

STAGING TRAUMA:
REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST IN HUNGARIAN THEATER

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Undergraduate Studies

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Culture,
Politics, and Society*

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Vienna, Austria
2024

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is centered around the question: how can we remember the Holocaust today? It explores the representations of the Holocaust staged by third and fourth-generation creators, whom I refer to as the generation of postmemory, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept (2008). Focusing on contemporary Hungarian theater, this research examines two theater plays to illustrate how this new generation of theater-makers can revitalize Holocaust memory in public discourse and engage young audiences. I claim that 3rd or 4th generation theater creatives can revitalize the public discourse on Holocaust memory by bringing fresh, temporally distanced perspectives, by possessing the tools to create a great treatment of the Shoah. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the context I present Hungary's current political climate, characterized by the government's illiberal stance, its cultural landscape, and its approach to Holocaust memory. The theoretical framework incorporates concepts such as collective memory, episodic and semantic memory (J. Assmann 1995; A. Assmann 2008), and postmemory (Hirsch 2008), offering a nuanced perspective on the nature of memory. By integrating these theoretical insights with an analysis of theater practices, this thesis demonstrates how theater can be an ideal space for remembering the Holocaust, for bridging past with present, as it fosters deep and empathetic understanding among today's youth and the broader public.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Vlad Naumescu, for his insightful feedback, and encouragement. I wish to extend my appreciation to Professor Borbála Faragó for her support and guidance during the writing process. I am particularly grateful to the creators of the theater productions I studied. Hanna Cseri, Júlia Bagossy, Eszter Zrinyifalvi, and Dorka Tóth, your openness and willingness to share your experiences and insights have enriched this thesis. My thanks also go to my high school teacher, Eszter Szarka for igniting my interest in the subject of this thesis, theater. Lastly, I would like to wholeheartedly thank my mother, Judit Kósa, my father Gábor Riesz, and Julian, for their unconditional support throughout my studies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2024, on the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust, it is crucial to reflect on the practices, spaces of remembrance, and on the people who are carrying out this process. An especially powerful sphere that has access to great tools for public remembering is the world of theater. In Hungary, I found multiple cases where theater deals with the Holocaust, out of which, two contemporary productions stand out, considering the young age of the creators behind them. The question arises: what does it mean to the memory of the Holocaust to create and perform plays about it today, by people who were not witnesses of the tragedy, but were witnesses to what its memory has done to individuals, families, and friendships, in all, society?

By analyzing two Hungarian plays, “Fatelessness” (“Sorstalanság”) and “Mr. Mundstock” (“Mundstock Úr”) I seek to demonstrate how theater serves as a platform for dealing with collective trauma. By collective trauma in this case, I refer to the trauma of the Hungarian society since it affected not only survivors or their families. To do so, I will explain the characteristics of two genres, specifically puppet and studio theater, as an artistic form that allows both the creators and the audience for reflection. Moreover, I explore how theater creatives understand their engagement and participation in the processing of collective trauma from idea to the final product.

1.1 Context

Concepts that are pillars of this thesis arise from Memory Studies. To move from broader to exact, I introduce the notion of **collective memory** aided by Jan and Aleida Assmann (J.Assmann 1995; A. Assmann 2008). Collective memory is a cultural phenomenon that can be re-embodied and transmitted from generations and that is shaped by socialization and

customs, rather than being inherited biologically. It is characterized by sharing attributes from both **episodic** and **semantic memory** (A. Assmann 2008, 51). The first refers to all personal experiences, while the latter connects to collective learning. I theorize that theater is a place where all the above-mentioned forms are present, providing a safe and ideal environment for remembering.

To understand the full picture, it is essential to introduce the time and place in which these plays were created and reflect on the past decade's Holocaust memory in Hungary. The current regime in Hungary, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, had a strong influence on both the memory of the Shoah and the cultural sphere therefore, it is crucial to highlight some of their steps. The government (FIDESZ) has been in power since 2010. In 2014, on the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust Orbán declared his vision to build an illiberal democracy (Bíró-Nagy 2017, 31). In terms of Holocaust memory, on the 70th anniversary of the tragedy, by erecting a monument overnight in the dark in memory of the victims of the German occupation in Budapest, they tried to rewrite history by hiding the truth that Hungary was just as much complicit to the Hungarian Holocaust (Pető 2019a, 472).

The government's policies of the last decade have had detrimental effects on the cultural sphere, including the theater world. The withdrawal of subsidies, the privatization of universities and institutions, and the appointment of those close and loyal to the administration are just a few characteristics of the regime. Working as an artist under these circumstances has become highly politicized, as those critical of the regime face constant uncertainty, holding them back from building a secure future. To further explain this context, I rely on academic research on Hungary and precisely Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime, cultural policy, and memory politics.

