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*Recent Research in Hungarian Theatre History*



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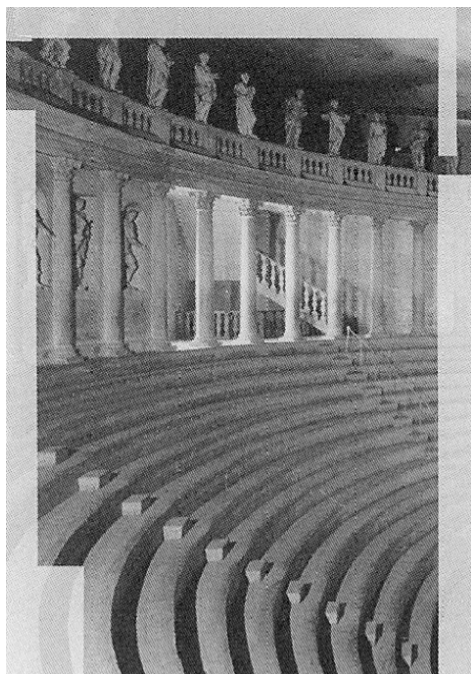
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## Hungarian Export Plays. Foreign Success Stories of Hungarian Dramas at the Turn of the Century

ÁGNES VÁRADI

**Abstract:** Although in Hungarian dramatic history we can occasionally find Hungarian plays that managed to have a good career abroad, but observing the dramatic literature of the first third of the 20th century, we can realise that the number of so-called export plays is considerable. Success stories in Hungarian drama literature are associated with the first decade of the Vígsház: naturally, as part of a modernising theatrical culture, press publicity and promotion play a significant role in audience success. Within the profit-oriented theatrical model, sold-out performances in large series are considered successful plays, forming the basis for potential export dramas. Considering the fact that only works that do not address a specifically Hungarian theme, meaning that they go beyond national borders and local problems, can attract the attention of foreign audiences; priority is given to social dramas, and, to a lesser extent, comedies which mainly deal with a social problem typical of the period. This study highlights key milestones in the international careers of some Hungarian export plays, starting from the Berlin premiere of *The Schoolmistress* in 1909 to the Zurich premiere of *The Dancer* in 1918.

Finding a path into the European theatrical world for Hungarian plays is far from simple, given the linguistic characteristics and the situation of small-language cultures; thus, Hungarian dramas performed on international stages deserve attention. Although in the history of Hungarian drama, we can occasionally find plays that achieved success

abroad,<sup>1</sup> examining the drama literature of the first third of the 20th century reveals a noticeable number of so-called export plays. However, we are talking about three decades during which the changes in the country's geopolitical situation, such as the traumatic World War I and the subsequent dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, led to a constant reshaping of theatre structure, cultural perceptions, and consequently, the position of Hungarian drama. Within the present study, it cannot be our aim to present the history of Hungarian export plays over three decades;<sup>2</sup> instead, we will focus on the dramas presented in the international theatrical world between 1900 and 1918.

### *Hungarian theatrical context, 1896–1918*

The strong representation of export plays in the oeuvre of Hungarian drama at the turn of the century is closely related to the characteristics of the Hungarian theatrical environment. This applies to both the operating practices of profit-oriented private theatres and the position of playwrights. Breaking the hegemony of the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház) in the late 19th century, a series of private theatres opened in Budapest, including the Vígsház (after the Népszínház) in 1896, the Magyar Színház in 1897, and the Király Színház in 1903. In this modernising theatrical environment, the absence of Hun-

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<sup>1</sup> We must mention, of course, Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, which is exceptional in this respect. It was translated by Lajos Dóczi and presented in Hamburg in 1892.

<sup>2</sup> BÉCSY Tamás, „Sikerdarabok: A húszas, harmincas évek vígjátékairól”, *Irodalomtörténet* 79, no. 29 (1998): 132–148.



garian dramas became apparent. To address this gap, more and more European import plays entered the repertoire of theatres.<sup>3</sup> These plays aimed to meet the expectations of the audience, as revenue—thus success—became the determining factor for profit-oriented private theatres. Therefore, Hungarian authors had to find recognition within this structure. The majority of imported plays came from the French and Italian theatrical worlds, serving as examples of a dramaturgical technique that could be the basis for entertaining and successful performances. However, Hungarian authors had to compete with audience-favourite imported plays, making their situation challenging in the Budapest theatrical environment. In the first decade of the century, Hungarian prose plays were staged in three theatres, but the path to the stage seemed more problematic than simple. It is worth observing the repertoire changes at the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház). While placing Hungarian drama in the spotlight and supporting the discovery of new playwrights are parts of the institution's profile, the cumbersome and bureaucratic operation of the drama review committee and this work of judging in the name of a quality guarantee actually made it impossible for playwrights to get on stage. Furthermore, due to state financing and the resulting programme policy, the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház) could not become the stronghold of Hungarian dramatists in the first decade of the 20th century. The structure of the program is determined by constraints and regulations, as the main task of the theatre is to "cultivate the ideals of literature, [...] preserve a higher spirit, and main-

<sup>3</sup> In the programme schedule of the Vígszínház, starting from 1896, the first years featured French, English, and Italian works. Among the authors were G.A. Cavaillet, R. Flers, G. Feydeau, E. Labiche, P. Potter, and Henry Bernstein. MAGYAR Bálint, *A Vígszínház története* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1979), 72.

tain a nobler style".<sup>4</sup> Although the directorial programme of Sándor Somló in the first years of the century suggests a focus on original Hungarian drama, the Hungarian series will be a failure, and the theatre's possibilities in this direction will be further reduced, referring to the costs of staging failed works.

In the competition for Hungarian authors' plays, the Vígszínház had a significant advantage in the first decade of the century. Recognising the opportunities in Hungarian playwrights promptly required good sense, boldness, and quick decision-making to select the right works. Within a well-functioning system and with above-average remuneration, authors willingly offered their plays to the theatre. Within the framework of the Hungarian drama series that began with Sándor Bródy's *The Nurse* (*A dada*) in 1902, Hungarian drama reached its first real breakthrough success in 1907 with Ferenc Molnár's *The Devil* (*Az Ördög*), through a Hungarian Cycle<sup>5</sup> initiated by Mór Ditrói.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by Sándor Bródy's *The Schoolmistress* (*A tanítónő*) in 1908, and then plays by Menyhért Lengyel and Dezső Szomory. The increasing audience interest, press publicity,

<sup>4</sup> HOFFMANN Sándor [Hevesi Sándor], „A Nemzeti Színház jövője”, *Magyar Szemle* 6, no. 12 (1894): 146–147. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>5</sup> The Hungarian cycle signifies one hundred Hungarian plays. In this sense, the first premiere took place in February 1902: the audience could see Ferenc Herczeg's *Ocskay brigadéros*, and the hundredth performance featured the drama *Kuruc Féja Dávid* by Samu Fényes. DITRÓI Mór, *Komédiások* (Budapest: Közlekedési Nyomda, 1929), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Mór Ditrói (1845–1945), director, theatre manager and actor. Initially, he served as the head of the National Theatre in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and later became a founding member of the Vígszínház. He played a significant role in shaping modern Hungarian theatre.

and plays performed to full houses brought substantial revenue to the theatre. Moreover, a new practice of playwriting emerged, often referred to as the Vígszínház model. Authors would write their works directly for the stage or, in some cases, at the theatre's request. This was completely impractical and inconceivable in the system of the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház). Many playwrights of the Vígszínház, including Sándor Bródy, Jenő Heltai, and Dezső Szomory, worked in this form. It became customary that the text evolved during rehearsals, even during the trial period.

The plays of Hungarian authors are characterised by thematic and genre diversity. Three important genres can be highlighted as pillars of the Hungarian drama oeuvre:<sup>7</sup> historical dramas, comedies, and social dramas. Examining the stage representation of each genre during the two decades reveals differences. While historical dramas were sought after in the Hungarian theatrical world from the first decade of the century, the comedy genre truly appeared in greater numbers in the theatres' schedules in the following decade. Social dramas represent a specific thematic group within stage works (middle-class dramas) in the theatrical environment of the early 20th century. On the one hand, certain criteria can be established based on common markers, on the other hand, due to the thematic variety of works, it is challenging to delineate the genre. Social dramas are stories set in the present or recent past, featuring typified/typical figures of the given society. These plays typically address issues relevant to a particular era, making social dramas strongly generational. This means that these plays move along the axis of what is still contemporary and what is already outdated, and their topicality further narrows down the genre. In this sense, social drama corresponds to the German drama

genre known as *Zeitstück*, an ephemeral variant of social drama.<sup>8</sup> The stories of social dramas are diverse, focusing on the specific issues of the era: career/work life, patriotic sentiments, conflicts between social classes, and themes related to women. Examining repertoires, it becomes clear that social dramas have played an increasingly significant role in the Hungarian theatrical environment since the last decade of the 19th century. Along with growing audience interest, the Vígszínház increasingly allowed the stage presence of Hungarian social dramas, making it the base for Hungarian dramas by the end of the first decade of the 20th century.

### *Hungarian–German Culture*

The recognition of Hungarian/Budapest theatre productions by German-speaking theatre professionals towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century can be attributed to the interplay of various factors. Firstly, we must mention the axis of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, encompassing Vienna, Budapest (and Prague), as well as Budapest's long-standing bilingual (Hungarian–German) culture. Additionally, the international connections of Hungarian playwrights, primarily within the German-speaking region, contribute to this dynamic. Due to the operational structure of the Monarchy, it seems entirely natural that Hungarian and German-language cultures coexisted and intertwined not only in Budapest but also in the region's major cities during the turn of the century. (In this case, we do not address the connection points between Hungarian and German cultures/languages before the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867.) Foreign theatre companies are key elements in the Budapest theatre scene, appearing from time to time. For example, the Berliner Ensemble played

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the three defining genres, we can also discuss farce, novel adaptations, and social dramas.

<sup>8</sup> A dramatic work that thematises and criticises a social phenomenon of its time; a current issue of the period.



in Budapest on numerous occasions.<sup>9</sup> It is at one of such guest performances that the already renowned Hungarian writer, Sándor Bródy, and the future German director, Max Reinhardt, first met in 1899.<sup>10</sup>

An exciting and defining representative of bilingual Budapest is the *Pester Lloyd*, a German-language magazine for the German bourgeoisie of Budapest.<sup>11</sup> This journal brings together journalists and writers living in Budapest, publishing in German, who also have international connections. What does this mean? In addition to national and international news, cultural events and theatre performances played an important role in carrying information to a wide readership across national borders. Hungarian writers and journalists who translated Hungarian literary works into German also participated in this publication. Among them were Miksa Ruttkay-Rothauser (Ruttkay György), Alfred Polgar, and Lajos Dóczi. It is undeniable that the Hungarian-German bilingualism of the period had played a significant role in the presence of Hungarian literary works in the German-speaking region since the second half of the 19th century.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The audience attended a guest performance by Burgtheater at the Vígszínház in 1897, while two Italian theatre companies, Gustavo Salvini's and Ermete Zacconi's, also performed in October 1897, and Gabrielle Réjane appeared on stage as well. GAJDÓ Tamás, „A Vígszínház”, in *Magyar Színháztörténet II. 1873–1920*, ed. GAJDÓ Tamás, 143–173 (Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub–OSZMI, 2001), 168.

<sup>10</sup> Isabelle KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy und Max Reinhardt: Orte ihrer Begegnungen”, *Berliner Beiträge zur Hungarologie* 11 (1999): 64–71, 64.

<sup>11</sup> The journal was launched in 1854 with János Weiss as editor-in-chief, later taken over by Miksa Falk in 1867.

<sup>12</sup> GULYÁS Pál, *Magyar szépirodalom idegen nyelven* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Könyvtára, 1915).

Lastly, we should explore the cultural ties arising from the fact that many Hungarian artists sought recognition in Berlin and Paris during the first decades of the 20th century. Berlin, emerging as an exciting cultural capital in early 20th-century Europe, attracted artists from all over the continent. Hungarian visual artists, filmmakers, theatre professionals, photographers, writers, and actors, including Dezső Keresztury, Sándor Márai, Ferenc Molnár, Menyhért Lengyel, Oszkár Beregi, Lajos Bíró,<sup>13</sup> found opportunities in Berlin. It is essential to mention Baron Lajos Hatvany; his role as a patron and literary organiser is well known in Hungarian literary life, so it is not surprising that he also occupies a leading position in the Hungarian colony in Berlin.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, he is acting as the intellectual leader of the Hungarian artists' group; he even publishes a Hungarian-language journal for a year. On the other hand, his relationships and financial capabilities enabled Hungarian writers and playwrights to enter the Berlin art scene. Baron Hatvany's involvement led to the introduction of Menyhért Lengyel and Sándor Bródy, each with a play, to the Berlin theatre environment. Otto Brahm, who, together with Max Reinhardt, belongs to Lajos Hatvany's circle of friends, supported the Hungarian authors as a renowned theatre expert. This explains why Jenő Robert, known as a Hungarian-born director of several German theatres, naturally embraced playwrights. As the director of the Berlin Hebbel-Theater and later the Munich Kammerspiele, Jenő Robert played a crucial role in having an increasing number

<sup>13</sup> KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Baron Lajos Hatvany (1880–1961), a patron and organiser of Hungarian literary life, was also responsible for the launch of the journal *Nyugat*. Throughout his life, he emigrated several times, he lived in Berlin, Vienna, and Oxford.

of Hungarian authors' plays performed on German stages.<sup>15</sup>

### *The concept of export plays*

Success stories in Hungarian drama literature are closely tied to the first decade of the Vígszínház: naturally, as part of a modernising theatrical culture, press publicity and promotion played a significant role in audience success. Within the profit-oriented theatrical model, sold-out performances in large series could be considered successful plays, forming the basis for potential export dramas. Considering that only works addressing themes beyond Hungarian specificity, transcending national borders and local issues, could capture the attention of foreign audiences, social dramas and, in terms of proportion, less prominent comedies were more significant. These works primarily explore various societal issues that characterise the era, such as the changing dynamics of male-female relationships in the modernising society, the opportunities for women's social roles, within which the actress theme strongly represents the path of modern female identity formation, and the crisis of the patriarchal family model, including the devaluation of male roles, etc.

In this study, we cannot aim for a comprehensive presentation of export dramas. However, we highlight some significant plays from the Hungarian productions that have achieved success among foreign audiences. The first major audience success of the Vígszínház is attributed to Ferenc Molnár's *The Devil* (*Az Ördög*);<sup>16</sup> a love story that

turns mystical. This was followed by Sándor Bródy's *The Schoolmistress* (*A tanítónő*), which explores the possibility of female role assumption; Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom* representing male-female relationships in the urban servant milieu; Dezső Szomory's dramas *Georgina, dear child* (*Györgyike, drága gyermek*) and *Bella*,<sup>17</sup> which deal with the actress theme and the social possibilities of female role assumption. Ferenc Molnár's *The Guardsman* (*A testőr*) features a renowned actress as the protagonist, and Menyhért Lengyel's *Typhoon* (*Tajfun*) takes us into a strange world where a femme fatale finds herself in a Japanese community in Berlin.<sup>18</sup> Sándor Bródy's *Tímár Liza* (1914) is also a drama about female identity search and the crisis of the patriarchal family model.<sup>19</sup> In the same year, Jenő Heltai's *Fairylogue Girls* (*A Tündérlaki lányok*) was staged, addressing the possibilities of women's social assertion, even in the theatrical world.<sup>20</sup> In 1915, the Vígszínház presented Menyhért Lengyel's *The Dancer* (*A táncosnő*), representing the possibilities of a female artist's assertion.

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Town. N.N., „Molnár Ferenc az Ördögről”, *Világ*, 1921. nov. 3., 23–24.

<sup>17</sup> Szomory's play was premiered at the Deutsches Volkstheater in Vienna in April 1912, translated by Henrik Glücksmann. N.N., „Színház, zene”, *Az Ujság* 10, no. 67 (1912): 14.

<sup>18</sup> The play achieved great success in numerous European cities, including Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, and Vienna. N.N., „Színház, zene”, *Az Ujság* 10, no. 44 (1912): 185. See N.N., „Színház, zene, film. Karl Heinz Martin német rendező Budapestén”, *Pesti Napló* 79, no. 98 (1927): 725.

<sup>19</sup> In Vienna, the play was performed at the Stadttheater. N.N., „Színház, művészet”, *Pesti Napló* 65, no. 76 (1914): 17.

<sup>20</sup> It premiered in Vienna and then in theatres in Germany, although theatres were in a more difficult situation in wartime. Before the war broke out, American contracts had arrived. N.N., „Színház, művészet”, *Világ* 13, no. 3 (1922): 43.

<sup>15</sup> IGNOTUS, „Robert Jenő”, *Nyugat* 5, no. 24 (1912): 975.

<sup>16</sup> During his guest appearance in Budapest, the Italian actor Zacconi watched the Molnár play starring Gyula Hegedűs. He liked the play, and in one day Andor Adorján translated it into French, then Zacconi himself into Italian. From then on, he performed the role over four hundred times from Trieste to Cape



Andor Gábor's comedy *The Beautiful Woman* (*Szépasszony*) was presented at the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház) in 1916,<sup>21</sup> depicting the story of an adulterous woman, and the devaluation of a marriage can be followed in Ferenc Herczeg's salon play *The Blue Fox* (*Kék róka*) in 1917.<sup>22</sup>

A fundamental question arises about the popularity and success of these plays. In the evolving theatrical environment of the first two decades of the century, privately owned theatres opened successively, shaping a new theatrical model: serving the needs of the audience must be accepted as a priority. Balancing artistic excellence and revenue-oriented perspectives, the success of the era's Hungarian plays was guaranteed by new and frequent productions, magnificent stage scenery (the importance of sets and costumes), and excellent performances by actors to entertain the audience. The Hungarian success plays of the two decades pose questions for both contemporary theatrical professionals and literary historians of the era: what is their role, and how can these works be positioned in the Hungarian drama oeuvre? According to the conservative literary perspective of the examined period, the plays provoke the bourgeois value system in their choice of themes, pushing the boundaries of good taste in their frivolity.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, in doing so, they shape audience expectations, pushing the theatre towards strident entertainment. It is worth highlighting some thoughts from Károly Szász's *The History of Hungarian Drama* regarding modern

plays, stating that these dramas attract audiences to profit-driven theatres with central themes such as adultery and sexual debauchery.<sup>24</sup> Zoltán Ambrus, a defining literary figure of the era, saw the reason for the theatrical success of Hungarian plays in the audience's lack of demand, ignorance, and the absence of artistic sensibility. According to Ambrus, this audience could only be lured into the theatre with immoral, i.e., mundane themes, as they were unsuitable to understand serious thoughts.<sup>25</sup>

From a dramaturgical perspective, we can speak of a kind of recipe for success: Hungarian authors quickly adopted the dramaturgical technique found in French and Italian theatrical environments, namely the characteristic structure of "well-made plays." This structure is recognizable in Hungarian plays as well, featuring a long first act, a shorter second act with a big scene at the end, and a disproportionately short, often seemingly inconsistent third act; alongside predictability, including the possible reactions of the audience.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, a well-functioning system was needed for Hungarian plays to be seen on the stages of Vienna or Berlin. This theatrical machinery consisted of stage directors, theatrical agents, and translators. The names of Miksa Marton and Josef Jarno must be highlighted in this context. Miksa Marton (1870–1936), a devoted theatre enthusiast (with actress wives), after studying law in Berlin and Vienna, pursued a career as a lawyer and, as a member and later head of the Hungarian Playwrights' Association, helped Hungarian playwrights to make their debut abroad. Thanks to his theatre connections, Hungari-

<sup>21</sup> The play, starring Ida Roland, was performed in Vienna in 1917. N.N., „Színház, művészet”, *Pesti Napló* 68, no. 10 (1917): 154.

<sup>22</sup> The play was first performed in Vienna and then, in an English translation by Cosmo Hamilton, on American stages. N.N., „Daily Mail öles cikke a magyar sikerekről”, *Színházi Élet* 10, no. 39 (1921): 23.

<sup>23</sup> See PINTÉR Jenő, *Magyar irodalom a XX. század első harmadában* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1941).

<sup>24</sup> SZÁSZ Károly, *A magyar dráma története* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1939), 274.

<sup>25</sup> AMBRUS Zoltán, „Színház”, *Magyar Figyelő* 1, no. 1 (1911): 95.

<sup>26</sup> See HEVESI Sándor and GYÖREI Zsolt, *A kis drámaíró a mellényzsebben, vagy hogyan lehetek egy nap alatt drámaíróvá?* (Budapest: Syllabux, 2015).

an authors' plays were able to find their way onto European stages. From 1910, he ran a literary and theatre agency and, as a theatre critic, he monitored Hungarian theatre life and represented the interests of Hungarian authors in theatre contracts abroad. Josef Jarno (1866–1932), born in Pest, was an actor and theatre professional. During a period of his acting career, he was an artist at the German-language Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Budapest (1877–1890), explaining his interest in following events in Hungarian theatre. Later, as the director of several theatres in Vienna (Theater an der Josefstadt and Stadttheater), Jarno supported Hungarian authors by providing a kind of host theatre for the first foreign premieres of Hungarian plays in the theatres under his leadership, and even played the lead role in some plays as an actor. We can also say that the Viennese theatre was somewhat part of Hungarian culture, complementing Hungarian institutions under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and as observed, even in the twenties.

#### *Four export plays in focus*

The history of Hungarian plays' presence on foreign stages can be the subject of thorough theatre history research, as evidenced by numerous studies on Hungarian plays appearing on American stages and in the film industry since the 1920s.<sup>27</sup> In this study, we delve into some of the highlights of the first two decades of the history of export plays, i.e., the foreign careers of four plays from the early period, bearing in mind the limitations of this structure, which does not allow us to fully explore the background of the foreign performances of the plays. Thus, Sándor Bródy's *The Schoolmistress*, Ferenc Molnár's *Liliom*, Ferenc Molnár's *The Guardsman*, and *The Dancer*, a play by Menyhért Lengyel are the focus of our study.

<sup>27</sup> See BÉCSY, „Sikerdarabok...”, 132–148.

Sándor Bródy's *The Schoolmistress* premiered on March 21, 1908, at the Vígszínház with a splendid cast.<sup>28</sup> The audience of Vígszínház warmly received *The Schoolmistress*, namely the rewritten version, as during the rehearsal process the theatre director suggested that the author change the ending of the play. A happy ending would ensure a more certain audience success: the protagonist, Flóra, the schoolmistress, would stay in the village and accept the marriage proposal of István Nagy, a wealthy and somewhat eccentric lover.<sup>29</sup> To meet the expectations of the theatre leadership, Bródy added a short scene to the text. This is the version that became fixed, and the first printed dramatic text appeared with this addition in 1908. After a successful season at the Vígszínház (the added part reached two hundred performances), the play, directed by Max Reinhardt, was presented on the stage of the Berliner Ensemble in 1909. In the beginning of this study we already discussed how Sándor Bródy and Max Reinhardt met in Budapest. Additionally, in 1905, Bródy visited Reinhardt in Berlin and found himself in a lively artistic circle: as friends of the director, he met Gerhart Hauptmann, Richard Strauss, and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal.<sup>30</sup> Bródy considered the attention and friendship of the German director a recognition that Hungarian playwrights could find a place in European theatre life. Following the successful premiere at the Vígszínház, Miksa Márton and Baron Lajos Hatvany proposed Bródy's play to Reinhardt; so successfully that he did not entrust the production to his collaborators but undertook to direct the play himself. On one condition: that the drama was to be performed with the original

<sup>28</sup> The play was performed with Irén Varsányi and Emil Fenyvesi in the lead roles.

<sup>29</sup> BARDI Ödön, *A régi Vígszínház* (Budapest: Táncsics Kiadó, 1957), 48.

<sup>30</sup> KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 67.



ending.<sup>31</sup> Although Bródy was bilingual (Hungarian and German), he did not undertake the translation of the play into German; this task fell to Miksa Ruttkay-Rothauser (Ruttkay György). The translation was successful, with an excellent cast, but the Hungarian village drama did not win the favour of the Berlin audience, and was only performed seven times.<sup>32</sup> Returning home, the author summarized the reason for the failure: "Imagine that despite my begging and threatening, Reinhardt refused to go into marriage, and we failed. Thoroughly."<sup>33</sup> Bródy's disappointment is understandable, and the failure of *The Schoolmistress* in Berlin serves as an instructive example for Hungarian playwrights: alternative directions must be pursued for foreign audience success. However, not long after the January Berlin premiere, and *The Schoolmistress* was back on stage, this time in Budapest. It became one of the plays for the upcoming German theatre guest performance, and the German-language version with the original ending was seen by the Budapest audience on May 29, 1909.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, within a year, the Vígszínház staged two different versions of Bródy's play: two productions and two endings. The play's history also includes numerous translations into other languages, but in its rewritten version; the original ending was not reconstructed until 1954. Nearly fifty years after the play had been written, it was presented at the Jókai Színház without a happy ending.

The premiere of Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom* took place on December 7, 1909, at the Vígszínház. The cast seemed promising, with Irén Varsányi and Gyula Hegedűs in the lead

roles.<sup>35</sup> However, success was not achieved. While reviews of the performances following the premiere varied, the fact that the play only survived 28 performances indicates that the Vígszínház audience was somewhat bewildered by the world presented on stage.<sup>36</sup> It is a sort of exotic journey; just as Menyhért Lengyel's *Typhoon* conjures a Japanese setting on the stage of the Vígszínház, this new Molnár play takes its audience on a journey to the world of the City Park funfair (Vurstli).<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, this thrill of the groves enchants the viewers, as does the intoxicating bacchanalia, as described by a critic from *Pesti Napló*, but on the other hand, the bustle, the body odour, the dust, and the loud, sweaty spin and twirl of maids and soldiers remain distant from the bourgeois audience.<sup>38</sup> Molnár finds it hard to bear the play's reluctant reception, its slow rejection, and its actual failure, and he compensates for his hurt with a great work ethic. And thus, a year later, the theatre's cast was preparing for a new Molnár premiere. On December 19, 1910, *The Guardsman* was presented under Molnár's direction. The play was a great success, comparable to *The Devil*, and indeed, the author, known for his vanity, could forget about the failure of *Liliom*. However, discarding the play was not necessary, because three years after its premiere at the Vígszínház, the Viennese audience particularly appreciated the story set in the world of the Vurstli. This was the audience of the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna, and the German-language premiere on 28 February 1913, with Josef Jarno in the title role, translated by Alfred Polgar, was indeed a

<sup>31</sup> In the original ending, Flóra, the schoolmistress, proudly rejects the marriage proposal and leaves the village.

<sup>32</sup> KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 67.

<sup>33</sup> BÁRDI, *A régi...*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 68.

<sup>35</sup> KÉRI Pál, „*Liliom, egy csirkefogó élete és halála*”, *Pesti Napló* 60, no. 290 (1909): 185–186.

<sup>36</sup> SEBESTYÉN Károly, „*Kessel: A művészet újdonsága*”, *Budapesti Hírlap* 29, no. 290 (1909): 228–229.

<sup>37</sup> K.Zs., „*Liliom a Vígszínházban*”, *Népszava* 37, no. 290 (1909): 95.

<sup>38</sup> KÉRI, „*Liliom...*”, 185.

great success with the audience.<sup>39</sup> The Vienna production not only rehabilitated the play, it also served as the first performance of the subsequent success story. Of course, the question arises as to the reason for the different reactions of the Vienna and Budapest audiences. The answer is presumably sought in the popular genre of *Volksstück* (folk play): this environment is indeed more familiar to the audience raised on Nestroy. The Austrian audience feels close to this theme, the characters, their spoken language, and this urban world is spiced with rogue romanticism, mischievousness, and sweetness.<sup>40</sup> After the foreign successes, it is not surprising that the Vígszínház also revived the Molnár play. In the 1918 production of *Liliom*, Irén Varsányi played Julika, and her partner as Liliom was no longer Gyula Hegedűs but Gyula Csontos. The play was a tremendous success, marking the beginning of an unstoppable triumph that would eventually lead to Broadway.<sup>41</sup>

The premiere of Ferenc Molnár's play *The Guardsman* took place on November 19, 1910, at the Vígszínház. The casting appeared excellent, with Irén Varsányi playing the female lead, the actress, as she had done well in previous Molnár plays, and her partner was Gyula Csontos. The drama was well-received by the audience: the presentation of the play was splendid, both in terms of the costume of the titular guardsman<sup>42</sup> and the stage setting of the second act. The stage was narrowed down to a large opera box; the stage was dimly lit, with red wallpaper, red velvet curtains, mirrors with golden frames, red plush pouffes, and chairs. On the opposite side, the opera audience could be seen,

and throughout the act, the music of *Madama Butterfly* played. *The Guardsman* was performed six times a week, quickly reaching its 50th performance, and thanks to the already existing international connections, it did not take long for the play to premiere in Vienna<sup>43</sup> and later in Berlin. In Vienna, under the direction of Josef Jarno, the play was staged at Deutsches Volks-theater on February 1, 1911. It is undeniable that Molnár's drama became a theatrical sensation, but the fact that the play's path in Vienna was accompanied by minor scandals also contributes to this. Julius Ludassy (Dr. Ludassy Gyula), the author of a one-act play entitled *Fidelity of Women*, which was staged in Leipzig in 1903, claimed after the Hungarian premiere that the theme, or the idea itself, belonged to him, and he accused the Hungarian writer of plagiarism.<sup>44</sup> The dispute was going on in the press, and although Molnár repeatedly stated that the accusations were baseless, the Austrian author remained adamant and wanted to prevent the Viennese premiere at all costs. Ludassy succeeded in having his play, *Fidelity of Women*, staged at the Josefstadter Theater before the premiere of *The Guardsman* (*A testőr*). The dispute ended with a reassuring outcome for Molnár, as the Viennese theatrical community did not find Ludassy's accusations well-founded. The play also achieved significant success in Berlin: the German audience was able to see *The Guardsman* on the stage of the Kleines Theater in the autumn of 1916, and it was not long before the play sold out a hundred and fifty times. Additionally, rehearsals for the play began in several locations, including St. Petersburg, with the premiere scheduled for the autumn season.

Menyhért Lengyel's passion for exotic themes was unquestionable for the audience of the Vígszínház, especially after the *Typhoon*, but the expectations were also high

<sup>39</sup> NAGY György, *Molnár Ferenc a világsiker útján* (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2001), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>41</sup> On 9 April 1945, the musical version of *Liliom* premiered under the title *Carousel*, and the play was performed 890 times. Ibid., 145.

<sup>42</sup> N.N., „Teljes gőzzel folynak a próbák...”, *Színházi Hét* 1, no. 1 (1910): 17.

<sup>43</sup> N.N., „A testőr”, *Világ* 2, no. 17 (1911): 452.

<sup>44</sup> N.N., „A testőr és az asszonyhűség”, *Világ* 2, no. 17 (1911): 452.



for the upcoming play by Lengyel. *The Dancer*, which was actually the major drama of the first wartime year, captivated the audience on Lipót Boulevard. The premiere, directed by Dániel Jób, took place on December 4, 1915, after six weeks of rehearsals.<sup>45</sup> The dress rehearsal, always special at the Vígszínház, left the audience in awe for hours: “they can hardly recover from the three hours of amazement and the breath-held silence”.<sup>46</sup> The preparations for the play were relatively long, partly because Irén Varsányi, who played the dancer, took dance lessons from Emilia Nirschy.<sup>47</sup> In the second act, the actress captivated the audience with her dance on a green, silky lawn: “a fairy-like phenomenon, hovering above the green threads”.<sup>48</sup> Exoticism characterises the entire play, both in the set design and the dancer’s costumes; white and yellow, translucent silk dresses and headpieces with an oriental charm. The play’s unique power lies in the fact that Menyhért Lengyel, understanding the audience, enveloped the world of the dancer with a kind of oriental enchantment, connecting artistic life with the desire for the unreachable. The author created a lush and sultry world on the Vígszínház stage. “The heroine of the play is the dancer. [...] A lush, subtropical plant, in whose shade we feel the whisper of the poisons of withering. [...] She is the priestess of the temple of Hetaira.”<sup>49</sup> Menyhért Lengyel leaves no doubt about the idol he followed in shaping the dancer’s character. In his autobiography, *The Book of My Life*, he recounts

<sup>45</sup> N.N., „Színház és művészet”, *Pesti Napló* 66, no. 335 (1915): 15.

