

“I had been cut off from my roots, so I had to find new ones”

József Szarvas's Fairy Garden

Interview by Annamária Rojkó



Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó

József Szarvas made his way to acting from the farmlands of the Hungarian Great Plain. He began his career as a bit player in Debrecen and was almost 30 years old when he graduated from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. It was on the advice of his former academic mentor, István Horvai, that he signed a contract with the Vígszínház, of which he remained a member for a decade. Afterwards, he worked with the Kaposvár company and in 2002, he joined the National Theatre in Budapest. In the meantime, he had major roles in a host of feature and art films. We talked to the Jászai Mari Prize winner Merited Artist and Distinguished Artist of Hungary, who has also won numerous other professional awards, about rootlessness, about his long sought and eventually found identity. For him, the clear spring to draw from is the Fairy Garden, created from the native fruit trees of the Carpathian Basin, and the Barn Theatre of Órség, founded by him and his family.

As a person born in Hortobágy, in the Great Plain, why did you choose a house in Órség, at the other side of the country? How did you find your home in Viszák?

■ I was born in a family living in Hortobágy-Kónya, from where we moved to Ebes farmstead in my childhood. In the early 1970s, however, forced by the times, my family had to liquidate the Ebes farmstead, cutting down all the trees, demolishing the manor house and “salting the earth”. This was the consequence of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. There are many ways to destroy folk culture, peasant culture and the politics of that era used this epidemic, among others, to wipe out farmsteads. By the time we moved to the village of Ebes, I was already 14 and went to Debrecen, where I studied to become a butcher. By my own decision, I applied to the Csokonai Theatre to be an bit player – with mandatory choir participation – and after seven years, I transferred to Buda-

pest. Later I never had a chance to return to the Great Plain, the Ebes area in the Hortobágy region, because by then all the prospects of doing so had been eradicated. There was nothing to return to and nowhere to settle; I had been cut off from my roots, so I had to find new ones.

We lived in a housing estate, and my wife at the time knew very well that I could not be locked up in a prefab. I can't stand and get stressed by not having anything to do at home. I was brought up in the belief that the kitchen was a woman's job and I had no business in there. Also, I don't like vacuuming, because when I was a kid, we used to sweep the earthen floor in the kitchen. What should I do with myself in a prefab? This also had its sources of tension within the family, so at my wife's encouragement we rented a garden in Pesthidegkút, so that I could at least do some hoeing. I suspect that due to the years spent in the countryside, my gestures reveal an inherent need to spend time productively. I cannot sit at home or just travel somewhere random to relax. My idea of relaxation is not what a spa hotel offers. For me, relaxation is when you create value and take pride in it. Earlier, I looked for the right places to do that. I familiarised myself with the Mátra, but it is a rather mountainous place for me. The story of how we found Órség dates back to the mid-1990s. I had a long weekend off while shooting a film. I asked my wife to find a place where we could drive for a little rest. She also found a small ad in the Magyar Nemzet, which advertised that at the village of Nagyrákos in the Órség region, Varga farm offered a weekend break. We got into the car, drove there and as I got out of the car I suddenly looked around and thought: this is it! Originating from Hortobágy, I was immediately captivated by the rolling, hilly landscape of Órség. I knew it was just a matter of time and money to go back, and I vowed not to leave until I bought a house. That's how I ended up in Viszák a few years later, where I bought a house and a 1600 m² homestead in 2000. Leaving the roots in Hortobágy I had been cut off from, it became my internal experience that what I had been looking for all this time was finally found in Órség.

You were originally looking for a place for active recreation, but the house in Viszák and its adjacent rebuilt barn have been expanded into a community space. Who inspired you, who changed your original vision?

■ The first moment of this occurred in 2002, when my actor friend Zoltán Rátóti contacted me with the news that there was a man who wanted to erect

an oak cross on the Szentegyházi hilltop, not far from the vineyard of Medes, in memory of the villages of Órség, Göcsej and Hetés that had been obliterated during the Turkish occupation. That person was looking for performers for the ceremony of the consecration of the cross. He knew that Zoli Rátóti lived in Órség and asked him if there was anyone else among his friends who had ties to Órség and would be happy to read a poem or short story at the cross consecration ceremony. Zoli approached me and I said yes. I went, and at the cross consecration ceremony I was introduced to a concept I had never heard of before, and the term itself was completely new to me. The term is 'orchardry', and the concept is the associated set of ideas. Forester Gyula Kovács stated, "Let's save the indigenous fruit legacy of the Carpathian Basin, destroyed by man, with the intention of strengthening the community." He had been saving the surviving fruit trees of the Carpathian Basin for more than twenty years by then, and still saves them, providing names, histories and gastronomic descriptions. He has collected more than 3500 native fruit trees for his own collection. Just think about it: 1500 apple trees and 1500 pear trees represent the plant diversity of our indigenous culture!

