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A trip to Berlin for the image of a liveable Hungary

Even if at times Viktor Orbán or László Kiss got into the crosshair, Krétakör's latest performance, *Bánk Bán ACT* is not about airing Hungary's dirty laundry in public. Árpád Schilling's Berlin project working with Hungarian activists was about the Hungary of which's "residents" national identity is no other than the struggle of making the very country a better place.

Europe is dead – I am reading on the cover of the latest Der Spiegel. This high-sounding statement brings on a smile in the circle of such Hungarian activists who have come to Berlin with a performance and with the very mission to say the Germans in their face: maybe after Brexit with its ever more comic twists we should sit down, and stop looking for big solutions, and just talk. Not by using abstract notions about Europe's future but about the current problems and issues of the Europeans. Although the common European idea may really be dead (the possibility of a union showing solidarity with each other seems, at least for now quite unrealistic), but thinking together is still possible.

Say, we can discuss what they think about the difference between East and West: do they really consider the citizens of the post-Soviet countries some sort of second-class Europeans? Or, are they so tolerant also in their daily life with the Berlin Turkish community when they are all over the streets after a victorious European Championship match?

Even unawares they were practicing democracy

Nevertheless, members of the *Bánk Bán ACT*, the latest project of Krétakör, reached these questions through a fighting path filled with debates. The performance reinterpreting the national opera wasn't the most difficult task but the creative process itself for the activists, most of whom

were stage-virgin and did not even know each other prior to the joint work. Art camps, more democratic than a traditional theater rehearsal, could not pass without conflicts, thus they practiced what they can also use during their daily work: when should one make a sensible compromise and how to avoid being discredit or dishonesty. Watching from here it is really understandable why Árpád Schilling who is turning more and more from theater towards activism has undertaken the direction.

However, even as such the biggest question was whether the second half of the performance wouldn't seem too direct and far-fetched for the Berlin audience when the activists invited them for a discussion. Based on the three performances it seems that it was worth polishing this part to the extremes, because the idea has worked. For example someone from the audience shared their doubts about the legalization of prostitution (which's regulation is about to change in Germany this year), or someone else talked about the occupation of Airbnb apartments as one of the results of the tensions due to the housing problems in Berlin. During the informal discussions after the performance the activists working on improving Hungary's education and housing, received more and more new tips.

Árpád Schilling's sentence may have seemed vague before the premiere of ACT, saying that he is not interested in making theater with civil society activists but in a common struggle with the civil society activists for a more liveable society.

However, when the audience-performer line vanished during the discussion following the *Bánk bán* reinterpretation zipped into half an hour, everyone realized that they happened to be not in a theater but in a place where people are interested in their opinion. Of course the interactive turn is the greatest fear of a theater spectator usually accustomed to passivity, but the actors have created such a free atmosphere on the stage, void of all mannerism right from the first minutes that they soon gained the sympathy of the people sitting in the hall. As Árpád Schilling has put it once during the rehearsals, *their clumsiness was their strength*, that's also why the reinterpretation of *Bánk Bán* resembled a Hungarian public society *Benny Hill Show*.

The point really wasn't that by the end of the evening Hungarian activists together with the Berlin audience would find the solution for each and every issue and would hand in hand go to the European Parliament. Rather they have proved themselves and the ones present that political and social engagement and forming an opinion is not solely the task of the big ones, one needs not to sit in any Parliament to do so.

From national kitsch to genuine national identity

Although after the first half of ACT the spectators could have misunderstood the goal of the performance. Because the first half was drawn up from the activists' own *Bánk bán* interpretation, which had the effect of having the country's dirty laundry shoved to the face of the spectators. To the aria of *Hazám hazám* (My country, my country) the chanting of the expressions of *internet tax* or *illiberal democracy* echoed, while a video montage from the most beautiful moments of national kitsch (from the national equestrian theater, through the shaman drum right to the paintings ordered by Imre Kerényi) made the overture even more complex. But after each playfully performed scene about the Hungarian wife-business or the operation of the local oligarchs, the spectators, whose faces varied through dismay and horror, could get the picture really fast.

„After this we don't expect you to save us” – said Réka Kinga Papp the performance's actor/moderator, following the parts painting a worrying picture of Hungary, and the *Bánk Bán.zip* compressing the music of the more than two-hour opera into five minutes, performed by Kristóf Darvas. By the end of the performance turning into a forum it has become clear for everyone present that the reason they had to watch all this was not the self-pity so typical of *Bánk*. It was exactly the activists' rage, and then their curiosity towards the spectators that made it clear that they wanted to demonstrate their readiness to act, and not to shove the country's issues, so popular in the foreign press, down the throat of the audience yet another time.

Thus, national identity, by now an archaic idea serving as the topic of the national opera and the entire Berlin performance, has gained a very specific and fundamental meaning. The spectators of ACT could leave knowing that Hungary does not equal to the *aching heart* and neither to the

excruciating *self-accusation*, nor to our politicians ever so often presented also in the German press. It was worth it.