<sup>46</sup> N.N., „A táncosnő”, *Színházi Élet* 5, no. 14 (1915): 35.

<sup>47</sup> Emília Nirschy (1899–1976), a ballet dancer and dance educator, prima ballerina at the Opera House between 1906 and 1920.

<sup>48</sup> N.N., „A táncosnő”, 35.

<sup>49</sup> N.N., „Színház...”, 15.

that Margherita Sylva,<sup>50</sup> a world-famous artist, inspired the story of the piece. She was a sad and beautiful singer who left the stage for a year for a romantic love affair, but her vocation made her break up and start her career again, lonely and with a death wish in her heart.<sup>51</sup> The author thus had an idea of how the character of *The Dancer* should be presented by the actress he considered best for the role, Irén Varsányi. Hence, Menyhért Lengyel’s remark in his memoir about Irén Varsányi seems surprising: “one of the best actresses of the contemporary Hungarian stage, though lacking the temperament and passion required for this role.”<sup>52</sup> Connected to this, it is worth seizing the secret of the play’s international career: Menyhért Lengyel believed that he had found the perfect and ideal dancer in Leopoldine Konstantin (1886–1965), an Austrian/German actress and ballerina. Thus, Ida Roland (1881–1951), the actress who had performed the lead role in the highly successful Vienna performances more than a hundred times, was replaced by Leopoldine Konstantin, whom Menyhért Lengyel had met in Berlin and who was a member of Max Reinhardt’s company. With Josef Jarno’s collaboration, Menyhért Lengyel staged *The Dancer* in 1916 at the Stadttheater, and as revealed in a 1928 interview with the actress, Leopoldine Konstantin played the titular role more than a thousand times in Vienna, Berlin, and Zurich. In Zurich, Lengyel’s play was staged by Theodor Danegger in 1918, and the author himself was actively involved in the rehearsal process.<sup>53</sup> It is undeniable that *The Dancer* is the defining moment of Leopoldine Konstantin’s career as an actress and, in fact, the basis of her popularity amongst both professionals

<sup>50</sup> Margherita Sylva (1875–1957), an opera singer, gained worldwide fame for her performance in the lead role in Bizet’s *Carmen*.

<sup>51</sup> LENGYEL Menyhért, *Életem könyve* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1987), 105.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

and the audience. It may also be presumed that this play and her acquaintance with the Hungarian author were the reasons why she built a close relationship with the Hungarian theatre creators. (Interestingly, her husband, Géza Herczeg, was also of Hungarian origin.) This means that she played roles in several Hungarian plays in Vienna, including Ferenc Molnár's *Carnival* or works by Dezső Szomory and Ferenc Herczeg, such as *Bella* or *The Blue Fox*,<sup>54</sup> where her name and acting skills guaranteed audience success. It can be stated that Leopoldine Konstantin became an iconic actress in Hungarian plays, beloved and well-known even among the Hungarian audience, playing several times in Budapest.<sup>55</sup> One of her guest appearances, in June 1923, performing *The Dancer* in front of the audience at the Vígszínház with her own company, Leopoldine in the role of Lola thoroughly impressed the Hungarian viewers, dominating the entire performance with her beauty, movements, and radiant passion.<sup>56</sup>

### Summary

Since the early decades of the 20th century, success and export plays have gained increasing significance in the Hungarian theatrical world, and as observed, they enjoyed great popularity among audiences on European stages as well. We have presented some important milestones in the international career of Hungarian export plays, from the Berlin premiere of *The Schoolmistress* in 1909 to the Zurich premiere of *The Dancer* in 1918. Obviously, Hungarian export plays may be the subject of further research, it

should nevertheless be noted that it is worth distinguishing between the plays staged in the first two decades of the century examined in this study and the theatre productions of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>57</sup> Distinguishing between plays that still have artistic or literary value and those that do not is critical. Starting in the twenties, as Tamás Bécsy notes in his study, the craft of playwriting became a means of livelihood for certain authors, and the dominant element in these comedies was indeed marketability and, therefore, audience entertainment. These plays were no longer published in print; they were written for one-time performances, and, while achieving success in Budapest was important, in many cases it only served as a springboard for international careers.<sup>58</sup>

The role of the successful plays of the first two decades is quite different; this is clearly outlined in the Hungarian theatrical structure. The nearly two decades of dramatic literature, starting with Sándor Bródy, provide the basis for the development of a modern theatre culture in Budapest. These plays created an audience, acclimated the public to theatre attendance, and made theatre a fashion and a value, an object of public attention. Authors such as Sándor Bródy, Dezső Szomory, Ferenc Molnár, Menyhért Lengyel, Ferenc Herczeg, and Andor Gábor are unquestionably key figures in Hungarian theatre history. Even though their works are rarely performed and known today (except *The Schoolmistress*), they are important components of the Hungarian drama oeuvre.

<sup>57</sup> See BÉCSY, „Sikerdarabok...”, 132–148.

<sup>58</sup> Some of the most well-known authors include György Ruttkay, Ernő Vajda (also known as Sydney Garrick), Imre Földes, Sándor Hunyady, László Lakatos, Béla Szenes, László Bús-Fekete, Kálmán Csathó, István Zágón, László Fodor, Lajos Bibó, Ernő Andai, Adorján Bónyi, Elemér Boross, Miklós Vitéz, Lajos Zilahy, János Bókay, János Vaszary and Gábor Vaszary. BÉCSY, „Sikerdarabok...”, 132.

<sup>54</sup> N.N., „Szívesen játszik-e magyar darabban – és miért? A legkiválóbb bécsi színésznők és színészek nyilatkoznak a Pesti Naplónak”, *Pesti Napló* 79, no. 291 (1928): 564.

<sup>55</sup> N.N., „Leopoldine Konstantin a Vígszínházban”, *Színházi Élet* 10, no. 24 (1923): 19.

<sup>56</sup> B.V., „Művészet, irodalom”, *Népszava* 51, no. 123 (1923): 15.

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## “In Rome, in Paris, / in Moscow, in Berlin, in London, and in Budapest”: Antal Németh and the European Theatre

DORKA POROGI

**Abstract:** In this paper, I outline Antal Németh’s career from the perspective of his international connections. Németh was the director-manager of the Hungarian National Theatre between 1935 and 1944. His whole career was significantly shaped by his interest in European theatre and his connections with the international theatrical scene. Renowned foreign directors and theatre influencers served as his role models in the 1920s and 1930s, and his academic performance in the international sphere contributed significantly to his directorial career in his homeland. Following World War II, during the era of state socialism in Hungary, he had to give up his leading position in Hungary’s cultural life. He lost some connections, and his ability to keep contact with the remaining ones was limited. Nonetheless, he maintained a deep interest in scholarly literature and Western theatrical influences.

Antal Németh, a theatre director, theatre theoretician, and former manager of the National Theatre in Budapest, arranged his written memories at the end of his life: his entire correspondence, notes, diaries, contracts, official documents, book plans, and autobiographies are all available for research at the National Széchényi Library. There is no doubt that Németh worked for posterity: here and there, he added comments and explanations in red on the margins of papers and the edges of envelopes.

In the following, primarily based on the papers, I outline Antal Németh’s career path from the perspective of his international connections. Although several books have been published on Németh recently, an institute was named after him, and efforts have been made to rehabilitate him, the academic study

of his actual theatrical oeuvre has not been carried out; it has barely even begun. The most significant work on Németh, *Set Design on Antal Németh’s Stage*, is by Mária István, who does not portray him as a solitary anti-naturalistic Hungarian director but as an artist who had connections with European stage designers of his time and was aware of stage design trends.<sup>1</sup> His collaborations with set designers are thus analysed from this perspective. In this paper, I also concentrate on international relations, highlighting how they shaped Antal Németh’s professional career as a director. Since his vast theatrical output is exceptionally well documented, I only aim to provide a general overview rather than delving into details, emphasising that throughout his entire career, from its inception to its conclusion, Antal Németh consistently measured his work against European standards, engaging with and relating to Europe’s perspectives and scale.

The two earliest biographies by Tamás Koltai<sup>2</sup> and Elek Selmeczi respectively,<sup>3</sup> both refer to a manuscript authored by Péter Mártonfi entitled *Dr. Antal Németh: An Outline of a Biography*.<sup>4</sup> However, this text is almost

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<sup>1</sup> ISTVÁN Mária, [\*Látványtervezés Németh Antal színpadán \(1929–1944\)\*](#), Művészettörténeti Füzetek (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1996), This work has an English summary.

<sup>2</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, „Az ismeretlen Németh Antal”, in NÉMETH Antal, *Új Színház! Tanulmányok*, ed. KOLTAI Tamás, 5–23 (Budapest: Múzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> SELMECZI Elek, *Németh Antal: A Magyar Színház Enciklopédistája* (Budapest: Országos Színház-történeti Múzeum és Intézet, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> MÁRTONFI Péter, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, (n.d.), OSZMI K Q11.124.

completely identical with Antal Németh's *Curriculum Vitae*, an autobiography written in the third person.<sup>5</sup> The latter appears to be an earlier version dating back to the mid-1940s. Antal Németh's father was called Márton Németh. 'Mártonfi' means 'son of Márton'. Therefore, it seems that Antal Németh's biography has persisted primarily through his own interpretation, that is, Németh authored his own biography.

### *Avant-garde*

The student Antal Németh became familiar with the arts through the reading of international avant-garde trends in Hungarian art activist journals, such as *A Tett* and *MA*. Németh was born into a working-class family in Budapest in 1903. After excelling in elementary school, at the request of his teacher, he was enrolled in a secondary school, where he was able to complete his studies owing to scholarships and private tutoring. According to his autobiography, at the age of fourteen, his favourite writer was Anatole France, and he studied Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He was not only a regular reader of *MA*, edited by the avant-garde poet and artist Lajos Kassák, but also frequented the editorial offices of the journal on Váci Street and later on Ferenciek Square. There he had many conversations with János Mácza, the group's theatre theorist, who later emigrated to Moscow.

Németh mentions three small episodes to illustrate that it was Lajos Kassák and his circle who made the greatest intellectual impact on him during WW1 and the ensuing years: 1) He was almost expelled from school after reciting Lajos Kassák's poem *Mesteremberek* (Artisans) in a Russian shirt in the assembly hall of the Tavaszmező Street Secondary School on May 1, 1919. 2) At a matinee performance where one of the invited artists to recite did not show up, the di-

rector János Mácza asked the young Németh, who was aspiring to be an actor at the time, to step in and recite the poem. 3) When pedestrians often laughed or were puzzled by contemporary works of art, linoleum prints, and sculptures displayed in the storefront of *MA*'s editorial office, some of those inside, such as Iván Hevesy or Németh, would go out into the street to engage in debates with them, persuading people of the legitimacy of the new artistic goals.

The influence of the avant-garde on Németh's later productions is evident in several ways. His attraction to the visual arts and media originates from here, as does his interest in stage technical innovations that enable an emphasised, expressive, and theatrical role for visuals and movement on stage. His theatrical work was marked by a demand for abstraction and the creation and use of stage spaces, following the principle that was first heralded in the early 20th century by the reforms of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig. Inspired by the avant-garde, Antal Németh's directorial profile can also be characterised by his efforts to achieve synthesis in the theatre arts and to reach large audiences. He aimed to introduce a cultural movement that conflicted with the traditions and aesthetics of bourgeois illusion theatre. In terms of aesthetics, as a contemporary of Artaud and Brecht but not under their influence, his interest in theatre went beyond Europe and extended to the Orient. In his 1929 doctoral dissertation, he refers to the Oriental theatre as a place where the purpose of the stage is not to create illusions and the task of the actors is not merely to depict humans.<sup>6</sup>

He was influenced by Craig, and he also considered the director a sovereign creative artist. This was the period in European theatre history when the first world-famous theatre directors emerged. Not only the narrow profession was familiar with the works of

<sup>5</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Curriculum Vitae” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/61.

<sup>6</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „A színjátszás esztétikájának vázlata”, in NÉMETH, *Új Színházat!...*, 151–205.

Max Reinhardt or Konstantin Stanislavski, but the wider public as well, through newspapers. At the time of his graduation from secondary school, Németh decided to focus on theatre direction instead of acting. Although he did not maintain personal and regular contact with the activists after the emigration of the MA group to Vienna, he continued to follow the work of the avant-garde artists. (For example, as a literary critic, he sent questionnaires to Béla Uitz, László Moholy Nagy, Lajos Tihanyi, and during his tenure as manager, he invited László Medgyes to work at the National Theatre).<sup>7</sup> However, as his interest gravitated more towards the theatre, he gradually distanced himself from the avant-garde milieu. Despite his wife, Piroska Peéry, regularly performing at Ödön Palasovszky's experimental theatrical evenings in 1928, Németh's opinion in 1931–1932, following two years of fellowships abroad, was devastating concerning the Hungarian avant-garde theatre group.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, his openness to new artistic currents, his constant desire for self-improvement, and the importance of knowledge gained through reading are linked to the MA circle in the early years of Németh. His need to have a broader perspective on the artistic life than the domestic palette originated from this circle. He was taught to regard and evaluate domestic theatrical achievements critically. János Máczá's categorical, strict critical style also shines through the young Németh's journal articles.

#### *Scholarships. Rome*

Németh began establishing his international relations in the late 1920s, primarily through his travels and secondarily, through professional correspondence. He began his studies at the university in Budapest just after World War I, during the post-Trianon era. This was

a time when Hungary's cultural and educational policies were relatively progressive due to Minister Kuno Klebelsberg's reform policies. Klebelsberg aimed to establish cultural superiority for Hungary among the nations, especially the neighbouring countries, after the lost war and subsequent financial crisis. His goal was to align Hungary with European academic trends. As part of this effort, scholarships and Hungarian cultural institutes were founded in foreign countries; for instance, the Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin, which supported talented Hungarian students studying there. Through the Collegium, Németh was awarded a one-year scholarship by the Hungarian state, which enabled him to live in Berlin and enrol at Humboldt University for the 1928–29 academic year. While writing his doctoral thesis (*An Outline of the Aesthetics of Performance*), he studied theatre history, theatre directing, and stage design.

The Theatre Studies Department of Humboldt University had been founded five years earlier, in 1923, by Max Herrmann, the founding father of theatre studies in Germany, whose writings were the most influential ones in the field. Hermann claimed that the separation of drama and performance was of utmost importance. Németh attended his classes as well as the lectures of art historian Oskar Fischel and mime researcher Hermann Reich. During the first term (until his death in December) Németh's tutor was Ferdinand Gregori, who was an actor, director, theoretician, and a professor of directing. According to Németh, Gregori was the first to apply the stylized stage, well before Reinhardt.<sup>9</sup> Németh learned the most from watching performances; he spent almost every night in the theatre. In his diary, he analysed every performance in a professional way,<sup>10</sup> and al-

<sup>7</sup> ISTVÁN, *Látványtervezés...*, 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi Napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/109. 2.

<sup>9</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „A rendezőnevelés és a színészképzés problémája”, in NÉMETH, *Új Színház!*..., 76–82, 80.

<sup>10</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Berlini napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/108. Géza Balogh published the events



so contributed theatre reviews and reports to the Hungarian journal *Napkelet* and other newspapers. He was particularly fond of the works of Alexis Granowsky, Alexander Tairov, and Leopold Jessner, but introduced the names of Leo Reuss, Heinz Hilpert, Erich Engel, Jürgen Fehling, Nikolai Evreinov to Hungarian readers, too. Though Max Reinhardt's very popular theatre and directing style did not impress him greatly, he certainly seized the opportunity to attend some of his rehearsals in June of 1929. "I've learned one thing: how to behave authoritatively without arrogance... without it, one cannot be a good director!" he summarises the lessons of these days in his diary.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Németh appreciated Jessner much more, as he saw in the works of Jessner that the style of directing is not some sort of personal brand, but it is always defined by the material; it is the drama serving as the basis for the performance that determines it.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Jessner's performances were entirely different from one another, although each one is stylized, and 'his strength lies in emphasising the rhythm of the performance, intensifying the intensity of expression beyond realism'.<sup>13</sup> In Granows-

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of the first part of the "Berlin Diary", considering it a "suddenly interrupted chronicle", although Németh continued the diary in another notebook until the end of the scholarship, June 1929. BALOGH Géza, „Németh Antal berlini naplója”, *Szcenárium* 6, no. 6 (2018): 7–33. See NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/109.

<sup>11</sup> NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, 45. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>12</sup> Németh calls this type of director "piece-player" or "play-player" and compares them to "character actors". NÉMETH Antal, „Két Shakespeare-rendezés a berlini Állami Schauspielhausban”, *Napkelet* 7, no. 11 (1929): 870–872.

<sup>13</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Jessner, Leopold”, in *Színházi Lexikon*, ed. NÉMETH Antal (Budapest: Győző Andor kiadása, 1930).

ky's productions, it was the mass movements and the interdisciplinary nature, collectivity, and playfulness of the performances that captivated him. He especially admired movement on Tairov's stage. Németh realised the importance of choreography as he watched Tairov's performances, acknowledging the defining role of space in the actors' movements and valuing the versatility of the ensemble as the Kamerny Theatre performed drama, operetta, pantomime, and comedy with equal skill. (In 1929, Németh was among the first in Hungary to describe contemporary Russian theatre art in the press.<sup>14</sup> He believed that most modern directors were among the Russians,<sup>15</sup> although Meyerhold appeared propagandistic and Stanislavski seemed naturalistic to him.<sup>16</sup>)

By the time Németh received his university scholarship, he could boast of having been abroad several times. In 1924, he travelled to Italy and made several visits to Vienna. He first encountered Tairov's book in a bookstore in Vienna, for instance, and two years later, he saw a performance there directed by Tairov for the first time. After the show, he sought him out and got to know him. In 1934, he was among the guests invited by Tairov to Moscow to celebrate the Kamerny Theatre's jubilee. However, he lacked sufficient funds for the trip, so he only sent his paper on *The Tragedy of Man* to the Russian director.<sup>17</sup>

Wherever he went—for example, in the autumn of 1927 on his journey through Amsterdam–Haarlem–Hague–Rotterdam—he went to the theatre, if possible. At the same time, travel logs and albums testify that his

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<sup>14</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Alkotó rendezők 1.”, *Délmagyarország*, 1929. júl. 28., 10.

<sup>15</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi lexikon”, in *Uj Lexikon*, ed. DORMÁNDY László and JUHÁSZ Vilmos (Budapest: Dante–Pantheon, 1936), 3563.

<sup>16</sup> NÉMETH, „Alkotó rendezők 1.”, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence between Alexander Tairov and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/3018 and 63/4259.

interest in classical music or art history was also significant. He was a great admirer of technological development, and film art occupied him almost as much as theatre. In Cologne, where he spent only a few hours, he went to the cinema and saw Eisenstein's film entitled *Strike*. In Rotterdam, he toured the town in an aeroplane. When Clarence Chamberlin (who held the endurance world record in transatlantic flight crossings) landed in Berlin in the summer of 1927, he kept a single flower from Chamberlin's car as a souvenir.

In addition to travels, another way of building international relationships was through collaborative theoretical work conducted from afar: in 1928, Németh was editing the *Lexicon of Acting*. The goal of this lexicon was to comprehensively summarise knowledge about theatrical arts—not only strictly about the theatre but also about dance or the circus. Foreign experts wrote the articles on international subjects. Németh had many Hungarian experts, from Sándor Hevesi to Antal Szerb, working on the lexicon. By that time, Németh, who appeared in public for the first time as a journalist, has already been already in contact with the entire Hungarian theatre industry, and he was able to mobilise them.<sup>18</sup> The importance of the lexicon, as later evaluators see it, lies in its “broad perspective in time and space, proportional treatment of practice and theory,” and its “astonishing topicality”: it discusses the latest contemporary global theatre events and breaks them down into performances and roles.<sup>19</sup> It reports, for example, on the leading actors of the Latvian or Lithuanian national theatres of the time, discuss-

es the history of theatre in Portugal, Romania, or the USA, and reflects on productions from 1928 or 1929. The list of foreign collaborators of the lexicon are Disher Willson (London), Edmund Erkes (Leipzig), Mario Ferrigni (critic and playwright, lawyer, son of Coccoluto-Ferrini, an Italian playwright; from Milan), René Fülöp-Miller (Vienna), Joseph Gregor (the head of the theatrical history collection at the Vienna National Library; he was the one who helped Németh begin networking), Franz Hadamowsky (Vienna), H. Jelinek (Prague), S. Jugović (Belgrade), Hjalmar Krag (Oslo), Marja Los (Berlin), Albert Maybon (orientalist, Japanese-French translator; from St. Cloud), Paul Alfred Merbach (theatre scholar and director, head of the science department of the Magdeburg Theatre Exhibition; from Berlin), Robert Nendham (Copenhagen), Franz Rapp (director of the Theatre Museum in Munich), Georges Reymond (Geneva), Wilhelm Treichlinger (theatre director of the Deutsches Theater, Berlin), and Otakar Zich (composer and aesthetician, Prague). Németh's authored editorial preface to the *Lexicon of Acting* makes it clear that the lexicon was intended for the “audience of Europe,” as a similar work had only appeared in the German language a hundred years earlier.<sup>20</sup> However, the work is still waiting to be translated into any other language to this day.

During the visits back home, Németh made diary entries in Budapest: “Directing: the usual: nothing!”, he declared after a new premiere at the National Theatre.<sup>21</sup> There was no theatre director in Hungary whom he admired or would like to follow. He was deeply dissatisfied with Hungarian productions. (He himself had directed only one production till then: in the spring of 1928, he

<sup>18</sup> SZÉKELY György, „A hetvenéves kutatómunka önmagában is egyedülálló a színháztudományban: Székely György portréja, 4. rész”, interview by Tamás GAJDÓ, *Parallel*, no 24 (2012): 12–19, 15.

<sup>19</sup> LENKEI Júlia, „A »theatrális művészetek egyeteme«: Adalékok, érdekességek, műhelytitkok Németh Antal Színészeti Lexikona körül”, *Critikai Lapok* 24, no. 7–8 (2015): 17–23.

<sup>20</sup> NÉMETH Antal, ed., *Színészeti Lexikon*, 1: [2.]. The *Allgemeines Theaterlexikon* of Hermann Margraff és Carl Herlossohn was published between 1839–1842.

<sup>21</sup> NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, on 5th April 1929, 7.

staged Strindberg's play *Easter* in Nyíregyháza.) In the spring of 1929, a letter arrives at his Berlin address informing him that in the following season he could work as the chief director at the Szeged City Theatre.<sup>22</sup> Here, over the next two years, he got the chance to put himself to the test by directing a total of 50 productions. Meanwhile, he taught set design at Álmos Jaschik's private school. With his supervision and guidance, students designed sets that later supplied the material for a theatre stage exhibition on November 16, 1929, at the city's cultural palace—the second such event in Hungary.<sup>23</sup> He spent two seasons in Szeged as a director. After the first season, he unsuccessfully applied for the manager's position. For political and economic reasons at the end of the second season, the city's supervision and support of Szeged's theatre, along with Németh's directorship, come to an end. At that point, he won another fellowship in the 1931–32 academic year, this time for Opera Direction and Theatre Studies, with stops in Vienna, Munich, Cologne, and Paris. He was allowed to attend university lectures without enrolling in Munich or Cologne. He also spent one month in Vienna (autumn) and one in Paris (spring), observing cultural developments in the theatre. This time he travelled as a theatre director, not as a writer, which is a difference: he obtains permission, for example, in Vienna at the Burgtheater to watch performances from behind the scenes, thus studying the operation of stage machinery.<sup>24</sup>

During this second fellowship period, he not only wished to learn and be inspired, but he also consciously tries to build his directing

career. Since he did not receive opportunities for directing in Hungary, he looked for opportunities abroad. In 1932, when the 100th anniversary of Goethe's death was celebrated by the Weimar Republic, Németh organised a theatre exhibition in the Munich Theatre Museum, based on his directorial-scenic concepts for Goethe's dramas. This included set designs and stage models that, according to his instructions, students of the Jaschik school prepare. "A few similar publications and a few exhibitions, and Europe will know us", he wrote optimistically to Jaschik in the spring of 1932.<sup>25</sup> The Goethe exhibition in Munich was invited to Berlin by the board of state theatres, then to Cologne by Carl Niessen, professor at the University Institute of Theatre Studies in Cologne. (Niessen is one of the theatre scholars with whom Németh later remained in contact and correspondence.) From Cologne, the exhibition moved on to Breslau, where it was supplemented with eight Hauptmann dramas that had well-developed directorial concepts. During this period, Németh directed an occasional charity event in Munich, gave two scientific lectures at the Theatre Institute on Hungarian theatre, and published a study on Goethe in German.<sup>26</sup> After such precedents, the German consul, László Velics, was already well acquainted with him. Németh presented a directorial concept for the Munich staging of Imre Madách's drama *The Tragedy of Man* to Velics. During months of extensive correspondence, he and his designer friend, Álmos Jaschik, worked on detailed visual plans for the stage performance of the play at the Prince Regent Theatre (Prinzregentheater). Moreover, Németh commissioned accompanying music for the

<sup>22</sup> BALOGH Géza, *Németh Antal színháza: Éle-tút és pályakép történelmi keretben* (Budapest: Nemzeti Színház, 2015), 11.

<sup>23</sup> The first Theatre Arts Exhibition in Hungary was organised by the Hungarian Association of Applied Arts in Budapest. The opening was on 30th May 1925.

<sup>24</sup> NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Antal Németh to Álmos Jaschik on the 17th of April 1932. OSZK K 63/3815.

<sup>26</sup> ANTON NÉMETH, *Goethe und der moderne Bühne*, vol. 3, Vortrage- Und Veröffentlichungen Der Deutsch-Ungarischen Gesellschaft 5 (München: Südost-Verlag Adolf Dresler, 1932).



production. Although Velics supported them, the plans for the performance experienced ongoing delays and ultimately did not materialize. In Paris, alongside his friend Géza Blattner, Németh visited Lipót Molnos, the manager of the Hungarian Institute, and negotiated with him about a possible Parisian premiere. They agree that the existing translation was not acceptable, and as a first step, a new French text must be prepared.

After his return to Budapest, Németh did not let go of the idea: he reviewed his concept and attempted to have Madách's play performed at either the Royal Opera in Rome or on the outdoor stage in Verona. A new Italian translation was prepared specifically for the stage performance; Antonio Widmar, the press attaché of the Budapest Italian Embassy, did the job. The set designer for this potential production was János Horváth, a young Hungarian designer on a scholarship in Rome at the time, and the re-composed music was handled by Ferenc Farkas, a young Hungarian composer also studying under Otto Respighi in Rome at the time. Németh travelled to Rome, where, with his colleagues, he developed two concepts: one for the Roman stage and one for the Verona stage. However, the performance—allegedly approved even by Mussolini<sup>27</sup>—at the last moment did not materialise there either. Nevertheless, the completed translation was published in Italian in Milan.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1930s, the Italian theatre was in crisis, and increased state intervention was seen as a solution. In 1934, the Royal Italian Academy (Reale Accademia d'Italia) organ-

ised an international scientific congress to explore the changing role of theatre in modern mass society, addressing the roles of theatre and culture, and the relationship between theatre and politics. Mussolini proposed the theme and closely followed the preparations. Renowned theatre experts were invited to the conference, including G.B. Shaw, Edward Gordon Craig, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gerhart Hauptmann, Paul Claudel, Jules Romain, W.B. Yeats, Stefan Zweig, Maxim Gorky, Franz Werfel, André Antoine, Jacques Copeau, Konstantin Stanislavskij, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Tairov, Mejerhold, Garcia Lorca, and the architect Gropius.<sup>29</sup> Pirandello served as the president of the conference, and Marinetti as the secretary. From the Italian side, Bontempelli and Romagnoli participated, along with Pirandello's "assistant", Silvio D'Amico.<sup>30</sup> From Hungary, Ferenc Herczeg, Ferenc Molnár, and Antal Németh were invited. Herczeg and Molnár were popular playwrights abroad, while Németh was not well-known even in Hungary at that time. However, Antonio Widmar, the Italian translator of *The Tragedy of Man*, had alerted his friend, the cultural politician Arturo Marpicat, which resulted in Németh receiving an invitation.<sup>31</sup>

Németh delivered three presentations at the "Volta" congress, two in Italian and one in German, on the following subjects: the role of theatre and the state, the situation of

<sup>27</sup> Ilona Fried cites from the letter of Antonio Widmar to Arturo Marpicat. FRIED Ilona, *Őexcellenciája kívánságára: Színház, kultúra és politika a fasizmus Olaszországában* (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2016), 186.

<sup>28</sup> Imre MADÁCH, *La tragedia dell'uomo*, trans. Antonio WIDMAR, La Stampa Moderna (Milano: S.A. Editrice Genio, 1936).

<sup>29</sup> Craig, Yeats, Tairov and 49 more people attended the conference, but almost two-thirds of the invited guests cancelled their participation. See FRIED, *Őexcellenciája kívánságára...*, 119–197.

<sup>30</sup> D'Amico later became the head of the Academy of Performing Arts, *Scenario* magazine's editor-in-chief, and stayed in contact with Németh: they exchanged letters, and D'Amico visited Budapest, writing about National Theatre performances. See the correspondence between Silvio D'Amico and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/860 and 63/3611.

<sup>31</sup> FRIED, *Őexcellenciája kívánságára...*, 186.

Hungarian theatres, and his views on radio, film, and theatre.<sup>32</sup> It is worth mentioning that at the conference, Németh was practically the only speaker who praised the possible role of radio and film without reservations, and did not fear their impact on theatre.<sup>33</sup> During this conference, he became acquainted with delegates from neighbouring countries and began collaborating with them. His plan, which received immediate support from the top manager of Bucharest theatres, the manager-director and set designer of the Prague National Theatre, the manager of the Athens National Theatre, and a dispatched Yugoslav playwright, was for theatre companies to visit each other during a three-day guest performance framework. On the first day, each company would perform the same play, such as *Hamlet*. On the second day, each company would present a classic play from their own country (for example, the Hungarians would perform *Csongor and Tünde*), and on the third day, each company would showcase a play from the country where they were currently guest performing (Greek, Romanian, Czech, etc.). However, upon his return, he had to abandon this idea as 'according to the guidelines of Hungarian foreign policy, the plan was untimely.'<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, thanks to his participation in the Rome congress, Hungarian cultural policy took notice of Antal Németh.

### *At the Hungarian National Theatre*

"If we can arrange the conditions of the work, et cetera, to our mutual satisfaction, I personally would be most willing to accept your proposal," Gordon Craig wrote on June 19<sup>th</sup> to Antal Németh.<sup>35</sup> Németh had been appointed to be the manager of the Budapest National Theatre only 19 days earlier. It seems that immediately after his appointment, one of his first tasks was to write to Craig, whom he had met in Rome. In his response, Craig mentions that he no longer designs sets but would make an exception for Németh. The context of the letters revolved around the stage direction for *Oedipus*. Craig wished to visit the theatre before preparing the designs and focused particularly on the technical equipment, especially the lighting.

Antal Németh's appointment as manager was sudden and quite unexpected. His appointment was marked as one of the "greatest scandals" in 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian theatre history,<sup>36</sup> a "revolution within an essentially conservative institution, induced by government action."<sup>37</sup> In 1935, the strongly right-wing Gömbös government's Minister of Culture, Bálint Hóman, allowed Németh (who was definitely more inclined towards left-wing views in the artistic and aesthetic realm) complete freedom as manager, and he would transform the National Theatre into an entirely new artistic venue. The minister terminated the contracts of most company members and renewed only those with whom Németh truly intended to work. Within a day, Németh secured the top talents

<sup>32</sup> The three presentations titled "Cultura teatrale, scienza teatrale e Stato"; "Rapporte sui teatro di Stato in Ungheria" and "Theater, Film und Radio" were published in the conference volume: Reale Accademia d'Italia, ed., *Convegno di lettere. Il teatro drammatico: Roma, 8–14 ottobre 1934. Atti del convegno* (Roma: Fondazione A. Volta, 1934) according to Németh's notes (OSZK K 63/60).

<sup>33</sup> FRIED, *Őexcellenciája kívánságára...*, 211.

