

Maybe Hungarians were born not to ride horses, but to produce films



by **BEENEDEK F. TÓTH** | **KÖVETÉS** | date: 27. 08. 2021. 14:44 | **Aljában, 43**

Astra Filmland started a HUF forty-billion development in Mogyoród. The large-scale project may create something unique in Hungarian film production, while Gábor Rajna, the mastermind for the project, who readers may know among others as the film producer for the Oscar-winning Son of Saul, says when a Hungarian film studio develops, it moves the entire Hungarian filmmaking forward.

Today's global film industry environment creates an opportunity that is excellent from more aspects for the continued growth of the Hungarian film industry, to further strengthen its currently prominent position and step up to the level of the largest Western hubs. It is not by coincidence that via the National Film Institute (NFI) the government also announced in summer that new studios would be added to the film production complex in Fót. According to Gábor Rajna this also shows that we no longer have to marvel with eyes wide open at the British Pinewood Studios, the largest European film hub; soon the time will come when Hungarian filmmaking can actually compete with London.

Not only because with Brexit the British have caused serious bloodletting for their film industry, but also because at the same time with the restrictions on cinemagoing, an unprecedented wave of streaming revolution has been swiping through the big studios (AppleTV, Hulu, HBO, Netflix, Amazon, Paramount, Disney, Marvel). Hungary has unique potential and when the demand is like now, developments can be implemented in a great market environment.

When talking about boosting the Hungarian film industry, filmmaking in our homeland, how should we approach the global market? Can we, Hungarians also ride the streaming wave, or is it more than that and we can even help to set the trend?

Hungarian film production has always been strong. Hollywood was partly built and invented by Hungarians. However, for a few decades – due to historical circumstances - Hungarian filmmaking did not develop like the studios of the western world. In the second half of the last century opportunities in filmmaking in Hungary were defined by state demand. Although when a good set was built, let's say in Fót or in Budapest in Róna Street, for example a medieval town, or Auschwitz for a Holocaust movie, the news travelled and more and more productions found the Hungarian studios. In addition, Budapest itself, owing to its architecture and image could and even today can secure the location for the scenes of several cosmopolitan cities; film scenes from Paris, Moscow or Vienna could be organised here.

Does this mean that when the film studio in Mogyoród was built in 2008, the goal was to make Hungary even more attractive for international film production companies?

The owners of the studio at that time mostly tried to react to the race between Budapest and Prague since Prague had a positional advantage for a long time, because Barrandov Studios had much more stages. Yes, it is true that three stages were built in Mogyoród and in parallel the Korda Studio in Etyek was also developed and these decisions proved to be right, because the focus of attention of international studios started to turn towards Hungary.



Gábor Rajna
Photo: Edit Gorondy-Novák / Index

Is that all? Studios need to be built and productions are coming?

It was also a highly important aspect that long before 2010 for the first time in the region Hungary had introduced serious tax refund options in filmmaking and this tax environment became even more favourable after 2010. Today we are already in a position where if at least 80% of the direct production costs of a film production is generated in Hungary, a subsidy equivalent to 30% of the production cost can be used. Another important factor related to all this is that the quality of the work of Hungarian film crews is on a very high level today. When the film Evita was shot in Budapest in the mid-90s, the Hungarian light technicians could maybe touch the cables, but not the lights. Today the Hungarian crew is entrusted with most of the settings, for example the lighting of the sets, which is a very important task and this is regularly carried out by the Hungarian gaffer and his well-prepared team.

Maybe Hungarians were not created to ride horses, but to make films?

I am convinced that Hungarian filmmaking professionals have always been excellent, as although they were disadvantaged compared to the western filmmakers, they have always been very brave and creative. They were never afraid to invent their own images without any special gadgets and technological innovation and shoot a scene using such "life-hacks". The practical thinking of Hungarians has always been exemplary as it is today. But I could also mention the world-famous film construction and set designers, we have outstanding designers and carpenters, joiners and cabinetmakers. I had the chance to see the works done by NuBojana Film Studios in Bulgaria and without meaning any harm to the professionals there – since they are also continuously learning and improving – Hungarian professionals can really work miracles compared to them.

Does this mean that for a production it is a rather important aspect what professional environment the crew of the forthcoming film arrives in?

