

Maria Shevtsova

The 2023 Theatre Olympics in Budapest

The account here is in the spirit of the short pieces that periodically used to appear under the rubric 'Reports and Announcements' at the back of *New Theatre Quarterly*. Its purpose is to invite the journal's readers from all over the world – and they are truly from across our whole planet – to be aware of the very existence of a major theatre event of socio-historical and artistic significance to our shared field of interest; and to give them some insight into the evolution of this event in its interface with political and social change, which, in the current times, have become increasingly brutal. The theatre field is vast, as vast and varied as the approaches and perspectives within it, the positions long held, shifting, or newly taken, and the stakes at play, differently for different people in different political, social, and cultural contexts. The Theatre Olympics, established in 1995, seek to pay tribute to, and activate interaction between, the multifarious humanity that makes theatre and is embodied in it.

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THE THEATRE OLYMPICS were founded in the spirit of cultural respect and openness during the earlier 1990s, when groups of leading theatre and other artistic practitioners feared that the homogenizing powers of a new wave of globalization would damage the distinctiveness of cultures across the world, together with the theatre's ability to build bridges between them. It seemed that globalization was more omnivorous than ever before in its history, promising universal economic prosperity while generating huge inequalities of economic wealth, but also neglecting the very idea of the human welfare that cultural action nurtures and sustains. The founders of the Theatre Olympics were the directors and playwrights Theodoros Terzopoulos (Greece), Tadashi Suzuki (Japan), Robert Wilson (USA), Nuria Espert (Spain), Heiner Müller (Germany), Yury Lubimov (Russia), Tony Harrison (UK), and Antunes Filho (Brazil).

The first of the Olympiads, which now span almost thirty years, was held in 1995 in Delhi, followed by an irregular pattern of separation between festivals by three to five years,

depending on the host country's financial largesse (financial support, in all cases, is not private but from the host's government) and the availability (and competence) of its organizational and administrative teams. Catastrophes too had to be taken into account, as happened when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the planet, causing a four-year gap after the 2019 festival, shared between St Petersburg and Toga. The latter is home to Suzuki's internationally renowned company SCOT (Suzuki's Company of Toga) in Japan.

The Budapest event in 2023 is the tenth Theatre Olympics. Masterminded and mapped by Attila Vidnyánszky, director and artistic director of the Budapest National Theatre and founder in 2014 of the annual MITEM (Mádach International Theatre Meeting), the Budapest Olympics in many ways surpass what had been cumulatively achieved in preceding editions.

Vidnyánszky, with characteristic vision and energy, decided to combine MITEM with the Theatre Olympics, thereby keeping faith with the audiences accustomed to a locally born festival which, over the years, had brought them up to date with the most recent

and exciting theatre trends, mainly but not exclusively of Europe. At the same time Vidnyánszky, while keeping the National Theatre as the central venue of a much bigger entity than MITEM alone, promoted his idea of the Theatre Olympics as a theatre for everybody – a perception in keeping with his view of the theatre as by and for humans on human concerns.

This outlook necessitated a far-reaching programme, skilfully arranged to embrace other venues – streets, open-air stages, and other outdoor spaces, including parks, as well as an island on the Danube. All were part of Vidnyánszky's plan to enable a wider and socially more varied audience demographic and to mix and merge demographically identifiable social groups. The Tompa Miklós Company, for example, from Târgu Mureş in Romania, performed *An Enemy of the People* on an open-air stage in modest surroundings to allay fears of 'proper' theatre or simply to reduce hesitations due to a lack of experience of theatre houses acknowledged by institutional structures to be important.

Broader social representation required stimulating curiosity and imagination so as to motivate spectators to stretch their habits and engage with what they knew less, or did not know at all. What could be called the educative, the humanly developmental, and the spiritually immersive dimension of theatre spectating is understood, in this perspective, to be integral to spectating's social identity. In other words, aesthetics and sociological interpretation meet in such a perspective, as they do, in fact, in the very practice of theatre-making and its dialogical interaction with spectators.