This thesis argues that the focus of remembering the Holocaust discourse should move away from the rigid details and turn towards the human experience, which is easier to grasp for the new generations than connecting to lists of places, names, or numbers in the history books. My intention is not to question the importance and relevance of those details. However, I suggest incorporating artistic treatments that have the potential to effectively convey the human side of trauma, and by that, fostering greater empathy and relatability for both those affected personally and those seeking to understand this profound historical event. I claim that 3rd or 4th generation theater creatives can renew the public discourse on Holocaust memory and step in with fresh, temporally removed perspectives, by having the tools to create a great treatment of the Shoah. Including a complex picture of the current populist tendencies allows them to see the importance of remembering the shared past. Additionally, theater as a live artistic form requires the presence and attention of a community of people, who go through the same theatrical experience together in those few hours. While being part of a bigger whole, a process in them also begins to form, a combination of personal and communal, which is in my experience the ideal circumstance to deal with a topic like the Holocaust.

The relevance of the topic lies in the recurring, long-lasting, and transforming nature of collective trauma, especially in the context of current Hungarian memory politics and cultural policy. Keeping the discourse alive, revisiting, and reframing the Holocaust is important now and going to be for the foreseeable future because a tragic event of such scale will always act as a reminder of one of the worst times of humanity. The notion of revisiting such acts is not repetitive, especially as to how it corresponds to our present puts it into a new, unseen perspective. Revisiting does not equal rewriting history, rather it means making new ties between past and present. This fresh angle can be evoked and fostered by theater since it is a genre that is able to address personal memories and feelings while creating a shared experience.

1.2 The Generation of Postmemory in Performance

The staging of *Fatelessness* (Kertész, 1975) the Nobel Prize winner novel by Imre Kertész for the first time in theaters since its publication in 1975, becomes an act of remembrance, especially significant today in 2024, a lifetime after the Holocaust. The play only includes two actors and is performed in smaller spaces like studio spaces and classrooms. As a play that travels to school classrooms, it has a strong educational aspect considering that this might be the student's first link to the topic. Conversely, in "Mr. Mundstock's" puppet theater play for young adults and adults, based on Ladislav Fuks's novel: *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* (Fuks 1963), the creators explore the freedom the genre provides. The combination of Czech grotesque humor with puppetry enables the expression of raw commentary on human nature, potentially evoking visceral reactions.

Both plays are staged by young female theater directors, alongside a very young creative team that provides them with a fresh, new perspective not only on the topic but on theatrical styles and approaches too. Their age makes them part of the generation of postmemory, which refers to their connection to traumatic events, which are mostly through inherited stories, images, and behaviors (Hirsch 2008). With this thesis, I suggest listening to and making space for the 3rd and 4th generation theater creatives' thoughts and takes on the different forms of Holocaust memory. It is only a small contribution to the ongoing discourse, but it offers an alternative perspective that approaches culture from a memory politics point of view. By elucidating what is happening in the theaters of Hungary and relating that to the academic discourse on the Holocaust and memory politics, I combine two different schools of study that have a lot in common and often overlap.

An essential part of the research is to experience the plays and their atmosphere; therefore, those encounters act as primary sources. Moreover, examining the genres, the

staging, the aesthetics, and the registers are all key components. Next, I conducted interviews with the creators of the productions, specifically, the directors, assistants, and playwrights to ensure a deeper understanding of why they began to focus on the topic of the Holocaust, their artistic vision, and how they approached both the production period and the audience. I analyze these interviews from a qualitative point of view.

1.3 SZFE – Freeszfe

Before introducing the creators behind the plays, I present the circumstances which became a key element in their creative identity. In 2020 the government announced the transition of the Theater and Film Arts University (SZFE) from a public institution to a foundation-based one, raising concerns about political interference and autonomy. In response, students occupied the university for 70 days to support the original senate and teaching staff, which was ended by the escalation of the pandemic. The long-term result was the creation of the Freeszfe Society which is an autonomous creative space founded by former and current members of SZFE to preserve artistic expression and academic freedom amid the restrictive restructuring of Hungarian higher education (Freeszfe Society, n.d.). The Emergency Exit program, facilitated by Freeszfe served as an alternative for students of SZFE who decided to leave the university, after its forced takeover in 2020. In the frame of the program, 170 pupils are receiving diplomas from seven European partner universities.

1.4 The Creators

Hanna Cseri, the director of “Mr. Mundstock” (2021) after studying Hungarian literature and sociology, attended a drama pedagogical course. Later that course steered her towards puppet theater directing which she started at the Theater and Film Arts University (SZFE) in Budapest and graduated through the Emergency Exit program. Today she works at the Budapest Bábszínház (Budapest Puppet Theater) both as a director and musical director

while pursuing a music career. Júlia Bagossy, the director of “Fatelessness” (2024) is finishing her studies through Freeszfe in theater direction, but she has branched out into different mediums as well, writing and directing short films, and releasing her album.

Eszter Zrinyifalvi, the dramaturg¹ of both plays, is in the last year of her studies at Freeszfe, and her first role as a dramaturg was in “Mr. Mundstock”, but prior to that she tried herself out as an assistant director. Before her dramaturg studies, she spent a year at ELTE studying liberal arts. Dorka Tóth, the assistant director and drama instructor of “Fatelessness”, is studying liberal arts at ELTE and specializes in theater studies and aesthetics while studying community theater at Freeszfe. All four young creators grew up in the 21st century in Hungary, making their late teenage, young adult years influenced by the same things, like the takeover of SZFE, the COVID-19 pandemic, or more broadly the illiberal political climate of the past decade.