<sup>34</sup> MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Letters from Edward Gordon Craig to Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/1228.

<sup>36</sup> JÁKFALVI Magdolna, „Changes: The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Hungary”, *Theatron* 16, no. 4 (2022): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2022.4.3>.

<sup>37</sup> SCHÖPFLIN Aladár, „A színházi évad és a Nemzeti Színház kérdőjele”, *Nyugat* 28, no. 7 (1935): 59–62, 61.

from Budapest's private theatres. He also received the opportunity and funds to upgrade the theatre's equipment. In the summer of 1935, the National Theatre was renovated inside and out. They made technical improvements, introduced alternating current, and installed transformers. The theatre acquired its own warehouse building and workshop spaces. They also purchased state-of-the-art stage technology equipment: projectors, centrally controlled auditorium spotlights, and sound amplification devices. Although Gordon Craig never came to work in Budapest, Németh did everything possible to upgrade the theatre's stage technology (especially the lighting technology), which matched or even surpassed those of the prominent European stages.<sup>38</sup>

Németh's role as the manager of the National Theatre can be analysed within the context of international cultural relations from two perspectives: firstly, the "marketing" of Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* can be viewed as the export of a cultural commodity initiated from the authoritative position of Hungary's leading theatre manager (since we have seen Németh's early support for translating and producing the *Tragedy* quite early in his career); secondly, closely related to this initiative, is the intention to introduce various countries' drama and theatrical cultures to the Budapest audience, with a special emphasis on introducing the drama of smaller European nations. Between 1935 and 1944, the Budapest National Theatre staged four Finnish, three Danish, two Swiss, two Austrian, one Estonian, one Bulgarian, one Yugoslavian, and one Polish play.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> During the 1936 theatre world congress, for example, when the Deutsches Volkstheater in Vienna staged *The Ronins' Treasure*, backgrounds had to be painted for the stage, since the projection technology was not available for the show.

<sup>39</sup> N. MANDL Erika, „Színház és metapolitika”, in *Társadalomtudományi gondolatok a harminadik évezred elején*, ed. KARLOVITZ János Ti-

After World War II, Németh was accused of fascism by one of the validation committees tasked with examining the conduct of Hungarian citizens during the Horthy era.<sup>40</sup> Németh's successful and active involvement in Hungarian-German cultural relations provided a piece of evidence against him. He had directed performances in Germany and had been honoured with the German Order of the Eagle for his merits. Németh defended himself by stating that he never wore the Order of the Eagle, and, as a state theatre, he was obliged by the government to invite German guest theatre managers. While he directed in Germany, through his productions of *The Tragedy of Man* and his entire oeuvre, he aimed solely to familiarise international audiences with Hungarian culture and establish it abroad. In his autobiography, he claimed that he had negotiated the staging of Hungarian classics abroad in exchange for performing German classics (which would have been performed at the National Theatre anyway).<sup>41</sup> He also drew attention to the fact that the National Socialist German cultural policy regarded Hungarian culture as part of German culture:

“Following the advance of Nazism in Germany, the Stuttgart »Auslandsdeutschum« began vigorous agitation

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bor, 241–247 (Komárno: International Research Institute, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Németh appeared before multiple validation committees. The first one verified him in December 1945. However, a report was filed against him, leading to another committee conducting the proceedings, resulting in a job loss verdict. He appealed against the decision, and in the summer of 1947, the court annulled the validation committee's ruling. However, following this, Németh couldn't secure a job anywhere, and it was only after 1956 that he managed to obtain a theatre contract again.

<sup>41</sup> MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 51–54.



to increase public awareness about Southeast Europe belonging to Germany's living space not only economically but also culturally. They claimed that the entire Hungarian culture had German origins. One evening, during the German Minister of the Interior, Frick's, visit to Budapest in the summer of 1938 or 1939, he went to the open-air theatre on Margaret Island, where they were performing the legend of Saint Margaret. The German minister seemed to be surprised, and after listening to a few sentences he asked, 'In what language are the actors performing?' He was astonished when they explained to him that it was Hungarian, because he thought in Hungary everybody spoke German."<sup>42</sup>

Németh saw himself as consistently resisting Nazi propaganda through legally possible means. He used the theatre's programme as the primary evidence for this. Indeed, between 1938 and 1944 the right-wing press continuously attacked Németh. Disputes arose with the right-wing Theatre and Film Arts Chamber, and in the summer of 1944, he was removed from the head of the theatre. During the certification process after World War II, Lipót Molnos (the former director of the Hungarian Institute in Paris) and Artur Saturnus, a Swiss journalist, testified in Németh's favour.<sup>43</sup> They emphasised that Németh advocated equally for the French and Swiss premieres of *The Tragedy of Man* (although the latter actually came to fruition in Bern) as he did for the German performances. The Danish playwright Jen Lochers also endorsed Antal Németh.<sup>44</sup> Locher's

play, *The Revolt of the Parents*, along with two other Danish plays, was performed at the National Theatre. Adorján Divéky, a private lecturer at the University of Warsaw, acknowledged that Németh took the initial steps in theatre relations by translating and ceremoniously presenting Krasiński's dramatic poem *The Undivined Comedy* (*Nieboska Komedia*, in Hungarian: *Pokoli színjáték*) on November 11, 1936.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Németh hosted the manager of Teatr Polski in Budapest, and then travelled to Warsaw to negotiate *The Tragedy of Man*'s performance. László Bényi, the painter and journalist, emphasised Németh's role in the creation of Slovenian and Serbian translations of *The Tragedy of Man* and highlighted his participation in the 150th anniversary of Slovenian theatre and the performance of Milan Begović's play *Who is the Third?* in Budapest.<sup>46</sup>

Németh's legacy contains only one letter from Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki, though two of her plays (*The Women of Niskavuori* and *The Bread of Niskavuori*) were staged in Budapest in 1941 and 1942.<sup>47</sup> The letter is dated a few years earlier and contains an invitation to Marlebeck, Wuolijoki's estate, which Németh visited in the summer of 1938, securing the rights to her plays. Wuolijoki, an Estonian-born millionaire who was later imprisoned due to her Soviet connections and eventually became a member of the Finnish Parliament, had connections with Brecht and Gorky and maintained a left-winged literary salon. In his autobiography, Németh mentions that the Finnish Writers' Association and later the Hungarian Ministry of Culture attempted to put pressure on him to select another Finnish play.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the National Theatre also premiered Jaerviluoma's drama *Northlanders*, but

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>43</sup> MOLNOS Lipót, „Statement”, in *Németh Antal igazolásai, 1945–1947. Forráskiadvány*, ed. POROGI Dorka, Theatron Könyvek (Budapest: Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2023), 180.; SATERNUS, „Statement”, 166–167.

<sup>44</sup> LOCHERS, „[Statement]”, 192.

<sup>45</sup> DIVÉKY, „Statement”, 191.

<sup>46</sup> BÉNYI, „[Statement]”, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Hella Wuolijoki to Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/3332.

<sup>48</sup> MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 27–28.

Németh insisted on staging the two plays by Wuolijoki.

Németh's correspondence confirms that he sought to maintain cultural ties not only with the Nazi Third Reich, but he also aimed for the same elsewhere. Among his five foreign productions, three were stagings of *The Tragedy of Man*: in Hamburg (1937), in Frankfurt (1940), and in Bern (1943). In the early 1940s, he seriously negotiated for premieres in Paris and Sweden, which were thwarted by the war and the subsequent political situation in Hungary.<sup>49</sup> According to László Szűcs, the dramaturge of the National Theatre, negotiations with Americans were also ongoing.<sup>50</sup>

During the period when Németh was manager of the National Theatre, several German directors came to Budapest to stage Schiller's and Goethe's dramas. Some newspapers at the time lamented the absence of Hungarian directors working in the National Theatre; foreign directors had been a rarity.<sup>51</sup> Each of the foreign directors staged a play from their own national literature. These productions were all classics: the revival of *Mary Stuart* in 1935 was entrusted to Hermann Röbbeling, the director of the Vienna Burgtheater (and also the director of *The Tragedy of Man* in 1934); in April 1937, the theatre presented *Faust*, directed by Kari Wüstenhagen, the superintendent of the Hamburg Staatliches Schauspielhaus; and Hans Meissner, the superintendent in Frank-

furt, directed *William Tell* at the Margaret Island Open-Air Theatre in the summer of 1940. He directed again at the National Theatre two years later, presenting *Don Carlos* in November 1942. Additionally, Heinrich George staged *Intrigue and Love* in April 1942. Furthermore, the Budapest National Theatre participated in theatrical exhibitions and tours in Vienna,<sup>52</sup> Frankfurt, and Berlin during Németh's time as a manager.

The theatre's stage designers participated in the 1937 World's Fair in Paris with their designs, and one of them, Mátyás Varga, won a silver medal for the set of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, directed by Németh. The National Theatre celebrated its centenary in 1937. *The London Observer* gave coverage of this event, and a special issue in the *Theater der Welt* was published.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Cold War times*

It seems that Németh began writing his autobiography during the validation committee proceedings, approximately between 1945 and 1947. This is indicated by the text of his *Curriculum Vitae*, in which he still hoped for a Swedish production of *The Trag-*

<sup>49</sup> The set designs for the Paris premiere were ready; they were made by Ernst Klaus, a French designer, who lived in Budapest in illegality.

<sup>50</sup> SZÜCS László, „Witness Testimony in the case of authentication of Dr. Antal Németh, former director of the National Theatre”, in POROGI, ed., *Németh Antal igazolásai...*, 106–108, 107.

<sup>51</sup> In the late twenties, newspapers couldn't stop talking about Martin Karlheinz and Alex Stein (from Vilnius) working as directors at a private theatre: the Magyar Theatre.

<sup>52</sup> The Hungarian National Theatre was on tour to Vienna in 1892 for the last time. Silvio D'Amico, the Italian theatre scholar, reported on the guest performance of the Budapest National Theatre in Vienna in the magazine *Scenario*. See the correspondence between Silvio D'Amico and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/860 and 63/3611.

<sup>53</sup> *Theater der Welt* was edited by Carl Nissen and published in Amsterdam, the “Un-garische Nummer” was released in October 1937. *The Observer* published an article about the National Theatre of Budapest on September 12, 1937. HANKISSNÉ HARASZTI Jolán, „A Nemzeti Színház és a külföld”, in *A százéves Nemzeti Színház: Az 1937/38-as centenáriumi év emlékalbuma* (Budapest: Pallas, 1938), 145, 148.

*edy of Man*,<sup>54</sup> and the fact that the writing is cut short before the proceedings of 1946–47. In the later version by Mártonfi, he continues with the story of the validation committees and mentions his intention to describe the following ten years, but ultimately does not do so.<sup>55</sup>

Németh's trip to Sweden was arranged by one of his students, Gabriella Margalit, who was on a fellowship to Stockholm at the time.<sup>56</sup> She wrote her testimony in support of Németh during this period, explaining that in the winter of 1944, the National Academy for Theatre Management and Direction, led by Németh Antal, was the only school in Budapest where students' documents of origin were not required.<sup>57</sup> Margalit contacted Agne Beier, the director of the Drottningholm Theatre History Museum, with whom Németh became acquainted in Rome, along with writer Siegfried Siewertzen and Prince Wilhelm of Sweden. In the spring of 1947, the secretary of the Swedish Institute visited Budapest and presented the Swedish government's proposal to the Hungarian Ministry of Culture.<sup>58</sup> The essence of the proposal was that the Swedish Royal

Academy (and other organisations) would host 10–15 Hungarian scientists, writers, or artists for 1–3 years to help them recuperate from the hardships of war and regain their creative spirit in suitable working conditions (research institutes, laboratories, etc.). The Hungarian Ministry of Culture accepted the proposal but disagreed with the Swedes on the selection of individuals. Despite the Swedish delegate offering the Hungarian government to create their own list alongside theirs and ensuring that the same hospitality would be provided to all the delegates from Hungary, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture insisted on modifying the Swedish list. Consequently, Németh's name was removed from it.

According to the plan, Németh would have spent three years in Sweden, primarily engaging in scholarly work (he had begun writing a monograph titled *Scandinavian Drama in Hungary*) but also directing a theatrical performance each year. Gustav Hilleström, a colleague from the Drottningholm Institute, personally invited him, but Németh could not leave Hungary as he did not receive a passport from the authorities. Németh's interest in Swedish culture had deep roots: he began learning the language at university and was familiar with Selma Lagerlöf's and Prince William's works; he had previously adapted radio plays from both of their writings. When he was allowed to travel abroad for the first time in the 1960s, he was still contemplating a work trip to Sweden to reconnect with his old contacts.

Another destination he aimed to reach was England. The final phase of Németh's career in directing began after 1956, when, after a ten-year silence, he was appointed chief director in theatres of Hungarian cities: Kaposvár, Kecskemét, and Pécs. These few years in his later career were documented as meticulously as the works from his youth. Despite ten years of unemployment, nearing sixty, and fully aware that there was practically no chance for a real career or future in the theatrical life of Hungary (even the chief

<sup>54</sup> NÉMETH, „Curriculum Vitae”, 41–42; MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 56.

<sup>55</sup> MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Margalit studied at the National Academy for Theatre Management and Direction's directing course in 1944 while volunteering alongside Raoul Wallenberg. After the war, she travelled to Stockholm on a theatre history fellowship settled there. Later, she married Torsten Kassius, a Swedish writer and literary historian.

<sup>57</sup> MARGALIT Gabriella, “[Statement]”, 18th February 1947, in POROGI, ed., *Németh Antal igazolásai...*, 163–164.

<sup>58</sup> Antal Németh's notes on Scandinavian drama (OSZK K 63/334) and his planned study trip (OSZK K 63/34). All the following information about the trip is from here.

director positions had extremely stringent requirements in his case), the surviving documents attest that he worked with nearly the same ambition as before. Although, due to the policies of state socialism in Hungary, he practically, could not leave the country. He tried to minimise its impact. In the 1950s, while learning Russian, he also studied Shakespeare extensively, followed English theatre culture, and read professional literature. In the years when there was no hope of directing in the theatre, he started a work about the Shakespeare cult in Hungary. In his legacy, he has six boxes of notes solely on Shakespeare. Although he did not have access to John Houseman and Jack Landau's 1959 work, *The American Shakespeare Festival*, he had someone prepare extracts from the book; the descriptions can be found in his papers, as well as notes from C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, among others.<sup>59</sup>

In 1955, he wrote a letter to Herbert Marshall, a writer-editor, who had included an image from the set design of Németh's first *Hamlet* production in his book *Hamlet Through the Ages*.<sup>60</sup> In the letter, he informs Marshall about his further interpretations (how he reconsidered *Hamlet* later) and requests audio recordings. He already had Moissi's "To be or not to be" and John Barrymore's "Hecuba" monologues in his possession but made inquiries about obtaining Forbes Robertson, Ben Greet, Henry Ainley, and Maurice Evans recordings, including the 1913 film version of the play. He could not get hold of recordings of Gielgud's and Laurence Olivier's monologues, but in the letter, he states that this time, he would try to arrange the purchase through the Dramatic Division of the Hungarian Cultural Institute. Also, in the spring of 1955, he contacted Nicoll, the editor of *Shakespeare Survey*, and asked for the book *New Hamlet* because he

was developing a new concept for *Hamlet* on paper, related to his work on the Shakespeare cult in Hungary.<sup>61</sup> The *Survey*'s secretary replied and requested a report from Németh about Shakespearean activities in Hungary. The relationship continued: in 1959, the *Shakespeare Survey* discussed Németh's *Othello* production in Kecskemét two years prior, and in 1961, his *Macbeth* production in Pécs from the previous year was mentioned in the *International Notes* section.<sup>62</sup> Németh sent photos of his performances, aiming for international recognition. The English-language *Theatre World* covered Németh's 1957 *Othello* performance extensively, describing the Hungarian theatre and crediting Németh's leadership in the Kecskemét theatre for the staging of the performance.<sup>63</sup> In connection with *Othello*, Németh gave an English-language radio interview and outlined a six-year plan for himself. For the Shakespeare anniversary in 1964, he planned to stage six Shakespearean plays, concluding with *The Tempest*, after which he intended to retire from stage directing.<sup>64</sup> Only a part of these plans material-

<sup>61</sup> Antal Németh's letter to Allardyce Nicoll on the 25th of March 1955. OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/4.

<sup>62</sup> Allardyce NICOLL, „International notes”, ed. Allardyce NICOLL, *Shakespeare Survey* 12 (2 January 1959): 109–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521064252.014>; Allardyce NICOLL, „International notes”, ed. Allardyce NICOLL, *Shakespeare Survey*, 2 January 1961, 116–125, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521064279.013>.

<sup>63</sup> Ossia TRILLING, „Hungarian Theatre Today”, *Theatre World, Le Theatre Dans Le Monde* 54, no. 398 (1958): 36–39, 45.

<sup>64</sup> “This performance of *The Moor of Venice* at Kecskemét tonight has been the first step on a new road in my theatrical work. This road had been indicated to me once by my paternal friend, Gordon Craig, as it was in accordance with my endeavours concerning theatrical aesthetics. His photograph in my study

<sup>59</sup> OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/3 and Fond 6/6/19.

<sup>60</sup> Antal Németh's letter to Herbert Marshall on the 31st of March 1955. OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/4.



ised; he directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and once again, and finally, *Othello*. This was the same year when Laurence Olivier performed the drama's title role at London's Old Vic. Naturally, Németh could not witness this performance, but the programme booklet can be found among his documents.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

Antal Németh's career was significantly shaped by his interest in European theatre and his connections with the international theatrical scene. Renowned foreign directors and theatre influencers served as his role models, and his academic performance in the international sphere contributed signifi-

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at Budapest, dedicated to me a quarter of a century ago, has never been a mere action of formality to me: it meant animation to realize myself on the stage in the mask of enlivening the plays I had to give reality to. I think I succeeded in taking off this mask and enlivening Shakespeare with complete subjectivism. I needed ten years of quietness, meditation to make – thorough the language of modern theatre and by help and benevolence of Shakespeare – this master-piece of my own lyrical revelation. Of course, this does not intend to make any distortion against the genius of Shakespeare, only to live through the spirit of the work more maturely, profoundly. I should like to work out, observing the views, a short Shakesperae-cycle, consisting of those of his dramas, that stand nearest to me: besides *The Moor of Venice*, *Hamlet*, two of his comedies, *Troilus and Cressida*, and finally *The Tempest*. I should like to celebrate in 1964 the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth with staging these six dramas in a unific conception. This would be my »six years plan« in the realm of staging.” Statement by Antal Németh for the Hungarian Radio's English-language broadcast. OSZK K 63/79.

<sup>65</sup> OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/3.

cantly to his directorial career in his homeland. However, following World War II, when he had to give up his leading position in Hungary's cultural life, he lost some of these connections, and due to the constraints of state socialism in Hungary, his possibilities for keeping in touch with the remaining ones was limited. Nevertheless, he maintained a keen interest in scholarly literature and all aspects that transpired from Western theatrical life into Hungary.

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OSZK SZT Fond 6 Antal Németh: Shakespeare

Antal Németh's letter to Herbert Marshall on the 31st of March 1955. OSZK SZT 6/1/4.

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## Smelter Workers in Bourgeois Overcoats: A Case Study on the Sovietization of Hungarian Drama

BALÁZS LEPOSA

**Abstract:** The performance of *Hétköznapiak hősei* (Everyday Heroes) at the Belvárosi (Downtown) Theatre, Budapest, was celebrated by contemporary critics as the birth of the new Hungarian schematic (industrial and production-related) drama and theatre. Éva Mándi's text lived on as a schema of schematic drama and presented a paradigm in the relatively short time span of four years that conceived of socialist realism along Zhdanovist principles. However, the Hungarian schematic drama followed the topoi of well-made plays both in story-building and character formation, and its heroes became genres. During the course of the reinterpretation of the bourgeois sujet, the happy marriage of the outcome was replaced by the right path of the wavering and the increase in production. The bourgeois home became a factory, and Manfréd Weiss of Csepel conjured up a foundry on the downtown stage, directed by Zsuzsa Simon. The performance flashed the possibility of Sovietized drama in the autumn of 1949, four years after the Soviet liberation of Budapest and just a few months after the nationalisation of Hungarian theatres. This case study tries to present the reconstruction and analysis of the performance from the perspective of 70 years.

### *Context of the performance in theatre culture*

After the liberation of Hungary by the Soviet Red Army (1945), the Belvárosi (Downtown) Theatre in Budapest, led by Artúr Bárdos, was one of the private theatres struggling with an uncertain financial situation and was taken over by the capital in 1946. In 1948, Bárdos left Hungary, and Zsuzsa Simon was given the opportunity to operate the thea-

tre, which was left empty, in a planned way in order to "promote the development of the new Hungarian dramatic literature."<sup>1</sup> As a result of the work of the new management, by December 1949, the theatre was able to boast the premiere of three new Hungarian dramas. In this pre-Sovietized theatre, state feminism was also emerging. As the theatre was headed by a female director, the first theatrical manifestations of the new Hungarian socialist-realist drama were written by female authors, and in the production *Hétköznapiak hősei* (Everyday Heroes), equality was also given a role in the content. However, Zsuzsa Simon's role as director was soon taken over by Ferenc Szendrő in 1949,<sup>2</sup> thus the Belvárosi Theatre lost its sensitivity to women's equality.

After the nationalisation of Hungarian theatres in 1949, even greater hopes and expectations were placed on the first (freshly written) domestic plays and their stage debut. On the premiere of Éva Mándi's play *Hétköznapiak hősei* in November, the press gave the following superlatives: "A modern Hungarian play, [...] a gripping and moving plot,"<sup>3</sup> "in the outstanding major scenes the auditorium and the stage are inseparably

<sup>1</sup> HONT Ferenc, „*Hétköznapiak hősei*”, *Fórum*, 1949. dec. 15., 1033. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> KOROSSY Zsuzsa, „Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében”, in *Színház és politika*, ed. GAJDÓ Tamás, 45–139 (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 49.

<sup>3</sup> N.N., „*Hétköznapiak hősei*: A Belvárosi Színház nagysikerű bemutatója”, *Friss Újság*, 1949. nov. 20., 7.



united," which "everyone should see".<sup>4</sup> "Socialism is heading towards the cliffs of prosperity!"<sup>5</sup> Here, "stage poetry" is also placed in a historical context, when the new tasks of the new theatre are defined by the author as follows: "in the age of the bourgeoisie, it was the conscientious agonies of the individual wandering in a maze of passions. Today, it captures the reality of the present moment, the struggle for social progress of people struggling between reactionary and progressive forces, recorded for the present day." Furthermore, "we would never have believed that the salt of our lives today could fit into a story around a Martin's furnace."<sup>6</sup> Sándor Sarló writes in *Új Világ* (New World): "In the sweat of the simple blast furnace workers of Csepel, the new world of the Hungarian socialist future, of the Hungarian Grinyovs, of the Hungarian Shtakhanovists, shines forth."<sup>7</sup> László Vas, a columnist for *Független Magyarország* (Independent Hungary), points out, among other things, that the play "faithfully reflects the full reality."<sup>8</sup> Ferenc Debrezeni, in the journal *Csillag* (Star), devoted a longer essay to the praise of the premiere, in which one can find a similar laudation to the praise listed in the daily papers: "*Hétköznapiak hősei* is the most significant Hungarian play since the liberation. [...] The first play to depict workers in the most important scene of their lives, their workplace, through their relationship to their work, the decisive

aspect of their lives."<sup>9</sup> According to Debrezeni, "in our country, the path of socialist realism does not necessarily follow the thematic sequence of Soviet literature (illegality: *The Mother, Enemies*; revolution: *The Rout, And Quiet Flows the Don*; construction: *Time, Forward!*, *Virgin Soil Uplifted*), but can be achieved through close and paired links with the work of the Great Five-Year Plan for the Construction of Socialism, and even more so in this way."<sup>10</sup>

#### *Dramatic text, dramaturgy*

In the Soviet episteme and the Sovietized literary model, development or progress is the priority. On the horizon of the expectations of the era, constant and straightforward progress is central, requiring constant criticism, constant monitoring of mistakes, both socially and economically, and in the personal development of individuals, as well as in the writing and staging of plays in successive performances. In the same way, the aesthetics of the era seek development in the characters of the stage; the competition of production is explicitly reflected in the "character" or "beliefs" of the characters; the closer they come to the Soviet ideal of the new man, who sheds his individualism, the more they are useful for the betterment of society and ultimately the world.

The Hungarian drama of the period is described in the literature as a schematic dra-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> ERDŐS Jenő, „*Hétköznapiak hősei*: Bemutató a Belvárosi Színházban” *Kis Újság*, 1949. nov. 20., 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> SARLÓ Sándor, „*Hétköznapiak hősei*: A Belvárosi Színház újdonsága”, *Új Világ*, 1949. nov. 25., 6.

<sup>8</sup> VASS László, „Független kritika: A *Hétköznapiak hőseiről*”, *Független Magyarország*, 1949. nov. 21., 6.

<sup>9</sup> DEBRECZENI Ferenc, „*Hétköznapiak hősei*: Mándi Éva darabja a Belvárosi Színházban”, *Csillag* 3, no. 26 (1950): 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. *The Mother* and *Enemies* are plays by Maxim Gorki. *The Rout* (also known as *The Nineteen*) is a novel by Alexander Fadeyev. *And Quiet Flows the Don* is Mikhail Sholokhov's most famous novel. *Time, Forward!* is a novel by Valentin Katayev and *Virgin Soil Uplifted* is a novel by Mikhail Sholokhov.

ma, following Olga Siklós,<sup>11</sup> which is further typified by Edit Erdődy along the thematic and other characteristics of the dramas as follows:<sup>12</sup>

1. Production-related plays played in factory environment, e.g. *Hétköznapi hősei* (Everyday Heroes) by Éva Mándi and *Az élet hídjá* (The Bridge of Life) by Gyula Háy, or peasant plays in an agricultural context and set, like *Vetés* (Sowing) by Éva Mándi, *Mélyszántás* (Deep Plowing) by Mihály Földes, *Nyári zápor* (Summer Shower) by Pál Szabó, or *Tűzkereszttség* (Baptism of Fire) by Ernő Urbán.
2. Peace drama, like *Diplomaták* (Diplomats) by Erzsébet Mágori.
3. Youth plays, like *Becsület* (Honour) by Klára Fehér and *Úttörőbarátság* (Pioneer friendship) by Márta Gergely.
4. Historical plays, like *A harag napja* (The Day of Wrath) by Kálmán Sándor, *Értünk harcoltak* (They Fought for Us) by László Sólyom, *Fáklyaláng* (Torchlight), and *Az ozorai példa* (The Example of Ozora) by Gyula Illyés.

Éva Mándi's play and its premiere were considered by the press of the time, as well as by professional forums, to have paved the way for Hungarian socialist realism. The play takes place in the autumn of 1949 (absolutely in the present), in a Martin furnace. According to its *sujet*, the central problem is the department's lagging behind in the work competition and the inability to increase the productivity of the casting furnace. See: "We have been at 101% for four months now, and

we cannot move away from it."<sup>13</sup> While the other departments are making substantial progress, the Martin workers cannot melt and cast more than 30 tonnes of steel in one run, mainly because of the size limitations of the melting pot and other related equipment. In addition, there is a constant turnover of staff, compounded by the fact that a female—thus useless—worker from the office, Anna, has been sent to help out. In the meantime, with the help of János Dunai, the assistant worker turned foreman, the group is constantly thinking of ways to increase productivity, which can only be achieved by increasing the internal volume of the casting pot.

Act II takes place in the office, where the intellectuals appear alongside the workers, in the person of the retrograde Chief Engineer, left over from the "old world", and the progressive figure of the engineer Nagy, born of the new world. The Chief Engineer treats his subordinates badly; his manner of speech is always that of a superior. He later admits that he does not, in principle, "give a damn about increasing productivity" and that he does not support the increase in the volume of the cauldron for technical and safety reasons because it could cause a serious accident. Engineer Nagy is initially sceptical, but then, thanks in part to the enthusiasm of Comrade Dunai, he becomes increasingly confident that the experiment will succeed. By the end of the act, the technical solution is found, based on the idea of Engineer Nagy: preheated oil, thinner masonry, and a 4 mm iron plate for the foundry to melt 35 tonnes instead of 30.

Act III is again set in the furnace, where we see the practical implementation of the innovation; the workers, who are constantly in a state of great excitement, are preparing for the first 35-tonne casting, which, as was said at the beginning of the act, will take an-

<sup>11</sup> SIKLÓS Olga, *A magyar drámairodalom útja 1945–1957* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1970), 228.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. ERDŐDY Edit, „A szematizmustól az új magyar drámáig 1949–1975”, in *A magyar irodalom története*, Vol. 9., eds. BÉLÁDI Miklós and RÓRAY László, 1333–1519 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990), 1333–1336.

<sup>13</sup> MÁNDI Éva, *Hétköznapi hősei: Színmű három felvonásban* ([Budapest]: Atheneum, [1950]), 11.

other 30 minutes. The doubters are still not sure of success, so much so that Szabo, the tapper, sprains his ankle, while the Chief Engineer, suspecting that the casting will be a success, goes to the office to work until he is allowed to. Anna fills the vacant position of the tapper, while Dunai himself joins the team of casting supervisors. The casting succeeds, the retrograde doubters are dismissed, and the “converted” wavers are promoted. The collective, celebrating the successful casting, is already thinking about further improvements and the dissemination of the results achieved in other plants. (See: “UNCLE JÁNOS: We should write to Diósgyőr about what we did here.”)<sup>14</sup> In the conclusion of the play, one of the few workers, Kovács, draws the (final) conclusion that they will find workers like themselves at another furnace.

According to the minutes of the discussion of the Hungarian Theatre and Film Arts Association held on February 4, 1950, “the play is the first Hungarian play since Liberation to be set in a factory, the majority of the characters are workers, and the subject is the increase of productivity.”<sup>15</sup> In his commentary, Endre Gellért (one of the most prominent directors of the National Theatre of Hungary) further emphasises that “every scene of the play [...] is about the present and the now,”<sup>16</sup> and thanks to its well-drawn characters, there are flesh-and-blood figures on both the reactionary and progressive sides.

The protagonist of the production-related drama is the developing man, the doubter who changes in a positive direction and who, by the end of the play, comes closer to the

ideal of the Soviet ideal man. The characters in this context can be divided into three main categories:

1. The retrograde/obscurantist who is a child of the old world. Often a reactionary figure who sabotages production and obstructs ideas through intrigue.
2. The sceptical progressive, who, by the end of the play, is convinced of the correct belief, is a mostly stumbling figure who, as a result of certain positive events, becomes a communist / soviet, or rather starts on the path to becoming a communist/soviet.
3. The communist/Soviet man, who is mostly a charismatic party bureaucrat, is the guide who leads the doubters on the right path and who defeats the obscurantists.

In the *Everyday Heroes*, according to the typification, retrograde figures are: Chief Engineer, Szabó; developing figures: Uncle John, Pinter, Engineer Nagy, Anna, and Mrs. Kovács, while the leading lights of the working class are the party men Dunai and Werner. It is typical that in their praise of this early play, all critics, almost all professional commentators and journalists, point out the play’s flaws: that the communist characters are too static, that their faith does not deepen during the play, and that they remain the same communists at the end of the play as they were when the curtain opened.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the question is: how innovative can the drama and theatre that try to write drama and create theatre according to Soviet expectations be? The question is whether, in the trichotomy outlined above, the socialist realist playwright of 1949 is creating exactly the same genres as the bourgeois naturalist-realist playwright of the 1930s. As Tamás Bécsy wrote of the supporting characters in pre-war domestic “well-

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>15</sup> *A Magyar Színházi- és Filmművészeti Szövetség 1950. február 4-én du 4 órakor tartott vitájának jegyzőkönyve*, manuscript, 2. (In the folder *Hétköznapiak hősei*. Source: the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest.)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

made plays”: “either their story or the story they tell is an anecdote. [...] They give the impression that ‘life’ is authentically shaped by them. [...] This familiarity is embedded in the recipient in such a way that it can be transferred to the story. It is not through their position in the story that they become familiar, but it is through their familiarity that the recipient accepts the story’s progress towards a happy ending.”<sup>18</sup> In Éva Mándi’s production-related drama, one can have a similar feeling about the typecast characters; in fact, there is no protagonist.<sup>19</sup> Does the foreseeable/perceivable character development of the genre characters not exactly realize the same character movement as preferred by the bourgeois salon comedy? It is another matter that Bécsy calls his own, essentially Aristotelian, Platonic, ontological theory of drama to account for in his 1930s comedies, but his conclusions seem to be correct for the late 1940s experiment of production-related drama.

