



Non-Verbal Narratives: An Interview with Eszter Kálmán

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

Our guest today is the Hungarian artist, director and designer Eszter Kálmán. She has had a long-standing collaboration as a designer with Budapest's József Katona Theatre and has also worked as a set and costume designer with independent companies and directors such as Róbert Alföldi. Since 2011, she has been creating her own productions mainly for the Trafó House of Contemporary Art.

Kálmán has received multiple awards and accolades for her artistic work including the Hungarian Theatre Critics Award for Best Costume Design for *Mary Stuart* in 2014, and an Audience Choice Award in 2016 for her production of *The Lake*. She has been featured as one of the top three female designers by the Hungarian edition of *Elle* magazine, and in 2019 she represented Hungary in the Prague Quadrennial with the installation *Infinite Dune*, co-created with a team of artists, which also won the Best Installation award.

In this interview we talk about her 2020 piece *Domestic Noise*, a sound puppetry show which Kálmán created with her husband, actor Zoltán Friedenthal. We also learn about her unusual developmental journey – which I have followed since our shared time at the University of Bristol Drama Department in the mid-2000s – and we find out about the joys and challenges of working in present-day Hungary as an unaffiliated, multidisciplinary artist and theatre-maker.

This interview took place between Balatonkenese and London on 3rd June 2020 via Zoom.

[00:02:05] RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

Duška Radosavljević: What is interesting to me about you as an artist in Hungary is the way in which you have brought in this way of working into the Hungarian context which has been shaped, and maybe influenced and informed, by your studies of performance – Performance Studies in Bristol. How you've then had to contend with the local ecology in Hungary, how you've had to fit in and find your way in. You've sent me recordings of two of your recent performances that you've made, one of which is called *Domestic Noise*. The approach you take there is about working with sounds primarily, with another performer on a very elaborately-designed set, but it would be interesting to find out more about what the impetus there was, and what the story you're trying to tell is. It's presented in a double bill, is that right?

Eszter Kálmán: Yes. I designed the other one, or helped design the other one. It's called *Quad*. It's based on Samuel Beckett's *Quad*. And it was directed by a friend of mine [Tamás Matkó] who is a contemporary composer, mainly working in theatre. And actually, on both of them we were together as a team. The man who is performing in mine, who's my husband by the way, he's performing in the other one as well; and the composer guy, helped with our sound bits as well. So, it was like an ensemble type of work, but the two directors was me and for the other one, it was him.

DR: Were they commissioned by any particular organisation or festival, or were they—?

EK: It was funded by Trafó, which is the contemporary house of arts here in Hungary, and also it was funded by this [fund] for young artists. And my previous work, *The Lake*, which you saw the trailer for, that was also co-funded by Trafó and this thing. It's called *Staféta* – I don't know what that can be in English. You know this stick, when they're running at the Olympics, and they're giving the stick to each other. So they go in turns, and that stick is called this.

DR: Yes, *Štafeta*. It's the same in Serbian. It's the same word. I know what you mean, we have the same thing. It's the baton, yes, baton.

EK: Baton. So it's called the 'Baton Funded Performances', but now it's an open call every year and a committee chooses the works. And it's specifically made for artists who are not part of big companies



and they are not state-funded, they are freelance theatre-makers like myself – because there used to be a huge gap, like, we didn't get any funding from anywhere. And the work came about that this friend of mine, his name is Tamás Matkó – we were working together... Well, actually it has to go back to my set designer background. So I was a set designer in Austria, in Graz, on an Austrian production. I was the set designer and he was the composer. And obviously, we went out a lot. And then, one evening he just told me this idea of his about Beckett's *Quad*, and how he wants to compose, how he was interested in the choreography and how the choreography makes noise itself – how they step, how they do stuff. He was particularly interested in cooking and cooking sounds, and how that can be somehow involved, and he was talking about very early works of John Cage. But he just said it as a dream, like he would never even start to think about getting funding for that. Like, he's not in that world. And then, I started thinking about something based on sound as well. So when Trafó asked me what my next move would be, I said that: 'Well, I don't like this pressure of doing a whole evening performance. I really suffer from that pressure every time.' I also suffer from the pressure to fill up 300 seats per performance, and I can't even do that. I mean, I can do it a few times, but not more, like I don't have an audience base. So I said that I would like to maybe do a double bill, like this, and do two half-hour very experimental pieces. And they were very open to it, and then we went for the – what did you say, what was the Staféta?