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 contextualizes the research by relating it to the existing literature in Theater, and Performance and Memory studies. Moreover, it draws an image about the Holocaust Memory, and cultural policy in Hungary, with the intention to reflect on the timings of the staging. The aim of Chapter 3 is to analyze the staging of the plays, to explain the creator’s goals, and decisions, all informed by the interviews. It considers how the plays interact with and affect the theories coming from Memory studies. Lastly, the Conclusion summarizes the arguments of the thesis, reflects on its limitations, and poses questions for further research.

¹ The dramaturg's tasks focus on the creation of theatrical texts, such as scriptwriting, script editing, historical research, creative participation in rehearsals, and theatre operations.

II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The following chapter aims to produce an overview of the political and cultural context that influences specifically the work of the interviewed artists, and broadly the artistic world in Hungary. I aim to connect the Holocaust memory of Hungary to the political tendencies, and by doing so, highlight the role of theater in remembering processes.

2.1 Holocaust Memory in Hungary

Remembering in Hungary, specifically the Holocaust has never been simple, but in the past decade, it became an overly politicized tool for the Orbán government. Despite the large number of deported Jews in 1944, out of which most never returned, today, the Jewish community in Hungary is still one of the largest in Europe. Ten years ago, 2014 was the Holocaust Memorial Year, when the government attempted to fight international accusations of not challenging the present anti-Semitism in the country (Kovács and Mindler-Steiner 2015, 50).

However, instead of doing justice to the memory of the Holocaust and all that were affected by it, as Andrea Pető puts it, a memory war was started. The monument's (mentioned in the introduction) portrayal of the relations between Hungary and Germany during WW2 is an attempt to rewrite history, as Hungarian authorities collaborated with nazi Germany. Demonstrations that followed the unmasking of the monument claimed it as an act of historical revisionism (Pető 2019a, 472). In absurd times like these, when the government is promoting a false and distorted reality, words alone, in my opinion, are insufficient to break the fabricated realities. However, theater, by operating on a different level, does not try to fight it but it manages to transcend it.

Pető calls the above-mentioned phenomenon **non-remembering** which she defines as “a conscious process of forgetting and replacing painful memories with less painful ones” (2019a, 472). She argues that there are two intertwined strategies for non-remembering. One: replacing a historical account with another and two: simultaneously resisting the remembrance of all murdered in Hungary in 1944 (Pető 2019a 472). The government that was in power in 2014 remains, today, in 2024, eighty years after the Holocaust, signaling no change in their memory politics, so Pető’s observations remain valid.

As mentioned before, the current governance of Hungary labelled as an illiberal regime, has a direct impact on the Holocaust memorialization as well. Andrea Pető in an analysis from 2019 on the ongoing illiberal paradigm change identified nine main tendencies constituting this shift, among which were treating memory not as a constant flux, but as something that should be closed permanently, and attacking the legitimacy of science by appointing anyone loyal to the regime to be an expert historian. The latter, according to Pető, results in the self-censorship of historians fearing what they say will have detrimental effects on their financial support (2019b).

This permanent fear and insecurity I believe is not an isolated example, many spheres experience the same worry, like public education, and the cultural world. Fighting this paradigm shift in Pető’s view, is not straightforward. However, at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) Pető and her colleagues, launched a podcast series accessible to the wider public, where guests are scholars who talk about their research. She aims to increase the visibility, and outreach of uncensored scholarship, while evoking thoughts in the listeners concerning the paradigm shift (2019b). Connecting this thesis to her solution, I suggest that theater, and even other art forms, could play another great role, as they use tools that the regime is not utilizing, and possibly can reach different crowds than academic discussions. Podcasts

stimulate the brain, while theater can spark (visceral) emotional responses, both have their rightful place in remembering the Holocaust. The bottom line is having both available to the public is crucial, as emotional reactions can spark intellectual interest.

2.2 Theater and Holocaust Memory

Lev-Aladgem, in her article “Remembering Forbidden Memories” cites Ernest Renan saying that “forgetting is an essential part of remembering: nations are bound and created not only through shared memories but also through shared amnesia, a collective forgetfulness” (2006). This quote implies that forgetting as well as remembering are connecting nodes for societies. How the process of selection works is a question for another thesis. However, there are events and moments of the past, like the Holocaust that are chosen to be memorialized, to act as a reminder of what humanity is capable of. She refers to Maurice Halbwachs to emphasize how remembering and forgetting are inherently social activities. To connect these statements to theater Lev-Aladgem brings in Freddie Rokem’s claim that “theater, as a specific art form, is a unique practice of performing history” (2006).