Culture, fruit trees, cross consecration – these were new impulses for me in Órség, which I felt would carry great significance.

The years passed, theatre, film, television, dubbing, the radio, the academy – where I was a part-time assistant lecturer at the time – and the Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár filled my time completely. The house and the courtyard in Viszák perfectly satisfied my inner need to be active. I went there, mowed the lawn, drank a few shots of pálinka, fell asleep, got up the next morning and headed back to Budapest. This went on for years, until one day Robi Pungor, my neighbour, came over and said, "Well, Mr Artist, from now on, as long as I'm your neighbour, I'll be mowing your lawn." I replied, "And what should I do in the meantime?!" He responded, "I don't care about that."

The one-time barn that belonged to the house stood in the yard as a pile of rubble. I knew that if I were to demolish it, I would have to build a new one in the same place, otherwise I would spoil the integrity of the original courtyard. We didn't need the barn – as a living space – we were satisfied with the bedroom, the kitchen and the pantry in the house. (We did, however, create a bathroom in the house and the pantry was eventually converted into a bedroom – that makes two bedrooms – but that was it.) Robi Pungor was already mowing my lawn at the time. I went down to the garden, sat on a chair and looked

at the barn. Robi mowed around me, I had my coffee, went into the house, my neighbour took my chair, moved it, mowed where I had been sitting and left. I stood there wondering what to do, what I was supposed to do there in Viszák, a village of 270 (now only 240) inhabitants.

The house I bought was a peasant house that had been abandoned for ten years. Next to it was a vacant plot with a vacant house. The house next door to the right had no one living in there either, the other house was also empty, but its garden was full of fruit trees. Who knew what kind of fruits, no one picked them. If somebody was to come and buy the plot, they would cut down the fruit trees and plant thuja in their place. I was observing and contemplating this scene. Suddenly, the words of Gyula Kovács echoed in my ears: "Let's save the indigenous fruit legacy of the Carpathian Basin, devastated by man, with community-strengthening intentions." I was dramatically engaged by this call, anatomising its meaning word by word and as a thought.

The first facilitating meeting was followed by a second one, with Attila Kaszás. At that time (2004), Attila donated his family house to his home village of Zsigárd in historical Upper Hungary to be turned into a community centre. He was planning its reconstruction, which we discussed many times. It was also at that time that I became interested in the concept of historical Upper Hungary, which I knew nothing about as a child. Little did I understand why Attila would speak Hungarian if he had been born in Czechoslovakia and their house was now in Slovakia. This left me with a serious riddle, making me wonder what being a Hungarian from historical Upper Hungary meant. I remember a Transylvanian woman selling handwoven goods at the marketplace, and a friend of mine bought something from her. I liked it and asked who she had bought it from. And she told me she had bought it from that Romanian woman! I completely lacked this basic knowledge presupposing identity for a long time. When I was a child, I never met a mentor like Gyula Kovács, who would have shared a reflection with me near Ebes in Hortobágy, that could have sent me back there. I never had a friend – like Attila Kaszás later on – who would have connected me around an idea. Ultimately, there was no village that offered me the chance to do something for the community, because the notion of community did not exist. This tremendous feeling of lack became food for thought later. Just like when you quit smoking, and the enzymes demand you to feed, and the withdrawal symptom appears. No one asked me for friendship, for trust, for attachment to culture, to the community, for the possibility

of preserving the tradition and heritage that it represents. Everything said, “cut it, leave it, abandon it”. And as soon as I stumbled upon a living word that said, “don’t abandon it”, I immediately clung to Gyula Kovács, Attila Kaszás, and later to Lőrinc Csernyus and László Tenk.

Had you previously never met a teacher or adult who would have encouraged you because they sensed your talent?

■ When we moved from Kónya to Ebes farm, I went to a farm school for half a year. The teacher listened to me, looked at me and asked: what are you going to be when you grow up? I said I would be a singer or an adult educator. She wrote in my school report card that the child was notoriously deluded and gave me a D in singing. That’s the hands I was under as a child. Nevertheless, I am very grateful to two of my primary school teachers. The headmaster of the school in Ebes, János Prepuk, and his wife, Mrs Prepuk, Aunt Erzsike, who was my form teacher and taught Hungarian – thank God they are still alive today. Mr Prepuk also led a choir. They could sense my special singing voice and my inner connection to the poem. They recognized that I had an inner drive, and they fostered that drive to unfold. The lady teacher heard immediately that this peasant child, at the age of ten, not only recited the two required stanzas of the poem by heart but had learned all of it and recited it in a more special way than the others. And the headmaster noticed my singing voice. When I went to college as a farm kid, it was common for farm kids not to be admitted as members of the choir, because rehearsals and performances were always at weekends, when farm kids had to be at home. But having heard my voice, my form teacher and the headmaster went to see my parents to beg them to let me join the choir. I have never forgotten this gesture of theirs.