DR: Baton.

EK: The Baton Funding, and then, we won it. So, then we could make it. Yeah. That was the story of how it came about.

[00:07:37] BEGINNINGS

DR: Let me just take it back a bit. You did the degree in Performance Studies at the Drama Department at the University of Bristol and I remember you arriving at the University of Bristol as a photographer, is that–

EK: Yes. That's right.

DR: Yes. So, is that a significant bit of this story? Because you chose to study performance-making in the UK, but you already had a pre-existing creative practice that didn't necessarily fit anywhere.

EK: Yes.

DR: What made you choose to study performance in a British university rather than anything that was on offer in Hungary at the time? And this was – just to get the time right, this was when, 2006?

EK: 2006. I really wanted to be – I think, because I didn't know else, I wanted to be a director, because in Hungary, as you say, like in Germany, there are very precise categories you can get into. But my interest wasn't based on text, ever, but it was more based on the visuals and the visual elements of theatre, always. Even my photography practice was mainly interested in dance photography. And it just didn't seem to happen for me here in Hungary. Like, it wouldn't now, either. It's not evolving in terms of – I don't know, new wave education in theatre practice. They just didn't get what I wanted at all. I was always interested in just being in London, or being in England, and I spent a month there when I was 15, and I really loved it. And I think in my personal life, like, the person who I was living with at the time, he went for an MA in Leeds in Film. So it just made sense to just go, and particularly Bristol, because the Film and the Theatre ran in parallel there for a while, like, for the first year or something. I can't remember. That made me think that maybe they understand my way of thinking – that visual thinking in terms of narrative, if they have the theatre and the film together, and it proved me right – and I got in, which was a miracle.

[00:10:15 to 00:11:24] Excerpt from *Justine* (2013)

EK: with two of my peers, we made *The Red Shoes* by Hans Christian Andersen, but we made it without any human beings on stage. It was just objects, and costume pieces, and set pieces moving, and shadows. And that experiment itself was very interesting. And even though I think it failed in terms of the original approach: 'Can you understand the narrative if there is no human being on stage?' I don't think you could understand the narrative, you could understand a narrative, but not the – so, when



an opportunity came up, again like a miracle, here in Hungary at Trafó, I wanted to follow this experiment and make it right.

DR: What was this opportunity at Trafó, and when did it happen?

EK: Well, it happened in – I finished university in 2009, and this was in 2011, I think. It was a bit – I don't know, it wasn't frightening not knowing anybody in this field here, when I moved back, but – so, I just thought that I can't really start anything unless I just really do it myself. So I made a performance [12 Szent István Road] in my own flat, and it was very fortunate that the head of Trafó came and watched it. She really liked it, and she said that it shows her a way of thinking, or a theatrical approach that she doesn't really see here in Hungary, and she would like to explore more of my stuff.

DR: Tell us a bit more about that performance. What form did it take? What was the concept?

EK: It was about a girl, who – like, the audience went into the flat, and then, she arrived home, and she made a pregnancy test, and it was positive. And you can only hear her talk if she was on the phone, either with her mother, or with the boyfriend, who really wanted to come over, but she wasn't sure what to do. So then there was this argument. She went to sleep and then, when the audience left, the guy was ringing the doorbell downstairs. It was in two parts, and then the next part was a week later, same time, the week later. The same audience came up to my flat and it started with her being in the flat with a child. So it looked like that we just jumped in time, and she had the baby. But then the child's mother arrived and it turned out that she was only babysitting, and she was just preparing herself for the abortion in the morning.

DR: You wrote this piece and directed it?