A small-scale expression of the idea of social merging – in this case, not so much demographically speaking as in terms of cultural predispositions and predilections – can be seen in the nudge to spectators well aware of established theatres like the Budapest National Theatre to go further afield – into the streets, certainly, but also, not least, to the small suburban theatres off their beaten track. Thus theatregoers were encouraged to go to the Teatro Tascabile ('pocket theatre') from Bergamo at the Karinthy Theatre, the

former's truly architecturally pocket equivalent in Hungary. A whole six of the Tascabile, their theatre known in Italy as a people's theatre, performed *The Yoricks: Comic Interlude* in Italian with surtitles; a maximum of four actors at any one time could play rather tightly on the minuscule stage, while those playing instruments sat above them on a platform especially built to ease the space problem. The Karinthy's director, actor Tamas Olt, wants to turn this tiny space, occupied by the Theatre Olympics to support popular theatre, into an accessible, but not condescending, playwrights' theatre.

A far larger expression of Vidnyánszky's vision of theatre for everybody – his word for this theatre is 'democratic' – is evident in how he had made sure that Theatre Olympics events were performed in Hungary beyond Hungary's capital, particularly in cities and towns well placed to serve counties or regions as geographic wholes. Among them were the larger conurbations of Debrecen, Győr, Kaposvár, Pécs, and Szeged, each with a strong theatre tradition of its own that embraced spoken theatre, opera, puppet theatre, contemporary dance, folk dance, and ballet. Put together, they hosted works from the full gamut of types and styles of theatre visiting from abroad: children's and youth theatre, puppet theatre, and dance and dramatic theatre, which performed contemporary as well as classical plays.

Several invited companies had eight or so runs, like the outdoors-playing Polyglot Theatre of Australia, billed as Children's and Youth Theatre, in Győr. Border regions whose borders have shifted with empires and wars, generally have so-called ethnic-minority theatres where performances are in the minority language. A case in point here is the Croation Theatre of Pécs, which hosted a puppet show from a village, unnamed but described as being near Brno in the Czech Republic.

The overall number in the Olympics programme of children's and youth theatres and puppet theatre was striking, comparing favourably with the great number of dance and drama theatre productions in their entirety from a very wide range of countries. Some in the category of children's and youth theatre

had conspicuously 'adult' themes, notably Poland's Ludowy Teatr's [People's Theatre] 1984: *Ministry of Love* – inspired, yes, by George Orwell. Far fewer productions at the Olympics were as cross-generic and cross-cultural as Eugenio Barba's ISTA [International School of Theatre Anthropology] production or the one-off marvel that aspired to be transnational and transcend all cultures for the sake of purely creative magic: Slava Polunin's *Slava's Snowshow*.

The inclusive character of this Theatre Olympics, by virtue of its decentralization, was, I would say, the event's most innovative aspect by comparison with its predecessors; and its ubiquity, its country-wide presence, helped its ambitious scale in the number, variety, kind, and provenance of the performance works that were shown overall. The first festival in 1995 comprised 9 performances from 7 countries, while the second, in 1999 in Japan, boasted 42 productions from 20 countries. The figures jump exponentially, showing the eighth Olympics in 2018 in India (New Delhi) with 470 works from 35 countries. The tenth – Hungary – gives 750 performances from 58 countries, which, apart from the bigger and/or more powerful European and Asian countries (Germany, France, India, China – then there are Mexico and South Africa), include the smaller European countries (Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Georgia – Ukraine too), and the smaller countries of Asia (Bali, Java – but also exiled Tibet).

Compare, as well, the long duration of the Theatre Olympics in India and Hungary with the Delphi initiator, which had covered two weeks: the Indian Olympics lasted two and a half months, while Hungary's took three months. This might well indicate the difference between a pilot festival and its move over the years to institutional status.

Among the details of provenance are visible the companies and the few solo performances whose works and work ensure the quality of the Theatre Olympics: for, of course, sheer size and the appearance of success are no guarantee of good performance. Here, in the plethora of quality, are to be found, among the dance soloists,

Pavarthy Baul (India), Dimitris Papaioannou (Greece), and Stella Höttler in a choreography by Jan Fabre (Belgium); and, among the companies with dance and song, Omar Fetmouche's reconstruction of the millennia-old *The Sound of Sand* (Algeria) and, from another ancient tradition, *The Story of Noble Dakini Nangsa Obum* of the Ache Lhamo epic tradition (abridged for Budapest). The latter was directed by Shamten Dhondup and presented by Tenzin Phuntsok, the artistic director of the Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), founded by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959.