How did Attila Kaszás’s personality and friendship shape your personality and mindset?

■ We talked a lot, I remember him cooking at times, us smoking cigars at other times, drinking wine, and making plans about how we would like to do this or that. His donation to his native village also inspired new thoughts in my head. I mooted the idea with him that we could turn my barn into a cultural space. Attila died unexpectedly in 2007, and the catharsis helped me to ask myself

whether Attila's passing gave me the right to take the idea forward and implement the project on my own, even if I didn't feel competent to do so. In the summer of 2007, we had to spend our entire film income for the year on construction. The barn was built, we started organising events, thinking that we could use the proceeds to support the events. But the income didn't even cover the cost of petrol. I wanted to organise events that Attila and I had agreed on. On the one hand, I wanted to develop cross-border cultural contacts and, on the other hand, I wanted to get involved in the cultural life of the village. I organised musical and theatrical events and evenings at the Barn Theatre at my own expense, but I soon realised that the villagers did not enjoy this kind of culture. There was no point in my wanting to provide quality culture and entertainment if they were simply not interested. They took an interest in the construction of the barn, tapping, inspecting and studying the timber, the beams, but there was not much demand for the performances and the pictures on display in the gallery. When I embarked on this project with wishful thinking, I could not ask anyone for help. I didn't approach anyone for support for five years.

Finally, in 2009, we understood the true vocation of the Barn Theatre, its mission of cultural acceptance, and since then everything has been guided by this idea. The common goal of the Attila Kaszás Barn Theatre and Gallery is to help create value. The situation began to stabilise, and we realised that we were on the right track, because the idea had transcended itself. My friends and I converted the loft above the barn into a lodge, and we also set up a yurt. In the summer, young architects and students camp at our facility under the guidance of architect Lőrinc Csernyus. They helped to expand the barn and garden, designed and built a bridge and an oven chapel. These projects cost a sizeable amount of money, but I managed to get funding through the NKA [Natural Cultural Fund]. Year after year, my fellow actors and friends Tamás Gál and Róbert Laboda fill the children's drama camp with content. The work of fine artist László Tenk, an artist associated with KAPSZ Gallery, led to the summer art camps. My wife and I are the hosts, but if you need help in Viszák, you always find some. One friend planted a small garden, another friend created a pond. A friend of mine, a railway engineer, made a canopy to provide shade to protect the children from the sun. It is self-evident to me that money has to be raised or earned to make the programmes happen, but this is not the point; the point is the good intention and goodwill of the community. I strive to make myself useful with an inner compulsion for homemaking, and now my



Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó

Picture 1. László Csurka (Sipkás), József Szarvas (Táncos Csuda Mózes) in the *Thirteen Apple Tree* (Director: Vidnyánszky Attila)

life has an inner rhythm in which work is a source of joy. I do most of the tasks and organisation during the year, and the moment we get here, the moment hundreds of people come to visit, my wife and I feel it is already time to celebrate. That's the reason why we do it!

How did the personal message of the Fairy Garden evolve and how did you begin to save the native fruit trees of Viszák?

■ The process was taking place before my eyes: the village was shrinking, many of the people living there were elderly, their children had left, the proportion of unmarketable houses was increasing, and the number of anonymous fruit trees condemned to dry up and be cut down was growing. Gyula Kovács's idea expressed in the words "let's save them with the intention of strengthening the community" finally became clear to me, and I understood that I was not

the one who should set the direction and tell the people of Viszák what to do. 2009 was the year when the Fairy Garden was created with the involvement of the mayor, the teacher and the doctor, along with the village community. Gyula Kovács helped and supported the initiative from the outset, gave us permission and the municipality granted us a free plot of land. The teacher suggested that all the fruit trees saved should have a custodian from Viszák, or a person originally from Viszák. Gyula promised to assist our plan with as many fruit trees as we can provide a caretaker for. And I suggested that every year we should save as many fruit trees in our garden as there were children born that year. We have planted 52 fruit trees in the Fairy Garden. If it were just me doing all this, there would be no point.

How do the messages of the Attila Kaszás Barn Theatre and the indigenous-fruit-tree-saving Fairy Garden interweave? Can this be called a pure form, a clear spring of Hungarian identity?