Gluhovic’s book written on Theater Studies and Memory talks about the Polish Tadeusz Kantor, one of the most influential theater directors attempting to deal with the traumatic events of the 20th century, specifically the Holocaust. As someone who directly experienced the Holocaust, he aimed to represent and commemorate the losses while hoping for a nicer future. Gluhovic quotes Malkin by saying both Kantor and Samuel Beckett (grotesque dramatist, who wrote “Krapp’s Last Tape” and “Waiting for Godot”) through their works present “not only with the act of remembering life but with a dialogue between living and remembrance, present and past: Man and his Memory” (Gluhovic 2020). The quote refers to theater’s capability to act as a bridge between the living and the memories and facilitate conversation between those. Gluhovic inspired by Kantor, reflects on the **dualistic nature of remembrance**, while part of

the mind recalls the past the other keeps on watching it, interpreting it, or even on some occasions rejecting it (2020). This duality appearing simultaneously can connect past with present, and bridging, past events to the present, providing an ideal situation for reflections.

Israeli theater productions about the Shoah around the 1980s developed a mode to include and gradually embed witness testimonies. A specific mode of this was documentary drama, aiming for an objective and realistic style of representation (Rokem 2000). Documentary theater has an important place in not only Holocaust memory but among the theatrical genres. There are contemporary examples from Hungary too, “The Dohány Street Sheriff” (“A Dohány utcai seriff”), premiered in 2013, now played in Örkény Theater, has been on the program for over ten years now. The creators did archival research on the Holocaust using survivors' statements together with different datasets, historical sources, and case studies which in the play are repeatedly interspersed with self-deprecating and characterful Jewish jokes, in which the same tragic fate is expressed (Kovács and Mohácsi, n.d.)².

“Salt Flower or the Euphoria of Existence” (“Sóvirág, avagy a létezés eufóriája”) staged by Tünet Együttes premiered in 2015 as a dance theater performance which was a duet between Holocaust survivor Éva Fahidi, and young dancer, Emese Cuhorka. As they danced through Éva’s life and traumas, a wonderful connection was formed between generations, which Fahidi said to be a therapeutic experience (Fahidi 2015).³ It is realistic because it treats Éva Fahidi’s life, and stylized because it is danced. In contrast to the Israeli treatments and to “The Sheriff of the Dohány Street”, but similarly to “Salt Flower”, the examined plays in this thesis offer a more personal approach, with no aspiration to be realistic. By introducing “The

² All Hungarian sources are my translations.

³ On 15 January 2020, after 4 years, “Sóvirág” temporarily said goodbye, as Emese Cuhorka was expecting a child. Unfortunately, they never returned on stage, as Éva Fahidi passed away in 2023. They have danced mostly in the studio space of the Vígszínház, but they regularly performed at other venues.

Dohány Street Sheriff” and “Salt Flower”, I aim to present the variety of theatrical approaches dealing with the Holocaust.

2.3 Theater’s Contribution

To understand theater creators’ contribution to tackling collective forgetting, I asked my interviewees about the role and responsibility they feel when dealing with the Holocaust. Dorka Tóth talked about theater’s characteristic of live presence and its social aspect. It is happening here and now in a community, even if there is no explicit communication between audience members, everyone is still in a closed space going through the same emotional, and intellectual experience. Moreover, by facilitating the follow-up workshops, Tóth has a closer connection to the audience, and she sees the immediate reaction to the plays. The emphasis of the workshops often differs, based on the classes' needs, interests, and emotions, still they always reflect on the props used in the play, to detangle the web of symbols and their roles. Tavia Nyong'o drawing from psychoanalytic theory in the context of staging historical trauma without re-enacting it, argues that theater can serve as a good enough environment for addressing trauma (2019). Simultaneously, he relates the concept of after-care, as a practice, that can allow both the cast and the audience to transition back to reality, and this is exactly what the previously described workshops provide (2019).

András Borgula, director, translator, and the creative director of Gólem Központ, as an intellectual and theater-maker, says theater’s task is to nuance and shine light on the complexity of the situations, despite who is in power (Borgula 2020). Assistant director and drama instructor Dorka Tóth highlights the significance of Hungary’s leading theater, Katona, including a play about the Shoah in their program. It directs the public’s attention to the issue and likely reaches many who otherwise might not have engaged deeply with the topic. She claims that the Holocaust should be brought back into the public consciousness, as it has a lot

to say about our present times. The performances of “Fatelessness” since its premiere in February of 2024 are usually sold out in Katona’s Sufni studio and many public schools have signed up, indicating the void it is filling. “Fatelessness” is specifically great for younger audiences, as it follows a young boy's life, showing his reality, and the brutality of his circumstances.

Bringing the Holocaust or specifically *Fatelessness* into the classroom is not a simple task, but the performance is a good opening. Zrinyifalvi points out that witnessing such a play can encourage people to investigate their family history and propose questions. She understands this effect in a broader way: if not the Holocaust trauma, something else will come up that needs processing, and in the long run individual treatment of the trauma will aid the collective processes, at the very least on the micro level. I tend to agree with the creator’s points, especially regarding the assumed long-term effect, all communications sparked by the play, help with keeping Holocaust memory alive.

Aleida Assmann theorizes that **collective memory is an overlap between semantic and episodic memory**. Semantic memory refers to the mind's ability to learn and store information and it is acquired through collective learning, which connects us with others in the end. Episodic memory on the other hand is linked to personal experiences, which are solely individual. While they can be shared and communicated, the quality of the experience will, in every instance, change (Assmann 2008). I see a strong link between directors and memory scholars, drawing on Aleida Assmann’s theory, I claim that theater is a place for collective remembrance, as it links semantic and episodic memory. Theater is semantic, because it is in a collective setting and can be understood as a learning process, and it is episodic since it is an individual experience, relating to one’s contexts and relations.