Dramatic theatre productions with renowned directors include *Prometheus '22* from the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj (an example, now from Romania, of an ethnic-minority-language theatre), directed by Gabor Tompa, and the UK's Simon McBurney with Complicité performing *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*. Also from the UK is Cheek by Jowl's Declan Donnellan directing Spanish actors who performed Pedro Calderón's classic *Life is a Dream* in Spanish. A number of countries were represented more than once at the Olympiad, spanning the different categories of theatre noted earlier that made up its entire programme.

Other examples are festival founder-director Terzopoulos, who showed *Nora* (after Ibsen – inevitably), while Suzuki offered his iconic 1974 *The Trojan Women* (updated), followed a few days later by *Elektra*, based on the texts of Sophocles and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Shakespeare productions came from Hungary, India, Italy, Georgia (two of them – *Richard III* and *Othello* from the Liberty Theatre in Tbilisi, directed by Avtandi Varsimashvili), while, to extend but not complete the canonical list, Beijing's Central Academy of Drama brought an adaptation of Goethe's *Tragedy of Faust*, directed by Liu Libin.

Vidnyánszky, himself a prominent director, staged *The Passion of Csíksomlyó*, which performed the story of Jesus in mystery play, folk-song, contemporary poetry, and national dance in the square in front of the fantastic St Stephen's Basilica in Budapest. I badly wanted see this work but, most unfortunately, it fell outside the time that I could take abroad; and this constraint is one of the disappointments of

the feast of riches of intensely charged, large-scale festivals like this one.

Within my reach was Complicité's *Drive Your Plow*, which I was unable to attend at the Barbican in London in March, making it doubly exciting to catch it in Budapest. McBurney is an inspired and highly skilled adaptor of prose, which was lightning clear in his 2015 solo piece *The Encounter* that he performed – brilliantly, as spectators of this production's world tour unanimously attest.

Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead was based on the 2018 Polish Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk's novel (2009) of this name. She had derived its title from William Blake's poem 'Proverbs of Hell'. Yet, while fragments from Blake supply the epigraphs to Tokarczuk's chapters, thus placed to draw attention to Blake's simple but powerful words – playful, enigmatic, often sibylline, too – McBurney's production, although full of words, transposes the visionary and the spiritual depth of Blake's universe into visual and movement imagery. The plasticity of the eye and the body is aided by an intricate sound design (Christopher Shutt) which, here and there, suggests sounds of the forest, and by a lighting design (Paule Constable) that calls up mystery and magic.

The upshot of the visual-aural-kinetic components motoring the production as a whole is that, while referring both to Blake and Tokarczuk, they create a *theatre* universe. McBurney's theatrical stratagems do not always capture precisely what they seem to want to convey. Even so, this theatre (*not* transposed literature) is undeniably palpable when, for instance, the actors move in graduated shadows of darkness to evoke the imperceptible movements of nature – night, vegetation, soil, animals, and insects.

Take a near-black scene faintly illuminated by what, fleetingly, look like the outlines, by tiny dotted lights, of deer heads: they are but some of the numerous animals shot by hunters for sport. The local posse includes corrupt village businessmen, senior police, and the Catholic priest whose sermons preach the sacredness of life. Apart from its beauty, this scene conveys the book's ecological drive and social and political critique, linking these

interconnected threads with the mystery/thriller theme that runs through it as well.

Striking, too, is the production's structure – fundamentally a solo in counterpoint with a chorus or, put differently, a leading voice with continuo. It comprises the protagonist, the elderly Janina, backed by a friendly but 'odd' neighbour, sympathizers (who are also a little 'odd'), and foes, who are self-seeking representatives of law and order, and vicious ones to boot. McBurney summons them, largely in the comic tones of Tokarczuk's book. Kathryn Hunter in the role of Janina (three tremendously demanding hours of play) can only be described as phenomenal. She masters her voluminous and utterly dense text, paying attention to necessary accentuations as well as nuances of emotion, meaning, and sequence. But she also shapes her solo with such integrity that it reveals, as the climax of her piece peaks and draws to a close, just how much human understanding is imbued in her performance.

It is while writing that I fully noticed the connection between *Drive Your Plow* and *Resurrexit Cassandra* – a fortuitous connection, yet one of convergence in that the protagonist of each is a seer and an outsider, taken to be a madwoman. Fabre had conceived of Stella Höttler's solo distinctly as a solo, using his eye for beauty, male as well as female, to enhance Höttler's strong presence, which comes from her absolute in-the-body focus as she dances. Höttler had performed in Fabre's twenty-four-hour non-stop *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy* (2015), whose massive inventiveness and mass energy I had found exhilarating, and which, by the end of the night journey, had sent me into a trance. Fabre resurrects her from this earlier epic, in which he had gathered salient parts of Greek tragedies, to carry her to the Cassandra after the Trojan War. It is a stand-alone solo, but can also be perceived as an epilogue, tragic in itself, to *Mount Olympus*.

