

National Theatre

WE LIVE ONCE OR THE SEA DISAPPEARS IN NOTHINGNESS THEREAFTER

(Egyszer élünk, avagy a tenger azontúl tűnik semmiségbe)

NATIONAL THEATRE, Main Stage

3 December, 19:00

220 minutes with two intermissions and English simultaneous interpretation

Budapest IX., Bajor Gizi park 1.

Tickets:

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Cast: Eszter BÁNFALVI, Zsolt DÉNES, Dénes FARKAS, Tibor FEHÉR, Ádám FÖLDI, Réka GERLITS, Gábor HEVÉR, Frigyes HOLLÓSI, János KULKA, Attila LÁSZLÓ, Zsolt LÁSZLÓ, Zalán MAKRANCZI, Dorina MARTINOVICS, Bence MÁTYÁSSY, Mari NAGY, Csilla RADNAY, Róbert ALFÖLDI, Zoltán SZABÓ, József SZARVAS, Dávid SZATORY, Kátya TOMPOS

Band: Márton KOVÁCS, Tamás ROZS, Gábor CSÍKVÁR, Árpád NÉMEDI, Ákos ZSÁGER-VARGA, Tamás SEBESI, Tibor BÁRÁNY

Composer: Márton KOVÁCS

Set Design: Zsolt KHELL

Costume Design: Krisztina REMETE

Dramaturg: István MOHÁCSI, Enikő PERCZEL

Choreography: Johanna BODOR

Lighting Design: Tamás BÁNYAI

Music Assistant: Zsuzsa KOMLÓSI

Assistant to the Director: Ágota KOLICS, Zsófia TÜÜ

Written by Márton KOVÁCS–István MOHÁCSI–János MOHÁCSI

Directed by János MOHÁCSI

Pre-synopsis

The play you are about to see was made for a Hungarian audience. It is full of constant references to Hungarian literature, culture, politics that everybody knows here and that are unknown outside of Hungary. However, you can understand it: in this pre-synopsis I'll give some points that you can hang on to, so instead of just sitting there completely bewildered, you can go, "oh, I get what that freakin' rose is all about!" Anyhow, it won't be that long, and I'll try it to be entertaining - but what's below here will be in the play in one way or another.

Sandor Petofi (pr: SHAN-dor PET-oh-fee) was a Hungarian poet, 1829-49. He is THE number one Hungarian poet: there's at least one street named after him in literally every village and city in Hungary (it's not a joke:

there are 17 streets and a bridge named after him in Budapest only). He's a mix of Goethe (as a national poet), Robert Burns (as his poems were like or even became folk songs) Thomas Paine (as he played an important part in the Hungarian revolution against the Austrians), and George Washington (as the embodiment of Hungarian nationhood). He even died in one of the last battles in that abovementioned revolution – but many legends emerged, claiming that he was still alive. One famous legend was that the Russians took him to Siberia, to Barguzin (near lake Baikal). In a very recent case, someone claimed to have found his skeleton there! The media went wild until it turned out that the skeleton was a woman's...

One of his main works is *Janos vitez* (John the valiant), which is an epic poem. It's actually a tale about an orphan Hungarian shepherd boy, who has a beautiful lover, but has no money to marry her. He becomes a hussar, wins over the whole Turkish army, refuses to marry the French princess because of his lover. He goes home to his village with fame and fortune finding his lover dead. He picks a rose from her grave, and goes away to find her. After again many adventures, he goes to the land of the fairies. He throws his rose into the Lake of Life, and thus his sweetheart comes out. They marry, and in the end he becomes the king of the fairies.

This poem is very well known in Hungary. It's like Mother Goose: my father read it to us when we were young and I read it to my children. We study it in school for long lessons, and we must learn lots of parts by heart.

Now you must know that there is another *Janos vitez*: a well-known musical based on Petofi's poem from 1904. Although its quality is much lower (sorry to burden you with subjectivism), it somehow won over the Hungarians' hearts, I guess mostly with its extremely proud Hungarianism: it proved that being a Hungarian is great, that Hungarians never lose a battle (which is a wild contrast to the truth: Hungary hasn't won a war since – I am not joking – 1490). Plus it had very pleasant music, which, much like Karma Chameleon by the Culture Club – not that great, but sticks in your head.

The story of the musical, of course, is really different from that of the poem (which will be important in our play). There's another character, who is secretly also in love with Janos' lover, and who is Janos' best friend, and who helps Janos to find his lover back, then he sadly disappears – very romantic. At the end of the play, Janos, instead of staying in the land of the fairies, he decides to go home to Hungary – and his lover follows him.

So much for literature. Now about history.

