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NÉPSZABADSÁG - THEATER:

Kertész's *Kaddish* performed in English at the Jurányi

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CLOSER TO GRANDMOTHER'S PAST

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The first English language theater adaptation of *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* is playing in Buda's Jurányi production center from today through June 7th, with the help of Orlai Productions. Imre Kertész's work is directed by the Hungarian-American Barbara Lanciers who even on first reading knew she wanted to create a theatre piece with her best friend, actor Jake Goodman. Why is this work important now in Budapest and in the United States? This was also discussed with the creators.

After reading the novel for the first time, Barbara Lanciers already felt the main character of *Kaddish* was speaking directly to her, expecting answers. As if she was sitting in the same room with the writer, listening to his monologue about holocaust and the world where it could happen, as well as about long human relationships and unwanted children. She also imagined how it would look if that person was indeed standing in front of her talking. And while she considered this, she imagined this character to be the actor, Jake Goodman. Interestingly, on reading *Fatelessness*, a completely different image flew in. Instead of the stage, she saw film etudes which she took no part in, but remained an observer of events.

Barbara Lanciers read the novel seven or eight years ago. She bought the book when she first started to visit Hungary (she also spent a year here on a Fulbright scholarship). She was researching her Hungarian roots for another project in preparation. Her grandmother, Ilona Boros immigrated in 1944 to the United States. She went to a place where she didn't know the language or the culture. Indeed, until Barbara's twenties, her grandmother refused to talk about what happened to her in Hungary, how she travelled, and she did not mention having been a child actor in Budapest or having sung in the choir of the Opera House. The actor-director felt that with Kertész's works she can get closer to the world her grandmother fled from. The novel offered new flavors to the grandmother's Hungarian life, about the nature of war and about what she must have felt when at 18 she had to leave her family behind forever. The writer's personal memories evoked her own family's history and gave her courage to start asking questions to her grandmother about details.

The play indeed reflects Kertész's final thoughts in his speech after accepting the Nobel-prize: "And if you now ask me what still keeps me here on this earth, what keeps me alive, then, I would answer without any hesitation: love." Thus he lives his life, creating his works in this spirit, and the brutal inner exploration of *Kaddish* is also comprehensible from this aspect: I accept the reality of my present and my past and I am hopeful about my future.

The first word Jake Goodman uses in connection with this work is fear. However much he was taken by the story just like the director, as an actor, it was his job to tailor the words to his own body. He was immediately taken by the language of the text and the fact that the writer spoke in it directly to the reader. Later, the more he read the book the more he felt: after all, this may not be so hard to impersonate, he only has to follow the pace of the „journey”.

Although his family has no direct experience of the holocaust, his Polish ancestors having emigrated to the United States before and after World War I. – among them his grandfather who in his childhood was kidnapped twice by the Polish during the pogroms.

Jake Goodman read a lot of holocaust literature but says that Kertész’s work cannot be compared to any of them. While the previous works he read dealt with concentration camps, in *Kaddish* the holocaust is a part of the main protagonist’s life. This is a tough experience that he has to cope with. It infiltrates his life, enters his relationships and forces him to decide whether to have a child in a world where such brutality is possible.

By the way, Goodman has also been faced with such a difficult decision. He ended a long relationship because his partner did not want a child while he himself did. Despite this opposite point of view he can completely identify with the protagonist’s problem, although his own arguments are clearly different. But this story is not so much about determination, a radical decision but rather about the results of the events of long years. It is about acceptance or indeed non-acceptance at the end of a long, common journey. What one chooses and whether one can let go of what he or she does not want to carry on. What is bearable and what should be left behind. These thoughts round up the theatre piece as a kind of ritual, prayer.

(Kaddish means a prayer expressing God’s greatness, omnipotence and mercifulness in a poetic form. Its most common form is the kaddish of mourners.)

The creators think that it is highly timely to present this work now in Hungary, knowing that since the last change of government, general public feelings have changed significantly in the country. Although Barbara Lanciers met the writer in person and corresponded with him, they never discussed politics.

They are both curious, however, how the Hungarians will react to two Americans coming here and performing their own Nobel-prize winning author’s work in English, with Hungarian supertitles. The reactions will be obvious from the first moment since the audience sits extremely close to the actor. And they certainly know that audiences react to this particular story very differently in every context, at every location. They react differently in America and differently in Hungary. Indeed, differently in Baltimore, where it has been played and in New York, where it soon will be performed. Most Americans do not know this book, so it is also a kind of introduction. Besides their love for the novel, this is what they argued with to Imre Kertész and his wife, Magda, when asked why they want to put it on stage in the United States. Although they don’t consider themselves well known artists, they still hope that at least their own audiences learn about the author. If they see the stage adaptation, hopefully the Americans will read the whole book. Although the text has not been changed – they were not allowed to – the theatre version is not more than a quarter of the original. Had they staged the whole, it would mean a four hour long performance – what they had in mind was about an hour.

The adaptation procedure was not the easiest but the Kertész's recommended they choose the parts they find important in the novel and they can change their order but not the text itself. Their work was helped by a conversation with the writer-poet András Visky who not only adores this work but also spent a lot of time with it, having made a stage adaptation, too. After this, Barbara and Jake Xerox copied parts from the book that resonated with them. As in a puzzle, they searched for pieces belonging together and when they were done, they sent their work over to the Kertész's for approval. For a while no reaction came which lead them to think the writer hated and will not authorize their version. But soon a reply came from Magda: Imre loves what they did and so does she. Whether the Nobel-prize winning writer will also see the production, they can only hope, but his wife will definitely be there for the opening night.