The energy of *Resurrexit Cassandra* is, necessarily, more contained, as is its virtuosic dancing and its installation-art effects, which bind Fabre-the-visual-artist to Fabre-the-choreographer. Höttler drops exquisite garments to a floor covered in earth, as if she were shedding

snakeskins; a large tortoise crawling on the chiaroscuro stage alludes to a primeval state of being. Moving images of the dancer, filmed previously, appear on life-size panels, each featuring its own postures, contours, shapes, colours, and moods. All are variations of a modern-day Cassandra, a youthful and stunning Cassandra, who speaks and sometimes howls her visions of the dangers confronting nature, thereby joining, by her power to foresee and foretell, the Cassandra of antiquity who had warned humanity against human violence.

Höttler, who is German, performs Ruggerio Cappuccio's text in French, which she had learned admirably for this work, balancing its verbal musicality with her body's rhythms. Words and non-words articulate Cassandra's knowledge, which nobody wants to know. More than a priestess, Höttler-Cassandra is a Homeric goddess who has come down from Olympus to guide human beings.

Again, fortuitously, the structural principle of solo-with-chorus evident in McBurney and hinted at in Fabre (I think of *Mount Olympus* as Cassandra's chorus) recurs in a particularly oppressive way in Romeo Castellucci's *Bros*. Here the chorus dominates the solo – a Jeremiah figure – who, although in a subsidiary, passive role, nevertheless carries great symbolic weight. After all, God had commanded Jeremiah to warn the people of Jerusalem that, if they did not mend their ways, their city would be destroyed and they would be taken captive.

Castellucci's Jeremiah figure is, then, a prophet of doom, a biblical Cassandra countenancing the disasters generated by humans who have fallen morally so low that salvation is nigh-on impossible. Such a moral fall is locked in their active dissolution of the humaneness, the civility, and the civilization that is rooted in the principles of what is kind, just, and right. Moral-human and social degradation are inseparable, and this perception is core to *Bros*.

Jeremiah, naked but for a loincloth, babbles for the first four or five minutes of the production in a barely discernible tongue – my ears say it is Latin. Once he changes position by

going further back into the stage into a bed, this arcane human remains silent, mostly asleep – somehow fossilized by sleep – for the rest of the production. Presumably, his dormant presence (but for one abrupt awakening by the chorus) is intended to be a reminder that a bygone prophecy is by no means anachronistic today. Meanwhile, the chorus of dark-uniformed, bludgeon-wielding police asserts its control of the space. From here until the end of the performance, this space is one of subordination, abjection, violence, and torture – a police state, one might say.

The chorus of twenty men was formed from local non-actors – 'men from the streets', as they were referred to in a cast list – who had no need of acting: they followed invisible commands off-stage through earpieces, having been prepared beforehand to respond to orders in unison and in perfect timing. The effect was, of course, sinister, all the more so because they were mostly in parallel phalanxes, and this composite image quite obviously traded on widely understood associations with Nazism, fascism, war, and concentration camps.

Three of the total of twenty-three men on the stage were actors – Valer Dellakeza, the soloist, and two in the roles of the police officers who waterboard a man tied up in a plastic bag and repeatedly beat a naked one on the floor, eventually giving him electric shocks. There is smoke, steam, fire, paint, the bang of stun guns, weird-looking machinery (the dystopian world of robot technology?), a portrait of Beckett (because he saw the embers of civilization?), and a few other pictures.

My earlier description as 'fortuitous' for the three productions cited may be a little misleading, for, although conceived independently, they were not made fortuitously. Their concerns overlap, regardless of how differently they were fashioned by stellar European directors, and this suggests that all three are responses to a collectively experienced situation. The latter, moreover, was not theirs alone but shared by their spectators. The situation involved seismic shifts undergone by multiple societies – indeed, by the whole world – during the onslaught of Covid-19, as well as its aftermath as the

pandemic began to retreat. Together with the pandemic, and the societal terror and disarray it had engendered, came the moral-spiritual inner earthquakes of human beings. The environment too rose up with natural cataclysms.