From the point of view of reading the text, how different the “happy ending” is in the author’s dominant plot from the “happy ending” that in the 1930s meant marriage and prosperity for the bourgeois spectator, as compared to the “happy ending” that in the 1940s and 1950s could be measured in the building of the socialist world (read: prosperity) and advancement in the workplace (read: well-being). Was the proletarian’s—who could use his strength and “sovietise”—way of thinking no match for the naïve who sought marriage in the hope of security of wealth? In terms of roles, just as there are genres in operetta and well-made plays, but also in farce and Molière, there are templates and patterns in the plot. Perhaps that is why the play was relatively easy to fit into the system of socialist-realist expectations.

<sup>18</sup> BÉCSY Tamás, *Magyar drámákról: 1920-as, 1930-as évek* (Budapest–Pécs: Dialóg Campus, 2003), 75–76.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Éva Mándi spent two and a half months before and during the writing of the play at the Weiss Manfréd foundry in Csepel (the name of which was changed to Rákosi Mát-yás Foundry only in 1950), six weeks of which she spent at Martin, i.e. next to the furnace.<sup>20</sup> Socialist realism is perhaps best understood by her on the basis of the drama, in so far as by socialist we mean the factory environment and characters, and by realism we mean the knowledge of the workers’ real life (including their way of speaking, their daily problems, their gestures, their dress).

### *Staging*

The press release for the performance practically loses the description of the staging. The reviews focus almost exclusively on the drama, emphasising its parable-like quality. In addition to praise for the staging at a general school level, which is difficult not to read as disparaging and macho remarks directed at women, the lifelikeness of the stage is emphasised: “Zsuzsa Simon’s enthusiastic, good staging is characterised by care and pure simplicity,”<sup>21</sup> writes *Világosság*. “The ensemble-forming staging of the theatre’s director, Zsuzsa Simon, deserves special praise. The director and the actors’ performances are characterised by a departure from theatrical templates and a deep study of reality,”<sup>22</sup> writes Ferenc Hont in *Fórum*, who sees the play as a milestone in working towards socialist realism. “Zsuzsa Simon’s staging is lively; when necessary, it is genuinely joyful, dynamic, and, especially in the third act, extremely tense, recreating the excitement and beauty of the first experimentation with innovation. The elaboration of

<sup>20</sup> GÁCH Marianne, „Hölgyfutár”, *Haladás*, 1950. márc. 16., 11.

<sup>21</sup> DEMETER Imre, „Hétköznapiak hősei: Mándi Éva színműve a Belvárosi Színházban”, *Világosság*, 1949. nov. 19., 4.

<sup>22</sup> HONT, „Hétköznapiak hősei...”, 1035.



the individual scenes is thorough”,<sup>23</sup> summarises the daily *Szabad Nép*. Endre Vészi, like Hont, writes that “this theatre has recognised the need for a new theatre—the path that leads to socialist-realist theatre. Zsuzsa Simon’s elaborate, measured, realistic direction has captured a great collective work in a commendable, disciplined framework.”<sup>24</sup>

What we can be sure of from the subsequent reconstruction is that a remarkable feature of Zsuzsa Simon’s staging was that she visited the Csepel foundry many times with the actors and the author to ensure, like Mándi, that the performance was realistic. Although there is no source for this, it can be suspected that the production was created in the spirit of collective creation and that this, in addition to its ideological nature, may have contributed to its freshness and success.

### *Acting*

In September 1950, acting earned the special attention and control of the political leadership (József Révai) of the Hungarian theatre, which was moving towards socialist realism, as reported in the article on the First Theatre Conference of the Theatre and Film Arts Association.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, in April 1950, Lajos Lenkei (who had previously headed the cultural department of the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Society and later the Budapest committee of the Hungarian Communist Party) considered the role of actors secondary to the sublime aspect of “mobilising and

educating the masses.”<sup>26</sup> According to Ferenc Hont, “actors in general have managed to free themselves from the bourgeois theatre’s cursed legacy of self-emphasis and self-validation and seek to assert their individual values through the characters they portray. The performance also proved that doubling the rehearsal time in our theatres has led to a quantum leap in quality.”<sup>27</sup> Miklós Molnár wrote that “we also see some excellent portrayals of people. László Bánhidi stands out in particular with his play, which sometimes lapses into formalism but is as a whole sensitive, decisive, and individual. He succeeds as the Horthy-sergeant György Gonda, and his portrayal of Pintér is well done by László Kozák, but as always, he seeks the »oddity« in the role instead of the individual.”<sup>28</sup> Endre Vészi singles out János Görbe (who later became famous as a Hungarian film actor), the labour director, for his dynamic playing, and László Bánhidi, who plays the role of Uncle János as the most successful character in the drama.<sup>29</sup>

### *Stage design and sound*

There is no doubt that the Heroes of Weekdays can claim a pioneering role in the history of Hungarian theatre in terms of scenic design. Before 1949, the stage had never before been a factory interior, and the most important element of the set was a furnace. “The red glow of the glowing steel illuminates the stage; we can almost feel the stifling air of the furnaces; we can hear the

<sup>23</sup> MOLNÁR Miklós, „Hétköznapiak hősei: Mándi Éva darabjának bemutatója a Belvárosi Színházban”, *Szabad Nép*, 1949. nov. 20., 11.

<sup>24</sup> VÉSZI Endre, „Hétköznapiak hősei: Új magyar színmű a Belvárosi Színházban”, *Népszava*, 1949. nov. 20., 8.

<sup>25</sup> LOSONCZY Géza, „Színházaink a szocialista fejlődés útján”, *Társadalmi Szemle*, no. 10 (1950): 796–808, 801.

<sup>26</sup> A dramaturg-kritikus tagozat vitája három magyar színdarab (A „Hétköznapiak hősei”, „Nyári Zápor” és a „Mélyszántás”) kritikáival kapcsolatban. Magyar Színház- és Filmművészeti Szövetség, 1950. április 17. Manuscript. Source: Hungarian Theatre Institute and Museum, Budapest.

<sup>27</sup> HONT, „Hétköznapiak hősei...”, 1035.

<sup>28</sup> MOLNÁR, „Hétköznapiak hősei...”, 11.

<sup>29</sup> VÉSZI, „Hétköznapiak hősei...”, 8.

chains of the loading docks creaking,"<sup>30</sup> begins the anonymous critic of *Kanadai Magyar Munkás* (Canadian Hungarian Worker). The construction of the interior of the Csepel blast furnace demanded work as meticulous, precise, and realistic as the writing, directing, and acting of the drama. The hyper-realistic set was set on a box stage, and the costumes were a gift from the Weiss Manfred factory; they were real workers' clothes.<sup>31</sup> The master foundryman wore all the martin workers' mandatory clothing: a heat-protective cape on his body, a helmet on his head, and the iconic "stanga", or poker, a rod used to move smelted iron.

The set was replaced by an office space in Act II, which was also a faithful replica of the actual location. In the office space, there was a table under the obligatory portrait of Mátyás Rákosi, a wall behind it, a window, and even an iron radiator typical of the period, which probably did not occur much in other theatre productions either, as it was certainly expensive and cumbersome to install. On the table was the obligatory office equipment of the time: a telephone, seal, papers and bound statements. The costumes in this production were a suit for the managers and an original Weiss Manfred Factory working suit for the workers. Although naturalism was a buzzword in the Zhdanovian expectations of socialist realism, the hyperrealism of the set rather impressed the audience and critics, as it fully supported the realism of both the drama and the acting in terms of visuals. "Zoltán Gara's sets are excellent; they create a suggestive effect of reality even on this small stage,"<sup>32</sup> writes Endre Vészi, but unfortunately he does not express his opinion more than the quoted line.

<sup>30</sup> N.N., „Hétköznapiak hősei: Mándi Éva darabja a Belvárosi Színházban” *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 1949. dec. 15., 11.

<sup>31</sup> GÁCH, „Hölgyfutár...”, 11.

<sup>32</sup> VÉSZI, „Hétköznapiak hősei ...”, 8.

### *Impact and posterity*

On March 16, 1950, a weekly, titled *Haladás* (Progress) reported on the 150th performance of *Hétköznapiak hősei*,<sup>33</sup> And since less than four months have passed since the premiere with the Christmas and New Year's Day breaks, it is legitimate to ask how it was possible to hold 37–38 performances a month. It is possible that the author of the article corrected the statistics in the heat of the labour dispute. It is easy to imagine that Magdolna Németh, the planner of the Mátyás Rákosi works, did not actually exist, or did exist, but never wrote a letter to the editorial office of *Világosság* saying that she wished “it would encourage writers to write works such as *Hétköznapiak hősei* or *Mélysántás*”.<sup>34</sup> The letter from Mrs. Károly Pieszol (a rewinder at the Standard factory's Workshop 8) is somewhat suspicious.<sup>35</sup> But the play was presented in the Hungarian rural theatres of Győr, Debrecen, Miskolc, Pécs and Kecskemét in the 1950–1951 season. During the preparations for the Miskolc (important industrial city of Hungary) production, the creators of the play visited the nearest Diósgyőr smelter in the same way as the Belvárosi company visited the Csepel one during the Budapest production, which means that not only the drama but also the “method of production” was canonised.

*Hétköznapiak hősei* was also performed in Łódź (Poland) and in Prague (Czechoslovakia),<sup>36</sup> and Béla Both reported on serious preparations at the State Film Production Company for the filming of the play.<sup>37</sup> Zsuzsa

<sup>33</sup> GÁCH, „Hölgyfutár...”, 11.

<sup>34</sup> NÉMETH Magdolna, „Íróink és az ifjúság” *Világosság*, 1950. júl. 23., 4.

<sup>35</sup> PIESZOL Károlyné, „Miért tetszik a Pieszol-házaspárnak a Hétköznapiak hősei?”, *Népszava*, 1950. jan. 12., 6.

<sup>36</sup> N.N., „Magyar színdarab külföldi sikeréről”, *Világosság*, 1950. okt. 10., 4.

<sup>37</sup> N.N., „Megfilmesítik a Hétköznapiak hőseit”, *Szabad Szó*, 1950. febr. 1., 2.

Simon received the Kossuth Prize (the most prominent prize in Hungary) in 1950 for her work in staging the new Hungarian drama, and from then on, she became director of the Academy of Drama.

The Heroes of Weekdays became a model of schematism, but due to its highly ideological nature, it was not staged after Stalin's death in 1953. But perhaps the most curious outcome of the performance's impact was its premiere by the workers' theatre troupe of the Mátyás Rákosi Works in early May 1950. The workers played themselves—more precisely, as a joke of hyperrealism and a living example of a representational loop—they played the theatre that had played them before.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Details of the production*

*Title:* Hétköznapiak hősei (Everyday Heroes). *Date of premiere:* November 17, 1949. *Venue:* Belvárosi (Downtown) Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Zsuzsa Simon. *Author:* Éva Mándi. *Set designer:* Zoltán Gara. *Company:* Belvárosi (Downtown) Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* János Görbe (János Dunai), Mária Sulyok (Anna), Pál Náday (Tóth), László Bánhidi (Uncle János), Sándor Kőmíves (Werner), László Kozák (Pintér), Lajos Pándi (Tímár), László Joó (Rókus), György Gonda (Szabó), Gyula Farkas (Kertész), Imre Sinkovits (Kovács), Tamás Benő (Füsi), László Földényi (Chief Engineer), István Somló (Nagy, Engineer), Oszkár Ascher (Horvai), Mária Simonyi (Mrs. Kovács), Béla Keresztesi (Foreman), Gyula Bay (Szalai), Emil Keres (Kőműves), Ferenc Deák (1st Worker), János Körmendi (2nd Worker), Pál Major (Hajdú).

<sup>38</sup> CSAPÓ György, „A hétköznapiak hősei a Hétköznapiak hőseiben: A csepeli munkásszínház bemutatója”, *Világosság*, 1950. máj. 4., 2.

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## The Development of Children's and Youth Theatre in Hungary: the Path of Institutionalization and Beyond the Professional Sphere (1949–1989/1992)

ANITA PATONAY

**Abstract:** It was after the Second World War and the nationalisations that autonomous theatres for children and youth and theatre performances targeting this age group were first established in Hungary. In my study, I will present the institutional history of children's and youth theatres in the period 1949–1989/1992 and the children's and youth theatre-makers who were amateur theatre-makers alongside the institutionalised theatres. I will give an insight into the productions that were produced during this period, the problems faced by the children's and youth theatre community, and the contradictions that creators had to face during the period of state socialism. I will look at decisions, decrees, and laws on the medium of children's and youth theatre productions from 1949 to 1989/1992, in order to gain a better understanding of the cultural context in which amateur theatre groups produced performances in the context of children's and youth theatre culture, alongside the institutionalised children's and youth theatres.

### *A brief history of institutionalised theatres for children and young people*

In Hungary, theatres were nationalised in 1949. On June 21, 1949, the government declared that privately owned or concession-operated theatres would be brought under state control. It was announced that the mandates of the theatre directors were no longer valid for the new season and that their successors would be appointed by the government. The theatres were placed under the supervision and control of the Thea-

tre Department of the Ministry of Culture. After the devastation of the Second World War, the transfer of the theatres to the state provided security: some buildings damaged in the war were rebuilt, the situation of actors, their employment and salaries, and the financial situation of the theatres were stabilised.<sup>1</sup> However, after nationalisation, theatres became rather similar: new structures, new operating procedures, and a centrally determined choice of works. Political decision-makers sought to use the theatre as a vehicle for the dissemination of 'communist' ideology. Cultural politicians sought to tighten their grip on theatres, strictly defining the nature, message, number, and target audience of the plays they could produce. Their aim was to ensure that the plays the political leadership wanted to see reached as wide a section of society as possible. The ideological-artistic line was thus framed by a system of control and authorisation/prohibition through the Ministry of Culture's College of the People, the Agitation and Propaganda Committee, the Dramaturgical Council, and the Ministry's Theatre Department.

At the time of the re-launch, some new theatres were organised specifically for children, as propaganda placed great emphasis on the ideological re-education of young people. Totalitarian political power saw itself as the source of all cultural value, so that all cultural and artistic phenomena became po-

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<sup>1</sup> This tight framework was loosened by the 1970s and 1980s, but the party and state leadership kept the substantive decisions in their own hands until the fall of the system. This situation held until the mid-1990s.

litical issues. This was the time when the Youth Theatre,<sup>2</sup> modelled on the Komsomol Theatre in Moscow, and the Pioneer Theatre<sup>3</sup> were created. In addition to these two theatres, the Hungarian State Opera House and the Erkel Theatre of the Hungarian State Opera House had also performed for children since 1949. The Youth Theatre and the Pioneer Theatre were merged in 1952 and renamed in 1954: the Youth Theatre became the Petőfi Theatre and the Pioneer Theatre became the Jókai Theatre.

There were several reasons for the merger. The main problem was that the representatives of cultural policy saw that the Youth Theatre had not succeeded in making its image into an outstanding theatre of socialist romanticism and that it had not succeeded in educating the youth to communist morality through plays. The official view was that the theatre's programming policy and the style of its performances were not sufficiently imbued with a militant spirit and that its links with the various youth organisations were weak. In contrast, the profile of the Pioneer Theatre was considered satisfactory by the promoters. The Youth Theatre was expected to produce more daring, more militant, and more revolutionary plays in line with socialist ideology.<sup>4</sup> The Youth Theatre had to change its programming policy. Its plays had to be inspired by the lives of young people, while at the same time aiming to raise young people's literary literacy: "Its task is to educate our youth on loyalty to the Party and to popular democracy, on militan-

cy, etc."<sup>5</sup> Finally, the merger of the management of the Youth Theatre and the Pioneer Theatre was justified by the fact that the two institutions' audience management and programming were not sufficiently coordinated; "a certain part of the youth was excluded from theatre education (secondary school students)."<sup>6</sup> The aim was to unify audience management in order to educate the whole youth to become theatregoers. Common management also served to employ actors more economically. The afternoon performances of the Pioneers and the evening performances of the Youth Theatre made it possible to use certain actors together; by developing a common programme, it was easier to coordinate the actors' performances.<sup>7</sup>

The renaming was determined by the political background of the 1953–1956 period. Stalin died in 1953, which caused a political détente in Hungary. Mátyás Rákosi resigned as head of government and was replaced by Imre Nagy. The easing of the situation had an impact on the life of the theatres, as their programmes became richer and more varied, and the freedom of works and creators slowly and steadily increased. The primary tasks of the Imre Nagy government included consolidating and rethinking politics, social issues, and the economy. Culture was only tackled from 1954 onwards, for example in the areas of restructuring the role of rural theatres, introducing ideologically different plays and genres into the programme, and optimising the theatre press.<sup>8</sup> The ideological imperative to educate young people in a propagandistic way was thus, for a time, removed, and the name change helped to bring this period to a close. Two years later, in 1956, the youth character of the Petőfi

<sup>2</sup> Youth Theatre: established in 1949 in a former cinema. The theatre's target audience was adolescents.

<sup>3</sup> Pioneer Theatre was established in 1949. Target audience was children under 14. It operated independently until 1952.

<sup>4</sup> KOROSSY Zsuzsa, „Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében”, in *Színház és politika*, ed. GAJDÓ Tamás, 45–137 (Budapest: OSZMI, 2007), 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> CSEH Katalin, „A teátrális demokrácia útjai: A színház szerepe az 1956-os forradalomban”, *Színház* 44, no. 8 (2011): 20–29.

and Jókai Theatres was abolished, and the youth character was let go. There followed a transitional period where, for a short time, there was no concentrated theatrical education for children and youth.

The State Déryné Theatre,<sup>9</sup> which was founded in 1955, began performing plays for young people in 1959 and then for children in 1960, which helped to fill the gap in the demand for children's and youth productions during the transitional period.

In 1961, the Bartók Children's Theatre was founded, which became a defining institution in children's theatre culture as it focused on children aged 6–14, not only upper school children, like the Pioneer Theatre, but also younger children in the lower grades.<sup>10</sup> "The theatre, as an educational institution, remained an important and controllable scene for ideological influence and a useful way of spending leisure time."<sup>11</sup>

The Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP KB), the Ministry of Culture, and the Agitation Propaganda Committee, i.e. the state power and its institutions, continued to determine (children's) theatre thinking and programming policy. In order to develop the socialist theatre, the leadership aimed at the ideological and political analysis of the theatrical art

process, the quantitative development of contemporary Hungarian literature, the promotion of genre diversity, and a more favourable development of theatre culture and audience numbers. In press propaganda, audience organisation, and programme propaganda, the distinctive support of socialist theatre also had to be more strongly asserted.<sup>12</sup> Law IV on Youth of 1971 provided a decisive legal background for the creators of children's and youth theatre productions, as it stipulated that in the Hungarian People's Republic the fundamental interests and aims of the state, society, and youth are identical and that youth, together with other generations, are building socialism, fighting for social progress, and ready to defend their socialist homeland and peace.<sup>13</sup> The Youth Act included a provision for the socialist education of young people through culture:

"A major task of the public cultural institutions, the press, radio and television, theatres, film production and distribution companies, publishers, and book distributors is the socialist education of youth, and the shaping of young people's interests and tastes. The bodies responsible for the cultural education of youth should support literary, film, theatre, musical, artistic, and other cultural works that promote the socialist education of young people."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> State Déryné Theatre was established in 1955. It provided theatre for small towns and villages not visited by rural theatres. In 1978, it continued to operate as the People's Theatre together with the 25th Theatre.

<sup>10</sup> Bartók Children's Theatre was founded in 1961. They performed at the Bartók Hall and the Operetta Theatre. In 1972, it became the Bartók Theatre, and its target audience was young people. From 1974 on, it was known as the Budapest Children's Theatre. From 1985 on, it continued to operate as the Arany János Theatre until 1994.

<sup>11</sup> NÁRAY István, "Állapotrajz", in *Gyermekszínházak Magyarországon*, ed. SÁNDOR L. István (Budapest: ASSITEJ Magyar Központ, 2006), 26.

<sup>12</sup> „Jegyzőkönyv az MSZMP KB Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottságának üléséről – 1971. október 12.”, in *Szigorúan titkos: Dokumentumok a Kádár kori színházirányítás történetéhez, 1970–1982*, eds. IMRE Zoltán and RING Orsolya (Budapest: PIM–OSZMI, 2018), 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Törvény az ifjúságról*, Országos Ifjúságpolitikai és Oktatási Tanács, 1971. Kiadja az Országos Ifjúságpolitikai és Oktatási Tanács Ifjúságpolitikai Titkársága (Budapest: Szikra Lapnyomda, 1971), 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

The programming policy of the main state children's theatre was also influenced by the passage quoted above, and thus the ideological and political influence that dominated the adult theatre structure was also typical.<sup>15</sup> In relation to the plays presented, the political leaders tried to meet the perceived or real expectations, but they were also given the opportunity not to present a play that did not please the management of a theatre.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the history of public children's theatres, the question of which age groups to address has been a constant. István Kazán's<sup>17</sup> ambition to turn the Bartók Theatre into a youth theatre was eventually rejected by the regime.<sup>18</sup> In the 1972–73 theatre season, it was decided that the theatre should only take into account the needs and characteristics of the primary school age group and that it should develop its programming policy accordingly.<sup>19</sup> Although the word "children" was removed from the name of the Bartók Theatre, cultural policy considered it important that it should remain a children's theatre and not be concerned with youth.

Between 1974 and 1985, the Budapest Children's Theatre became the main theatre

for state children. The word "child" was reintroduced into the name, which clearly identified the main age group of the state theatre: primary school children. István Kazán was the first director of the Budapest Children's Theatre, and Judit Nyilassy<sup>20</sup> was its director from 1977 on. Under István Kazán's direction, between 1974 and 1977, the number of performances for children increased to two hundred and seventy in one season, and fifty evening performances were given for young people. The theatre performed for four age groups: preschoolers were treated to *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Trallala and Lallala*, while 8–10 year olds were treated to *Fairy Ilona*, *Andersen tales*, and *King Matthew's Shepherd*, 11–14 year olds to *The Beggar and the King*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Three Tailors*, and *Wait an Hour and Manhood* were for the older age group.<sup>21</sup> In 1974, Kazán said that the aim of the Children's Theatre was to develop a theatre-going audience and to extend the impact of theatre to all children in Budapest so that they could go to the theatre that was right for them at least twice a year.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the Budapest Children's Theatre, the productions for children by the rural theatres did not receive much attention; the ministry only expected them to have a children's theatre production, but what they should play for children was not the focus of attention. Thus, in 1973, Nelly Litvay and Colodi's *Pinocchio*, directed by Tamás Ascher,<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup> IMRE and RING, eds., *Szigorúan...*, 141–144.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–105.

<sup>17</sup> István Kazán (1924–2006): theatre director. Director of the Hungarian People's Army Theatre between 1956 and 1962. Between 1962 and 1969 he was chief director of the Attila József Theatre, and from 1974 to 1977, he was chief director of the Budapest Children's Theatre.

<sup>18</sup> „A Művelődési Minisztérium előterjesztése az MSZMP KB Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottság a számára az 1981/82-es színházi évad tapasztalatairól, az 1982-es nyári és az 1982/83-as színházi évad programjáról – 1982. június 22.”, in IMRE and RING, eds., *Szigorúan...*, 568.

<sup>19</sup> „Jegyzőkönyv az MSZMP Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottság üléséről – 1973. június 26.”, in IMRE and RING, eds., *Szigorúan...*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> Judit Nyilassy (1929–2007): director of the Bartók and Budapest Children's Theatre between 1972 and 1977, and then director and chief director between 1977 and 1985. She retired in 1985.

<sup>21</sup> ABLONCZY László, „Színházba járó közönséget nevelni...: Beszélgetés Kazán István-nal, a Budapesti Gyermekszínház igazgatójával”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1974. márc., 29., 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Tamás Ascher (1949–): Kossuth and Jászai Mari Prize-winning Hungarian director, university professor, merited artist.



was presented in Kaposvár. The production of *Pinocchio* was a defining moment in the history of children's theatre, as it was cited as an example that highlighted the fact that if a theatre, its management, and its director care about children, then so will the actors, and that this is how a production can be created that can give children a lasting experience.

In the mid-1970s, an initiative was launched by the theatre profession and the Ministry of Culture to address the issue of children's and youth theatre. It was a way of giving creators of theatre for children and young people the opportunity to discuss professional issues. In the twenty-five years since nationalisation, there had never been an initiative to address the theatrical aesthetics of children's theatre. Thus the first Children's Theatre Review in 1974,<sup>24</sup> which presented children's productions from seven theatres, was born. It was the first time that children's theatre companies from the capital and the other cities met: the State Déryné Theatre, the State Puppet Theatre, the Budapest Children's Theatre, the National Theatre of Pécs, the Jókai Theatre of Békéscsaba, the Csiky Gergely Theatre of Kaposvár, and the Kisfaludy Theatre of Győr.

The next major initiative in theatre and cultural policy was a survey. In 1977, the State Youth Commission (ÁIB)<sup>25</sup> and the

Ministry of Culture carried out a joint survey of the situation of theatre performances for children and young people.<sup>26</sup> The survey found that the number of children and youth theatregoers had increased over the previous five years, but that working conditions meant that the People's Theatre<sup>27</sup> was able to take productions to fewer venues and that there was a maximum demand for children and youth performances in the cultural centres. The demand was there, but most of the actors and directors working in children's theatres were penalised by being assigned to children's plays, given only a few rehearsal slots to prepare for a production. In addition, there was no interest in children's productions either from the theatre profession or from critics, while they had a lot of work to do because they had to play to a lot for the children.

Judit Nyilassy faced the same artistic and economic difficulties identified in the survey in 1977, when she replaced Kazan as director of the Budapest Children's Theatre. Judit Nyilassy inherited a situation in which the Children's Theatre had to continue many performances and replace actors who had left. Nyilassy saw the enormous difficulty of her task in the fact that the category of children's theatre director did not exist in 1978. She was aware of the existence of aids and could rely on the experience of others, but she felt that this was a job best learned in the profession, largely by instinct.<sup>28</sup> Judit Nyilassy emphasised differentiation according to the age of the children, so she even divided the upper school pupils into two groups: 5–6 and 7–8 graders, which was a highly innovative idea in 1978, but everyday life over-

<sup>24</sup> In the framework of the Budapest Art Weeks and within the Children's Aesthetics Week, the Hungarian Children's Theatre Review was held between 11–22 October 1974, organised by the ASSITEJ, the Hungarian Centre of the International Association of Children's and Youth Theatres. (MORVAY), „Gyermekesztétika hete”, *Esti Hírlap*, 1974. okt. 11., 2.

<sup>25</sup> The State Youth Committee (ÁIB) was an organisation dealing with youth policy issues from 1974 to 1986. It was established on June 13, 1974 as the successor to the National Youth Policy and Education Council. The Council of Ministers supervised it directly.

<sup>26</sup> NÁRAY István, „A gyerekek és a színház”, *Színház* 11, no. 9 (1978): 14–21, 16.

<sup>27</sup> People's Theatre: The People's Theatre was created in January 1978 by the merger of the State Déryné Theatre and the 25th Theatre.

<sup>28</sup> RÉVI Judit, „Gyermekszínházi adósságaink”, *Népművelés* 25, no. 12 (1978): 34–36, 34.

rode this initiative. Nyilassy saw a huge obstacle, apart from the difficulty of age group classifications, in the fact that children's theatre work was not attractive to actors, as it was not attractive to the theatre profession or to critics.<sup>29</sup>

In the Budapest Children's Theatre, under the direction of Judit Nyilassy, in the 1980s, there was already a performance where actors and children acted out a folk tale, the Cat Master or Puss in Boots, together.<sup>30</sup> Judit Nyilassy was therefore concerned with creating a new kind of audience relationship, which she wanted to achieve through physical theatre by involving the audience, innovating in a way that could reform traditional children's theatre performances and, through them, the profession. Part of the period under Nyilassy's leadership also signified a new way of working more closely with schools. The theatre launched a competition for primary school teachers with the support of the Pedagogical Institute of Budapest. The theme of the entries was how to prepare pupils for theatre performances and how to lead sessions on the theatre experience. At the same time, a professional collective of teachers, sociologists, and aestheticians was formed to analyse the problems of theatre-school, and theatre-audience response. Both initiatives aimed to bring theatre closer to its audience, to be able to influence young people, to enable teachers and theatre management to work together more organically, and to produce even better children's productions. Nyilassy also set up a youth studio stage, which was a crucial decision in terms of company building as it meant that the artists had to stage not only fairy tales but also dramas, comedies, and unconventional theatre ventures closer to adult theatre.<sup>31</sup> One

can see how much Judit Nyilassy tried to innovate, but such performances did not become a trend at the Budapest Children's Theatre.

The state socialist system paid attention to artists working with children and young people to the extent that, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, the ÁIB established the Youth Prize for Excellence and gave artistic awards to artists whose work was also related to youth, thus showing the value of working with young people. Both institutionalised and non-professional, amateur theatre artists in the field of children's and youth theatre have been awarded such prizes for high quality work in the field of children's theatre education or for their work in the artistic education of pre-school children, for their work in promoting theatre and drama, or for their outstanding work in the development and dissemination of children's theatre.

The International Children's Year of 1979 can also be seen as a cornerstone of the cultural context of children's theatre, as it was in the context of the preparation of the Children's Year that theatre for children, the writing of plays for children, literature, the quantity and quality of performances, the uncritical nature of children's theatre, children's aesthetics, and children's psychology began to be addressed. In the framework of the International Year of Children, the Kaposvár International Children's Theatre Meeting was held, with four foreign and six Hungarian companies. In general, it was noted that theatre and audience had become more concerned with educating young audiences, especially in theatre-school relations. Visits to the theatre in schools had become an integral part of class teachers' work, and in several schools this activity had been included in the reward criteria for teachers.

In the 1980s, in addition to the main Children's Theatre, many places also held performances for children: the Radnóti Stage, the Játékszín, the József Attila Theatre, the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>30</sup> FÖLDÉNYI F. László, ed., *Tanulmányok a gyermekszínházról* (Budapest: Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1987), 6.

<sup>31</sup> NÁRAY István, „Berzsián, a Bohóc, Jean és a többiek”, *Színház* 13, no. 8 (1980): 1–4, 3.

Thália Theatre, the Vidám Színpad, and various other theatre companies.

However, the year 1985 brought a change in the life of the Children's Theatre: the theatre was renamed Arany János Theatre, and its director was István Keleti<sup>32</sup> until 1989, when János Meczner<sup>33</sup> became its director. István Keleti took over the management of the theatre in 1985, but the children's theatre remained the theatre for children aged 6–14. The name change was thought appropriate to ensure that children aged 12 and over would also like to go to the theatre, and they would not be put off by the term "children". The emphasis was also placed on the programming policy, which focused on productions that were about children of a particular age and on not wanting to act as a theatre that illustrated the compulsory reading.<sup>34</sup> Keleti did not see the children as pedagogical subjects but wanted to play with them,<sup>35</sup> and also aimed to dispel the fears of the actors of the Arany János Theatre about children's audiences. His theatrical thinking was based on children—on the existence and behaviour of children. It was with this in mind that Keleti staged *Emil and the Detectives* and *The Palace of Spotted Owls*. One hundred and ninety thousand children visited the Arany János Theatre every year. Eight performances were given every week. Five hundred and thirty people could fit into the theatre at one time.

<sup>32</sup> István Keleti (1927–1994): theatre director, dramaturg, deserving artist. Founder of the Szkéné and the Pincészínház (amateur theatres).

<sup>33</sup> János Meczner (1944–): director of the Kisfaludy Theatre in Győr, then of the People's Theatre, executive secretary of ASSITEJ, Jászai Mari Prize-winning director, theatre director, university professor, meritorious artist.

<sup>34</sup> BÁN Magda, „Csodát kell produkálni”, *Ország-Világ*, 1985. dec. 25., 18.