Even though the theater creators did not necessarily reflect on Hungary's Holocaust memory in our interviews as a broader notion, they still contributed to it in many ways. First, they direct attention to the topic, already by solely choosing it for themselves to create a production, but also by sharing it with wider and mixed audiences. Secondly, they are fighting the limitations of **communicative memory**, which according to Jan Assmann implies that a community remembers up to 80-100 years into the past (Assmann 1995). Since 2024 is the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust, it is due time to revisit and resist collective forgetting. Thirdly, they take part in the creation of a dialogue between past and present with an effect on the future. Lastly, staging the Holocaust becomes both a point of reference and a tool for fostering curiosity, sensitivity, and understanding toward one another and about the shared past. What theater does, that other artistic means cannot, is the creation of a “**good enough environment**” in which trauma can be encountered, in a non-traumatic way (Nyong'o 2019).

2.4 State of the Theater World in Hungary – Financial Dependency and Cultural Policy

To grasp the challenges that theaters face in Hungary I explain the financial dependencies and the effect of policies on the relevant institution's operations. Katona is a theater funded by the city of Budapest, a lot depends on who is the mayor, which means that the future of the theater closely depends on who oversees the city. However, they belong to the minority of five cultural institutions funded by the city, while others belong under the jurisdiction of the government, depending on them financially as well.

Gólem Theater, which housed “Mr. Mundstock”, is an independent theater that over the years was able to create a financial model that provides them with enough funds for the running of the establishments. Despite this, they still applied for some governmental funds, out of which

a few were successful, but not all of them were received. For instance, in the year of the Holocaust's 70th anniversary, when the government put up a monument signaling the victimhood of Hungary the management of Gólem along with many other winners of the fund decided to turn down and return the funds (Borgula 2020).

Another form of financial subsidy, the 'tao' (corporate income tax) was canceled during the Orbán regime, based on the pretext of sign of significant abuse in the culture sector (Kovács 2018a). 'Tao' meant great support for independent playing spaces, as the system did not depend on funds from the government, companies were able to transfer a part of their corporation tax to performing arts organizations, which were entitled to claim up to 80% of their net ticket sales. This percentage in the cases of independent organizations meant almost double their income from ticket sales, which in many cases could cover 50-60% of their total income (Kovács 2018b). The subsidy was replaced by another system, which in the case of Gólem meant 1/6th of the sums from the original 'tao' subsidy, which is handled by the Secretary of State, who almost single-handedly decides who to support. Borgula, in an interview, argues that 'tao' was a good system as it was strictly based on business and while there are many cases of VAT fraud, VAT is not abolished (2020a). This point counters the government's stance of not taking part in the culture war and that cultural support is not politically motivated.

Culture in a broader sense is under attack, Orbán's cultural policy in the analysis of Luca Kristóf is understood as government efforts to subsidize and control the arts. Cultural policy in this case "emerges when agents of the political system decide to intervene with the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products, services, and experiences" (Kristóf 2021, 193). She explains Orbán's approach to cultural policy with the function of creating and maintaining the political community. The direct result of this function is the overlap of the spheres of culture and politics. She differentiates between implicit and explicit

cultural policies, which combined represent a hidden ideology that legitimizes power structures both outside and inside the political system. Kristóf addresses two interrelated focal points: the multiple attempts to alter the cultural canon and the introduction of institutional and financial changes.

One example relevant to this thesis can be found in the canon-rewriting activities, where a cult of radical nationalist authors - writing extensively on the Trianon trauma - was created, conveniently ignoring their often-antisemitic characters. Conversely, the government does not accept open antisemitism, and they have awarded Imre Kertész with the highest Hungarian state order. Kristóf in her analysis states that they seem to separate objectionable views from cultural achievements, therefore antisemitic authors can still be included in the new cultural canon (Kristóf 2021). Even though this might seem like a small step, it is important to remind ourselves that these tiny steps of pushing boundaries individually might not seem detrimental, but viewed as part of a process, it becomes concerning. To draw a parallel, *Fatelessness* also reflects on these steps of taking away more and more rights from Jewish people, limiting their freedom.

In this chapter, I provided the framework for the following analysis of theatrical productions. By examining the political tendencies and narratives regarding the Holocaust discourse of the Orbán regime, theater's significant role becomes visible. I also explained how theater can provide the best tools for remembering a collective trauma, through the concept of aftercare, and its duality, being able to bridge the past with present. Moreover, by presenting Jan Assmann's theory that a society can only remember up to 80-100 years, it proves the great timing of the productions.

III. ABOUT THE PLAYS

Earlier I have already introduced the creators, but before turning to the analysis of the plays, I want to highlight their point of origin. The creators belong to the 3rd or the 4th Holocaust generations. This means they are either grandchildren or great-grandchildren of Survivors. Even if some do not have a familiar connection, it still affects their perspective, given that their socialization happened during the same time.