1946: Hungary has just lost yet another war. The country is in ruins: 600,000 soldiers died and as many Jews were killed – virtually every Jew

outside of Budapest. There is a terrible scarcity of food. The Soviet army has occupied Hungary, and shows no intention of ever leaving. There's a democratically elected government, but the communist party (which has basically no popular support) is increasingly involved in everyday politics with the help of the Soviets.

Wherever the Soviet army camps out, there are a lot of incidents. Rapes, thefts and killings are commonplace. Lots of people (and we are talking about tens of thousands) were taken to the GULAG, to the Soviet labor camps. They were just picked up off the street, and came back years later – if they were lucky.

Our play is based on a true story. In 1946, in a small village, an amateur theater company wanted to perform the *Janos vitez* musical. Drunken Russian soldiers went on stage to rape the actresses. A fight broke out, and the actors, the "Hungarian hussars" beat the Russians. But not for long: because there were lots of attacks on the Soviet soldiers at that time (see the abovementioned reasons), the Soviets wanted to make an example of them: they sent three actors (the main characters), the chief of police and the completely innocent notary of the village to Siberia. They actually wanted to send the mayor of the city, but he luckily was away at the time of the incident.

There are also a lot of little things which are well-known in Hungary. Well, everyone knows that Russians drink. But did you know that they drank perfumes, too? Or that they just loved watches? They took them from everyone. They took my grandfather's pocket watch when he was taken to Siberia by train. He made a big fuss with a high-ranked officer, saying that "I thought the great Soviet army does not steal", etc. He got his watch back, but the window of their wagon was boarded up and they didn't get any food or water for three days. Coming back two years later, when they crossed the Hungarian border, he ceremoniously wound up his watch. According to witnesses, grown men started crying hearing the ticking of that watch.

The second act doesn't need too much explanation, maybe one: when the audience (probably) will be laughing and cheering at the soliloquy of the GULAG officer, it's because we used exact and well-known words of today's politicians.

About the third act: it plays in the 1960s. A couple of years after the 1956 revolution, the Hungarian communists decided to go on with a kind of soft suppression. "You can think whatever you like, but don't bring it to the streets: the Russians will punish us!" So everybody became sort of schizophrenic: Hungarians had to pretend to enjoy communism to survive. The opportunists pretended to be good communists – and for small special advantages they had to oppress those who didn't pretend as well as they did.

And this pretentious, opportunist way of thinking continues to poison Hungarian politics today. Huge corruption, obvious stealing, blatant lies in the face of the public... This is where we are right now. This is more or less what you see in the third act.

Well, I hope I helped a little to understand this play. I am sorry if some of you find the play boring – don't feel bad, I completely understand that: you are not the target audience. However for those of you who can find joy in immersing yourselves into another culture – well, I wish you all the best.

WE ONLY LIVE ONCE

synopsis

FIRST ACT

Easter of 1946 in a small Hungarian village, where time is measured by a water clock because the Russians took all the watches away. Since all the other appropriate buildings are ruined and the Jews have all been killed, the amateur theater company of the village decides to make use of the synagogue (where the fuses always burn out, but the candles light up by themselves): they will perform a play of *John the valiant*: a musical based on the famous epic poem by Sándor Petőfi: a tale about an orphan shepherd, who becomes a hussar, wins over the whole Turkish army, refuses to marry the French princess because of his Hungarian lover, and in the end becomes the king of the fairies.

And this is how it begins: we see the company rehearsing, while some Russian soldiers are drinking. Maybe only Braun Jolan, the only Jewish survivor of the village is not happy: she verbally attacks the policeman of the village for beating them as he herded them into the train cars (during the war).

Lori, one of the leaders of the Hungarian communist party (which wasn't strong at all back then) arrives as the lover of a village girl. He is an electrician and tries to fix the light, in vain. He learns that all the villagers, even the communists, are afraid of the Russians, especially their lead officer, called Van Gogh: not because he paints, but because he cuts off the ears of anyone he doesn't like. They tell him that this Van Gogh tried to rape the local minister's daughter – who then turned into a patch of reeds. Yet, VG raped the reed, cut it down, then made a whistle out of it. Lori suddenly becomes deeply interested in the main actress, Ilon, making both his lover and Ilon's husband (Imre) angry. Imre tells his story: his best friend, Janos was Ilon's first husband, but he died somewhere in Russia. His last words to Imre were to take care of his wife, Ilon. So he married her when he came back.

The Russians discover a plate of traditional Hungarian Easter food – which the people of the village gave to the actors: everybody is touched: back then food was incredibly scarce. Since the Hungarians are reluctant to give it to the Russians immediately, they destroy it.