EK: Yes, but it wasn't really like anything written. It was improvised, and I think I just gave like pointers, what to follow, and what to include, and then we fixed that. So it was maybe a bit improvised, but we sort of fixed it.

DR: And in terms of design, was this also an element of this piece? Was the design aspect of the experience, in terms of visual design, something that was an important bit?

EK: Well, it was – not as the main element, like it was my flat, I didn't change anything about it, but in terms of how time works, in a time narrative of the set, like, you could see images, framed images in the flat of her and the boyfriend, and those changed after the week. And there was this light bulb, which I'm sure you remember, because I remember telling you about it, that the light bulb was out in the first part, but it was on – it was a new light bulb in the second. Little bits like that. I would say it's like some sort of the narrative way of the visual element working towards the story, but not in terms of – the actual *mise en scène* wasn't as strong.

DR: So the director of Trafó theatre saw it–

EK: Yes. And she was the artistic director at the time, I think.

DR: What was her name?

EK: Her name is Beáta Barda. And she's the head now, by now she is the top.

DR: What was the opportunity she offered you on that occasion?

EK: I think she said that I can do anything. Yeah, I think she said that if I want to do something just tell her, and I can do it.

DR: So what was the thing that you did in response to that invitation?

EK: So I did the same concept as *The Red Shoes*, but I did it with the *Cinderella* story. And I used video projections as well. She found an opportunity to build the performance into the Temps d'Image festival that was on at the time. It was an international visual theatre festival that gave opportunities to young artists to do a minimum 20 minutes, maximum 30 minutes piece, which was ideal. [My piece] was like 24 minutes or something, and it was so successful that they funded a full version of it for the next year. And then I finished it and I improved it a bit.

DR: And that led to your developing a practice as both a performance-maker and a designer working with other directors on more conventional work in theatre?

EK: Yes. The more conventional career of being a designer was actually a separate route. I mean, I'm



sure this helped, but I think it's the other way around. My set designer route helps always the theatre-making route. And that was based on – I think we had to go to industrial placements at Bristol, and I knew I was probably going to move back to Budapest, so I asked to do my industrial placement there, to start building connections. And I went to this very, very famous artistic theatre called Katona József Színház [József Katona Theatre], and I did my placement there. From there I made the connections and started working as a production assistant in independent companies, and then I had the opportunity to go to the Merlin Theatre, which was like half-international and worked with British artists at the time.

DR: This was László Magács running it?

EK: Yes, and I was his assistant, and then worked even as the English-speaking dramaturg, with those actors. And from these, I started to somehow build a base for set designing, and then I just picked up costume as well.

[00:19:11] EXPLORING DESIGN AND SCENOGRAPHY

DR: When you think about the journey of your own creative practice where you are the director of your work as well – how did that evolve from that point on? What was the next step in your journey from that Trafó *Cinderella*?

EK: I tried to direct a text-based play, also like a flat situation. It was Stephen Belber's play – I think it's called *Tape*, which is originally set in a motel room. I did that. And then it just really proved to me how my concepts can be great, but the actual working with the actors and text, and analysing, and helping them through that, is really not my strength at all. I was asked to do something else as well, and that proved even more that this is not my way of theatre-making. And very interestingly, those two were the most watched and successful in terms of audience, obviously. But in any other artistic respect they were not good. Like, not even close to – I want to be modest – the uniqueness of my usual work as theatre-maker in Hungary. I wouldn't want to do that anymore. I wouldn't want to experience that failure every day in a rehearsal room.

DR: So then what did you do as a result?

EK: I started thinking how different elements are interesting to me. Like, all the theatrical elements, how they can build up narrative. I mean, even in *Cinderella*, that was the case – like, how all those elements can work with the story, supporting it, telling it. And then started examining genres even, and did a whole production about Marquis de Sade: *Justine* as a pop musical. That was a big one – very big failure by the way, but I really loved it. We all loved it, all of us who were working on it, really, really loved it – but it was disappointing.

DR: When was that?

