Tamas Koltai, editor-in-chief of Szinhaz (Theatre) magazine, described the 1993-94 Hungarian theatre season as "the winter of our discontent." A season fraught with artistic controversy and financial travail foreshadowed the 13th Annual National Theatre Festival. (See Theatre Journal March 1994 for a review of the 12th Festival.)

This year's Festival curator was film director, Jancso Miklos. An already difficult job of selecting sixteen plays from over a hundred new productions was complicated by a media campaign to discredit his choices. Jancso did not deny his subjectivity. Among his selections were such notable titles as Hamlet, Richard III, Waiting for Godot, Edward II, The Threepenny Opera, and Miss Julie, as well as more recent plays such as Amadeus and Crimes of the Heart. Surprisingly, only one play represented Hungarian dramatic literature and three productions of The Threepenny Opera were included although one was cancelled at the last moment.

Kleist's Kathchen von Heilbronn (Kate of Heilbronn) opened the festivities at the Vigszinhaz (Comedy Theatre) with breathtaking impact. Before the play began, scenes of Medieval images and gargoyles were projected on the ceiling and walls accompanied by modern, electronic music. The stage was dark with smoke emanating in great profusion. In the dim light we saw the outline of a large basket chair hanging from the rafters with someone in it. The chair was moved about by a stagehand dressed in black, Bunraku style. As our eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, we could see six other baskets much higher up. All the occupants were dressed in purple robes, their faces covered with fencing masks. As the Emperor, in the main basket, questioned the hero, Count Frederick, the six assistants reacted with orchestrated hand movements and sounds that gave us the eerie feeling of being present at an inquisition. In front of the proscenium arch, the stage was expanded in order to accommodate a relatively large pool, which served as a lake and swimming pool. The stagehand ingeniously maneuvered the Emperor's basket over the water. The special effects never ceased. In addition to abundant use of water, much pyrotechnics were used. Eniko Eszenyi, last year's award winning director of West Side Story, subtitled this work the Crucible. Her perception of this chivalrous tale of romance was total theatricality, a visual feast, but never at the expense of performance. This group of thespians produced absolute team work with many outstanding portrayals. Best Supporting Actress/Actor Awards went to Nora Tabori as Helen/Brigitta and to Antal Cserna as Gottschalk.

The 13th Annual Theatre Festival may be characterized by a single word: Spectacle. Edward II, Marlowe's persona laden chronicle play was staged by the Budapesti Kamara Theatre for a chamber theatre using only thirteen actors. Heavily, but effectively cut, the diverse story of the weak king was set in a meat locker. Hooks used for sides of beef served as hangers for costumes and props. Depending on the role, actors wore bloodstained aprons and carried meat cleavers. The butcher's block became a symbol of execution and after...