<sup>35</sup> FÖLDÉNYI F., ed., *Tanulmányok...*, 35.

By the second half of the 1980s, children's theatre had become more important as a theatrical issue. The first national children's theatre meeting, for example, was accompanied by a four-day international dramaturgical conference in Budapest in November 1987, the aim of which was to take stock of the dramaturgical problems of productions for children and young people of different ages. The conference, entitled "Ages and Dramaturgies" was attended by experts from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the GDR, the FRG, Spain, and the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> The conference was based on three keynote speeches by Katalin Gabnai,<sup>37</sup> István Keleti, and István Nánay.<sup>38</sup> Judit Páli, psychologist, and Miklós Baktay, sociologist, reported on their studies on the impact of children's theatre.<sup>39</sup> Katalin Gabnai spoke about children's theatre for preschoolers, the double consciousness of children watching theatre, children's experience of reality in theatre, the present tense of children's theatre, children's concentration time, and the use of music.<sup>40</sup> In his presentation, István Keleti explained the age group of the classical children's theatre audience, his opinion on how to activate children in the theatre, what kind of music is appropriate for children's theatre, how to set the stage, what kind of text to use and say in children's performances, what kind of performance style should be used in these performances, and the power of fairy

<sup>36</sup> SZ. N., „Dramaturgiai tanácskozás”, *Színház* 21, no. 2 (1988): 1.

<sup>37</sup> Katalin Gabnai (1948–): playwright, critic, university professor, one of the leading figures in Hungarian drama pedagogy.

<sup>38</sup> István Nánay (1938–): journalist, critic, university professor, a leading figure in theatre criticism.

<sup>39</sup> BAKTAY Miklós and PÁLI Judit, „A csillogó szemű gyerekközönség: Gyermekszínházi hatásvizsgálat téziseiből”, *Színház* 21, no. 2 (1988): 11–13.

<sup>40</sup> GABNAI Katalin, „A legkisebbek színháza”, *Színház* 21, no. 2 (1988): 4–6.

tales.<sup>41</sup> And István Nánay posed questions to start the debate: Is there a need for autonomous theatre and performance for 12–16 year olds? If so, what kind? What themes are worth playing for this age group, and how?

It was typical of this period that few performances for children were performed, despite the large number of children's audiences. This shortage gave rise to a market for professional theatres, which mainly sought to meet the needs of community centres, and occasional companies were formed. By 1987, the issue of children's and youth theatre had been addressed. The formulation of a framework for what is needed to make a children's theatre production viable and effective was initiated.<sup>42</sup>

*Children and youth theatre performances  
beyond the professional sphere*

Documentation on theatre performances for children and young people outside the formal sector is extremely scarce. Laws and regulations are available that can provide some insight into the work of creators and groups who produced children's and youth theatre outside the professional sphere. The archival material of the State Youth Commission has not yet been processed and will therefore dominate the next section, since it provides a strong basis, in the absence of

<sup>41</sup> KELETI István, „Mese és színpadi valóság”, *Színház* 21, no. 2 (1988): 6–8.

<sup>42</sup> István Nánay, in his summary study on children's theatres published in 1987, explained in detail that the creators of theatre performances for children should not only concern themselves with artistic quality but also with the purpose, task, and method of their children's theatre activities. He found that “the vast majority of children's theatre productions do not meet the desired and expected standards, neither pedagogically, psychologically, nor artistically, and in many cases do more harm than good.” FÖLDÉNYI F., ed., *Tanulmányok...*, 3.

other documents, for understanding the circumstances and situation of children's and youth theatre performances outside the professional sphere in the period under study. These documents provide a picture of children's and youth theatre performances and how a particular state-supported opportunity inspired or even limited the theatrical thinking of the creators, which could have contributed to generating change in the field of amateur theatre-making. One such example was the 1971 Youth Act, which encouraged amateur companies to produce theatre for children and young people:

“[...] Young people must be introduced to the works of culture and taught to enjoy them. At the same time, Article 24 of the proposal also aims to enable young people to become not only passive recipients of culture but also creative participants, so that they can make their lives richer and more meaningful.”<sup>43</sup>

Article 25 was about making good use of young people's free time. In this respect, the detailed explanatory memorandum explained:

“[...] Efforts should be made to ensure that young people spend their leisure time cultivating their minds, enjoying themselves in a sophisticated manner, developing their physical strength, and protecting their health.”<sup>44</sup>

Since the mid-1970s, regulations on theatrical performances have undergone changes, including those relating to children's and youth theatre. In December 1974, a decree on the organisation of programme performances was published, which specified the performances that could be presented:

<sup>43</sup> *Törvény az ifjúságról...*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



"Only works that have already been published (published, broadcast, performed, or presented in a programme by a professional director) or that have been approved for performance by a specially appointed body (the Arts Council) or by the director may be performed in a programme. The professional performer or the head of the amateur artistic group and the director of the organising body shall be responsible for compliance with this provision."<sup>45</sup>

This regulation made it even clearer what can be shown, what can be played, and who can be held responsible for the shows. The issue of revenue also became problematic, as:

"Only a professional performer holding a professional performer's licence issued by the National Philharmonic, the National Direction Office, or the National Centre for Entertainment Music (hereinafter referred to as a professional performer) may perform in a series of shows for a fee or other compensation."<sup>46</sup>

This paragraph of the decree stipulated that anyone who did not have a performing arts licence could not be paid for performing or playing. This made it difficult for many amateur actors or encouraged them to perform for free as a hobby. It was not worth becoming a professional performer because there were many more regulations to meet, and as an amateur art group, the subject of the performance was not subject to a licence, although they could not be paid for

their work, so it was worth staying in the amateur category.

In the situation survey of 1977, cited above, the ÁIB and the Ministry of Culture stated that they were counting on amateur theatres and the performances they produced, as there was a huge demand for children's productions in the countryside and in the capital.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, however, most of the well-established amateur theatre companies had not yet recognised the opportunities that this public cultural situation offered them.

For a more complete picture of the performances for children and youth by amateurs, e.g. *Gyerekjátékszín*,<sup>48</sup> and some performers, e.g. Békés Itala,<sup>49</sup> see the cultural programmes of the construction and holiday camps.<sup>50</sup> The ÁIB and the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (KISZ) together organised the cultural programmes of the camps centrally. The political leadership's approach to the cultural provision of

<sup>47</sup> NÁNAY, „A gyerekek és a színház”, 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Gyerekjátékszín* was amateur theatre founded by Éva Mezei in 1976. Until 1986, it produced performances for children and youth. This theatre group created the first TIE (Theatre in Education) performance in Hungary, the *King Matthias Was Here*, in 1978. Éva Mezei got the TIE form in England.

<sup>49</sup> Békés Itala (1927–): Kossuth and Jászai Mari Prize-winning Hungarian actress, a deserving and distinguished artist whose one-woman theatre for high school students and young adults was performed in pioneer and construction camps: *The Soul and Dance*, *Disco Itala* (1980), and *To Be or to Be Seen* (1981).

<sup>50</sup> The KISZ organised the construction camps from 1957 onward. The construction camp movement contributed to the socialist education of young people, strengthened their community spirit, satisfied the seasonal labour needs of the national economy, and mobilised tens of thousands of people every year.

<sup>45</sup> No. 3/1974. (XII. 14.) KM Decree of the Minister of Culture on the organization of performances, 4. §., *Magyar Közlöny*, 1974. dec. 14. / No. 95. 1017.

<sup>46</sup> 5. §., *ibid.*

the construction camps and pioneer camps was to ensure that the performances were as valid and of the highest quality as possible. The aim of the ÁIB was therefore to ensure that the students spent their free time after the camps as meaningfully as possible, an aim that was also underpinned by the political dimension of the time: the idea of controllability. Theatres, groups, and artists were invited by the ÁIB to put on theatre, music, and other types of programmes for the camps.<sup>51</sup>

In 1976, in addition to the three hundred and three central performances of the professional theatres, amateur artists and groups performed three hundred times in the camp programmes organised by the Central Committee of the KISZ. According to ÁIB reports, the most successful programmes were performances where the artists were able to establish direct contact with the campers and thus involving them in the performance. This may have encouraged the artists to create a format for the summer performances that would engage and involve the campers in the performance.

In a report for 1980, the ÁIB stated that the amateur theatre movement was making the youth's contact with professional theatres more active. It was seen that the rigid boundary between professional theatres and the amateur movement was disappearing and that amateur groups' broad audience connections were helping to enrich the audiences of professional theatres and to make the theatrical experience more inclusive. In

particular, the Puppet Theatre and the Children's Theatre consciously developed their links with the amateur movement. The latter also hosted an annual meeting of children's theatres under the title "Children's Theatre – We Own the Stage!"

As well as performing in pioneer and builder camps, there were amateur theatre makers who were given other spaces to create theatre productions. One such artist was János Novák,<sup>52</sup> who became a distinctive artist of the period with his work in the 1980s, which was different from traditional children's theatre. In 1980, he staged *Bors néni* (*Auntie Pepper*) at the University Stage. Novák's subsequent works were also influenced by the form of children's theatre that was already present in *Bors néni*: audience participation and singing together. Other performances of this kind included *Mowgli* at Játékszín, *The Eyelashes of the Wolf* at the Radnóti Miklós Stage and *The Storytelling Garden*.

There were also theatre companies that created good children's productions. One of these was a troupe of actors, mainly from the National Theatre company, directed by László Vándorfi,<sup>53</sup> which presented Sándor Weöres' *Peter the Deceiver* on the University Stage. At the beginning of the performance, the actors talked to the audience and, together with the musicians providing live music, taught the children a few mocking songs and sayings, asking them to shout and sing them out loud with the musicians during the performance if they heard such and such a text. Imre Katona<sup>54</sup> and Maya Szilágyi<sup>55</sup> were

<sup>51</sup> "The 1975 summer youth holiday season has come to an end. According to the preliminary summary, the utilisation rate of the various ÁIB benefits, worth HUF 24.3 million and involving some 100,000 young people, was favourable. The institutional cultural programme of the summer camps and holiday camps included 150 performances." In *Tájékoztató – Jelentés az ÁIBT 1975. III. negyedévi tevékenységéről*, 2., Source: 1. doboz-XIX-A-99, 1975. szeptember 29.

<sup>52</sup> János Novák (1952–): director, director of the Kolibri Children's and Youth Theatre, became a distinctive figure of the period with his works in the 1980s, which were different from traditional children's theatre. In 1980, he directed *Auntie Pepper* at the University Stage.

<sup>53</sup> László Vándorfi (1951–): director, actor, director of Pannon Castle Theatre.

<sup>54</sup> Imre Katona (1943–): director, dramaturg.

the key figures of the Universitas Ensemble between 1976 and 1987. They mostly performed in the framework of the University Stage, in the Hordó of the Eötvös Klub, under the name Universitas for a while, then Gropius. Gropius also had the professional aim of creating high-quality musical children's theatre performances. Their first children's production was in 1983, entitled *Cinóber*, which was then presented under the name Universitas. The play was inspired by E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Little Zaches Called Zinnober*. The dialogue was composed from sketches of real classic clown plays and improvisations. The group then performed Tor Age Bringsvaerd's *The Mighty Thespian* at the University Stage in 1983. Continuing the series of performances for children, in June 1985, Elek Benedek's *The Prince of Many Treasures* was performed on the beach in Gyula.

There were one-man theatres run by Kati Sólyom<sup>56</sup> and Itala Békés. They researched the material for the subject of their performances alone, wrote their scripts alone, created their productions alone, and involved only technicians and musicians in the execution. They became researchers, dramaturgs, directors, actors, teachers, costume designers, and visual designers in the process of creating and realising their performances.

This complex creative attitude also characterised the other amateur theatre groups: the Gyerekjátékszín, the Térszínház,<sup>57</sup> and

the Lakásszínház.<sup>58</sup> These communities were part of the amateur theatre scene, which also had a defined need for a complex commitment, although in the Gyerekjátékszín and the Térszínház the directors were one-man shows, with the other functions being shared between the members of the groups. Everybody did everything: dramaturgy, directing, cleaning, audience organisation, typing, and costume sewing. The creators of the Térszínház reinforced the collective creation between the members of the group, i.e. everyone played all the different roles in the creative process.

Éva Mezei's Gyerekjátékszín was made up of mostly teachers and kindergarten graduates, liberal arts students, and early career teachers who wanted to teach children, but with a different method than the Prussian, hierarchical education; that is, they were more committed to pedagogy.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, as teachers, they could make theatre and act as actors, and on the other hand, through theatre, they could play and think with children and young people. The latter gave them a strong foundation for their teaching careers and for their daily practice in schools and pedagogy.<sup>60</sup>

The members of the ensemble of the Theatre on the Square, led by Hunor Bucz, went to work while doing theatre. Among them were carpenters, doctors, folk artists, plumbers, postmen, tailors, craftsmen, and children's librarians. The Square Theatre team was made up of socially disadvantaged

<sup>55</sup> Maya Szilágyi (1947–): actor, set and costume designer.

<sup>56</sup> Kati Sólyom: Jászai Mari and Aase Award-winning Hungarian actress and permanent member of the Pécs National Theatre. Her one-woman children's theatre productions include *Mesebál* (1970) and *Csipkefa* (1971), which were aimed at the kindergarten and school age groups.

<sup>57</sup> Térszínház is an amateur theatre company founded in 1969 by Hunor Bucz. Since 1978, it has been running a dramatic playhouse for preschool and school children.

<sup>58</sup> Lakásszínház was founded by Péter Halász and Anna Koós. In 1974, they created *Guido and Tyrius*, which was performed twice to a mixed-age audience; the audience ranged from infants and preschoolers to primary school children, with adult chaperones.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. MEZEI Éva, „Színház a nevelésben: Theatre-in-education”, *Színház* 19, no. 11 (1986): 22–25, 22.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. ILLÉS Klára, ed., *Az élet tanítható: Mezei Éva rendező, drámapedagógus szellemi öröksége* (Pécs: Alexandra Kiadó, 2008), 274.

young adults with housing problems. Instead of working odd jobs, they made theatre. Hunor Bucz did not select the team members; there were no exams, and he welcomed everyone who wanted to join with open arms. A family-like, commune-like community was formed during acting. The Tércsínház “nurtured actors, audiences, and theatre”.<sup>61</sup>

The members of the Lakásszínház also made theatre while working, if they had a job. Anna Koós emphasised in an interview I had with her that no one was an actor in the Lakásszínház, everyone was just a human being, people who loved to act and wanted to bring joy to other people. A joy that took the audience out of their everyday lives.

Amateur artists and creative communities approached the realisation of performances for children either with the idea of thinking through theatre as a goal (Gyerekjátékszín, the one-man theatre of Kati Sólyom and Itala Békés, Péter Levente and Ildikó Döbrentey<sup>62</sup>), their theatre took on a defining role by creating children’s performances (Tércsínház, *Bors néni* of the University Stage, József Ruszt’s School Theatre and Initiation Theatre<sup>63</sup>), or they were acting for the theatre itself (Lakásszínház).

Children’s and youth theatre performances outside the professional theatre were therefore present in the 1970s and 1980s. What can be observed in the case of amateurs and one-man shows is that they chose

the age group themselves, wanting to play for children and young people. Their performances were adapted to play in different spaces, creating different formal versions where the audience’s position shifted from the traditional spectator’s perspective. These changes have been incorporated into their everyday operations, creating new variations on the spectator-actor relationship and the use of space in their performances, ideas, experiences, and ways of thinking that influenced professional children’s and youth theatre performances.

As a result of the institutionalised and non-professional children’s and youth theatre processes outlined above and the change of regime in 1989, three institutions or companies were established in 1992 that initially only performed children’s and youth theatre and that are still dominant in the children’s and youth theatre scene today: the Kolibri Children’s and Youth Theatre, the Budapest Puppet Theatre, and the Round Table Theatre Education Centre.

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<sup>61</sup> BÓTA Gábor, „Közszemlére tett szenvedéstörténet”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 2006. márc. 3., 19.

<sup>62</sup> Péter Levente’s and Ildikó Döbrentey’s performances on the Micro-Microscope Stage *Zűrhajó* (1982) and *Motoszka* (1984), which were for children aged three to seven.

<sup>63</sup> Among József Ruszt’s school theatre productions, *Csongor és Tünde* (1976) was for high school students, *Romeo and Juliet* (1975), and *Antigone* (1976) for middle school students. In Zalaegerszeg, the introductory theatre performances were aimed at secondary school students, e.g. the 1982 *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Ruszt.



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## The Self-Definitions of the Hungarian Minority in Vojvodina in the Performances of the Tanyaszínház (Grange Theatre)

TAMÁS OLÁH

**Abstract:** The Hungarian travelling theatre company named Tanyaszínház (Grange Theater) was founded in 1978 in Yugoslavia, and it has not stopped since. In their performances, one can observe how successive political systems generated social issues that also affected minorities. These issues are not presented as historical facts but rather as everyday realities on stage. Their productions, which are given in villages and small towns, serve as prisms that directly reflect social experiences back to the community. From the history of the company's performances, one can discern the infinitely complex narratives of self-definition for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina (North Serbia), spanning from the late 1970s to the present day. Over the last four and a half decades, they have not only thematized the process of self-identification of the Hungarian community in the province but have also participated in it.

In the spring of 1978, Frigyes Kovács and György Hernyák decided to establish a theatre company that would create performances specifically for the Hungarian population in the small settlements within the province of Vojvodina in Yugoslavia. At that time, Kovács was graduating from the first Hungarian-language acting class at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, and Hernyák was the first Hungarian directing student at the same institution. Both of them came from rural backgrounds and were first-generation intellectuals. The Tanyaszínház (Grange Theatre), which is undoubtedly Yugoslavia's first independent (semi)professional minority theatre

company, began its unique operation in the region during the summer of that same year, and it has not stopped since. Estimates suggest that nearly half a million viewers have attended their free performances so far. Although there have been many changes in terms of organisational structure over the past four and a half decades, this theatre essentially operates outside the system of the province's permanent theatres. Every summer, the company is reorganised for the duration of a production, which, after a few weeks of rehearsal, is performed approximately 25 to 30 times during a tour that lasts about one and a half months. After the evening performances, the actors dismantle the stage, rest, and then move on to the next village in the morning, where they begin setting up the stage again. Apart from the sound and lighting technicians, there is no technical staff to assist them, and they do not have any backstage personnel either. The actors themselves are responsible for constructing the sets, sewing costumes, and creating wigs and props. The backbone of the Tanyaszínház company consists of university students who are currently studying acting at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, joined by volunteer professional actors and invited amateurs. They perform their shows in marketplaces, schoolyards, and pub courtyards, even on football fields. The traditional venue for their premieres is Kavilló in North Bačka, which has a population of only 144 inhabitants according to the latest available data. It is where the first performance was created and where the troupe now produces their shows on their own plot of land in relatively modern conditions, albeit still

under the open sky. Currently, there is no professional Hungarian actor in the province who was not a member of the travelling theatre company during their academic studies. Therefore, a distinctive feature of Hungarian actor training in Serbia is that academy students must familiarise themselves with the unconventional acting apparatus and behaviour required by the Tanyaszínház's unique playing conditions quite early on, often during the summer following their first year. This sometimes happens years before they step onto the stage of a conventional theatre for the first time.

In the examination of theatres operating outside of institutional structures, an important consideration is whether they reconstruct the ideology running the traditional theatres in their region without reflection or are critical of it. According to Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, various modes of playing and functioning appearing on the contemporary theatre stage can no longer be properly described in terms of the dividing line between the traditional, permanent, and independent theatres, but through the contrast between

“the theatrical practice of adopting a given framework for a performance and the practice which shows the framework in the usual theatre, dance, performance, and art spaces and utilising the usual forms, as well as the policies of the institutions and the ideology embedded in them.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the performances of the Tanyaszínház, which often reflect on the mechanisms of state power, are almost always and everywhere “sold out,” and over the years they have not only thematized the complex pro-

cess of self-identification of the Hungarian minority in Serbia but have also participated in it. In the introduction of her monograph, Ágnes Czérna declares that

“the Tanyaszínház is more than just a travelling theatre troupe in the countryside. Because while it captivates a wide audience in Vojvodina, it also knits communities together. [...] Because it speaks to everyone. Because a villager, dressed in his fine clothes after harvesting, threshing, or milking a cow, enjoys it just as much as a university professor, nurse, or businessman from the city who comes to see the play here. Or perhaps in a different way. But what's common is that they enjoy it. Because the Tanyaszínház is a living experience.”<sup>2</sup>

In the course of performance analyses and the vividness of the experiences, it is worthwhile to approach them from three separate aspects, but not independently from each other. (1) On the one hand, it cannot be ignored that the performances are aesthetically distinct from the productions of the permanent Hungarian and Serbian-language theatres in Vojvodina, although their actors often come from those companies. And that does not just mean that outdoor performances legitimately require much wider gestures or increased volume from the actor. As a result of the form languages of great personalities who emerge from time to time, a special image of the theatre was formed and developed through the types of plays, the pieces performed, and the playing style during the alternation of successive ensembles. (2) On the other hand, the *ars poetica* of the Tanyaszínház (if it had not been formulated in the 1970s) could be considered a kind of TIE (theatre in education), as their perfor-

<sup>1</sup> Nikolaus MÜLLER-SCHÖLL, „Színház magán kívül”, trans. TELLER Katalin, in *Kortárs táncelméletek*, ed. CZIRÁK Ádám, 221–237 (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2013), 222. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> CZÉRNA Ágnes, *Tanyaszínház: A harminc évad története (1978–2008)* (Novi Sad: Forum Könyvkiadó, 2009), 7.

mances—although they never reach the level of participation typical of the applied theatrical forms—like theatre in education sessions “deal with moral, micro- and macro-social issues,” and their goal is to “develop a common frame of thought concerning a consciously selected issue and a problem in focus, which allows those involved in the process [...] to define their personal attitudes towards the problem to be investigated.”<sup>3</sup> The creators, almost without exception, designate the (social) issues intended to be at the core of the planned productions with a clear pedagogical intention. Armed with this knowledge, they select the foundational text and construct the dramatic structure of the performance to effectively pose their “open questions” to the audience.<sup>4</sup> (3) Furthermore, since “the unreflected certainty and security in which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour,”<sup>5</sup> an examination of theatre policies is inevitable, all the more so since the company was formed in 1978 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, experienced the final collapse of the Tito regime (1989), the disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–1999), the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the overthrow of the Milošević regime (2000) and has remained active to the present time. And through all that, it has not stopped its activities, with the exception of 2020. My thesis presupposes that the reason for this is that the creators of performances that focus on the national identification of the eclectically changing community(ies) in the context of the eclectically changing circumstances—as members of the community—legitimately had to redefine themselves again and again.

Practitioners of contemporary cultural studies employ a highly diverse conceptual

framework to describe the “uniquely structured cognitive entity” that we have referred to as identity for about three hundred years. However, they mostly concur that it would be futile to seek a “universally valid theoretical definition” for this concept, as “cultural identities [...] resist violent or arbitrary oversimplifications.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that both individuals and communities possess some form of identity, which can be influenced by biological, social, and historical factors alike. According to Predrag Matvejević, “complex civilizations possess and cultivate multiple identities,” and “this holds true for the individuals and works of art that embody or express them.”<sup>7</sup> Although one’s various identities often have a dominant element, this can frequently give way to another under the influence of external factors. This process of identification is thus “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us”,<sup>8</sup> which also means that the individual “decides in their functional everyday practice which sense of identity to »use« in a given situation, that is, which node of their identity network to activate.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Gábor Gyáni draws attention to the fact that if “identity is mostly plural nowadays, then the concept of locality even more so ex-

<sup>6</sup> Predrag MATVEJEVIĆ, „Identitás-betegség”, trans. BAJOMI-LÁZÁR Péter, *Regio* 6, no. 1–4 (1995): 3–6, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart HALL, „The Question of Cultural Identity”, in *Modernity and its Futures: Understanding Modern Societies, Book IV*, eds. Tony MCGREW, Stuart HALL and David HELD, 274–316 (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 277.

<sup>9</sup> KOLLER Boglárka, „Identitásdilemmák a kortárs Európában”, in *Európai identitás(ok), identitások Európában = Identité(s) Européenne(s), identité en Europe = Europäische Identität(en), identitäten in Europa*, ed. L’Harmattan, 34–55 (Budapest: Károlyi József Alapítvány–L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2017), 42.

<sup>3</sup> TAKÁCS Gábor, „Padlóváza a színpadon”, *Színház* 42, no. 2 (2009): 42–49, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen JÜRS-MUNBY (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 104.



presses the fragmentation and further particularization of collective life, as locality serves as the breeding ground for subnational identities.”<sup>10</sup> In this context, when examining the portrayal of collective identity in the performances of Tanyaszínház, which thematize the experiences of their own minority community, it is worthwhile to explore the representation of collective identity in its plurality. Beyond the expression of national identity, these performances also incorporate other particular identity elements.

In one of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s seminal texts, which responds to the influences of cultural turns, she treats it as a fact that by the end of the 1990s, theatricality had become a key concept in cultural studies. According to her argument, theatre can be considered a cultural model for two main reasons. On one hand, this is because researchers no longer “pretend to examine reality, but rather focus on the meaning attributed to this reality by individuals and groups.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the theatre collects the problems appearing in cultural activities like a prism, and then it reflects the concentrated beam towards the community, resulting in making problems visible that are not discursive elements of the social sciences. All of this is possible because striking similarities can be observed “between the transient event space of today’s culture and the transient nature and eventness of theatre.”<sup>12</sup> In light of this, the performances of the Tanyaszínház can be considered *aesthetic dramas* (in the sense that Victor Turner defines them), which are able to model the *social dramas* of the social changes in Vojvodina—which exponentially affected the minority Hungarians—that came to pass since 1978 to the present day. According to Turner, these

<sup>10</sup> GYÁNI Gábor, „Identitás, emlékezés, lokalitás”, 2000 20, no. 6 (2008): 19–26. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, „A színház mint kulturális modell”, trans. MESZLÉNYI Gyöngyi, *Theatron* 1, no. 3 (1999): 67–80, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

two “drama types” interact: if there is a change in one, it will be demonstrable in the other; moreover, theatrical activity can be interpreted as a community act.<sup>13</sup> Thus, during the examination of the performances, the momentary social changes and problems that have influenced (and are influencing) the identification of the Hungarians of Vojvodina in the last four and a half decades can be outlined.

A community always defines itself along the lines of its relationship with another community. It becomes unique in its separation from the other. Homi K. Bhabha refers to this as the “symbolic demand of cultural difference”,<sup>14</sup> and Edward W. Said calls it the “clash of [cultural] definitions.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, according to Judith Butler, identity is a performative accomplishment, “which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”<sup>16</sup> Gábor Virág defines this in the following manner:

“Living as a Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, until recently (until the end of the 1980s), while not entirely without challenges, was considered an enviable

<sup>13</sup> Victor TURNER, *On the Edge of the Bush* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 300.

<sup>14</sup> Homi K. BHABHA, „DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy J. HALE, 717–733 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 730.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. SAID, „The Myth of »The Clash of Civilizations«”, (Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 1998): 2–14, 7, last download 31.10.2023, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Edward-Said-The-Myth-of-Clash-Civilizations-Transcript.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Judith BUTLER, „Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–531, 520.

situation, at least from the perspective of other Hungarian minority communities and even from the standpoint of the motherland. The blessings of Tito's socialism concealed, or at least pushed to the periphery, the negatives. [...] However, the hyphen, as mentioned by Derrida, even if only implicitly, was there, creating tension between Yugoslavian and minority identities."<sup>17</sup>

It is well known that in the former Yugoslavian republics, by the early 1990s, the centrifugal effects of local nationalisms intensified dramatically. This gave rise to mutual distrust between the majority and minority communities. The Hungarian minority in Vojvodina had to seek new modes of identification instead of the previously accepted Yugoslavism, as the conditions of its discursive system changed alongside the representational system. Therefore, they had to rearticulate their relationship with Serbia, Hungary, and Vojvodina, which entailed the reconfiguration of their "believed" identity constructs of being Yugoslavian, Hungarian, or Vojvodinian.

The central question is whether the troupe of Tanyaszínház, in reflecting on this process of definition, resorts to the simplest (mimetic) model of artistic effectiveness or if it critically engages with its own representational and perceptual framework. This is why it is quite telling that the performances of the past four and a half decades have borne the marks of various types of plays. The ensemble consciously staged stories and myths using genre-specific frameworks and patterns that were well-known and readable to

an audience and that were both vertically and horizontally strongly segmented.

The question arises as to how the creators utilised and reinterpreted dramatic traditions, thereby positioning their own community and its history within society. Upon examining the repertoire of Tanyaszínház spanning forty-five years, representing three politically well-defined periods, four major thematic groups seem to emerge.

We could label as allegorical those performances that, through fictional, fairy-tale-like, or mythical worlds, often present satirical stories, confronting the audience with their own reality. One example is the adaptation of George Orwell's cult novel *Animal Farm*, brought to the stage by dramaturg Nándor Katona. It was performed in the summer of 1992, during the Yugoslav wars, mainly featuring academy students and high school amateur actors, as a significant number of male actors eligible for military service had fled the country to avoid conscription.<sup>18</sup> Under the direction of Lajos Soltis, the well-known story of the pigs' takeover gained a clear contemporary political significance even without any specific localization. By

<sup>17</sup> VIRÁG Gábor, „A NEM-mel keresztülhúzott ÉN: A kisebbségi magyar nem”, *A Magyar-ságtudomány Műhelyei*, 2005. 08. 24–25, Budapest, last download 31.10.2023, <https://hungarologia.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Virag-Gabor-dri2005.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> As it is known, the leaders of the Yugoslav member states, who were fond of nationalist rhetoric, did not stand idly by Slobodan Milošević's power aspirations. In June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia unilaterally declared their independence, plunging the once seemingly united common Yugoslav state into a bloody fratricidal war, gradually fragmenting it. The frontlines almost without exception ran through regions of the country that were ethnically heterogeneous, which several successor states claimed. In the initial phase of the war, the bloodiest battles took place in Slavonia and Baranja, which are adjacent to Vojvodina and now belong to Croatia. Mass mobilisation began in Serbia, which did not spare the Hungarian population, and in fact, some municipalities with a majority of Hungarians received disproportionately many conscriptions.

1992, the grandiose socialist slogan of “brotherhood and unity” had become thoroughly hollow, and political decisions affecting the community were now being made by those who considered themselves more equal than others. It's interesting that in 2016, Anna Terék wrote an allegorical drama for Tanyaszínház, placing the pigs at the centre of the narrative, more specifically at the top of the power hierarchy. In the world of the play *Hangos disznók harapnak* (Loud Pigs Bite), the titular characters hold humans in a bestial order, keeping them in pens. If they resist authority, they are slaughtered. Zoltán Puskás's staging revolved around everyday experiences that define minority identity, such as vulnerability to state power, party-based employment, and the economic emigration that disproportionately affects the region.<sup>19</sup> The series of mythical perfor-

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<sup>19</sup> The post-war transition, instead of consolidation, brought about numerous uncertainties, ultimately leading to disillusionment. Zoran Đinđić, the first Prime Minister of democratic Serbia and a standard-bearer for pro-Western policies, was assassinated in front of the parliament in 2003, just two years into his term. While the newly formed states embarked on the challenging path of reconciliation, Balkan societies often still attempt to position themselves and their neighbors between the categories of guilt and victimhood, even two decades after the peace accords. Meanwhile, the economy in Serbia is developing slower than expected. While guest work in welfare states, particularly in Germany and Austria, has been a common practice for the region's population since the 1970s, livelihood migration and the partly related population decline are taking on increasingly alarming proportions. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), approximately 60,000 people leave Serbia annually. While there isn't a precise breakdown for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, the 2011 census indicated that

mances was enriched by the 1993 production titled *Csantavéri passió* (Passion of Csantavér), which drew inspiration from medieval mystery plays. Exploiting the fact that the story of Christ's suffering is fundamental knowledge for the Catholic Hungarians in the region, it contemplated the possibilities of moral purity and the responsibility of minorities in the face of the threat of war.