EK: I don't know, maybe 2014 or '13. No – '13, because I directed something every two years, that was it. So '11 was the *Cinderella*, and then '13 was that, and then '15 I did a performance called *N, like Nosferatu* that was experimenting with puppetry. It was only one puppet artist on stage, but all the other characters were puppets or objects or pieces of clothing or... But the *Justine* was a very visual performance as well, because the actors were like puppets themselves, singing, and there were video projections on everybody, everywhere, all over the place.

DR: What made that more fun in terms of working with the actors than the ones where you were working on text?

EK: I think it was because of the music. It was the music and the visuals, and how with the help of the video projections it was building new narratives, that they were underlining it with the music and the singing, or that both were maybe equal. But the music and the emotions of the music were leading the narrative, and not the actual words.

DR: Did you choose all the music for it? Did you actually do the libretto for it or did you work with other–?

EK: No, I worked with other artists, of course. My husband worked on the music, as well as a fantastic composer called Árpád Kákonyi, and I had a dramaturg [Ármin Szabó-Székely], who worked on all of these projects – I think *Cinderella* not, but from then on in all of them, and he did the libretto. It was just



great fun for everybody, there were dancers in it – it was really good. It was very good fun. I'm very sad that they didn't like it, and I thought it would be great abroad as well, like, touring.

DR: When you say 'they didn't like it', was this the critics or the audiences?

EK: Well, the audiences were like half and half. But it was very – it was either hating or loving it. There wasn't anything in the middle. Critics, they don't often come to see my shows. The few that I had were also either loving or hating it – but Trafó didn't like it.

DR: Was that the first time, with the pop opera, that you worked with sound as an element?

EK: Yes, definitely. I mean, obviously, in *Cinderella*, I worked with it, but the emphasis wasn't on it – because it was so many elements together – but for this one, yes, most definitely, it was mostly the sound. And then obviously after that, in *Nosferatu*, it was the puppetry and the visuals.

[00:24:54 to 00:27:05] Excerpt from *The Lake* (2016)

And then, because I got so interested in puppetry, I did this performance called *The Lake* in 2017 that was based on a puppet artist and a dancer, and it was experimenting with how similar and different those two genres are in terms of it being choreographed movement of a human body and a non-human body, but they're still doing the same choreography. It was a wonderful project that we were in love with, and it was the most successful thing I've ever done. It went on and on for two seasons.

DR: So *The Lake* refers to *The Swan Lake*?

EK: Yes, yes, it was very vaguely following the narrative of *The Swan Lake*. Yes, but it was made from their improvisations. I had made a structure that could work. And in the structure, based on the actual scenes of *The Swan Lake*, I made up situations where the two can confront each other.

DR: The puppet and the dancer?

EK: Yeah, the puppet and the dancer. Then we took that structure into the rehearsal room, and for one week, I only rehearsed with the puppet artist, and another week, with the dancer, and they never met. They didn't know each other. And then after two weeks, we put them together when they had an idea of what this was all about. They loved each other and it just became really like a family production from then on.

DR: What did it look like? For the benefit of the listener, what did it end up being as a piece of theatre?

EK: It was a black mirror floor, and that was it, really. A black theatre space and the black mirror floor that was reflecting everything. It was beautiful. The lights were on the floor, all around it. So nothing was hidden. There was this inflatable child pool in the corner, where the whole performance started, and that went on to [become] the lake. And this reflective floor was full of dirty tissues, and those were the swans.

[Laughter.]

DR: As in being manipulated, as puppetry, right?

EK: Well, you could just, like, look at it and think that: 'Oh, this is a lake full of swans.' And then, it was obviously moved. Yes, it was animated. Yeah. And sometimes, it was working as dirty tissues in a dance rehearsal room. Like, there was a scene when the guy, the puppet artist, was a cleaner and sweeping them off while the girl, after a dance workout, was blowing her nose and throwing them away. So we used it in many ways, but I really needed their creativity in it as well, I can't say that it was all me. I think the concept was me, but they really helped me fill it up with their own talent, really.