This is the moment when the believed-to-be-dead communist Janos shows up, blind. No one recognizes him, except Ilon, when he takes out the rose she gave him. Huge surprise. Janos tells how he escaped: seven dwarfs saved him. Janos gets upset when he hears that there will be a show in the synagogue – he claims that everyone should remember. Someone says: “The dead – died.” He tells them that whoever says it out loud three times will send the dead back, and that for the living nothing will remain but a black solitude. Janos tries to integrate into the village, but it turns out he has lost everything: his house has been sold, his wife (Ilon) is married to his best friend (Imre)... No wonder: they did get an official letter saying that Janos was dead.

The performance begins. The Russians enter and start to sing. Then one of them wants to rape Ilon, the main actress. In the middle of the commotion Van Gogh enters. Makes a speech about the “naughty kids that wake even comrade Stalin up with their noise”, and then, as an act of benevolence, he doesn’t shoot everyone in the head, but sends them to Siberia. Lori, the Hungarian communist makes a request to save one prisoner – but instead of saving his lover, he saves Ilon.

SECOND ACT

A GULAG labor camp in Siberia. The Hungarian men work here. They have very hard work: they have to beat pillows to make snow for the whole Soviet Union. However, there’s an accident: one drops a pillow on his foot, which – obviously, what else – breaks. They try to help their friend, but the camp commander orders them to get back to work. When they resist, the commander kills the invalid. However, the dead jumps up – he is really dead, he even shows the hole that the bullet hit through him. He is dead, but stays with them.

The blind Janos (who is a long-time communist) makes a big scene, and calls the Soviet soldiers “not communists”. They get angry and put him into a torture chamber to kill him.

At this point a new commander enters with his helpers. It turns out that he speaks Hungarian! He stops Janos’ execution, and they kill the old staff, the Russian guards. Something incredible happens: Janos can see again! He can see now that those Russians actually are communists – and he gives up his faith in communism.

It turns out that the new soldiers are from Barguzin (the town where Sandor Petofi's "grave" was allegedly found, see above), where they learned the language from Sandor Petofi. Soon they find out that the Hungarian prisoners are here because they had been trying to perform the *Janos vitez*. Cultures meet: they happily quote the famous verses. A great idea is born: they should show the *Janos vitez*. The almighty commander magically brings the women from another labor camp: now everything's ready for the performance.

Meanwhile it turns out that there are a couple of dead with the Hungarians: they just don't leave them. One of them, as it turns out, Braun Jolan herself, the Jewish "survivor". She tells her story of how she died in the gas chamber, and she admits that she didn't go with her family because her father saw her naked in there.

The prisoners start the play; however, the Barguzinians soon stop them: this is not *Janos vitez*! After a while the prisoners understand the problem. They explain that they are doing the musical based on Sandor Petofi's work. The commander is furious: the Hungarians have desecrated *Janos vitez*! He tries to make the Hungarians to perform the original poem, but of course, they can't – they learned the musical. The commander makes a huge speech about "the theater of Hope vs. the nihilist theater", then sends the Hungarians home – they don't even deserve to be buried in Soviet ground.

THIRD ACT

The same village as in the first act, November 7th in the 1960s. The people of the communist party are trying to put the last touches on the annual celebration of the Soviet revolution. Ilon arrives in a car with her husband, a high-ranked communist. They are here to see the Great Train of Socialism that will stop in the village and to unveil a statue: a water clock that measures eras – sometimes it doesn't even drip, sometimes it pours for forty days. The train is coming soon – however, it fails to stop, and leaves them there. Moreover, there is another problem: the exiles are coming home. Ilon is scared to see two of her husbands, and hides in the water clock.

It's extremely uncomfortable for everyone. It is forbidden even to remember those who were taken away, and why and where they were taken away. (It is actually a historical fact: people who came back from the Soviet labor camps were not allowed to talk about it.) Yet here they are, obviously creating trouble. The prisoners are uncertain even about their place in the world: people are not happy to see them because they mean trouble and no one is happy to see them again. They are told to not even mention to anyone where they were. Meanwhile someone else lives in their homes. He throws his rose Ilon gave him into the water clock

(another reference to the *Janos vitez*, where the rose is thrown into the Lake of Life) - and since it scratches her, Ilon climbs out. But she is no longer his: now Ilon is married to someone else. Janos says the sentence: "the dead – died" for the third time, and curses the country with a black solitude for seven generations. The dead, who were with them until now, leave and disappear.

The prisoners are told to "adapt to the circumstances" and are offered jobs like night watchmen... The curse works: time stops going ahead in Hungary.

*István Mohácsi,
writer and dramaturg of the play*