We could characterise those performance texts as parabolic, which focused on small- and micro-communities whose stories could be likened to the histories of Hungarian rural communities in Vojvodina. In doing so, they mostly stayed within the framework of mimetic representation. The 2013 production of *Ilja próféta* (Ilya the Prophet) directed by Gábor Nagypál, based on the play by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, revealed the process of religious mass psychosis and manipulation by power. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the unnamed Eastern European village seemed to merge with the Vojvodina audience seated around the cross-shaped stage. László Sándor's staging of *A bor* (Wine, 2015) by Géza Gárdonyi, while remaining within the genre framework of folk drama, placed particular emphasis on the motifs of domestic violence and alcoholism in certain scenes of the performance.

The third group includes stories set in Vojvodina, mostly in contemporary times, which encompass texts specifically written and localised for the Tanyaszínház and for the troupe. Among the mentioned works, we can include the most famous piece by the Dubrovnik poet and playwright, Vlaho Stulli, originally published in 1800, titled *Nagyszájú Kata* (Big-Mouthed Kate), whose adaptation was presented by the troupe in 1980. The tragicomedy, originally set in a poorhouse in Dubrovnik, steeped in human misery, was transposed by the newly joined dramaturg,

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there were over 250,000 Hungarians living in the region at the time. However, as of 2022, their numbers have dwindled to just over 184,000.

Angéla Csipak, into the context of present-day Vojvodina. Director György Hernyák, for whom this production served as his graduation project at the University of Arts in Novi Sad, made the muddy soil of Bačka one of the main characters in the play. In the early 1980s, the troupe actually presented numerous adaptations and localised stories in their repertoire. In 1983, they adapted László Gyurkó's play *A búsképű lovag, Don Quijote de la Mancha szörnyűséges kalandjai és gyönyörű szép halála* (The Melancholy Knight, Don Quijote of La Mancha's Terrible Adventures and Beautiful Death) by the title *Don Quijote '83*. The performance took place in the dust of Bačka. In this version, the roles of Cervantes' hero and his loyal companion were taken over by two contemporary characters (both Vojvodina Hungarians) after their deaths, symbolically continuing the fight against windmills. Then, in 1984, they turned the popular and easily successful musical genre on its head, holding up a distorted mirror to their audience and community. Under the title *Csámpáskirálynő* (The Clumsy Princess), László Kopecky wrote an operetta parody for the troupe based on Imre Kálmán's classic, *The Csardas Princess*. After the turn of the millennium, premieres of original works became more frequent in the repertoire. Judit Ferenc's text titled *Különös ajándék* (The Strange Gift, 2009) explored the complex identity of the audience from Vojvodina, touching upon the Balkan, Vojvodinian, and Hungarian aspects. The setting was a courtyard of a block of flats in the Telep district, the heart of the Hungarian community in Novi Sad. The performers sang the revisionist song *Kalász, kalász* with the same intensity and sincerity as they did the former Yugoslav anthem, *Hej, Sloveni*. The former song (especially the line "adjatok a magyaroknak mindent vissza"<sup>20</sup>) was a particularly bold undertaking in certain municipalities of Vojvodina. The play addressed the crisis of men wearied by war who deserved

more, as well as the victims of state socialism, the helplessness of those stuck in nostalgia for the old Yugoslavia, and the plight of young people yearning to break free but lacking the means to do so. The latter theme unfolded within the framework of a full-evening performance, *Y-elágazás* (The Y Fork, 2019) by Róbert Lénárd. *Mérföldkő* (Milestone, 2012) also belongs to this group. Thanks to its prominent self-reflective and addressing gestures, it can be connected to the post-dramatic paradigm, as it primarily engages in a dialogue with its own audience.

The fourth group includes productions based on classical dramas that did not respond at all to the contemporary socio-political reality of the audience. Although they contained certain moral and ethical questions, their primary goal seemed to be entertainment. Examples of such productions include *Holdbéli csónakos* (Boatman in the Moon, 1981), *Csongor és Tünde* (1988), *Két úr szolgája* (The Servant of Two Masters, 1995), *A Pál utcai fiúk* (The Boys of Paul Street, 2007), or the anniversary production of *A képzelt beteg* (The Imaginary Invalid, 2017). However, in connection with these performances, we must not forget the specific relationship between the Tanyaszínház and its audience, meaning that in this theatre, actors do not emerge from behind the curtain but rather "from among the people" night after night to perform their stories—to use László Gerold's beautiful metaphor—in the "motherland which means the world."<sup>21</sup> And in doing so, they "share a common destiny" with their audience. In this way, the micro-communities of Hungarians in Vojvodina become visible during shared events, strengthening their identity-affirming bonds. Addressing the audience becomes equivalent to, and even more emphasised than, the dialogue of the dramatic characters. The space of the performances extends beyond the stage, encompassing the audience as

<sup>20</sup> "Give everything back to the Hungarians!"

<sup>21</sup> GEROLD László, „Színházi napló”, *Híd* 56, no. 9 (1992): 702–705, 704.

well. This opens up to cultural, political, and magical forms imbued with content, such as “gathering, feasting, and ritual.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, “ethnicity-related identity is also just a construct, which becomes understandable through the practical application of certain categories.”<sup>23</sup> So, the shared sense of origin, much like identity, is not inherently given but is actualized in specific situations, “the worldview, or rather the means of self-representation in the world.”<sup>24</sup>

In the performances of the Tanyaszínház, one can observe how successive political systems generated social issues that also affected minorities. These issues are not presented as historical facts but rather as everyday realities on stage. The productions serve as prisms that directly reflect social experiences back to the community. From the history of the company's performances, one can discern the infinitely complex narratives of self-definition for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, spanning from the late 1970s to the present day. And, if we were to summarise, in these narratives we encounter the image of the apolitical common man, vulnerable to the mechanisms of power at any given time. This individual, faced with failure, either resigns from public engagement or never even participates in the majority discourse. As a result, they remain nearly invisible while history rushes overhead.

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<sup>22</sup> LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> PAPP Z. Attila, „Kisebbségi identitáskonstrukciók a kettős magyar állampolgárság által”, *Regio* 22, no. 1 (2014): 118–155, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



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## The Danse Macabre of “Democratic Dictatorship”: Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* in State-Socialist Hungary

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN

**Abstract:** Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* was first staged in a professional theatre in Hungary with considerable delay. The production opened in Szolnok in 1978, thirteen years after the world premiere of the play in Warsaw. “Mrożek had not been allowed to get onto our stages for years,” wrote Grácia Kerényi, the Hungarian translator of *Tango*, with surprising openness in 1978, thus highlighting the discredited status of the play in the cultural policy of the Kádár regime. However, it is a mistake that the premiere in Szolnok in 1978 was the national premiere of *Tango*, even if it was advertised as such on the playbill. Mrożek’s three-act play already had some production history on Hungarian stages, as it had been presented to audiences on several occasions before. Therefore, we cannot talk about a national premiere in the case of the production in Szolnok, but only about the first fully staged performance of the play in a professional theatre in Hungary. But this production still lives strongly in cultural memory. The essay outlines the reasons for this high status and analyses István Paál’s *mise-en-scène* according to the so-called Philther method.

### *Context of the performance in theatre culture*

Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* was first staged in a professional theatre in Hungary with considerable delay. The production opened in Szolnok in 1978, thirteen years after the world premiere of the play in Warsaw. The first Hungarian *Tango* was born in a small but nationally renowned theatre workshop, which, together with the theatres of Kaposvár and Kecskemét, was referred to as “a place of pilgrimage for enthusiastic lovers of thea-

tre.”<sup>1</sup> Of the ten professional theatres operating outside the capital, these three institutions attracted special attention. Almost all of their premieres were reviewed in national newspapers, and the best ones were shown in Budapest as well as in other major cities of the country, thanks to the extensive performance touring system. *Tango* also toured from Szolnok to the capital, and its performances at the Madách Theatre gained overwhelming success. However, the fifteen-minute standing ovation was fueled not only by the outstanding *mise-en-scène* and acting but also by the euphoric joy of sharing the experience of a play finally released on a professional stage.

“Mrożek had not been allowed to get onto our stages for years,” wrote Grácia Kerényi, the Hungarian translator of *Tango*, with surprising openness in 1978, thus highlighting the discredited status of the play in the cultural policy of the Kádár regime.<sup>2</sup> *Tango* attracted the attention of Hungarian theatre people already a year after its birth, and the Thália Theatre in Budapest planned to stage it. However, the evaluation of the 1964–1965 season by the Ministry of Culture listed Mrożek’s drama among those plays that “are not necessary for us but can help the artistic experimentation of our thea-

<sup>1</sup> SÜLYÖK László, „Az elődök örökébe lépni: Beszélgetés Kerényi Imrével, a szolnoki Szigligeti Színház igazgató-főrendezőjével”, *Nógrád*, 1978. okt. 8., 9. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> KERÉNYI Grácia, „A fordító ajánlása”, in *Tangó*, ed. DURÓ Győző, 116–118 (Szolnok: Szigligeti Színház–Verseghegy Ferenc Megyei Könyvtár, 1978), 117.

tres”.<sup>3</sup> The document, dated June 11, 1965, further states that the Theatre Arts Council dealt with “controversial plays” as well and classified *Tango* as “not proposed.” While all of the plays mentioned with *Tango* (such as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*) were staged within one to three years, the first professional production of *Tango* had to wait another thirteen years.

However, the fact that the premiere in Szolnok in 1978, was advertised as the national premiere of *Tango*, is a mistake, which was subsequently taken over by several newspapers and periodicals. Mrožek’s three-act play already had some production history on Hungarian stages, as it had been presented to audiences on several occasions before. It could be first heard at two stage readings organised by TIT (Tudományos Ismeretterjesztő Társulat, a kind of open university) on October 24, 1966, in Budapest,<sup>4</sup> and then by the National Theatre of Miskolc on May 5, 1967. The article reporting on the latter event even mentioned that the National Theatre of Miskolc intended to stage the play during the next season as “an experimental performance,” but this did not happen. However, an amateur company in the capital in the 1970s, staged *Tango*, and the Metro Stage played it for years. When they presented it at the third Budapest Amateur Theatre Festival in 1977, many critics considered that “the glory of discovery” was worthy of recognition, but the director could not find actors equal to his concept because some of them “could not cope with the extremely difficult task”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> IMRE Zoltán and RING Orsolya, eds., *Szigorúan bizalmas: Dokumentumok a Nemzeti Színház Kádár-kori történetéhez* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2010), 146.

<sup>4</sup> The event was heralded in *Esti Hírlap* on October 19, 1966, in seven short lines on page 2 of the newspaper.

<sup>5</sup> SZÁLE László, „Fél van”, *Népművelés* 24, no. 12 (1977): 28–31, 31.

Since there had been several stage readings and amateur theatre performances of *Tango* before 1978, we cannot talk about a national premiere in the case of the production in Szolnok, but only about the first fully staged performance of the play in a professional theatre in Hungary. In the rather rigid and controlled system of Hungarian repertory theatres of the time, “the deservedly world-famous piece of Mrožek was first given the green light”.<sup>6</sup> The Polish Theatre and Music Days, which took place nationwide between December 1 and 10, 1978, certainly played a major role in it since it provided an excellent opportunity for the premiere in Szolnok. As part of a rich series of events, not only various works of important Polish directors such as Andrzej Wajda and Krystian Lupa arrived in Hungary, but Hungarian theatres also staged plays by well-known Polish dramatists such as Gombrowicz and Słowacki. Among the many guest performances, there was a triptych of one-act plays by Mrožek in the production of the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, and Állami Bábszínház (the State Puppet Theatre of Hungary) produced a masked play based on Mrožek’s *Striptease*. The premiere of *Tango* in Szolnok blended into the rich programme, certainly not unnoticed but without becoming outrageous, since the theatre of Dunaújváros presented *The Party* by Mrožek a day earlier and the theatre of Veszprém produced *The Emigrants* a month and a half later. Thus, the season undertook Mrožek’s legitimacy in Hungary, albeit covertly, but the memories of *Tango* in Szolnok proved to be particularly enduring.

However, this series of events could not make people forget the more than one-decade delay in the first full professional staging of *Tango*. As an author of the best-known literary weekly stated, “if the play were presented to Hungarian audiences ten years ago, it would have felt like a real novel-

<sup>6</sup> FABIÁN László, „Legenda egy színházról: A szolnoki évad”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 23, no. 24 (1979): 8–11, 10.

ty, an intellectual excitement. But now it felt like an old dream that had come true. This is not the real thing anymore."<sup>7</sup> This statement does not contradict the fact that István Paál's *mise-en-scène* was really sensational. At the same time, it highlights the futility of the frequently used procedure of state-socialist cultural policy to reduce the subversive force of a phenomenon so that it would lose its relevance by banning it for years. After all, "what happens [...] if a work of art does not reach the public in time? In the case of *Tango*, the value of the play has appreciably risen,"<sup>8</sup> wrote the aforementioned critic, referring to the astonishing tumult surrounding the guest performances of *Tango* at the Madách Theatre. This means that, despite the loss of topicality, the reputation of certain works of art released to the public increased significantly after the ban, in many cases regardless of their aesthetic quality. This reputation (growing for nearly a decade and a half) tacitly gave the premiere of *Tango* exceptional status, but it was not only hype that made Mrožek's play viable in Szolnok in 1978. Rather, its director was "able to bring the questions implied by the play to the level of today's public life, meaning that this strange »family drama« was not foreign to the audience at all."<sup>9</sup>

#### *Dramatic text, dramaturgy*

István Paál's *mise-en-scène* avoided the cul-de-sacs of both bourgeois humanist and Marxist interpretations. Paál barely modified the dramatic text, but by tuning it, he raised very topical questions. Although *Tango* was not allowed to be staged in a professional theatre for a long time, the Hungarian press extensively wrote about it. The July 1967 issue of the literary magazine *Nagyvilág* pub-

lished a Hungarian translation of the play, and this translation also came out in a collection of modern Polish dramas a year later. Meanwhile, short news about some of the productions of *Tango* in Düsseldorf, London, Paris, etc. was continuously published in various newspapers, and Hungarian-language periodicals in Transylvania and Vojvodina also reviewed the Yugoslav and Romanian premieres. When Mrožek's play was republished by the Szigligeti Theatre and the county library in 1978 as the play text of the production in Szolnok, *Tango* was already fully known in Hungary as well.

This publication makes it clear that only marginal changes were made to the text of *Tango* in Szolnok. This is partly due to the fact that Mrožek's precisely structured dramatic text does not seem to require or allow for deeper transformation. On the other hand, those major revisions that began to form a visible trend in Hungarian theatre after 1989 and started around the mid-1980s were still unknown. István Paál's *Tango* retained the original division of the play; it was performed with two intermissions, but its genre became more concrete. While in the Hungarian editions *Tango* is merely called "drama in three acts," the playbill advertised it as a tragicomedy in Szolnok, and the critics of the production unfolded the dramaturgical background of this modality. The concretization of the genre also shows that the director set *Tango* in accordance with the sensitivities of the 1970s in Hungary and suggested in several ways that it was our own tragicomedy, so it was "meant to mean the fate of us all."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Paál did not share those interpretations that diminished the subversive force of *Tango*, although the play easily offers itself to a conventional approach that was first developed in one of Péter Nádas's articles. As an employee of *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, Nádas reviewed

<sup>7</sup> BOLGÁR György, „Tangók”, *Élet és Irodalom* 23, no. 21 (1979): 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> NÁRAY István, „Lengyel dráma – magyar színház”, *Színház* 12, no. 6 (1979): 14–20, 17.

<sup>10</sup> ZAPPE László, „Történelem a színpadon: Jegyzetek új bemutatókhoz”, *Népszabadság*, 1979. febr. 4., 13.

contemporary Polish theatre in the summer of 1968 and devoted a separate article to the highly successful Warsaw performance of *Tango*. According to Nádas, the spectator identifies with Arthur and follows the events with the gaze of an actor, who does not seem to play but lives his role. So the audience sees the plot “with the clear gaze of a young man who begins the ‘first act’ by saying that he cannot ‘live in such a world’.”<sup>11</sup> Arthur is “pure, beautiful, and relatable, as pure and likeable as our best ideals, the ideals that mankind has been working to realise for thousands of years”.<sup>12</sup> He wants order in the world and the right to rebel, but he cannot find a way to do this according to his own ideas, so he sometimes wanders into fascism or into traditions that he himself denies. The first two acts tell the story of Arthur’s rebellion, and the third act shows the order achieved: the perfect petty bourgeoisie created “by the violence of goodness.” But this is not what Arthur wanted; there is a gap between his intention and the reality he created, and it is in this void that fascist dictatorship is conceived: Edek kills the boy and then dances tango with Uncle Eugenius in Arthur’s clothes. According to Nádas, Mrožek conjures world history into “the life of a family, living in Nowhere Land” and makes the “European historical scheme of the first half of the century, humanism fighting fascism and fascism fighting humanism” our lives.<sup>13</sup>

*Tango* also gave way easily to a Marxist interpretation that can be read in the programme notes of the Polish Theatre and Music Days and in an article in the local newspaper in Szolnok. According to the former text (by an unknown author), Stomil, the father, and Eleanor, the mother, represent an anarchist desire for freedom, which trans-

gresses all traditions and moral values. Grandma Eugenia and Uncle Eugene are representatives of the homage to rebellion that has degenerated into fashion. Arthur embodies a young generation torn by this turmoil, for whom all that remains is rebellion against rebellion. Arthur’s tragicomedy consists in the fact that he “cannot oppose freedom that has become formless and meaningless” to a new idea, which implicitly means that he will not reach socialism. Arthur’s gaining power is “merely a revival of old conventions,” meaning (implicitly again) that his rebellion is retrograde and logically ends in brute force.<sup>14</sup> According to this approach, *Tango* is a play of ideologically incorrect awakening and aimless rebellion. The article of the local newspaper in Szolnok wove the leitmotif of Marxist literary criticism into this approach, not concealing the fact that *Tango* reveals the absurdity of human and social nonsense. According to the critic, however, the play does so with a noble sense of responsibility for Man, a belief in solid moral values, and the changeability of the world.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the critic made a perceptible effort to integrate the play and its performance into state-socialist theatre culture. While both texts described the characters as mouthpieces of ideas and representatives of attitudes, István Eörsi noticed with keen eyes that no one can be simply identified with anyone or anything in the play; Edek, for example, can be as much a Hitler parody as a janitor parody. This is because “reality always lurks behind the absurdity of *Tango*, so spectators, readers, and amateur and professional experts can never enjoy unambiguous decipherment”.<sup>16</sup> One of the most signif-

<sup>11</sup> NÁDAS Péter, „Lengyel színház (1) Pótszék-ről: Mrožek”, *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, 1968. júl. 25., 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Lengyel Színházi és Zenei Napok: 1978. december 1–10* (Budapest: A Magyar Színházi Intézet kiadványa, 1978), 48–49.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. VALKÓ Mihály, „A »baromember« tangója”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1978. dec. 10., 7.

<sup>16</sup> EÖRSI István, „A Nagyvilágban olvastam: *Tangó*”, *Élet és Irodalom* 11, no. 32 (1967): 7.



icant Hungarian literary critics of the time also referred to this when he described Mrožek's masterpiece as "fickle, ambiguous, and even contradictory at certain points, despite the mathematical precision of its structure."<sup>17</sup>

István Paál did not use simple identifications either but continued to dissect recurring themes of his *mise-en-scènes*, and the conceptual gravity of his *Tango* lay in the very topicality of the implicit questions formulated through stage events. What does freedom mean if it can really become so "formless and meaningless" that a new idea has to be challenged? Why does the will for freedom always turn into terror and violence? Why does a regime that promotes the idea of freedom end up in a (proletarian) dictatorship? And how does a legitimate uprising against it become a "counter-revolution"? If terror shatters everything anyway, what is the value of any rebellion? What are we to make of a situation in which the former revolutionaries (today the maintainers of an absurd regime) have grown old and complacent and have become opportunistic and cowardly submissive? And how can you be leftist when some people monopolise leftism? More broadly, what idea can be opposed to institutionalised socialism? Can something different be developed against a sclerotic model? Paál's *Tango* in Szolnok carried the opposition inherent in these questions with the same openness as its director's works made five to ten years earlier at the legendary University Stage of Szeged. His *mise-en-scène* in 1978 also highlights the fact that there was hardly another theatre director in the state-socialist Hungarian theatre of the 1970s and 1980s who posed the complex questions of power, freedom, and revolution in such a maniacal and multifaceted way as István Paál.

### Staging

*Tango* was regarded by contemporary critics as Paál's best work to date and, 25 years later, in retrospective theatre history as one of the four peaks of the director's oeuvre.<sup>18</sup> *Tango* was a text-based and actor-centric *mise-en-scène*; it enforced the effects of the dialogues through the actors' work. It made maximum use of the character comedy inherent in the play, but it also elaborated on the frequently changing situations and made them realistic. Paál did not concretize space and time outside of the here and now and followed Mrožek's stage directions only partially. Although some elements of the long description at the beginning of the dramatic text could be seen on the stage, they did not show an emphatically old-fashioned bourgeois salon. The plot did not start "according to the rules of bourgeois drama" in Szolnok either, and the bier, the main element of the set, did not become visible in the course of the first act, although it was from the beginning.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the stage did not depict a strange apartment as a whole but only partially incorporated some of its components while revealing itself as a bare stage and its connection to the rest of the theatre building. The performance extended to the auditorium since the actors sometimes arrived or left through its doors, and this became just as important a means of breaking down the distance from the action as the lack of a curtain covering the stage. "The destruction of the virtual wall between the stage and the auditorium" had become a constant feature of Paál's works by this time,<sup>20</sup> but in the case of *Tango* it was supplemented by the fact that the audience could catch sight of the dominant colours of the production, red and black, already in the foyer. Furthermore, dur-

<sup>17</sup> TARJÁN Tamás, „Sławomir Mrožek: *Tangó*”, *Kritika* 8, no. 1 (1979): 32–33, 33.

<sup>18</sup> DURÓ Győző, „Az életmű csúcsai”, *Színház* 36, no. 8 (2003): 6–10.

<sup>19</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrožek: *Tangó*”, 32.

<sup>20</sup> NÁRAY István, „Partizánattitűd”, *Színház* 36, no. 8 (2003): 2–6, 3.

ing the intervals and even after the curtain call, music played from the speakers, which “fits *Tango* and distances you from it at the same time”.<sup>21</sup> These things not only hindered the complete simulation of reality but also pushed the performance towards the present, as Paál “articulated the social experiences of the past two decades into the production with the passion of the participant.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Paál and his actors/actresses managed to make the characters of *Tango* familiar in relation to the everyday lives of the spectators with the same “analytical critical consistency” that had determined Paál’s staging of Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf* two months earlier.<sup>23</sup>

However, at the beginning and end of *Tango*, the *mise-en-scène* used a purely visual approach that astoundingly suspended all familiarity and made ambiguity irrepressible. The epitome of the staging became the opening and closing scenes, which were different from the rest of the play, and after nearly half a century, based solely on some descriptions and later reminiscences, it is no longer clear what exactly happened in them. In the prelude, eight members of the company turned up to the music of Kraftwerk, while the stagehands furnished the elements of a topsy-turvy apartment in front of the lonely bier. The actors, along with the director, who was “wearing his usual denim outfit and holding his favourite rotary pistol, slowly came forward in a line like the magnificent seven plus one man”.<sup>24</sup> Paál aimed his pistol

at the actor playing Arthur, who then showed him a book in his hands. The director hung the pistol on a door frame and went outside. A fog flooded the stage and the auditorium, and amidst the loud music, the lights of a forest of spotlights flickered behind a translucent curtain.<sup>25</sup> It is uncertain, however, whether the actors (always) said “Good evening” to the audience, or they just stopped and greeted them as if grimly. It is also unknown whether Paál held the .45 Colt to his forehead or whether he also aimed it at the spectators.

The reconstruction of the postlude seems to be much easier. As Edek was dancing with Uncle Eugene to the sounds of La Cumparsita, a skeleton descended between the two others standing on either side of the stage from the beginning of the performance. Then the stagehands emptied the stage so that only the bier that was initially visible remained. The melody of the tango was replaced by the music of Kraftwerk, and for the curtain call, each actor/actress “brought with them a portrait target painted red and black, depicting his/her contours, and put it in front of the audience.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, the main props of the opening and closing scenes were the pistol and the targets, but the events described in these two scenes did not serve clear communication. After all, in the case of the prelude, it was uncertain who came forward: the characters or the actors—that is, whether the entry of the eight people was already part of a fictional world or still part of the reality of the evening of the performance (also lived by the spectator). The actors may have been familiar to the audience from other productions, but István Paál not necessarily. Thus, not all spectators could become aware of the fact that they were seeing the director of *Tango* among his actors. And when Paál raised the pistol to his forehead—if he raised it at all—the spectator could not know whether one of the characters in the play

<sup>21</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>22</sup> PETERDI NAGY László, „Lengyel színház – magyar színház”, *Színház* 12, no. 2 (1979): 40–42, 42.

<sup>23</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>24</sup> DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10. – It is worth mentioning that John Sturges’ 1960 western, *The Magnificent Seven*, was first shown in Hungarian cinemas in March 1971, but the main cinema in Szolnok screened it for a week in the days of the premiere of *Tango* again.

<sup>25</sup> Vö. VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

<sup>26</sup> DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10.

wanted to shoot himself or someone (the director in civilian clothes) who had no role within the dramatic world of *Tango*. Furthermore, when Paál aimed the pistol at the actor playing Arthur, the spectator could not know whether a character (unknown to him/her) wanted to shoot another character, and thus the prelude foreshadowed a later event, or whether the director (István Paál) wanted to shoot the character played by the actor (Arthur), or the director (István Paál) wanted to shoot the actor (György Pogány). In short, the spectator could not know whether representation, presentation (demonstration), or self-presentation were taking place.<sup>27</sup> The opening and closing scenes thus left the audience uncertain as to their specific meaning, and we have no information about the symbolic meaning the spectators of the 1978 evenings created in their place. However, it is clear from István Paál's memoirs what he himself created, as he saw "*the pure desire for self-destruction*" in these scenes, especially in the imitation of shooting himself.<sup>28</sup> We also have the symbolic meaning created by a contemporary theatre expert: the warning of the danger of terror through an apt metaphor.<sup>29</sup> And we know the explanation of a contemporary theatre critic: the demonstration of "the personal nature of the performance" in the sense that "*it is about us.*"<sup>30</sup> To this, we can add the exegesis of another critic, i.e. "the young man [Arthur] must perish"<sup>31</sup> and that of a former colleague who re-

calls his memories: "the intelligentsia is an eternal target and an eternal loser against the philistines".<sup>32</sup> This dispersion of interpretations illustrates the futility of the attempt to wrap an openly uncommunicable meaning in an image and expect the spectators to decipher it unanimously. It is no wonder that the prelude and postlude of *Tango* caused some confusion in the audience, although the questions that presumably inadvertently popped up in the spectators may have provided a good basis for understanding Paál's approach to theatre, which was not fundamentally interested in answering but posing questions.

By 1978, István Paál's physical appearance in his own *mise-en-scène* had become as much a part of his "Formenkanon" (Einar Schlee) as his use of ludic images as a framework. It had nothing to do with the incorporation of the author-director's personality into a theatre event, as in the case of Tadeusz Kantor, nor with some kind of epic theatricality, i.e. the indication of the artificial and created nature of the performance. Rather, it was about breaking the distinction between theatre and social existence and making it clear that what we claim in the world into which we have entered is about and applies to the world from which we have come from. Therefore, many people rightly perceived the director's "sum of all his work" in *Tango*.<sup>33</sup> After all, Paál's productions had previously dealt with "revolutions of different kinds" and the relationship between freedom and submission; then in his three *mise-en-scènes* in Szolnok prior to *Tango*,<sup>34</sup> the examination of vulnerability and manipulation came to the fore, and now, in the staging of Mrožek's masterpiece, these two were closely linked.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Andreas KOTTE, *Theaterwissenschaft* (Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2005), 189–201.

<sup>28</sup> BÉRCZES László, *A végnek végéig: Paál István* (Budapest: Cégér Kiadó, 1995), 113. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>29</sup> Elżbieta WYSIŃSKA, "A magyar rendezői színház lengyel szemmel", *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 7 (1979): 1076–1079, 1078.

<sup>30</sup> BOGÁCSI Erzsébet, "Tangó a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban", *Magyar Nemzet*, 1979. febr. 7., 4. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>31</sup> VALKÓ, "A »baromember« tangója", 7.

<sup>32</sup> DURÓ, "Az életmű csúcsai", 10.

<sup>33</sup> BOGÁCSI, "Tangó...", 4.

<sup>34</sup> *The Cabal of Hypocrites* by Bulgakov, *The Visit* by Dürrenmatt and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* by Albee.

<sup>35</sup> BOGÁCSI, "Tangó...", 4.

## Acting

The acting in *Tango* did not differ from the realism that served as the vernacular of Hungarian theatre at the time, but it was free from any exaggeration. Although some elements of the absurd were tempted to it, farce did not prevail, and the actors/actresses succeeded in a sophisticated role-playing that delved into the psyches of the characters but remained "playfully uninhibited."<sup>36</sup> Many critics noted the lightness that distinguished the performance, and they enthusiastically drew verbal portraits of the characters the actors had created.

The press described István Fonyó as outstanding in the role of the once rebellious, now idle father, who became ridiculous while walking half-naked in unbuttoned pyjamas without ever falling out of the seriousness of the character.<sup>37</sup> Fonyó's acting greatly contributed to the fact that situations that started out tragic sometimes unexpectedly turned into comedy, and Stomil's "faux-anti-conformism mocking faux-Marxists" created a figure familiar to the audience.<sup>38</sup> Critics judged György Pogány's Arthur, "this sensitive Hamlet as a medical student",<sup>39</sup> less unanimously, and following Jan Kott, they portrayed him as a modern Shakespearean hero. Pogány's acting was based on temper, with which he was able to convey both the misfortune and the lack of compromise of the play's ideologue as well as his fanaticism.<sup>40</sup> He made impatience and anger the basic traits of a man of principles without

hesitation,<sup>41</sup> so his Arthur almost imperceptibly became the "novice domestic tyrant"<sup>42</sup> who spouted on top of a table until Edek knocked him down with a single blow.<sup>43</sup> Since Pogány was considered the problematic centre of gravity of the production, "it was not the rude lackey who defeated the hot-tempered university student, but the stronger actor defeated the weaker one" in the end.<sup>44</sup>

Although the female characters are overshadowed by the dramatic text, the performances of the three actresses of *Tango* in Szolnok were highlighted by critics. The acting of Ági Margitai, who drew attention to the immorality of the mother by subtle means, was called a "stylistic masterpiece,"<sup>45</sup> and the somewhat grotesque mimicry and sloppy movements that characterised the actress were considered perfectly suited to the figure of Eleanor.<sup>46</sup> Klári Falvai was also praised for the grotesqueness embodied in the role of Eugenia, who, "wearing tennis shoes for her dress with a long train," fought an endless card battle with Edek.<sup>47</sup> The actress played the grandmother at the age of 39, but was able to convey "not only the oppressed, crappy old woman of the family, but also the wise irony of old age"<sup>48</sup> and did not shy away from using more extreme means. Even with less extreme means, Dorottya Udvaros became "one of the most bril-

<sup>41</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> As a critic put it neatly, Arthur's „pursuit ends in the same way as his predecessors: the barren reign of Edek's terror. Arthur himself will be a knocked-down victim of his own *democratic dictatorship*”. RAJK András, „Színházi esték”, *Népszava*, 1978. dec. 15., 6. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>44</sup> SAÁD Katalin, „A *Tangó* szerepei”, *Színház* 12, no. 3 (1979): 26–29, 28.

<sup>45</sup> VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

<sup>46</sup> BOGÁCSI, „*Tangó...*”, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

<sup>36</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> -kd-, „Az ész megáll, a vadállat uralkodik: Mrożek *Tangója* a szolnokiak produkciójában”, *Dunaújvárosi Hírlap*, 1979. márc. 9., 5.

<sup>39</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>40</sup> VÁNCSA István, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna: Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház: *Tangó*”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 22, no. 51 (1978): 8.

liant surprises of the production"<sup>49</sup> and portrayed the most normal member of the family in the role of Ala, the niece. Most critics emphasised her deep flirtatiousness, charming femininity, and almost queenly elegance. Rather than using the stereotype of a simple-minded lass, Udvaros caricatured stereotypical feminine logic<sup>50</sup> and revealed the carefully thought-out nature of her portrayal as she paired provocative, self-indulgent behaviour with gloomy emotions.