Of course, but it is not only the professional environment that matters – and here we can refer back to the first question. 90% of Hungarian studios are filled by international contract production and service. Today, streaming service providers turn to us with almost endless capacity demand and due to this the capacity of the studios and stages in Mogyoród is 100% utilized and booked in advance.

There are a lot of productions made, I understand that, but they could go anywhere else...

Global film industry trends show that big studios and streaming service providers are keen on coming to Hungary, but the competition for filming locations is really big, and if we want Hungary to get into an even more favourable position in this competition, we need to develop. This is the big picture and it is important to understand that for example what I am talking about now is not only about our project, about Astra Filmland, but about the entire filmmaking industry in Hungary.

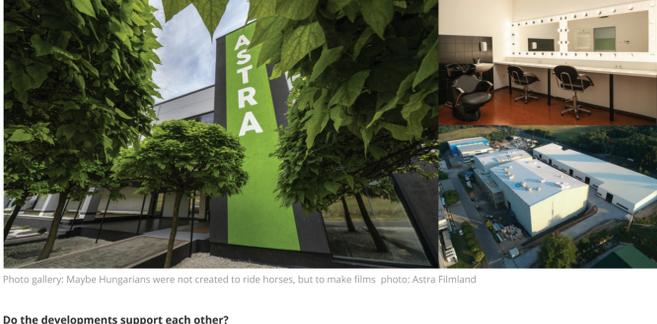


Photo gallery: Maybe Hungarians were not created to ride horses, but to make films photo: Astra Filmland

Do the developments support each other?

Yes, the Mogyoród development is part of the process in which Hungary can become even stronger and more efficient in global film production. The point is we need to provide better and higher quality in everything than our competitors. We need to get ahead in the area that impacts the entire filmmaking process. One of these aspects is time. The British are struck by quite a lot of problems nowadays, Brexit did no good to the filmmaking there starting from the burdens of customs proceedings to the administrative requirements. These take up a lot of time from a shooting and time is what is most precious there. If here in Mogyoród we create opportunities that save time for the crews, we already have a competitive advantage.

Could you give me an example?

We take this aspect into consideration in all elements of our development plans. We are also building a stage that is suitable for aircraft stage shooting. So far we could only shoot such scenes in Ferihegy, but once this facility is built, we do not need to go there separately, the production process will speed up. Moreover, here not only the time of the journey matters, but also that the crew do not need to go through four different security checks, but the cameras are just set and the work can start. The result of the same conscious planning is the backlot, which is our development in outdoor set technology. The more special services we have, the higher the chances are that not only special scenes, but entire films will be shot in Hungary. Fortunately, the National Film Institute is open to sit down the Hungarian film professionals together and to align what special services they provide. Maybe there is no need for two aircraft studios, but if someone gathers and coordinates the special studios that are needed, we can make the Hungarian supply even better. However, support is needed for developments, because it is more difficult to convince investors with classical business plans to get into special projects.

So if there is an attractive factor that makes it worth to choose Budapest, entire productions can come here, not only to shoot a specific scene?

We have elaborated a set construction technology in Mogyoród that is unique in its kind: imagine a modular system on which permanent sets can be built this way more films can plan their shooting days for one structure. Filmmakers can save significant time, which is money since from now on there is no need to travel back to New York to shoot the scenes of outdoor sets, because we can build almost any kind of street view for them here in Mogyoród. There is something else that I am extremely proud of: our digital development centre. Each element of this is based on Hungarian innovation.

How should we imagine it? Is it a computerized control centre?

Nowadays LED is a favoured technology, this was used during the shooting of The Mandalorian. We also have this special LED wall with which we can create the experience of the real, authentic environment. Connected to this we have our motion robot and spider camera system that we developed and which makes 3D filming possible and the centre can produce the content for it. These are all developments which are in huge demand. But I could also mention that we are planning to build a water pool in Mogyoród, 20 x 10 metres, six metres deep with a crane over it.



Gábor Rajna
Photo: Edit Gorondy-Novák / Index

This is needed obviously at the filming of underwater scenes. When can it be ready?

By this autumn and yes, it will be suitable for filming almost any water scene: sinking ships, cars falling into water, diving scenes can be shot in there. They have one like that in Pinewood, too, but only few people know that Budapest could actually even be the international filmmaking hub for water scene shooting. There are such capacities in several Hungarian studios: in Fót there are large outdoor pools in Origo, in Korda and there is also a small one in Róna Street. Over time we would also like to build an outdoor infinity pool where wave-effect ship movements can also be simulated. However, I would like to highlight again that when I am talking about these as own concepts, it is really not about the competition within the country, we do not want to build competition, but we would like to make Hungary more attractive for the film industry. The essence of the entire development is that it is not enough to build stages, but an entire background world for filming should be created. Complex infrastructure development is needed linked to film production.