3.1 The Generation of Postmemory in Theater

The young age of the crew makes their perspectives new and fresh. “Mr. Mundstock” was Hanna Cseri’s fourth-year final exam for university, therefore most of the people working on it were students as well. In the case of “Fatelessness”, the oldest person working on the production was 33, but the bulk was in the first half of their twenties. To reflect on the creator’s generation, I rely on Marianne Hirsch’s notion of Postmemory (2008). She introduces the term postmemory, as a reflection on our current times, as she says, “we are in the era of “posts”, which continue to multiply: “post-secular,” “post-human,” “postcolony,” “post-white” (Hirsch 2008, 106). Postmemory, according to Hirsch, describes the next generation's connection to traumatic events of the past through inherited stories, images, and behaviors. These experiences often feel like genuine memories to later generations, implying a link through imagination and creation to the past. The notion of postmemory also involves being shaped by events of the past that are difficult both to understand or to attempt to reconstruct (Hirsch 2008).

In addition, two common factors influencing this new generation of theater makers closely defining their experiences as high schoolers, university students, or young adults were the destruction of SZFE in Budapest and the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences informed Bagossy’s and Cseri’s decisions in choosing the books they ended up staging. They

were able to spot the mutual elements, possibly parallels between what happened eighty years ago and what was happening in their present (Bagossy 2024). By this, they are in no way trying to compare the incomparable, but as Bagossy puts it “you cannot compare the feeling when the trust in the world - about which Kertész writes so much - is suddenly shattered. Your father loses his job, he leaves the country, you do not know what tomorrow will bring, there is a pandemic, and very harsh, derogatory things appear in the press” (Bagossy 2024). The loneliness and turning mad because of the lack of contact were all points of resonance to their COVID times.

3.2 Background of the Plays

Fatelessness was published in 1975 in Budapest but only received wider recognition thirty years later after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature (Kertész 1975). The narrator is the 14-year-old Köves Gyurka, who, in 1944 is deported to a concentration camp from Budapest and the book follows how he adapts to the worsening circumstances. There is a linear transformation from a naive boy to a young, wounded man. Ladislav Fuks, Czech novelist wrote *Mr. Theodore Mundstock* in 1963. The protagonist, Mr. Mundstock, a Jewish chinovnik figure is waiting for his summon to the concentration camp. He becomes so obsessed with this moment, that the boundaries of reality and imagination wash together, which results in Mon, a shadow figure, a doppelganger of Mr. Mundstock, who portrays his anxiety. One day Mundstock realizes, he can prepare for the concentration camp by being strategic and methodological. He sleeps on an ironing board; practices being shouted at, and even being killed.

In both plays, some overarching themes arise from the topic of the Holocaust but can be understood in different contexts too, thus allowing the audience to see the Holocaust through the lens of an already familiar state of mind. In *Fatelessness*, Gyurka goes through a forced growing up, as a teenager facing the worst of humanity that leaves him disillusioned. *Mr. Mundstock* reflects on the crippling anxiety caused by the uncertainty surrounding his fate. His reaction may seem exaggerated, due to the permanent anxiety he distances himself from reality and his soul splits into two, but theater is the right place to be hyperbolic. The audience is often familiar with these feelings, therefore relating is simpler, and staging this unimaginable tragedy becomes part of a translation process that bridges the gap between generations.

3.3 Staging

In “*Fatelessness*”, two actors portray all roles, including Gyurka, the protagonist and narrator, through whose eyes the story unfolds. Gyurka’s character is being passed between the two actors, allowing the creators and the audience to reflect on the complexity of human thoughts and showing various ideas, and emotions at once (Jakab and Gloviczki 2024). Similarly, in “*Mr. Mundstock*”, despite the multiple characters, Mr. Mundstock and Mon, the shadow figure emerging from Mundstock, are played by two actors/puppet movers. The use of duplicate figures allows for a better understanding of the inner struggles the protagonists are going through, resulting in a clearer, more detailed picture for the viewer.

In both productions a stylized approach is adopted, through a strong, but limited visual language, not striving for historically accurate settings, and costumes, they only carry symbolic value. Puppetry, by its nature, has to be stylized, visual language is key to its success. Hanna Cseri highlights that with puppets, one cannot use long monologues, as they lack mimicry, and there is a limit on their expressivity. To keep the puppet alive, one must rely on gestures and

movement. Eszter Zrinyifalvi, the dramaturg, highlights that the puppet genre is very form-oriented, which means that once a decision is made about the type and form of the puppet, the script must follow.

The play itself builds upon grotesque and dark humor, which for some might sound questionable, considering the topic, however, the puppets seem to soften the blow. Their looks are constant, and in most cases have a friendly face, which contrasts with the brutality of the script. Many statements are short, frank, and harsh, which coming from an actor would seem harsh, but the puppets are a great buffer to deliver these brutal comments and observations. “Mr. Mundstock” could have had very different outcomes had they not used puppets. By using puppets for the transmission of the messages the communication is not direct, between actors and audience, but there is a third party involved as a mediator.