■ Yes, in Viszák the two-branched clear spring merges into one. In the 1800s, all fruit trees were still public property. The fruit belonged to the farmer who grafted, planted, nurtured and cared for the tree, but the tree was public property, a culture-bearing common treasure. There are countless synonyms for fruit and thousands of poems, melodies and songs are associated with it. Thus, man has created a cult, a culture, around the fruit tree. He is attached to it as he is to his festivities. Thus, in the 19th century, the fruit tree was a culture-bearing creature of public thought. If you think about what a fruit tree represents nowadays, I will have to say that potentially a tree is recyclable waste today. It means nothing more. Because what happens to a tree? Its leaves and twigs fall off, which are collected in a plastic bag for recycling, taken somewhere, compressed, set burning, and of course it generates electricity, which we buy. We are talking about the tree, to which we no longer have any attachment. We have given up on trees, just as art has forsaken the representation of peasant society. The peasant man could have been a cultural agent if his family had not been driven away. These families were moved into prefabricated housing and from then on, it has seemed as if this bygone class no longer existed. Along with the peasantry disappeared the fruit trees, the poetry and culture associated with trees, the notion of culture and tradition. But tradition does not belong in a museum, it must be renewed day after day. Today, instead of culture, multi-

culturalism is proliferating. For me, multiculturalism is like socialist morality: a virtual reality. The term multiculturalism makes no sense to me because something is either multi or culture; it is either socialist or morality. Culture is very much tied to a place and the past, suggestive of the future. If you plant an indigenous fruit tree, it's sure to be there in a hundred years' time, and in the meantime a family can grow up. Mother, father, children, grandchildren. I'll remind my grandchild of all the delicious jams, preserves, vinegar and pálinka that are made [from the fruit of the tree]. I also consider it important to entrust him with the task of taking care of the tree and saving it when the tree is old, because it is associated with so many memories and tastes. The arts facilitate and support this.

Do you see your work bearing fruit yet?

■ Over the past decades, tens of thousands of resistant fruit trees grafted onto wild trees have been saved throughout the Carpathian Basin. These hundreds of Tündérgert (Fairy Gardens) were created with the intention of enriching the landscape and strengthening the community. In 2023, the Kaszás Attila Pajta Theater and Gallery in Viszák launched the Attila Kaszás Theater to the Carpathian Basin after 16 years, with the intention of crossing borders and relearning culture. Our goal is to save the once seemingly endless variety of native fruit trees that still remain but are doomed to destruction. The Kaszás Attila Theater – together with several other theaters, partially renouncing their own professional goals – wants to play an initiating role in the process of relearning folk culture. In a joint performance with the Spektrum Theater in Marosvásárhely, we presented Zsigmond Móricz's drama: *A boszorkány (The Witch)*, and together we created a Fairy Garden in the village of Buza in Mezőség. It was possible to initiate a new and sustainable holiday in the settlement, which brought surprising hope to the doomed community. Also in 2023, with our already mentioned Móricz performance, we participated in the jubilee event of the Gyula Illyés National Theatre in Beregszász, and in the joint decision of the three theaters, we planted the tree of hope for rebirth in Tiszacsoma, i.e. Petőfi's pear tree. We founded another Tündérgert with this expanding intention. We will continue our work in 2024. With the participation of new theaters, creating new performances and new Fairy Gardens. By introducing new communities to a new collective art initiative, the purpose and goal of which is to serve the re-strengthening of local patriotic communities.

The Fairy Garden reminds me of Attila József's poem "I shall be a gardener", which is a symbol of all this. Has your family accepted your mission?

■ The decision to buy the house and build the barn was also supported by my first wife. Her support helped me a lot to come to believe that the idea that had touched me was culturally good, important and value-creating. My second wife inherited this situation. I am happy to say that she is now our hostess for our helpers and guests, and so is my daughter Katinka, who is nearly eight years old and has settled in well and grown to love Viszák. Early on in the planning process, I imposed my "fantasy" on the village and on my wife, but I tried to convey my ideas in a way that they would come to like them. Today, I embrace everything that can be added to this idea, as new sources of extra joy also reinforce it. Not only in me, but also in the villagers' souls. Back in the days, László Földes (Hobó), Tamás Jordán and Sándor Fábry came to perform for free, and with this gesture they helped me move forward.

Is it possible to separate József Szarvas' theatrical and cinematic self from his fairy garden?

■ Through these village productions that enable personal growth, I am becoming a better and better actor. All the more because I get a strong, deep, identity-building professional opportunity to underpin my roles. After all, the more meaningful my life is, the richer and more meaningful my sentences are. The theatre is a workshop for sharing culture, but so is the fruit tree. I enter the theatre in the evenings because that is my profession, I am an actor. On weekdays I am József Szarvas. I can't go everywhere as an actor. The spectator who sees me in the theatre is not watching the actor, but the character. I have to create the authenticity of my roles. Thus, theatre is part of how my life is complete. My solo evening, *Snowfall*, brings together the theatre, the barn and the Fairy Garden. It incorporates my whole life so far.