[00:29:49] MAKING DOMESTIC NOISE (2020)

DR: So am I right in thinking then that the next step after *The Lake*, was this *Domestic Noise* piece?

EK: Yes.

DR: Where you actually build the narrative of the piece through sound. So they literally are domestic noises, and we hear the first noises in darkness, and they sound like brushing teeth and having sex, and then, when the lights come up, the narratives of the two performers unfold in sync with each other, or against each other, around this long counter which could function as a kitchen counter or a bathroom



counter and it is very carefully lit, and looks beautiful as well on stage. So how did you develop that piece? And what was the dramaturgical conceptualisation of that?

EK: So first, I just knew that I wanted to now experiment with sound, and specifically, noises. But I wasn't sure really about the form. It wasn't domestic at first at all. So it could have been anything, and then I thought that maybe it should be about a man and a woman to give more of a dynamic, or not to be heavily relying on telling a specific story, but just telling maybe emotions. And I thought: 'Okay, so because my husband is usually the composer for my pieces but he's an actor in normal life' – he's doing the composing as a hobby and he's a well-known actor here, and–

DR: And what's his name?

EK: His name is Zoltán Friedenthal. So then I thought: 'Okay, so because he's going to work on the sounds, he can be in it as an actor.' So that's great. But then, how will I – what will I say to any actress? Like, there are no good instructions in it, and it's not even acting – not in a normal way, of an acting job. So how can I approach that? It would be awkward – and then I thought: 'Okay, so then it might as well be me.' Which I've never done before, I've never performed. I think even in Bristol, I tried to avoid that situation most of the time. So then I thought: 'But if it's us on stage, then it has to be real. Like, it has to be domestic, and it has to be about our everyday.' So this is how it came about.

[00:32:27 to 00:35:49] Excerpt from *Domestic Noise* (2020)

First I thought that we're going to have a map of a flat outlined in white in the black space. So we would have outlined all the rooms, and then in each room would be like those paper boxes where you put your stuff when you're moving. And then we would take out the stuff that we're making noises with in each room, and then it would be like a conflict about having children or not yet. That would be like trying to make the outline of a new room, and then taking it up, and then putting it down and taking it up. But then we went into the rehearsal room – by the way, I think it was only a two-week rehearsal period – and we went in, and it was just impossible to do all of that on the floor, even though we are very into Japanese culture – we went to Japan on our honeymoon. But we just couldn't do it on the floor at all, like, it was hurting and it wasn't working. So we had to start using tables. And that's how the shape of it came, that we just – we were forced to do it, it was more comfortable, really. Also, it felt like we were rehearsing in a very white space, I remember. And then it really felt like a lab, like, we took half of the stuff from home, the actual stuff from the kitchen and the bathroom, into this white space and then putting it out on white tables, and I thought that we are like lab workers, trying to make little noises: 'And what do you think this sounds like?' It was crazy. That's how the shape and the stage came.

DR: You use a series of microphones as well, and then you are creating noises in different ways with different objects. But it's puppetry as well, isn't it? In a way, it's also puppetry.

EK: Yes. Yes, definitely. And it was a big, big dilemma of using a camera and the projection of close-ups of our hands as well. I felt that it would take the emphasis from the actual dynamics of us. Like, I felt that there are so many little nuances in our reactions to each other, not in terms of the noise but in terms of us and our energy – and it's so short, these noise-making things are so short, that if an audience member had to look up and down, and look up and down, it would be lost. And so I didn't want to do that.

DR: So you decided against the projections?

EK: Yes, but you're right, it is puppetry, and also, I guess because you watched it on the recording, it's obviously, it has close-ups on what we're doing. Sometimes I taped, I recorded the rehearsals and watched it back to see what we're doing and what it needs–

DR: So maybe it would work better as a film than as a live performance? Maybe it works ideally for the Covid time, when people are watching live-streamed performances in a way.

EK: We were just talking about it today, how there is this sequence when we are irritating each other with cutting fingernails and stuff like that, and then how different – it will have a little more depth now, after this pandemic.