Wearing a black suit with shorts and dancing tango with Edek in the finale, János Pákozdy drew with sharp contours the course that Uncle Eugene runs during the three acts. The first likeable "old boy" almost imperceptibly becomes a "spineless rogue serving the ruling power".<sup>51</sup> Dénes Újlaki's Edek became an "acting hit"<sup>52</sup> by allowing the closemouthed figure of the lover playing cards in a family circle and then the obedient servant, who unobtrusively exerted his influence more and more threateningly on the others, to exploit the great opportunity in a single moment and unscrupulously seize power. Although critics referred to the "lumpen beast born of the people,"<sup>53</sup> "the dictatorship of brute force"<sup>54</sup> and "a terrifying portrait of plebs"<sup>55</sup> in connection with Edek, it was elegance and economy that predominated in Újlaki's acting. His extreme accuracy also created the terrifying atmosphere of the closing tango, with Uncle Eugene's body almost collapsing in his arms, squeezed into the rhythm. Which was "like making a bear dance. But here the bear was leading."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> SAÁD, „A *Tangó* szerepei”, 28.

<sup>50</sup> -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

<sup>53</sup> -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

<sup>54</sup> TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

<sup>55</sup> BOGÁCSI, „*Tangó*...”, 4.

<sup>56</sup> MÉSZÁROS Tamás, „Sok nagyszerű, fontos merény...”, *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 12 (1979): 1866–1871, 1866.

### *Stage design and sound*

The stage of *Tango* did not allow the spatial and temporal separation of events from the present and reduced the environment required by the dramatic text to its most necessary components. The set of the performance was designed by László Najmányi, who was a significant artist of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde and created performances (with László Rajk and Tibor Hajas, among others) under the auspices of the István Kovács Studio from 1971 onward. In 1975, Najmányi became the set and costume designer of the National Theatre of Pécs, where he participated in several productions by István Paál, including *Caligula* and *King Ubu*. He probably signed for Szolnok at Paál's encouragement in the summer of 1978, but a year later he emigrated to Paris, from where he moved to Canada, and then to the United States. His set design for Mrożek's play was thus one of his last works in Hungary before his emigration. The set of *Tango* aimed at eliminating the milieu, using the selective realism familiar from Brecht, but omitting those components (half curtain, etc.) that define the politics of epic theatre. Najmányi's simple design was also connected to the *mise-en-scènes* of Paál's earlier period, since the productions of the University Stage of Szeged also reduced the set elements and props to a minimum.

At the world premiere of *Tango* in Warsaw, three people were sitting at the table of a salon, which was (as in Mrożek's stage directions) "indescribably chaotic" when the curtain rose.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the Polish production was based on the stage design and the exposition familiar from bourgeois theatre, made its conventions an expectation, and triggered its perceptual mechanism. *Tango* in Szolnok did not use the curtain of the theatre, and the audience was not faced with confusion. In the middle, a single bier stood in a glass cage between candles, but the can-

<sup>57</sup> NÁDAS, „Lengyel színház...”, 2.



dles were not burning. At the beginning of the production, the empty stage elevated the drama to an almost metaphysical level, since “the infinity of the starry sky was shining” in the background, where only the bier stood and a forest of spotlights were placed behind it.<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, the elements introduced in the prelude made this setting more concrete but did not represent a real place. The interior place of the plot was indicated by a simple door frame, and the flat of Stomil’s family was indicated by an old table, a couple of bentwood chairs, an armchair, a screen, a pram, and a bird cage. Avoiding naturalistic details, the equipment was reduced to the very essential objects, and the auditorium, whose doors were often used for the entry and exit of the actors/actresses, provided maximum room for the plot. With minimal visual evocation of the disarray in which Arthur’s rebellion takes place, the set seemed “funnily abstract”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the set created an almost “surrealist atmosphere”, since it “turned into a closed circle [by the second act] from which one cannot exit, even if there are no walls to prevent this exit”.<sup>60</sup> (As if Paál crossed Mrožek’s play with Buñuel’s 1962 film, *The Exterminating Angel*.) In addition, the scene was created with undisguised theatricality, in front of the spectators’ eyes (by the stagehands during the prelude), and it was also removed in front of the spectator’s eyes (in the postlude), leaving only the actors’ red and black targets with the seemingly immovable bier. Meanwhile, Edek and Uncle Eugene started to dance tango and then “plunged into infinity as the lights artistically went out”.<sup>61</sup>

The costumes did not change the requirements of the dramatic text as spectacu-

larly as the set, and critics paid little attention to them, apart from some of their striking components. However, the dresses designed by Nelly Vágó were described as “inventive in their details,”<sup>62</sup> “tailored to the characters,”<sup>63</sup> and “delightfully ironic.”<sup>64</sup> Acoustic effects based on Kraftwerk, i.e. on utterly contemporary music, in addition to the obligatory La Cumparsita, were described by critics as “well-timed and intensified.”<sup>65</sup> László Najmányi may have taken part in finding the appropriate music for the production too, since he was one of the founders of Spions in 1977, a punk band that gave a musical snapshot of the conditions in “Nirvania” at three troubled concerts. Twenty years later, Najmányi described these conditions as “total enervation, constant waiting, total immorality, which I began to realise at that time, and which sometimes still outrage me.”<sup>66</sup>

#### *Impact and posterity*

Although there was an undisguised professional consensus in the assessment that the Szigligeti Theatre “created a performance of European standard,”<sup>67</sup> the reception of *Tan-*

<sup>62</sup> BOGÁCSI, „Tangó...”, 4.

<sup>63</sup> RAJK András, „Színházi esték”, *Népszava*, 1978. dec. 15., 6.

<sup>64</sup> VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

<sup>65</sup> RAJK, „Színházi esték”, 6.

<sup>66</sup> MARTON László Távolodó, „Tilost csinálni. Jegyzőkönyv: Najmányi László a Kolibri Pincében”, *Balkon* 6 (1998): 7–8, 10–15, 12. – To put it another way, Nirvania was „par excellence the place of insignificance, which is only worth abandoning, from which it is only worth running away, fleeing; the key to departure and escape to cultural, moral and artistic survival, i.e. *condition humaine*.” K. HORVÁTH Zsolt, „A gyűlölet múzeuma: Spions, 1977–1978”, *Korall* 11, no. 39 (2010): 119–144, 137.

<sup>67</sup> BORS Edit, „Mrožek: *Tangó*: Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház”, *Pesti Műsor*, 1979. jan. 31., 51.

<sup>58</sup> DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10.

<sup>59</sup> VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

<sup>60</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Darabválasztás és kompromisszum”, *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 4 (1979): 587–595, 591.

<sup>61</sup> MÉSZÁROS, „Sok nagyszerű, fontos mérénny...”, 1866.

*go* in Szolnok was built on silence: its aesthetic qualities were highly appreciated, but the issues it raised in relation to contemporary public life were all circumvented. The production was immediately canonised by critics, who were unanimously enthused about writing about it and stated that "István Paál's *mise-en-scène* made the premiere an event in theatre history."<sup>68</sup> To confirm this opinion, they also quoted the statement of some Polish theatre experts who watched the production in Szolnok and defined it as "one of the best of the twenty *Tangos* they saw."<sup>69</sup> In the meantime, the production toured in various Hungarian cities, and the guest performance in Budapest was a particularly memorable success. Two evening performances of *Tango* were announced at the Madách Theatre, but due to the great interest, a third performance starting at 10.30 p.m. had to be scheduled on the second day. One of the reviewers wrote about "a long-close combat at the box office"<sup>70</sup> and István Paál mentioned the mounted police standing on the boulevard in front of the theatre in connection with the legendary performance late at night.<sup>71</sup> It is partly due to this that the production still lives strongly in cultural memory.

However, the reason for the special status of the premiere in Szolnok can only be slightly deduced from the press, as "the authorities changed tactics: they did not ban the production, but 'did not advise' the publication of reviews about it either. Only a few articles that gave information, rather than real criticism, received publicity, and the most important journal, *Színház*, could only publish an analysis of the actors' performances."<sup>72</sup> What kind of undocumented political debates Paál's *Tango* may have generated in the offices and corridors of the party com-

mittee can be guessed from an article published in *Népszabadság* two months after the premiere. According to the official newspaper of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the production in Szolnok leaves no doubt that "it is about ideological issues, more precisely *about the question of ideology*. Whether ideology is good for something or makes some sense, power belongs to brute force anyway and the struggle of principals only creates upheaval, confusion, and helplessness."<sup>73</sup> Although the article revealed what its author believed to be the statement of the production, it was not motivated by the purpose of denunciation but by the reflection on the uselessness of silence. Applying the usual phraseology of the newspaper without orthodoxy, the article focused on the "disillusionment expressed in symbols and ideas" of a generation whose chagrin "is not the result of manipulation with counter-revolutionary aims... it is a fact, the feeling of a part of a generation."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, it is just as wrong to neglect it as to contrast the basic tenets of Marxism with the spirit and view of history of some incriminated productions in order to "curse them from our stages."<sup>75</sup> The article argues that in order for the "orientation apparatus of our intellectual life" to function properly, theatre critics should provide "relevant, substantive analyses" of these productions, which may give false or extreme answers, but ask real questions. And "just as excommunication does not help to clarify anything... it is equally futile if our criticism is modestly silent about the problems that are repeated quite loudly in our theatres."<sup>76</sup> After nearly half a century, it is clear that this proposal was rejected and no further progress was made. And some theatre productions of the next decade raised the dilemmas of the almost

<sup>68</sup> VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

<sup>69</sup> RAJK, „Színházi esték”, 6.

<sup>70</sup> BOLGÁR, „Tangók”, 5.

<sup>71</sup> BÉRCZES, *A végnek végéig*, 113.

<sup>72</sup> NÁRAY, „Partizánattitűd”, 5.

<sup>73</sup> ZAPPE, „Történelem a színpadon...”, 13. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

unbearable nature of existence in the Kádár regime even louder.

Even after the premiere in Szolnok, the reception of *Tango* on the Hungarian stage was not uncomplicated at all. In the 1984–1985 season, the Ministry of Culture did not consent to its staging at the National Theatre but did not object to its premiere at the Pesti Theatre, indicating that they were paying close attention to the rehearsals.<sup>77</sup> (At the same time, two other plays by Mrožek were not allowed to be staged.) The other three premieres of *Tango* before the regime change were not a patch on Paál's *mise-en-scène*, nor did they come close to it in their impact. Most of the premieres after 1989 either played *Tango* as a farce or tamed it, making it politically impotent. The subversive nature inherent in Paál's approach became exploitable again when a regime offered a good basis for a less heartening examination of the problems of individuality, community, power, past, and present. In the context of the so-called System of National Cooperation,<sup>78</sup> László Bagossy's 2012 *mise-en-scène* at the Örkény Theatre, Budapest raised questions eerily similar to the production in Szolnok 34 years earlier and recalled to the audience's memories a famous line of Géza Bereményi (songwriter) and Tamás Cseh (singer), that "tango is still fashionable today."

#### *Details of the production*

*Title:* Tango. *Date of premiere:* December 1, 1978. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* István Paál. *Author:* Sławomir Mrožek.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. IMRE and RING, eds., *Szigorúan bizalmas*, 436–437.

<sup>78</sup> The System of National Cooperation (In Hungarian: Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere, abbrev. NER) is the network of political and cultural institutions and private corporations closely aligned with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and with the national-conservative FIDESZ party in Hungary.

*Translator:* Grácia Kerényi. *Set designer:* László Najmányi. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó; *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Klári Falvay (Eugenia, the grandmother), János Pákozdy (Eugene, her younger brother), István Fonyó (Stomil, the father), Ági Margitai (Eleanor, the mother), György Pogány (Arthur, the son), Dorottya Udvaros (Ala, the niece), Dénes Újlaki (Edek).

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## The Urban Theatre of the Present. The 40 Years of the Katona József Theatre

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI

**Abstract:** Katona József Theatre closed its 40<sup>th</sup> season on June 16, 2023. Director Gábor Máté said that “the entire staff at the Katona József Theatre can be proud that, despite the ongoing economic difficulties, the 40<sup>th</sup> season was completed in a manner worthy of the institution’s roots.”<sup>1</sup> During the anniversary celebrations, I watched the performances and was haunted by the thought of taking a look at the Katona (as the people of Budapest call it) from the outside of its cultural framework and creative idiom. For forty years, the Katona has provided a most intensely stimulating discourse on artistic creation in Hungarian, with a specific theatrical idiom and a continuous self-reflective redefinition of its own status. In search of such ideas as “roots” and “worthy manner”, in this paper I juxtapose the 1982 and 2022 seasons to evaluate this complexity as it can be understood and perceived from the perspective of European urban theatre cultures.

### *Company-narrative*

The history of the Katona József Theatre is a relatively well-known story with a relatable meaning and a narrative substance<sup>2</sup> that is easy to represent. Since its first day, the

Katona’s directors have regularly articulated what kind of theatre they wanted to create. These formulations have taken the form of interviews and, in recent years, a multitude of retrospectives and public discussions. With precise and sensitive insights, the first leaders of the Katona, Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki, understood professional theatrical discourse not as a revelation but as a way of communicating ideas and using clear statements. Their third collaborator, the theatre’s all-time director, Tamás Ascher, also stands out with his analytical attitude, both in his public utterances and his non-public ones, preserved as anecdotes of the company, which define the narrative of the Katona and therefore also its aesthetics. It is due to the narrative skills of Székely, Zsámbéki, and Ascher that the Katona is able to convey a direct historical experience that confronts the past in a sensual way. The theatrical representation of historical experience initiated by the three of them is at the core of what the Katona József Theatre is: the only Hungarian theatre for many decades that has been able to weave its own events into its own narrative.

To understand this narrative, in our analysis, we should consider Székely’s and Zsámbéki’s shared college education until their graduation in 1968, their shared National Theatre *debut* in 1979, and their shared founding of a company. The political-historical process of the transformation from the National to the Katona Theatre has already been explored in a multitude of studies.<sup>3</sup> Now I

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<sup>1</sup> Katona homepage, last download: 30.08.2023,

<https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/43692-jubileumhoz-melto-sikerek-es-eredmenyek-lezartuk-a-40-evadunkat>. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Frank R. ANKERSMIT, „Truth”, in Frank R. ANKERSMIT, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, 102–126 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 124.

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<sup>3</sup> RING Orsolya, *A Nemzeti Színház-kép változásai és változatai a késői Kádár-korszakban* (Budapest: Opitz Kiadó, 2019); RING Orsolya,



will follow the process of the development of the theatrical and aesthetic phenomena<sup>4</sup> that can be perceived around the transformation between the two institutional paradigms, from that of a national theatre to that of an urban theatre. In what follows, I will mainly summarise the reflections of the three directors who founded this narrative.

### *Urban Theatre*

Let's start with the recognition that the Katona is a successful embodiment of the European urban theatre model. Its repertoire and its working procedures are familiar from all the big cities, where theatre has become a significant communal space for national and cultural movements and thus has a theatrical tradition of at least two centuries. The notion of urban theatre has been brought back into focus with the 2018 manifesto of Milo Rau and the Ghent Theatre,<sup>5</sup> although Rau and his team are taking stock of the commitments of the urban theatre of the future, which prefers a multilingual, multicultural, travelling theatre practice that uses literature as inspiration rather than as a score. The

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„25 éves az önálló Katona József Színház”, last download: 30.08.2023, [https://www.archivnet.hu/politika/25\\_eves\\_az\\_onallo\\_katona\\_jozsef\\_szinhasz.html](https://www.archivnet.hu/politika/25_eves_az_onallo_katona_jozsef_szinhasz.html); IMRE Zoltán, „Halleluja: A késő Kádár-kori szocializmus és a (nemzeti) színház keretei – A Nemzeti Színház 1981-es *Halleluja* előadása”, in IMRE Zoltán, *A nemzet színpadra állításai: A magyar nemzetiszínház-elképzelés változásának főbb momentumai 1837-től napjainkig*, 208–218 (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> FÖLDÉNYI F. László, „A színházművészet minősítésének csapdái”, in *Színházművészetünkéről*, ed. ANTAL Gábor, 180–185 (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Milo RAU, Stefan BLÄSKE, Steven HEENE and Nathalie DE BOELPAEP, „What is ‘the city theatre of the future?’”, last download: 30.08.2023, <https://www.ntgent.be/en/news/wat-is-het-stadstheater-van-de-toekomst>.

Katona is the urban theatre of the present, helping us to be “fairer to the unfortunate,” “teaching us to endure” in the face of adversity, and “working on our education” while “feeling passionate,” thus “showing us the way to civic life.”<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that we still hear most of Schiller's premise for the operation of the municipal theatre, albeit in a hushed tone, but it was basically a municipal theatre in Mannheim in the 18th century that tried out how to speak publicly about ideas within the political-power framework of the city-state.

Urban theatre in the 20th century also uses theatrical effect as a moral tool, and the Katona is a real urban theatre in this Schillerian sense. Located in the centre of Budapest, it belongs to the downtown and the nearby Danube; a geographical advantage it exploits as much as the Odéon in Paris exploits the hill, and as the Berliner Ensemble exploits the river. The Katona carries the pattern of the functions (and possibilities) of state socialist big cities, a pattern that is built on a routine of state subsidies and licencing processes of the Party and the cultural context in which artistic-aesthetic considerations tend to transform into ideological battles. For decades, the Katona has been distinctly apolitical in their manifestations, while their performances have been staging the absurdity of state socialist reality, and the repertoire is characterised mainly by the Schillerian task of *showing the way* and *teaching to endure*.

The founding of the Katona can also be seen as one of the results of the struggle for creative freedom in the secondary public sphere from 1968 onwards, since by 1982 the spread of samizdat literature was already uncontrollable and the islands of cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich SCHILLER, „Theater Considered as a Moral Institution”, trans. John SIGERSON and John CHAMBLESS, last download: 30.08.2023, [https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/trans/schil\\_theatremoral.html#related](https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/trans/schil_theatremoral.html#related).

freedom<sup>7</sup> were becoming visible. The foundation of the Katona, the breaking out from the National Theatre, thus seems to be an exercise of freedom, and the reaction of the urban public is understandable: they expected a kind of aesthetic avant-garde from a company that, breaking free from the state-controlled protocol, choosing its own repertoire, idiom, and independent communicative intent, wanted to be different from the National Theatre.<sup>8</sup>

The gesture of breaking free would also imply the abandonment of the expressive idiom of the National Theatre because the claim of independence seems incompatible with the simultaneous yet different motivational and metaphorical urge to fulfil the task of a national theatre. However, the Katona formulates itself in terms of a company and not in terms of aesthetics—a company that wants to become a working community that is free of ideological impulses and informers.<sup>9</sup> Legally, only Székely, Zsámbéki, and 32 actors left the National Theatre and moved to its Chamber Theatre in the city centre, but they were not following the pattern of the legendary splits (in Meyerhold style). The Katona became the National,<sup>10</sup> and the National functionally ceased to exist.

When the repertoire of the first season was being set up, the old successes were included among the new ones, so it is spectacular that in terms of programming policy, the

Katona put together a National season of the Székely–Zsámbéki era, which was fairly familiar, “responsibly passionate” in a Schillerian way, and which had two striking peculiarities. The first was a specificity of the founding company, which brought together the skills of three generations of actors, proving that the Katona was not a generational theatre. The other was the alliance of directors, which was not the result of power positions but of unusual and rare human relationships. The Katona is characterised by a constant willingness and desire to analyse and to create and maintain a working community through it. This continuity is a source of secure functioning and also a stylistic characteristic of the Katona: the directors keep the performance ever-present because they do not handle their work as a single instance of an event that is being prepared for premiere but as a recurring event that can be revised and reformed several times.

The communication strategy for the 40<sup>th</sup> season also reinforces that the Katona’s time is the present. And in this present, the Katona’s actors are very special, as no one else in town is surrounded by 40 years of company history anymore, so all their personal stories can be lived as company history. When in the season’s celebrations the actors recall their own events, they shape the Katona’s time and position in the city to be almost exclusive. It is not the content of these narratives, but their presence and their endless flow is what draws together the endpoints of the beginning and the present, and these rhythmically edited materials declare that this company has a path, and the task remains “to walk the path, to play honestly, to work honestly and deeply.”<sup>11</sup>

The Katona is an urban theatre that plays every night if possible, like the Bulandra in Bucharest, in as many venues as possible,

<sup>7</sup> From Tamás Fodor’s vocabulary, in SÁNDOR L. István, *Szabadságzigetek: Fodor Tamás és a Stúdió „K” története 1978-ig* (Budapest: Selinunte Kiadó, 2020), 35–37.

<sup>8</sup> SZÉKELY Gábor, „Még egyszer ilyen nem lesz”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *A Katona*, 40–55 (Budapest: Pesti Szalon Könyvkiadó, 1997), 45–46.

<sup>9</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A mai magyar színházról nyolc tételben”, *Mozgó Világ* 13, no. 3 (1987): 87–95, 88.

<sup>10</sup> NÁNY István, „Indul a Katona: Egy színházalapítás háttere”, *Beszélő* 4, no. 2. (1999): 112–114.

<sup>11</sup> SZÉKELY Gábor, „A körülmények hatalma”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *Kulisszák nélkül*, 80–89 (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1978), 85.

like the Odéon in Paris, and maintains a huge repertoire, like the Schaubühne in Berlin. In its 40<sup>th</sup> season, the company's programme included nine new productions and thirty old ones, making the whole company a constant source of entertainment. Of the 540 performances in this season, several actors appeared in a third of the performances, so they were on stage every second night. For the 40<sup>th</sup> season of the theatre, even the youngest actors of the original company members turned seventy. They were chosen by each other,<sup>12</sup> while the newcomers came from the University of Theatre and Film Arts, most of them from classes led by the founding directors and from a familiar background. The start of the 40<sup>th</sup> season was marked by the Critics' Choice Awards announcement in October 2022. The Katona won ten prizes in eight categories, with *The Dead of Kál* and *Melancholy Rooms* dominating. The theatre critics duly recognised the entry of a young generation.

In the meantime, from 2020 on, more and more political decisions are scratching the surface of artistic creation in Hungary, and after the dictatorial overtaking of the University of Theatre and Film Studies, another way of transferring knowledge must be sought. The loss of government funding puts the cost of maintaining the theatre on the city and its residents, and in this financial environment, the framework of ethos and 'core characteristic' [*milyenség*]<sup>13</sup> will change. This change will be spectacular, as it has not happened so far. It was not noticeable either with the change of the regime or with the leaving of Gábor Székely in 1989 or with the retirement of Gábor Zsámbéki as director twenty years later. Many of the performances, even some of those from the last few seasons, e.g. *The Genius*, *The Politicians*, *The Secretaries General*, built on the existence of a shared historical consciousness and the belief that the experience of history could be

understood through a shared effort. The other award-winning performances in the repertoire, however, abandon the notion of right or wrong systems of notation (Gombrich's term) and explore the possibility of diversity and multiplicity in dramaturgy, in staging, and, by extension, in theatrical composition. The milieu of the Katona continues to be built on the artistic fulfilment of the company, the acting-creating work, since its director, Gábor Máté, is also a leading actor and a member of the community.

But the 40<sup>th</sup> season's ambitious summaries, new look, professional marketing, and attractive and informative community platforms also fill a gap. The 40<sup>th</sup> season is faithful and worthy, and as such, it brings the Katona's story to a close, leaving it *in the process* of rethinking the Katona's place in the city and the questions of the future of the present urban theatre for the (perhaps prepared) coming seasons.

#### *The aesthetics of the 'core characteristic'*

Rethinking, to use the Katona's own vocabulary, refers to 'core characteristic'. The search for 'core characteristic' is the basis of the processes of creation and reception and primarily refers to the performance style but also to the construction of the narrative. In watching the 40<sup>th</sup> season of the Katona, I sought to isolate this phenomenon in its regularities.<sup>14</sup>

The 40<sup>th</sup> season promised three main-stage productions, one of which, the heavily symbolic *Twilight of the Gods*, was suddenly replaced by *The Cherry Orchard*. *Ten Eskimos* is a contemporary Hungarian drama—a well-crafted conversation piece. Kriszta Székely's *Hedda Gabler* is the only interpretive-positional piece that, while bearing the potential

<sup>12</sup> SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Gábor Zsámbéki's vocabulary.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond ARON, „L'histoire de l'homme: La recherche de la vérité”, in Raymond ARON, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire: Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique*, 423–431 (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

for great feats of acting, continues to reflect on the complexity of Ibsen's present time, obscured by the routines of social practice. The Kamra (Chamber), which opened in 1991 as an underground venue for experimentation with Péter Halász's legendary newspaper theatre, has become an Annex Theatre (not a studio) for the 40<sup>th</sup> season. Ascher's *The Genius* is a four-person play. Tarnóczy's promising *Lonely People*, instead of Hauptmann, struggles with the confinement of the black cellar. In Zsótér's Witkiewicz *Vízityúk* (*Waterfowl*), the inspirational drive of the two guests playing the lead roles is combined with the local knowledge of the company members. And the third venue, Sufni, belongs to students learning the theatrical idiom. Even in its 40<sup>th</sup> season, the Katona continues to explore the framework of ethos and spirituality that can be expressed in its performances, taking the nation, the language, and the culture as a given and not as a reference to be defined. This is why it puts together a truly national programme every year because it is the process of the company, the community, and history that arouses its interest, and it is the reordering of this triple relationship that makes it a passionate creative workshop. Each of the forty seasons shows that the organic cohesion of the company is primary and that "overly heterogeneous companies"<sup>15</sup> are dysfunctional.

The Katona's strength is the Company. At the time of its founding, its unique ability (or superstrength) was to fit the self-determined artistic practice of 1968 into the existing state-socialist framework of 1982. Consequently, the international recognition of the Katona was aided by the fact that the psychological realist mode of communication originated in the Soviet era, but the language of freedom was rooted in the European Enlightenment. The theatre's greatest touring successes, *Three Sisters* (1985), *King*

*Ubu* (1984) and *Coriolanus* (1985), carry the idiom 'core characteristic' that, according to the director's statements, consists of the following: the Katona builds on an understanding of the "ownness of the work"<sup>16</sup> and does not aspire to involve other stylistic features in its performances. Therefore, no major change has occurred in its aesthetic preferences and commitments in forty years; the playing idiom favours the "ironic, bitter, and ironic" theatrical framework, this particular kind of "truth-telling."<sup>17</sup> This logic brings about the analytical-pedagogical realisation that what happens to the actor on the stage is manifested as truth; everything else is just an illustration.<sup>18</sup> This manifestation is inherent in the *core characteristic*, since the *core characteristic* is formed within the framework of the "mentality, ethics, and taste"<sup>19</sup> shared by the company, and for this to happen, agreement on "things of the world, life, and the theatre" is indispensable.<sup>20</sup>

A further defining element of the *core characteristic* and part of the narrative construction of the Katona is that contextualization, or direct political interpretation, always comes from the viewer and is almost expected. For example, the overwhelming success of *Revizor* in 1987 is due to its metaphorical report on corruption, while the director Zsámbéki was interested in "the so-called tendency to subjugation"<sup>21</sup> in the performance. The Katona does not want to be political, says Zsámbéki; theatre is political, says Székely, but it contributes to politics through its performances, so it is political in its relationship with society, not in its relationship with the actualised story.

<sup>16</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A szemlélet a fontos”, in MÉSZÁROS Tamás, *A Katona*, 9–39 (Budapest: Pesti Szalon Könyvkiadó, 1997), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>18</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, „A mai magyar színházról...”, 92.

<sup>19</sup> SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>21</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 29.

<sup>15</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „Csak a kidolgozott előadás érvényes vitaalap”, *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, no. 36 (1981): 12–13.

The feeling and functioning of the *core characteristic* seem to have already been formed in 1979, when Székely and Zsámbéki declared their programme for the National Theatre,<sup>22</sup> formulating their artistic intention in a manifesto-like manner: “In our time, the character—the profile—of the theatre is most comprehensively reflected in the spirit of the productions. This means, without questioning the importance of the repertoire, that the choice of plays can only be conceptually consistent and successful in relation to the theatre’s overall ambition.”<sup>23</sup> Thinking about conceptual consistency, however, has been dissolved in (pseudo)debates about the national mission,<sup>24</sup> even though the technique of representing spirituality and the *core characteristic* had presumably been formulated by the young directors earlier, during their college years. This is documented in a manifesto published in the journal *Színház* in 1969, written by Péter Molnár Gál,<sup>25</sup> a theatre director who graduated in 1961. He summarises the script of the taking over of the Ódry Színpad as a manifesto of the young directors’ theatrical vision.

Let’s just declare that in state-socialist Hungary, the very appearance of this manifesto is unusual since it formulates the foundations of democratic theatre, and it is obvious at first reading that instead of matching ideas, ideologies, and even themes, the driving force behind collective creative work should be the mutual trust of individuals. Thus, the ‘immediacy of life’<sup>26</sup> can be

reached without a network of informers and observers. It is in this respect that the points of the manifesto are worth following.

According to the young directors’ insights, the Ódry Színpad was given as a playing field, and the Béla Balázs Studio, founded in 1961, was a model of self-government. The name of this proposed theatre would be the College Theatre (Főiskolások Színháza; CT), and any director graduating within five years would be a member, the actors being “preferably from a single year of acting.” The CT would be based on the in-depth, exploratory work of actors, made possible by a five-year contract and “a significantly higher salary than usual.” Actors would be only allowed to work in the CT, and their training in movement, vocal technique, and theory would be compulsory. When not in a role, they would be responsible for the day-to-day running of the theatre. The directors would remain attached to their mother theatre somewhere in Hungary and participate in the work of the CT in their free time, without payment. The task of management, of which the actors would be relieved, is considered a merely administrative one since it is the responsibility of the entire company to evaluate the artistic results and the quality of the performance before the premiere, collectively, by majority vote. This theatre is free of the constraints of regular premieres; “the CT would operate on an annual budget.”

The Manifesto carries the momentum of the 1968 European revolutions and a belief in self-governance; in essence, the company is supposed to collectively develop the “good artistic reputation of the organisation.” It is therefore essential to note—and is explained in the longest of the paragraphs—who can be a member of the CT:

“[...] the management board should not include any external person (e.g., a representative of the college, a teacher, an ‘adult director,’ a highly respected actor, a theatre teacher, a ministry official, a critic, etc.), because this would

<sup>22</sup> SZABÓ István, „Nemzeti Színház 1978–1982”, *Színház* 31, no. 1 (1998): 12–25, 20–23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> ANTAL, ed., *Színházművészetünkről*.

<sup>25</sup> MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, „Színház: csak 28 éven aluliaknak – 28 pontban”, *Színház* 2, no. 11–12 (1969): 27–30.

<sup>26</sup> FODOR Géza, „Közénk és az élet közé állt az ideológia”, in PETRI György, *Összegyűjtött munkái III.*, eds. RÉZ Pál, LAKATOS András and VÁRADY Szabolcs, 535–549 (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2005), 535.



inadvertently break the democratic self-government and self-regulating power of the company's management." At the same time, "[...] there should be no participation outside the company, as this would allow the board to filter out careerism, protectionism, violence, and lack of talent. Open debate would regulate the antics of incompetent bureaucrats."<sup>27</sup>

The Manifesto was published in 1969, and although it did not receive a significant publicly visible reaction, its operational framework was perceptible in 1982, at the launching of the Katona as a permanent community of equals, a non-hierarchical alliance with no established stars, inspired by the literary text, operating within the framework of the city, of the theatre, and, economically, of state socialist cultural funding. Almost all the above characteristics similarly characterise the starting up of the Théâtre du Soleil in 1970, the Bouffes du Nord in 1974, and the Berlin Schaubühne in 1970. While the Katona may have started ten years later than many new European urban theatres, it is almost concurrent with the artistic direction of the Paris Odéon under Strehler. And the gesture of taking up space by inventing and rebuilding the theatre is also evident: the Katona company immediately demolished "the stage portal, which architecturally separated the stage from the auditorium. The two spaces became one theatre space. This dismantling of the stage frame [...] became a symbolic gesture that determined the future."<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the organisational model set out in the manifesto, it is the task of the theatre to prepare a model for the actor. Among the "strictly professional issues,"<sup>29</sup> the first is the talent of the actors, and beyond that, "the ability to work for the whole theatre and the whole production is a deci-

sive criterion."<sup>30</sup> The priority is "artistic enrichment"<sup>31</sup> rather than one's own career plan, because "we wanted to live up to our own standards."<sup>32</sup> It is clear from the statements that this norm, although it starts with the order of the masters, goes beyond it and that the basis of construction is the actor's inspiration, not the director's "mechanical plan," since the director's task is "to set the framework. What the purpose of a scene is and what weight that scene will have within the production. And he has to put the actors in a state in which they can find the solutions."<sup>33</sup>

When talking of a Hungarian theatre, it is worth emphasising that, from the psychological realist tradition, it is the "spiritual content of the actor," rather than the psychology of acting, that is interesting, but all this is a "necessary starting point. Then one has to find the necessary set of means of expression."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the Katona has been aware that in the theatre structure of Budapest it is particularly challenging to develop *repertory acting* as a social art form. Most of the Western European theatres taken as models are based on an *en suite* system, while their Eastern European colleagues try to increase their power of expression by metaphorizing images,<sup>35</sup> which means that they have to find their own devices.