Do you mean that a complete mini society must stand behind a single stage or studio building?

Exactly. What viewers mostly see from the filmmaking are the films that are screened and maybe a few moments from the shooting. However, behind a two-hour movie there is a whole universe. That is also why the Mogyoród development is so special. I know that outsiders say that film production facilities are like industrial parks, but we say that this should be more like a filmmaking community hub. If you like, it should operate as a filming village where there is everything that the residents may need.

Shop, cinema, school, pub?

Naturally, there are shops in there, that is studios, building workshops, warehouses, but there are also other buildings, streets, green areas and yes, shops, service units, training facilities (for example for the sparks, make-up artists, dressers), restaurants, gyms or even a petrol station. These are all essential components.

Everything must be there so they do not need to go out for anything and lose time?

There is one thing that big film studios do not like at all: uncertainty and unpredictability. That is why it makes a difference what kind of environment welcomes the directors, actors and the studio employees. Today it is not rare that the crew arrive not for a few months of shooting, but even for years, for example in case of a series with multiple seasons. That is why it becomes important what the city and the natural environment is like, what entertainment opportunities there are, what cultural and gastronomy experiences the crew have.

That is also why we are thinking to create this background world for filming in Mogyoród in the four development phases of Astra Filmland. With a kindergarten, school, hotel capacity, tourism and leisure activities and healthcare services. All this with an eco-conscious planning. We are already in negotiation with companies that have campuses in London, but they are planning to build also in Budapest where they would not only train the professionals of the filmmaking world, but students could also gain real filming experiences as interns. We are in negotiation with an international kindergarten and school to provide education and schooling opportunities for those who come to us for four-five years with their families. The residents of Mogyoród will also profit from this since we create workplaces and the town can calculate with significant business and building taxes.



Photo gallery: Maybe Hungarians were not created to ride horses, but to make films photo: Astra Filmland

However, this requires financially strong market players and investors. Can the state play a role in this?

The purpose of Astra Filmland is to create an even better environment for international film productions implemented in Hungary. The state is also needed in the project as the state has a long-term strategy for the Hungarian film industry including training and infrastructural development so essentially we are talking about a complex industrial development that actually requires long-term strategic thinking and planning. I think we already have this today, but if this perspective persists, the whole of Hungary can profit from it. I regard the state's coordinating and supporting role especially important where the special services that work like magnets (aircraft studios, deep water pools) are set up, because these will serve for everyone's benefit later.

What size industry are we talking about?

In 2019 the filming industry contributed to the Hungarian GDP with nearly HUF 200 billion, but a development like this has a lot of other positive benefits. Great films are made here, and there is no better advertisement needed for a country when productions are made there one after another; if Hungary shows up in famous international films and the biggest stars praise the country. Let alone the fact that the crew live in Hungarian hotels, spend money in Budapest and this also has a multiplier effect resulting in the country winning more than the subsidies. Finally, if the film infrastructure develops nicely, if we can implement big international projects, it will all be returned in the production of Hungarian films. With better trained professionals, in a better quality environment better Hungarian films can be made.

This really seems like a state interest and responsibility, but then where is the role of private investors?

Once again I would like to highlight that we think that for the aforementioned reasons there will be a serious and stable demand in the coming years in the international film industry so this is a particularly good project also for private investors. We examine all opportunities, we negotiate with more investors, find their international investors can join and we would like to set up a structure where everyone has their role and where everyone can find their gains.

Would you be happier about Hungarian or foreign partners?

In my view this project can be put together solely from Hungarian funding. We only need to accept and understand that a film industry investment is not like the construction of housing complex or a logistics centre. The implementation of the complete project is not pressed by time in such a way that the foundation stone is laid down, then the finished apartments or other facilities are handed over. Film industrial development should be imagined with a similarly high return on investment, but rather that the demand that can adapt to the current sectorial, in this case, the film industrial trends. I feel that it can be definitely stated as a process, the hunger for content will persist in the long run. This development must be viewed as an opportunity that must be started if we want to remain in competition with the world's film production.