DR: Yes. And so you performed it live already. How many times?



EK: Twice.

DR: How did it go down with the audience?

EK: Very well, I have to say. There wasn't as many people as my previous works but I think it just really frightened people – performance based on sounds, like, it really wasn't very catchy, this idea, but a lot of people from the industry came, which was interesting. Like, much more than usual, and so I felt that maybe it's because of Tamás as well, that – it was his debut. But I felt more openness than in the previous years, most definitely. Also, that's why I'm saying that it really, my designer career, being as it is, is really helping these.

[00:38:44] THEATRE IN HUNGARY

DR: So you are planning a festival of sound-based theatre and performance?

EK: Yes, it's just – yes! Sometimes Trafó tries to schedule performances that can be themed together, or giving out opportunity for ticket sales that if you buy tickets to certain types of performances then you get like a deal or something. It's just like a themed [season] I would say, not like a big festival. But I thought that because they are inviting artists from all over the world, so really it's, I would say, half-international, half-Hungarian, if not more international. Like, DV8 used to come and Forced Entertainment, but it was a while ago now, unfortunately.

DR: Eszter, can I ask you – I think it's difficult for me not to ask you, considering that you are a Hungarian artist – about the political situation of being an artist in Hungary at the moment. To what extent is this – what you're noticing as a lack of the international representation in Hungarian theatre, linked to this? And in what other ways are artists affected by the current political situation that you have with Viktor Orbán in Hungary?

EK: I think we're – it's very difficult to say how much of us are affected by it directly, but I would say, as the more liberal side of the industry, we are suffering a lot from it. Like, our funding is not great. I think even like the theatres' funding [is] cut back brutally. More and more independent companies – they just die, they have to close down. There's only a few of them left, which means more unemployed people, more freelancers, less work, less opportunities, less money as a salary. If you do get a job, then you have to have four at a time to make a good living. And it's not getting any better for us, it's not. It's really difficult to talk about it without being very angry, or very emotional, or whatever – or to be very clear or very objective even. But this whole nationalist approach towards life and culture and education and everything is just so strong now, that if you don't stand in that line you're not proving them right. You're not. You're nothing. You're nothing, you can do it but you can do it if you can fund yourself. That's what they say, that you're free to do it but then you don't get any funding, you don't get any opportunities. The theatres that are alive still and working, and have liberal leaders, are fighting constantly against this, and there are now public demonstrations and all that, but it's not helping at all. I don't see the end of it yet. But I do realise that the other regime, my side, was maybe too rigorous about their own liberal thinking and their own artistic values, and didn't let others into the centre. You can feel a lot of, again, ego in the whole thing and it smells like revenge in every aspect of it: politically, culturally, everywhere. So it's not very good, no.

DR: So sorry to hear that!

EK: If you want to get funding for your financial loss now, during the pandemic, you have to promise them in writing to do something like a nationalist performance. And it's absolutely normal now to say that out loud, officially.

DR: So in a way, making work that is experimental in other ways is already resistance. Like your work, even though it's not explicitly political, it resists this official line that requires you to be nationalist in a way.

EK: Yes, you could say that, or even if it's not provocatively doing that, but just by working in a certain theatre, you put yourself on one side, which is just – I think it's just horrendous, really.

DR: So how do you envisage the sound theatre festival then, in this situation?

EK: I just watched this Complicite performance online, and then I thought: 'Oh, that's something that



could be easily invited, because it's only one person on stage.' And just thought of our productions, that it's quite small-scale, I just thought then maybe there are other performances dealing with this, that could be on a normal scale that are inevitable. And then, I just approached Trafó with this idea: 'What if I find other performances that would be interesting to then create this theme?' And they said: 'Yeah, just show us what you found.' And it's interesting...

DR: Great!

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

[00:10:15 to 00:11:24] *Justine* (2013)

[00:24:54 to 00:27:05] *The Lake* (2016)

[00:32:27 to 00:35:49] *Domestic Noise* (2020)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery3-eszterkalman/.

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