3.4 Humor

An ethical question appears in the audience while watching “Mr. Mundstock”: is it acceptable to approach a collective trauma with humor? Tamás Cseke in his critique says it creates an internal dilemma in the audience that remains undecided (Cseke 2021). However, despite the unusual perspective, there is never a moment of scandal: it is precisely this borderline position that is the most intense mechanism of the performance (Cseke 2021). The grotesque humor of *Mr. Mundstock* according to Zrinyifalvi made it approachable and easier to handle for them as a creative team too. Humor also appears in “Fatelessness” through playfulness, drawing on Kertész’s original novel. There is a rhythm of playful, light, and shocking moments that allows the play to work on several levels, as Balázs Jakab, one of the actors, points out (2024). Humor can often be harsh too, and more effective in conveying painful points, and observations. Kevin Newmark finds in Baudelaire's essay on laughter, that a perpetual shock, where misery and greatness are both present can cause laughter, even if the

matter is not necessarily laughable (Newmark 1991, 524). This contradiction provides a noble place for humor in the sphere of Holocaust memory. From my experience of being a member of the audience, I observed how the audience sits in silence even during a clearly comical situation, up until one person starts laughing. The one sound acts as a release for the rest of the audience, they let go and allow themselves to be affected and drawn into the performance. This audience intimacy works best in smaller spaces.

Bagossy was in some ways also limited by the genre of the play, she could not work with a complete stage design, and she had to limit the prompts and select them to the extent where they were easily transportable, but still meaning would be attached to them through words and performance. Together with the stage designer, she established a new visual web of language, giving meaning and movement to simple, everyday objects. Many objects, like the shoes, and bricks are part of the Holocaust visual language repertoire. It is a special experience to see those otherwise frozen-in-time objects come to life. Table tennis balls symbolize the crowds, and shoes and shirts stand for all the characters brought to life by the two actors. This object animation has much in common with the puppetry of “Mr. Mundstock”. The physicality of the performance facilitates the listener's processing of what is presented, and sometimes even its reframing (Keszte 2024). He claims that the play is great not only for reflecting on the 20th century's worst moments but also for expanding the historical account and transforming it into a universal human experience (Keszte 2024). By using a stylized visual language as opposed to the oftentimes quite frank speech, visuals make the topics more digestible and relatable. Cseri highlights that a stylized approach can often convey deeper messages, than a naturalistic one.

3.5 Sound Design

Sound design can greatly complement diction and visual language, creating a distinct atmosphere for the play. Hanna Cseri had live musicians join the puppets and puppet masters on stage, playing klezmer music. With each character deported in the storyline, a new musician appeared from behind dressed as a prisoner and joined the orchestra sitting on the side but in front of the stage. Klezmer music according to Larry Ray disappeared after the Shoah and later had a revival in the 70s and 80s in the USA and Central Europe, in many cases without the involvement of Jews, where he quotes Morris saying, “the presence of klezmer denotes an absence, an ‘echo of absent spaces’” (Ray 2010, 360). Thus, playing klezmer music in the theater is part of a process of rediscovery, and reconnecting with the past, or with the ‘before’.⁴

Bagossy conversely took a different, modern approach by implementing a looper in the performance and having the actors create a sound chamber on the spot. The looper allows for the repetition of multiple sounds, in this case, laughs that get louder and louder and it goes just a second longer than the point where the audience would get completely overwhelmed. Using audio of this kind not only creates an atmosphere, but it becomes an immersive experience, the audience gains an embodied understanding of the plays. The embodiment that music and audio paired with visual inputs can do is recalling unnamed sensations, and feelings, which can form a deeper connection. This is where theater is proven to be both semantic and episodic memory.

⁴ Adorno’s phrasing mentioned in Larry Ray’s article: “Migration and Remembrance: Sounds and Spaces of Klezmer ‘Revivals.’”

3.6 Performance Spaces

The different spaces in which these plays are performed play a huge role in the staging process and the target audiences. Both plays are staged to be presentable in classrooms, studios, and smaller theaters, which means that there is no need for strong theatricality, that would need to overcome the distance between actor and audience. This characteristic allows the directors to include more subtle details without having to think about what these would look like from afar. Smaller spaces create a closer bond between the actor and the audience, allowing the formation of a more intimate atmosphere. The proximity aids the audience with a clearer reception of the play and can lead to a stronger presence as well. Moreover, the members of the audience also become more aware of one another. I am not saying that a personal connection is formed between the audience members or between the actors and the audience, I am only arguing that there is a difference between being part of a group of 30 and a crowd of 200. When the space is smaller, as a member of the audience, one becomes more aware of who is around.

The spaces in which “Fatelessness” is performed vary greatly. Since its premiere in February 2024, it has been performed twice a month in Katona’s Sufni studio, for which anyone can buy tickets. In these cases, the audience will be mixed in all possible ways, age, gender, profession, and class, but the interest in the play connects them for those two hours. In addition to this, the play is brought to high schools mostly in Budapest, but sometimes in the countryside as well, where they aim to play in a classroom. Transforming an everyday space with a specific purpose, such as a classroom, into a room that can foster the theatrical experience is not a simple process. It requires well-selected and planned prompts, that are effective, but still easy to transport, and not secondarily, excellent acting and presence is a must. Without these, the

room might be too distracting, but when planned and executed well, the room becomes a secondary factor.

