emancipation of the students.” Besides he also says that certain problems of course require constant critique and self-correction. He lists – among others – the need for the betterment of the administration and communication within the institution, a rethinking of the inner structures and assuring the proper autonomy of students, compliance with the challenges of the 21st century theatre: involving the new genres and principles of theatre making and constantly adjusting to the changing social role of theatre or the break-up of former fixed hierarchies. Yet – Schilling adds – it is now exactly this transformation towards a more progressive curriculum that is being stopped by force.”

SZFE might have needed reforms (just like many prestigious institutions with a long history often do). There would have been further need for infrastructural developments too, even if this was never before possible because of the lack of state financing: the restructuring does not bring new funding streams into the system, however it is likely that the government will attempt to better support its own appointees. The question I rather ask with Schilling is, what price do we pay now for this new ‘systemic (unprofessional) reform’ when it is finally forced through? Because the new leadership has made it clear that they are not planning to improve the democratic processes when correcting the anomalies of the past, on the contrary: they are now planning to eliminate all autonomy. *But if I understand it correctly, the fight of the students is not for simple restauration to old institutional practices, rather it is to regain autonomy and also create space for future reforms based on democratic debate.* And the students are right if this is what they choose to fight for.

If the ‘systemic reforms’ proposed come true, all the long, enthusiastic, hopeless yet *democratic* debates of the past, are ended with an autocratic voice from above. Before criticism came from bottom-up, from Schilling for instance, who was not in a position of power to shape the profile of the university. Whereas now we experience a misuse of power from above. „Vidnyánszky speaks of a vision for systematic change – says Schilling – without writing down a single line about his knowhow”. And indeed, it is quite difficult to imagine, that any good reform could come without serious case-studies and analysis, that a reform may work top to bottom, as a form of pressure. On the top of all this, the government’s

control attempt comes in a moment when SZFE is in a good phase, when new fields of study, such as applied theatre has appeared among its majors, when new forms of democracy have started to be integrated in the life of the university. For instance, the student body now chose their rector – never officially accepted and appointed by Fidesz – via an election after a public debate between the two candidates running for the position.

And yes, Attila Vidnyánszky takes an active role in the vandalism against SZFE, but what is maybe more important to notice than that: *he is also a tool*. A tool of the government that is doing the same now with SZFE as it did before with CEU, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the schools for the underprivileged children, Klub Radio, Index, while the government also benefits from Vidnyánszky's defensiveness and takes advantage of his ambitions.

So, the students are right to call attention with their actions not only to SZFE, but to the general oppression against freedoms and autonomous thought in Hungary: go for it, guys!

The author (1986, Budapest) is a theatre critic, editor of the theatre magazine SZÍNHÁZ, associate professor at the Hungarian Theatre Institute at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj and since 2014 gives courses at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest.