



SPRING ROLLS
magazine



Through Foreign Eyes

How an International Artist Experiences French Culture

Born in Hungary and brought to France by love, Szandra Déaky has spent years building an artistic career in a country that was not hers, in a language that was not hers. Today, she is co-director of the *Théâtre Au Chapeau Rouge* in Avignon and she answers every question the way she knows best: through her body, her work, and her stage.

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF?

I don't really like introducing myself. In fact, I introduce myself through the performances I create that is my way of doing it. But I can say that I come from Hungary, and that I originally started studying business, so nothing to do with theatre. In Hungary, we are brought up with the idea that "you have to earn money," "you have to study," "you have to learn languages" so people don't necessarily think about going into art, because it doesn't pay. So I followed the path that had been mapped out for me, except I couldn't resist. I have always done theatre, since nursery school, and one day I decided to leave my business studies behind and commit myself to theatre.

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“Theatre is my path”
DEÁKY Szandra



Photo by Xavier Curtat, featuring Szandra Déaky. Déaky performing during a contemporary physical theatre production.



Photo by Xavier Curtat, featuring Szandra Déaky. Movement and gesture become central elements of storytelling on stage.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO DO THEATRE IN FRANCE?

I came to France in the most classic way imaginable: I met a French man in Budapest. He was on holiday, and it was love at first sight. I was 24 at the time and was already working in theatre in Hungary it was my profession. We met in August, I came to France in November, and in December we realised one of us had to move. That was when I decided to come to France without speaking a single word of French. Since I didn't speak French, I had to set theatre aside for a while. But then I came across a physical theatre company that happened to be looking for non-French-speaking performers.



It was only a month after I arrived. I saw the announcement and applied and it was actually my boyfriend who called them to get me an audition. I auditioned in Hungarian and with the few French words I knew. A few months later, they took me on. That is how I started doing theatre in France, in a physical theatre company. There was some text, but very little, and since I was picking up French very quickly, the director gradually gave me more lines. And that is how I ended up doing theatre in France.

The Art of Physical Theatre:

Speaking Through the Body

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS PHYSICAL THEATRE?

I give a lot of interviews about physical theatre, but I still haven't found the right way to explain it. It is bodily expression, non-verbal communication and in fact it is something all human beings do, we are just not always aware of it. In physical theatre, we are conscious of it: we know what each gesture communicates. We are able to tell a story or convey different emotions without using a single word. It works through the body, the gaze, facial expressions, and gestures. We can also speak of stylised physical theatre, where the gestures are more extreme, I would say. There is a connection with dance, even though it is not dance. When you watch a physical theatre performance, you feel as though the performers are dancing. I can do physical theatre using only everyday gestures, or I can go even further into a kind of stylisation.



Photo by Klaudia Lanka, featuring Szandra Deaky.

A multilingual performance exploring communication beyond words.



Photo by Léo L., featuring Szandra Deaky. Caption: Rehearsal moments reveal the physical intensity behind contemporary theatre.

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“We can tell stories without using a single word.”

WAS PHYSICAL THEATRE A GOOD WAY TO START DOING THEATRE IN FRANCE?

In Hungary, theatre begins with the body. I did not discover physical theatre in France. In Hungary, theatre is a combination of body, voice, and emotion, which can be separated but are taught together. That is where there is a major difference with France. In Hungary, in theatre training, during the first year, you don't open your mouth at all. An entire year at the conservatoire passes without speaking that is, we first learn how to use our bodies. In Hungary, we don't necessarily talk about physical theatre, because it is part of every actor's basic training. So when we graduate, we are equally capable of doing straight theatre or physical theatre. I discovered in France that actors learn everything separately: they train for voice, they train for body, but never at the same time. In Hungary, it is completely unthinkable to separate voice, body, and emotion they form a single whole for the actor.

Cultural Differences & French Audiences:

France Through Hungarian Eyes



DID THAT HELP YOU ADAPT
TO A FRENCH AUDIENCE,
WHICH IS NOT NECESSARILY
THE SAME AS IN HUNGARY?

I was very glad to join that company, because they specifically needed performers who could express themselves through their bodies something that is very rare in France. I helped the company go further in its exploration of body work, and the company allowed me to showcase everything I already knew how to do. Through this experience, I discovered just how difficult it is to produce performances when you offer something different. In France, if you stage Molière or Cyrano, everyone comes. It is relatively easy to fill seats because audiences know the great classics. But as soon as you offer something unusual or different like physical theatre it becomes difficult to find an audience, simply because audiences are not trained to receive that kind of theatre.



Photo by Cie Framboisiers, featuring Szandra Deaky.
Deaky combines theatre, movement, and visual expression in her artistic work.

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“In Hungary, theatre is almost
political.”

DOES THE FRENCH
AUDIENCE RECEIVE
PERFORMANCES
DIFFERENTLY?