The peak years were 2020 and 2021, while the worst, appearing to taper off in later 2022, began hideously to reveal such catastrophes-in-waiting as further serious climate change, more wars, more deaths, more economic exploitation, more hardship for people the world over, and worsening shameful political behaviour in the chaotic world of politics. The list of actual and encroaching difficulties is far from complete, but a production called *Bros* ('brothers') could dare to be grimmer still by how it ends. A machine parachutes down to the stage carrying a child who, having landed, picks up a heavy baton and wields it efficiently, exactly as had his bludgeoning elders.

Spectators grasp full well that, as the dictum goes, 'the child is father of the man', and this particular child is to be understood as the father of the next man, and the next, and the next of the future. All will symbolically stand for but also actualize bludgeoning violence, not only with batons but also, and especially, with an array of means as glimpsed in this very show.

Even such lightly sketched paragraphs, leaning on the analytical principles of the sociology of the theatre as these do here, indicate how closely the theatre is in step with the societal dynamics in which productions are made. They also open out how, through the processes of their theatre-making, productions are able to look, speak, and mean to various groups of spectators. These same sociological principles ask why theatre is made. What is it for? Why do theatre artists defend its existence against all odds?

These questions lie in the very doing of *Bros*, *Resurrexit Cassandra*, and *Drive your Plow* (but then all theatres, in all languages, posed much the same questions, especially during lockdown). The first two productions were premiered within months of each other in 2021. *Drive Your Plow* premiered in January 2023, foregrounding the interrelation between ecological and social injustices, and between

them and those who wield power to disempower others. But the crucial point for now is that these three works were incubated in the crisis years noted, and that they bear the wounds of those living in the crisis. These works – of the *theatre* – open the opportunity for spectators to interrogate the shared crisis and to find their bearings, not least within their own psyche.

Eugenio Barba too had known grief, a sign of which appears in his echo of rebirth in the title of his *Theatrum Mundi ISTA* production, *Anástasis (Resurrection)*. Barba had brought ISTA together whenever he could (it was not an annual affair), tangentially relating it to *Odin Teatret*. Custom had it that the workshops with master-practitioners, which defined ISTA, would conclude with a public workshop-cum-demonstration. In the early years, this closing gathering showcased the masters of their particular art form – notably Odissi, Topeng, and Candomblé. Eventually ISTA was to present a new generation of masters (the senior masters, with whom Barba had had strong bonds, had passed away) on a stage, together with the wider group that were the ISTA participants and their workshop students.

Such was the case with this seventeenth ISTA, which had trained for two weeks in a freezing monastery in Pécsvárad before its sixty-odd participants came with Barba and his team of artist-pedagogues to Budapest. They rehearsed intensively for long hours over several days on the National Theatre's voluminous stage – big enough for Ana Woolf, Barba's assistant from Argentina, to drill the ensemble movement of the participants meticulously. Unless I am very much mistaken, this was the first time that Barba had directed on a huge stage and, moreover, on the stage of what, in possibly outdated vocabulary, can still be called a 'mainstream' theatre (Figures 1 and 2).

Barba attentively combined and assembled the masters' specific practices. ('Patchworked' might be appropriate terminology, since the texture and weave of the performance combinations were of primary importance and of equal importance.) Among other practices, which are not named here, were Baul sacred



Figure 1. Eugenio Barba rehearsing the ISTA participants of *Anástasis (Resurrection)* at the National Theatre in Budapest 2023. Photograph by and courtesy of Franceso Galli.

dance (Parvathy, whose solo performance referred to above was a separate event); Japanese Noh (Keiin Yoshimura); Taiwanese Nanguan Opera (Yacan Lin); and Cavalinho and Bumba Meu Boi from Northern Brazil (Alicio Amaral and Juliana Pardo).

True to his lifelong endeavour, Barba avoided hybridizing these respective traditions so as to maintain their unique characteristics while enhancing them through juxtaposition; and such juxtapositions, whether they showed disparate pieces that were performed side by side in the same story (Baul beside Nanguan, for instance), or compared and contrasted aspects of dance, thus arranging dance dialogues that were sometimes quirky, sometimes straight-out funny, and sometimes just beautiful to watch – all were intended to stimulate a sense of wonder and respect for the artistic richness, indeed cultural richness, of the peoples of the world (Figures 3, 4, and 5).