Nevertheless, there are many upsides to bringing plays to schools. By experiencing a play in one's everyday space, one might feel more comfortable reflecting on what they have seen, as they are used to both the environment and the majority of the people present. This is ideal, especially in the case of "Fatelessness", where performances are always followed by a 45-minute workshop that aims to help the students process what they have seen, it is a place for clarifications, questions, and concerns. There is very little fuss about the play, as it is not an after-school extracurricular, where students would be more focused on the surroundings. Here, because the environment is familiar, and the timing is during the school day, the performance is at the very center of attention.

Conversely, "Mr. Mundstock", is more tied to its original location or at least the dimensions of that, as the proportion of the puppets needs to be planned to the space, therefore it only works in rooms with similar features to Gólem Központ's. András Borgula on their website claims that Gólem is first and foremost a theater, secondarily Jewish, and thirdly it embodies Budapest. Unlike other community theaters, Gólem aims to reach the entire theater-going public (Borgula, n.d.). The original theater was founded in 2005 but Gólem Központ opened its doors in 2021 in the 7th district, which houses the Jewish quarter of Budapest.

"Mr. Mundstock" was the first play that was performed in the new Gólem Központ, and in a way, it was also an exemption, as the management of the theater avoids plays about the Holocaust, because Borgula states that the Holocaust happened to the Jews, but it is not a Jewish domestic issue, it was a national tragedy (2020b). Borgula in an interview in 2020 explains what he means by the term Jewish Theater while reflecting on the role of 3rd and later generations' duty. Gólem Theater is Jewish as it looks at the world through the lens of Jewish

culture. It does not imply that the topics are specific to the Jewish community. They are concerned with life, death, love, family, friendship, etc. In addition, a lot of humor is involved, mostly intended as self-critique and self-reflection. Similarly, I argue, the memory of the Holocaust is not specific to the Jewish people, it concerns the whole society. He claims that in Hungary since the Holocaust, there has been no honest conversation about Jews. Thus, it is the Jews who have to break these taboos or desecrations, which implies the showing of how these people can also be as fallible, petty, or evil as anyone else. Yes, the Holocaust was a terrible thing, he says, but the third generation and those after them should not live their lives basing their identities on this collective trauma and victimhood (Borgula 2020a).

The chapter provides an overview on how the intersection of Holocaust memory, the generation of postmemory, contemporary events, theatrical techniques can become a medium for respectful, relevant and approachable engagement with the Holocaust. The intimacy and closeness provided by small playing spaces, the humor provided by the novels, and both original, brave yet sensitive, and considerate treatment resulted in two great examples of how we can talk about the Holocaust today.

IV. CONCLUSION

Even though the main purpose of the research was to unravel how theater can be space for bridging past with present, in short, to remember, it became clear, that this cannot be examined in a vacuum. Therefore, this thesis presented the Orbán regime's historical revisionist tendencies regarding the memory of the Holocaust. I have detailed, how the generation of postmemory can relate to and explore the memory of the Holocaust through theatrical means. The research showed how theater brings together knowledge and understanding, collective (semantic) and personal (episodic) memory.

Regarding theater, I found through both "Mr. Mundstock" and "Fatelessness" that the use of stylized visual language, and complex sound design paired with humor are great tools to engage young generations with traumatic historical accounts. If audience intimacy is fostered by the space and the plays, a vulnerable connection is created between audience members and the actors. Plays followed by workshops further engage the audience, creating more than an invisible bond and shared knowledge.

Besides all the positive effects of staging the Holocaust, it is important to examine the limitations a one-time theater play with or without a workshop can have. Until now, there is no information about the long-term impacts of these plays, which would be specifically interesting in the cases of classroom plays. Dorka Tóth mentioned how great it would be to do a follow-up, to connect back to the audience, so they could see what kind of micro-movements, and thought processes were sparked, and if they ever think about their collective experience again.

Almost all of the theater makers interviewed reported a constant sense of insecurity concerning their freedom of creativity, freedom of speech, job security, and outlook on their future. Due to the limitations of this thesis, I was not able to explore what this permanent state

of uncertainty means in the long run for the young generation of creatives. Even though this seemed to be the overarching feeling, Hanna Cseri pointed out that puppetry is recognized as a children's genre, and because of its stylized and often abstract nature, it enjoys greater freedom than other theatrical genres. Another unexplored angle was the historical revisionism of the state. Understanding how theater could challenge the flood of false information would be a great starting point for further research.

Overall, this thesis has shown the significance of young theater maker's contribution to the Memory of the Holocaust. Through their unique stagings, the next generation has a chance to gain a personal, emotional understanding of what happened a lifetime ago. Their work presented exemplary instances of taking memories and writings of first-generation artists and crafting them into productions that resonate with the youngest generations. Through their artistry, they foster a meaningful connection and ignite an interest in the audience, in both their personal and collective past.

Their work stands as exemplary instances of reinterpreting the memories and writings of first-generation artists, crafting them into narratives that resonate profoundly with the youngest generations. Through their artistry, they foster a meaningful connection and ignite a genuine interest in both personal and collective histories.

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