Yes, very differently mainly because the two systems are very different. Hungary was a communist country for fifty years, and I was born under communism. When I arrived in France, I found myself in a completely different system, with two very different cultural outlooks. In Hungary, going to the theatre was a civic duty you went at least once a month, or even once a week. Hungarian audiences go to the theatre. It is even considered a civic duty to support or challenge a production if you disagree with it it is political. If people don't enjoy a performance, they will go to the town hall to demand it be stopped. Theatres are funded by the state; small private theatres like this one barely exist. Actors are permanent employees of the theatre, paid by the state. For Hungarian audiences, theatre matters as much as politics. In France, as I was saying, it is easy to draw audiences for classical plays, but much harder when it comes to something different. I have never seen so many empty houses as in France it is a real problem getting audiences through the door.



Photo by Xavier Curtat, featuring Szandra Deaky.

Physical theatre allows performers to communicate emotion through movement and presence.

Behind the Curtain:

Life Inside French Theatre

WAS THERE ANYTHING
ABOUT THE WAY THEATRE IS
DONE IN FRANCE THAT
SURPRISED YOU?

A medium-sized theatre in Hungary has around five hundred seats. In a theatre like that, between fifty and a hundred people work in administration or technical departments sets, props, hair, make-up, costumes. Then there is the artistic team, also around fifty to a hundred people. These theatres have permanent staff on four-year contracts, which corresponds to the presidential term. Actors have nothing to do but learn their lines and rehearse. Each person has a role; everyone does their own job. In France, it is very different.

There is no support staff. The director has to do the work of ten people making posters, costumes, filming, taking photos on top of their actual job. As a performer, it is the same. Companies have to pay just to have a rehearsal space, and performers often see the venue where they will be performing for the first time on the day of the show they have never set foot in it before. On top of that, we are forced to share all the administrative and technical tasks among ourselves because there is no staff. That is what surprised me most when I arrived in France.

“I feel I could do so much more if I had time to focus only on my role.”

On the one hand, it has allowed me to learn an enormous amount: I know how to film performances, take photographs, design posters. Had I stayed in Hungary, I would never have learned to do any of those things, since there would have been dedicated staff for each task. But on the other hand, the time I spend doing all of that is time I am not spending on my role. Working on a role is not just rehearsals performers need time to work on their craft. In fact, the real work of a performer does not happen in rehearsals. I walk down the street, I watch people, and that feeds into my work. Performers are always working. So all the time I spend managing a website is time I am not spending thinking and that is not my job as a performer.

DOES THAT DIRECTLY AFFECT THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK?

Yes, absolutely. I find myself never having time to work deeply on my role. In Hungary, all I had to do was work on my text and rehearse, which left the rest of the day free for reflection. Here, I can't do that, because I am doing the work of ten people. I miss that time I feel I could do so much more if I could invest it in my role.

Language, Movement & Creation

The Language Beyond Words

YOUR SHOW ON *S'EN FOUUUSSS!!!* BRINGS TOGETHER NINE LANGUAGES. HOW DO YOU WORK WITH THAT AS A DIRECTOR?

The languages themselves are not really what matters it is more a question of sound, of sonority. The languages follow one another in sequence, but everything is supported by the physical. At first, I had not planned to include any text in my performance; the idea came from my students. Among them were poets, people who spoke other languages, and there was also the Festival Ville des Langues organised by the Théâtre du Chapeau Rouge. It clicked for me. I asked my students to use their own texts, and since there were foreign languages within my team as well, I added foreign languages. We started from my students' French texts, I asked them to improvise, and then we added movement. At first, they clung to the text, but I asked them to let go of it because in my view, the text is only a starting point, a base to work from. It is in detaching from the text that creation truly begins.



Photo by Vörösmarty Színház, featuring Szandra Deaky.
Contemporary staging and movement shape the atmosphere of the performance.

“The text is only a starting point.”



A Theatre Without Borders

HOW DOES ONE BECOME CO-DIRECTOR OF A THEATRE IN AVIGNON WHEN COMING FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY?

Well, it is quite simple, because the director is not French either. In fact, I think the theatre has always had a bilingual, international dimension, since it is run by non-French speakers. So in the programming there were already many non-Francophone performances, and there is also the Festival Ville des Langues, where many foreign languages are represented. What I do physical theatre has nothing to do with language, so having a foreign co-director seems entirely natural. But the reason I became co-director of the Théâtre du Chapeau Rouge comes down to my meeting with Helen, the director. In 2017, during the festival, I came to Avignon with a company and we performed at the Théâtre du Chapeau Rouge that is when I met Helen. We stayed in touch, and then last year I found myself in Avignon again with a company for the festival, and that was when Helen offered me the position of co-director of the theatre.



Photo by Klaudia Lanka, featuring Szandra Deaky.
Through theatre and multilingual expression, Deaky explores cultural identity and artistic connection.

Between movement, language, and culture, theatre becomes a space where identity can exist beyond words.



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