A salient example of the dance dialogue evoked here is a comic competition ('Oh, so you can do that, but let me show you *this!*') between Alicio Amaral and István Berecz (Hungary), who, only minutes earlier, had shot out a captivating, virtuosic, and perfectly



Figure 2. *Anástasis (Resurrection)*. Photograph by and courtesy of Franceso Galli.

elegant knee- and thigh-slapping Hungarian folk dance. 'Competitions' of this kind are common to most European folk dancing, but they appear in folk art far and wide. Amaral, apart from playfully trying to upstage Berecz by wittily reproducing his steps and gestures, also found exactly what was necessary for repartee in his North Brazilian folk tradition. Barba's aim, overall, was to integrate such culturally specific materials not solely in this or that section of his – allow me to call it – 'global tapestry', but in the tapestry that constituted the presentation as a whole.

There is a new, joyful spirit in this most recent ISTA work that comes also from Stefano Di Buduo's translucent, weightless, digital scenography and light design – Barba's first confident forays into this electronic universe, which needs large spaces for effective projection. Here, at the National Theatre, *was* the large space that Barba, it seems, did not



Figure 3. *Anástasis (Resurrection)*. Photograph by and courtesy of Franceso Galli.



Figure 4. *Anástasis (Resurrection)*. Photograph by and courtesy of Franceso Galli.



Figure 5. *Anástasis (Resurrection)*. Photograph by and courtesy of Franceso Galli.

think to look for before. There were glimmers of lightness elsewhere, like the waltz fragment by Richard Strauss danced on stilts – familiar from many of the Odin’s barbers, not least from ‘Mr Peanuts on stilts’, Julia Varley’s company signature. Barba’s programme note speaks of a ‘rebirth in the world of nature, animals, and humans’, and the sentence that follows speaks eloquently to this work: ‘*Anástasis* is a hymn to the power of Life and an homage to the performer’s art with its splendour of styles and expressions.’

Yet it has become clearer over the years that behind ISTA is a philosophy of being, an existential philosophy of how to be. ISTA may have looked, in its beginnings, as primarily about experimentation in aesthetics through cultures; and, to its critics, it may have looked like another variant of exoticism. Gradually, however, its practice gave contours to a view of being without preconceived ideas and prejudice about peoples, without discriminatory racial, class, gender, or cultural attitudes, without oppression or imposition, and without

ignorance. In its practice, it could be said, lies an aspirant and necessary model of being in the world.

The Theatre Olympics opened with city-wide celebrations for all tastes, and it closed with comparably festive musical and other events, indoors and out. Vidnyánszky mounted a theatre finale on verdant Margaret Island in Budapest based on Hungarian icon Imre Madach’s 1861 poem *The Tragedy of Man*.

The epic poem tells of Lucifer’s seduction of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Paradise. Lucifer then reveals to them the horrors to be endured by humanity in the centuries to come. Adam and Eve, aghast at the consequences of their actions, wish to return to God’s realm, only to be told by the Almighty that they must live on earth: ‘O Man, strive on, strive on, have faith, and trust!’ This is the optimistic logo of the Theatre Olympics and a standard bearer for Vidnyánszky’s *Madach Project*, which he also saw as a tribute to Madach on the writer’s 200th anniversary. If Barba’s ISTA production for the Olympics is a

'hymn to Life', the *Madach Project*, on a far grander scale, is a hymn to Life and also to Hope – not to contemplative hope, but to hope activated for humanity's regeneration.

Unfortunately, I was unable to accept the generous invitation of returning to Budapest for this grand finale, but I knew of its considerable planning and preparation in collaboration with the University of Theatre and Film Arts in the city. Students from nine universities outside Hungary were involved, including France, Greece, the UK, Egypt, and Canada. Vidnyánszky had selected the sections of Madach's epic to be worked on for several months by the respective students, accompanied, I believe, by several guidelines. Otherwise, they were left to work with their home teachers. The goal was to connect the

assigned parts in Hungary so as to bring together the whole epic in a performance (or, perhaps, to bring to fruition what may have turned into an abridged version of it).

Vidnyánszky spent two weeks with the students adjusting and coordinating details and constructing the work that was to be shown to the public. In the event, the production became seven hours long, and the proof really had to be in the pudding – in being a live spectator of the *Madach Project*. Clearly, it was an ambitious project for new generations of theatre people, who would have had a glimpse of a universe bigger than their home and whose imagination would, hopefully, have been fired to strive to do more – and better – not for themselves alone but in and for both their smaller and larger worlds.