Acrobatics, flexibility, and constant readiness are the first among the means of self-expression, but a stable yet sensitive nervous system is also one of the requirements. The theatre's task is "to take possession of the worlds of the plays on stage, to build them up,"<sup>36</sup> and in this construction, it seeks ten-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> Liviu Ciulei at Bulandra in Bucharest, Krystian Lupa at Sary Teatr in Krakow.

<sup>36</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, "A szemlélet...", 34.

<sup>27</sup> MOLNÁR GÁL, "Színház: csak...".

<sup>28</sup> SZÉKELY, "Még egyszer ilyen...", 46.

<sup>29</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, "A szemlélet...", 9.

sion. The technique of working in tension is close to the as-if situations inherent in Stanislavsky's method of constructing reality with imagination, and the known side-effects of the realist technique at this time are the multiplication of nervous and mental symptomatology brought about by the techniques of "happening" and "living," so that it is part of the technique that "various nervous and physiological peculiarities" are revealed.<sup>37</sup> The relationship between working in tension and nervous stability is metaphorized in public discourse,<sup>38</sup> while techniques of reality construction can take the power of the will to the point of violence. The urban theatres of the present, including the Katona, attempt to resolve the confused coordinates of life and theatre resulting from the technique of the play by naming situations and theorising the phenomenon of who can speak to or touch whom, when and how; for the moment, the discourse is in a period of exploration, not analytical understanding.

The urban theatre is interested in "certain social issues and problems,"<sup>39</sup> and is looking for classical drama and contemporary plays. Gábor Székely is concerned with images of destruction, the paths leading to the end, and the total helplessness of the individual. Zsámbéki is interested in "the internal relations of communities, groups, [...] dramatic conflicts."<sup>40</sup> The Katona's own narrative is defined by "human quality,"<sup>41</sup> and this means perseverance, loyalty, and devotion, when, in the words of Gábor Zsámbéki, the theatrical person does not separate "the life of the theatre from life itself."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>38</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI Gábor, „A színészképzésről”, in *Színészképzés: Neoavantgárd hagyomány*, ed. JÁKFALVI Magdolna, 306–308 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó–SZFE, 2013), 307.

<sup>39</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 37.

In forty years, *core characteristic* became a historical concept, which includes the long experience<sup>43</sup> of theatre in Szolnok<sup>44</sup> and Kaposvár, the three seasons in the National Theatre, the college with the common masters, especially Tamás Major and Kálmán Nádasdy, but also European theatre practice. Due to Gábor Székely's realisation that the last ten years of the National Theatre lacked "the whole of 20th century theatre,"<sup>45</sup> Europe had become a part of the *core characteristic* for them, and the theatre concepts and company organisation routines of contemporaries such as Mnouchkine, Brook, Strehler, Stein, Ciulei, and Lupa turned into inspiring models in the Katona. The historical idea and the burden of theatre-making are presented in a European context; the artistic intent to speak of theatrical and lived-through reality as one thing is once again expressed in the language of European (and not that of Soviet) theatre; this constitutes the ideological framework of the *core characteristic*.

But this is only a framework, because the aesthetic surface of the performances of the three directors of the Katona is quite different, although the company presents the constructions of reality as conceptually similar. "According to its tradition and its present image, the Katona József Theatre is a realist theatre—but not in the narrow sense of stylistic realism, but in the outlined, overarching aesthetic sense of its relationship to reality."<sup>46</sup> This relationship to reality is expressed in the tragic seriousness of Chekhov's, Shakespeare's, and Pinter's plays, while the comedies, using the theatrical tools of irony,

<sup>43</sup> SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 46.

<sup>44</sup> SZÉKELY Gábor, „...a Nemzetinek elsősorban színháznak és jó színháznak kell lennie”, *Élet és Irodalom* 39, no. 10 (1995): 21.

<sup>45</sup> SZÉKELY, „Még egyszer ilyen...”, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Katona homepage, last download: 30.08.2023, <https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/a-katona/a-katona-toertenete>.

sensitively but dominantly focus mainly on the phenomenon of provincialism.<sup>47</sup> The performances of the 40 seasons rhythm with the issues of European urban theatres of a similar status: certain plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Goldoni, and Molière are almost in conversation with each other in Berlin, Paris, Milan, and Budapest. But the quality of the Katona is in its actors, its playing styles, its patience, and its attention; the founders simply pass on to the others the company's knowledge, the quality of which involves matching role and status with talent and knowledge. As an urban theatre, the Katona creates the ideal company for a civic theatre of illusion: twice as many male roles have been written by playwrights as female roles, so half as many women are needed in the theatre. The roles are also shaped according to this repertoire of texts: tragic hero, tragic heroine, character actor, and comic actor, usually all with an allusion of character acting.

The Katona became a European urban theatre from the National tradition, and although in the early 1980s it found inspiration and refuge for its work only within its own urban community, it was also present in Europe for a few years after the regime change. It will be forgotten in a few decades anyway, but let us reiterate, at least when celebrating four decades of creativity, that the exploration of unknown depths in the context of state socialist culture could only begin with the discovery and expression of one's own pure, independent thought. The exploration of Far Eastern cultures (in the wake of Brook or Mnouchkine) is too noisy a challenge when in Budapest the task is still to separate one's own creative idiom from that of the official propaganda. Nevertheless, the urban spectators encode the message inherent in this separation, and it is impossible to escape from this metaphorization, which has become a mechanism of reception in which

everything is saturated with heavy meaning understood only by the initiated.

To sum up, let us repeat: the Katona's narrative is inevitably a story tailored to the National Theatre, because those who left the National Theatre carried on its mission and ideas, so the Katona functions as a hermeneutic exercise that is able to present to the nation the different perspectives of the past as a whole. Its four decades of urban theatre show the process of how the idea of the nation-state was transformed into a community practice, or how the urban theatre of the present represented in the most direct way those belonging to the same cultural and linguistic community.

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At the end of May 2021, the last production of the founder Gábor Zsámbéki, *King Lear*, was staged as the premiere of the jubilee season. The title role was played by guest artist Géza D. Hegedűs, and this decision in itself triggered the metaphorization of reading, the mechanism of reception and creation that, for forty years, has been working to develop a shared interpretative matrix where the audience, including critics, were partners in the construction of meaning, even stimulating it. In season 40, the Katona's community equated the story of King Lear, who divides his kingdom among his daughters who truly love him, with the founder. This farewell to the King was the summing up of the last seasons, perhaps the last performance to articulate the 1982 nature of the Katona. And it is difficult to see it separated from Kriszta Székely's new production of *Hedda Gabler*, a situational interpretation and a new addition to the repertoire in the 40<sup>th</sup> season. Refraining from metaphorizing the moment of generational change, we nevertheless notice that Ibsen's enigmatic work thematises the understanding of history, and thus also the creation of the narrative, since Tesman and Løvberg are both historians, representing two different

<sup>47</sup> ZSÁMBÉKI, „A szemlélet...”, 27.

philosophical trends, one of them thinking about the history and the other about the course of civilisation.<sup>48</sup> And Hedda annihilates both.

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<sup>48</sup> Hayden V. WHITE, „The Burden of History”, *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111–134, 117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504510>.

## The Afterlife of an Unfinished Musical Play: Géza Csáth's and Tamás Fodor's *Zách Klára*

ÁGNES MAJOR

**Abstract:** The name of Klára Zách is commonly associated by Hungarian readers with the ballad of János Arany or perhaps with *Képes Krónika* [Illustrated Chronicle], but not with Géza Csáth. The eponymous one-act musical play, composed of ten scenes, is one of Géza Csáth's lesser-known works since it remained unpublished for decades. Although discovered in the 1960s and published by Zoltán Dér in Csáth's selected works, *Ismeretlen házban* [In an Unknown House], the libretto of *Zách Klára* has never been adapted for the stage due to the lack of its musical parts. However, it is surprising that the screenplay of Tamás Fodor's reinterpretation of the play in 1996 was included in Csáth's collected theatrical works edited by Mihály Szajbély in the same year. Fodor's adaptation of *Zách Klára* incorporates various texts of Csáth in addition to the original work. In this paper, I explore the transformative nature of Fodor's text and analyse the intertextual connections between the two works by Csáth.

In his own time, Géza Csáth (1887–1919), writer, medical doctor, music critic, and composer, was one of the eccentric artists of the *fin de siècle* Hungarian artistic and journalistic culture, and until the 1960s, few people thought that his oeuvre would one day be included in the national literary canon. The imaginative universe of his literary works, together with the provocative themes of his autobiographical writings about drug addiction and erotomania, his simultaneously austere and passionate writing style, and his adventurous and tragic life story, have been a source of inspiration for numerous artists since the 1970s. One significant aspect of the recognition of Csáth can be at-

tributed to his play *Klára Zách*, whose contemporary relevance and meaningfulness were discovered in the 1990s by Tamás Fodor, a member of the alternative theatre scene.

When hearing the name or title *Klára Zách*, Hungarian readers likely associate it with János Arany a national poet's ballad from the 19th century, or the story from the *Képes Krónika* [Illustrated Chronicle], one of the earliest surviving codices depicting early national history, and it is unlikely that Géza Csáth comes to mind. Csáth's one-act musical play, consisting of ten scenes, remained in manuscript for decades and was never staged due to the lack of musical parts. The libretto was discovered in the 1960s and was subsequently included by Zoltán Dér in the first volume of Csáth's short stories, dramas, and scenes, entitled *Ismeretlen házban* [In an Unknown House] in 1977. In 1996, Tamás Fodor adapted Csáth's *Klára Zách* to stage as a tragicomedy, and Mihály Szajbély included the script in the volume of Csáth's theatre plays published that year,<sup>1</sup> a gesture that directly linked Fodor's work to Csáth's textual universe. However, Fodor went beyond a mere adaptation of Csáth's musical play by incorporating quotations from several short stories by Csáth into the play. In this paper, the focus will be on analysing Csáth's hyper- and hypotexts in Fodor's theatre adaptation, which incorporates Csáth's quotations in an unmarked and somewhat altered form.

The story of *Klára Zách* arose from the attempted assassination of the Hungarian king,

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<sup>1</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Zách Klára”, in CSÁTH Géza, *Az életet nem lehet becsapni: Összegyűjtött színpadi művek*, ed. SZAJBÉLY Mihály, 137–162 (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1996).



Róbert Károly, in 1330 by Felicián Zách.<sup>2</sup> As documented in the *Képes Krónika*, the primary source of the story is the nobleman Zách Felicián, who was initially an ally of the powerful Hungarian lord Máté Csák, a rival of the king. He then later turned to support the king and launched an attack on Róbert Károly and his family at the royal court in Visegrád. The assassination attempt failed, but the assailant wounded the King's hand lightly and the Queen's severely, cutting four fingers. Felician was captured and beaten to death by the court guards. In response, the king ordered that Felician's severed head and body parts be dispatched to different parts of the country to discourage future attempts and ordered Felician's children to be executed with special cruelty. The *Képes Krónika* recounts that Felician's daughter, Klára, underwent mutilation, losing her nose, lips, and eight of her fingers. She was then tied to a horse and dragged through several towns, compelled to shout: "Thus let her who is unfaithful to the king be hanged!" Felician's eldest daughter, Sebe, was beheaded and his sons were exiled to an island. The *Képes Krónika* makes no further mention of Klára, nor does it explain why Felician attacked the monarch.

None of the primary sources of historiography mention the alleged motive for the assassination. However, later works suggest that Zách sought revenge for the dishonouring of his daughter.<sup>3</sup> This motive has been deemed plausible by posterity, as in the 19th century, the tale of a vengeful father attacking the king inspired countless artists across

multiple genres. The most famous rendition is undoubtedly János Arany's ballad from 1855, while Mór Jókai also references it in his work *A magyar nemzet története regényes rajzokban* [The History of the Hungarian Nation in Novel Drawings], published in 1860. Most of the works were written for the stage: Károly Kisfaludy, Lajos Kuthy, Imre Vahot, Ede Szigligeti, Kálmán Tóth, Jenő Bajza, and Árpád Abonyi adapted the tragedy of the extermination of the Záchs,<sup>4</sup> and Viktor Langer composed an opera inspired by the tragic story of the Zách family.<sup>5</sup> The story has become a popular subject not only in (drama) literature but also in the visual arts. Soma Orlai Petrich, Viktor Madarász, and later Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch depicted some of its scenes in oil paintings.<sup>6</sup>

Csáth had been preoccupied with the idea of setting the story of Klára Zách to music (and then staging it) from a very young age. In a diary entry from November 17, 1902, he wrote that he had composed eight stanzas of music to Arany's *Klára Zách*,<sup>7</sup> using Arany's ballad as his main source. In 1907, the subject resurfaced, and Csáth's diary entry indicated completion of the work.<sup>8</sup> How-

<sup>2</sup> KÁLTI Márk, „Felicián megsebzí Erzsébet királyné úrasszonyt”, in KÁLTI Márk, *Képes krónika*, Monumenta Hungarica 3, 209–212 (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> An Italian chronicler, in his memoirs, writes that the queen's brother, Prince Kázmér, seduced and abused Klára with the queen's intervention. Cf. ALMÁSI Tibor, „Zách Felicián ítéletlevele”, *Aetas* 15, no. 1–2 (2000): 191–197, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Károly Kisfaludy: *Zách Klára* (1812), Lajos Kuthy: *Első Károly és kora* (1840); Imre Vahot: *Zách nemzetség* (1841); Ede Szigligeti: *Zách unokái* (1846); Kálmán Tóth: *Az utolsó Zách* (1857); Jenő Bajza: *Zách Felicián* (1864); Árpád Abonyi: *A Zách-család* (1895).

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Langer: *Zách Klára* (1870).

<sup>6</sup> Soma Orlai Petrich: *Zách Felicián* (1860); Viktor Madarász: *Zách Felicián* (1858); Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch: *Zách Klára története I–II* (1911).

<sup>7</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Méla akkord: hínak lábat mosni”: *Naplófeljegyzések 1897–1904*, eds. MOLNÁR Eszter Edina and SZAJBÉLY Mihály (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó–Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2013), 381.

<sup>8</sup> In his note of May 31, 1907, he writes, „I have begun *Zách Klára*. The writing is going well.” The next day, June 1, he reports that he has finished the work. The speed of com-

ever, three years later, in March 1910, he wrote: "I started working on Zách Klára, and the first three scenes are nearly complete."<sup>9</sup> The reason for this discrepancy is uncertain, but it is plausible that he initially attempted a musical version, followed by a shift to the short story form, before revisiting the concept of staging it with music. All we know for sure is that Csáth wrote his short story *Régi levél* (Old Letter) in 1907, setting the narrative in an epistolary form. During that same year, another event may have also piqued Csáth's interest in the Zách theme. Ernő Lányi composed a musical play titled *Klára Zách*, drawing inspiration from Arany's ballad, which was then performed in Szabadka, Csáth's hometown. Csáth expressed admiration for the performance in the *Budapesti Napló* on June 15, 1907:

"The composition comprises distinct themes that are uniquely Hungarian yet strikingly contemporary. The themes of Kázmér's yearning, the organ music during the church scene, the girls' sweet melody, and the theme of hopelessness all contribute to the drama. The entire piece is elegant and refined. Mihály Zichy depicted Arany's ballads in illustrations, and Lányi should do the same in music!"<sup>10</sup>

All this means that Csáth was increasingly preoccupied with the subject for years. The choice of a historical topic seems odd in

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pletion and the year of writing suggest that this is the short story *Régi levél*, which Csáth still refers to as *Zách Klára*. BRENNER József (CSÁTH Géza), *Napló (1906–1911)*, ed. BESZÉDES Valéria, *Életjel könyvek* 122 (Szabadka: Szabadegyetem, 2007), 122.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 150. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>10</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Érdekes új kották”, in CSÁTH Géza, *A muzsika mesekertje*, ed. SZAJBÉLY Mihály, 212 (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 2000), 212.

Csáth's oeuvre;<sup>11</sup> nevertheless, its 19th century's adaptations, especially Arany's ballad, contain various implicit elements that may have caught Csáth's attention. These elements comprise the issue of sin and punishment, the characters' vain struggle to suppress their sexual desires, post-coital shame, impulsive murderous tendencies, and brutal murders. Csáth adds his own unique style to the narrative, adapting it to fit his own image. He expertly crafts the story into a typical Csáth tale while keeping the fundamental elements of the original story intact. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Csáth's *Zách Klára* evolves into a true piece of Csáth's writing and identify the elements he added to enhance and alter the core storyline.

As mentioned previously, Csáth has already told the cruel destruction of the Zách family in a short story in 1907 that he adapted later into a play. The short story, as its title, *Régi levél*, suggests, was written in epistolary format, where an anonymous letterwriter, a doorkeeper at the royal court, informs his brother of the bloody events at Visegrád. In the narrative, an external narrator, in the position of a bystander, gives a first-hand account, also expressing his own opinion:

"I thought, but more than once, that [Klára] would be disgraced in time. She used to braid her hair into two braids, and as she parted it at the back of her neck, much of her naked white skin was visible, with only faint wisps of hair remaining. It was so unusually provocative, and so unlike any other maiden's (though most of the girls at court comb their hair in the same way), that the King's eyes were caught at it, and so were those of Father Franciscus, the court confessor."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The only exception to this is the *Schmith mézeskalácsos*.

<sup>12</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Régi levél”, in CSÁTH Géza, *Mesék, amelyek rosszul végződnek: Össze-*

The letterwriter suggests Klára's strong attraction affected even influential, powerful men of strong morals. The writer's tone implies a judgement of Klára's appearance as flirtatious and provocative. The doorman also notes the sexually exciting effect of "baby fuzzes" on Klára's neck, a detail that seals her fate, as highlighted in Fodor's play with a scene titled *Pihék* [Fuzzes].

After completing the short story, Csáth, similar to Ernő Lányi, opted for a musical adaptation as a potentially more authentic medium to portray the story, as one of his instructions reveals it. "The emotions that lingered on the stage after the prince's departure were spread throughout the orchestra, creating a sense of sluggish despair that lacked direction."<sup>13</sup> Although the instructions were made for the musical composition, the written music itself was never completed. As such, we must rely solely on textual sources to reconstruct Csáth's ideas for the piece.

Csáth employs a frame narrative within the musical play, an important poetic technique in his entire oeuvre. Upon examining his short stories, a noticeable trend towards an abundance of works utilising the frame story emerges in 1912, though the technique had already been present in earlier years.<sup>14</sup> The play's opening scene introduces the courtier

Mária, who calls out Klára's name. In the play's closing scene, Kázmér, the true catalyst of the tragedy, the prince who besieged her with his love, also whispers Klára's name, framing the events.

Csáth introduces several new characters in the story, including Kornelius, the court physician, who attempts to cure Kázmér's constant complaints of illness through baths, potions, and stomach-strengthening drops. As a practicing psychiatrist and doctor, Csáth's works frequently adopt a medical vantage point, utilising the doctor theme in various short stories, often featuring doctor-patient dialogues. Csáth contrasts the teachings of Christian religion with the hedonistic concept of the primacy of bodily desires in his theatrical dialogues. His work also features the juxtaposition and collision of different philosophical and moral viewpoints, another trait of Csáth's texts. Kázmér, who is reading Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, receives a warning from Gyulafy, tutor to the ruler's children, that the book contains morally questionable content that he believes is "harmful and poisonous to the soul." In the confession scene, the super-ego and the id, known from Freudian psychology, are embodied as Klára discloses her secret sexual fantasies and lustful dreams to Father Franciscus, who grants her absolution for her sins in exchange for a few prayers.

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*gyűjtött novellák*, ed. SZAJBÉLY Mihály, 155–158 (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 2006), 157.

<sup>13</sup> CSÁTH, „Zách Klára”, 157. The musical accompaniment of the musical play was not completed, and consequently, the play was not performed; only the manuscript with the text, without notes, survived. In the manuscript archive of the National Széchényi Library, under Fond 457/37, there is a typescript of the play, which contains manuscript corrections and a stage design.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the framed narratives are of particular importance in the oeuvre. See in detail SZAJBÉLY Mihály, *Csáth Géza élete és munkái: Régimódi monográfia* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 2019), 405.

Tamás Fodor adapted Csáth's musical play into a one-act tragicomedy with twelve scenes and a postlude. Fodor directed the play, which was staged by Studio K, Budapest, in 1996 and won the Theatre Critics' Award for Best Alternative Performance in the 1995–1996 theatre season. Audiovisual resources for the production are also available. The play was also staged at the People's Theatre in Subotica in 1999, under the direction of Zoltán Hernyák. The National Museum and Institute of Theatre History, Buda-

pest, has preserved a recording of the performance.<sup>15</sup>

The dominant narrative standpoint of the plot is indicated by the subtitle “Tragicomedy of Our National Greatness.” The term “our national greatness” draws from Károly Kisfaludy’s play, *Mohács*,<sup>16</sup> and establishes an ironical intertextual connection with it, which is further accentuated by the genre’s code that sharply challenges the historical pathos.<sup>17</sup> In Fodor’s play, the events are framed by a chronicler’s summary; thus, he retains the framing narrative familiar from Csáth’s writing. The appearance of the chronicler, who serves as an objective and detached Csáthian narrator, suggests an intention of aesthetic-poetic pattern-tracing. Fodor achieves this, however, not only through structural adaptation but also by incorporating selected passages from prominent Csáth short stories into the dramatic text. These excerpts, often reworked, lack clear indications and are occasionally presented out of context. Nevertheless, the Csáth texts add nuance to the play’s psychological motivations, “validating the events portrayed on stage.”<sup>18</sup>

In the following examples, I will illustrate Fodor’s quotation technique, how he transforms texts, and how he places them in new contexts. The first text is the opening scene, but the last, in terms of chronology. Court

servants Rozi and Mihály wash the corpse of Zách Felicián, and Rozi, an unconditional believer in the king, takes advantage of the situation to express her opinion about the already deceased assassin:

“ROZI: Mihály. Hold on a second. I want something. [...]”

MIHÁLY: What on earth has come over you?

ROZI: Now that you’re dressed like that. Now it’s Zách Felicián again (spits in the face). It was an occasion.

[...]

ROZI: Just once more. [...] If I hadn’t done that, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life.”<sup>19</sup>

The passage describes a scene reminiscent of the slapping scene from Csáth’s short story *Trepov a boncolóasztalon* (*Trepov on the Dissecting Table*). It also touches on the taboo topic of necrophilia.

“‘Wait, Uncle Nikoláj, I want something.’

‘What do you want, you?’

‘You’ll see.’

Vanja tiptoed around the room, looking into the dissecting room. Finally, he stepped up to the corpse, suddenly raised his hand, and slapped it hard three times across the face. After the slaps, the two men looked at each other in silence.

‘I did this, said Vanja, because it would have been a despicable thing not to have desecrated this impudent man, this murderer of robbers, the vilest man that ever rotted in the earth. It was an opportunity!...’

<sup>15</sup> OSZMI Audiovisual Repository 2066. GEROLD László, „Zavarba ejtő megoldások: Csáth Géza – Fodor Tamás – Hernyák György: *Zách Klára*”, *Critikai Lapok* 9, no. 2. (2000): 14–15.

<sup>16</sup> „Hősvértől pirosult gyásztér, sóhajtvá köszöntlek, / Nemzeti nagylétünk nagy temetője, Mohács!” [I greet you with a sigh, / The great graveyard of our national greatness, Mohács!]

<sup>17</sup> GEROLD, „Zavarba ejtő megoldások...”, 14.

<sup>18</sup> SZAJBÉLY Mihály, „Tragikomédia nemzeti nagylétünkből, avagy Csáth esete a budapesti Stúdió K-val”, *Üzenet* 26, no. 9 (1996): 462–467, 465.

<sup>19</sup> FODOR Tamás, „Zách Klára: Tragikomédia nemzeti nagylétünkből”, in CSÁTH, *Az életet nem lehet becsapni...*, 271–296, 276.

[...] 'Wait a minute, the other one said, just one more time!'

He started again. And one last snapping slap to the corpse's face. [...] After a while, Vanja spoke:

'You know, Uncle Nikoláj, if I hadn't done this now, I would have regretted it all my life.'<sup>20</sup>

In both passages, we observe the voices of marginalised individuals who lack agency in shaping events. Rozi punishes Felicián for his rebellion against the ruler, and so does Vanja for the actions of Trepov, who is blamed for the deaths of the masses. However, the ramifications of their actions are inconsequential, and they merely imitate the gestures of justice in a self-congratulatory fashion. An interview with the director indicates that Fodor's primary focus was to present a subordinate social position and a lower perspective in his tragicomedy.<sup>21</sup> The unsettling scene from Trepov, presented at the start of the performance and disrupting the chronological narrative, imbues Felicián's character—accused by the court's attendants—with heightened significance. The scene's inclusion invites repeated reflection throughout the unfolding of the story, prompting the ongoing question of whether Felicián is indeed responsible for the tragic events.

<sup>20</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Trepov a boncolóasztalon”, in CSÁTH, *Mesék, amelyek...*, 386–388, 387–388.

<sup>21</sup> [Csáth's *Klára Zách*] „It was a great help in understanding the story that Csáth himself wrote a short story, and in it he sees the king killing Klára Zách and her father from the perspective of the doorman. The version we presented at the time also began with a dialogue between two undertakers. I was excited to see how the stories could be acted out from below.” BÓTA Gábor, „*Alulnézet*” [interview with Tamás Fodor], *Pesti Műsor*, no. 10 (2014), 11.08.2020.

Mihály and Rozi are also the central characters in a reworked scene from *Fekete csönd* (*Black Silence*). Tortured by jealousy, the couple made love in the kitchen while cleaning fish, and in Fodor's interpretation, the citation borrowed from the short story expresses Mihály's erotic monologue:

“I'll set your father's house on fire, fear not, when that ragged daughter of his sleeps in her room, between snow-white pillows. Her breasts rise slowly up and go down. And then there is the fire in her bed. My fire. She wakes up in a bed of fire. And her white feet are kissed dark brown by the red fire. And her head will be bald because her hair is burned. Bald! You hear that, baldy? The father's beautiful brunette daughter will be ugly; bald.”<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, the original passage in the short story *Fekete csönd* is in fact nothing more than the delirium of a broken mind:

“I set fire to the house of the priest because his daughter sleeps in the room, in a snow-white bed. Her breasts rise slowly up and go down. Then the fire hits her bed. My fire. She wakes up in a bed of fire. And her white feet are kissed dark brown by the red fire. And her head will be bald, because her hair is burnt. Bald! Hear that, baldy? The father's beautiful blond daughter will be bald.”<sup>23</sup>

The passage's transposition is evidently informed by a comparable psychological state: the loss of judgement and the release of primal and instinctual impulses. As such, this behaviour is equally characteristic of inten-

<sup>22</sup> FODOR, „Zách Klára...,” 289.

<sup>23</sup> CSÁTH Géza, „Fekete csönd”, in CSÁTH, *Mesék, amelyek...*, 11–14, 12.



tional property destruction and arson as it is of uninhibited sexual behaviour.

If we examine the reception of Fodor's performance, it is worth recalling István Tasnádi's review of the performance at Studio K from 1996. As Tasnádi says, "Tamás Fodor has transformed the ballad theme into an analytical drama. The story is not a parable of the guilty and the innocent, the good versus the bad. Here, man meets man, which is a rather sinister thing."<sup>24</sup> However, this important statement is worth refining. It is that Fodor *adapts* Csáth's treatment of the ballad theme: it was Csáth who transformed the story into an analytical drama, and Fodor's interpretation only nuanced and deepened it further. According to Mihály Szajbély's review of the performance, at the narrative's core Csáth's true interest lied in the complex psychological situation. It presents a dilemma: why did Klára and Kázmér's mutual attraction result in tragedy and bloodshed, even in the absence of clear culprits?<sup>25</sup> The unhappy ending is, without a doubt, predictable: the conflict between moral standards and sensual desires, the battle against repression, and the outburst of instincts can only culminate in a tragedy. Fodor extends this sobering situation even further, emphasising Csáth's conclusion that repressed desires can lead, even if indirectly, to the development of fatal impulses.

The narrative of Klára Zách possesses inherent storytelling quality, as János Arany already noted and reinforced through balladic fragmentation, elliptical structure, and the silencing of the antecedents. However, Csáth (along with Fodor) obliterates obscurity by elevating the psychological motivations of the characters, where analytical and scholarly understanding clarifies and reveals the mysteries.

<sup>24</sup> TASNÁDI István, „Mindjárt a lapáttal”, *Criticai Lapok* 5, no. 6 (1996): 4–5, 5.

<sup>25</sup> SZAJBÉLY, „Tragikomédia nemzeti nagylétkéből...”, 463.

Both Csáth and Fodor approach the story without emotional bias: Zách Felicián is no longer a symbol of personal rebellion and self-sacrifice against a foreign power, nor is Klára a symbol of virginity and purity. The character of Kázmér is also nuanced, and neither version portrays him as a heartless rapist. Zoltán Dér considers the play's novelty to lie in the development of the character of Kázmér within the context of Csáth's drama:

“The uniqueness of Csáth's play, in comparison to Arany's ballad, is that Prince Kázmér is compelled by the weight of a deadly ailment to seize the single opportunity he envisions for redemption from Klára Zách. His actions are not premeditated but propelled by the overwhelming intensity of the moment and the illness-induced fever. He not only benefits from, but also falls victim to, the abnormal passion that overtakes him.”<sup>26</sup>

The symbolism in Fodor's production effectively upholds the plot. The wall clock lacking hands connotes a timeless story and problem. Even though the knotted rope dangling on the wall is not tied around anyone's neck during the performance, it acts as a prologue by foreshadowing the tragic outcome of the events. The mirror, which all characters gaze into during the play, forces characters to confront themselves and each other, highlighting the validity of psychological interpretation. Meanwhile, the tub in the centre of the stage is multi-functional, transforming from a dining table to Rozi's wash-tube during Klára's erotic dream confession. Rozi replies to Klára, who is tormented by her lustful dreams, in the words of Father

<sup>26</sup> DÉR Zoltán, *Az árny zarándoka: Csáth Géza emléke*, ed. LÉVAY Endre, *Életjel miniatűrök* 6 (Szabadka: Szabadkai Munkásegyletem, 1969), 21–22.

Franciscus, (who is absent as a staged person from Fodor's version): "A dream itself is not a crime, only if you think about it. If you take delight in it. That's what Father Franciscus told me. Ten Pater Nosters and ten Hail Mary, and penance is done."<sup>27</sup> But this is also where the sexual encounter will take place, and Felicián will either be submerged in the water basin or his body will be placed on it, as depicted in the earlier scene.

Although Fodor could not completely compensate for the lack of musical accompaniment, he approached the source material in a manner that confirmed Csáth's "presence" in the drama's text. Fodor stressed the psychological approach's validity by integrating excerpts from Csáth's short stories into his tragicomedy. The selection may have been influenced by the necessity of storytelling, but the hypotexts, which have been highlighted, transformed, and inserted into the dramatic text, are a set of familiar and characteristic motifs from the Csáth text. Fodor expands upon the themes of Csáth's textual universe, including violence, sexuality, conscience, and defence mechanisms, through additional texts taken from the short stories. This approach presents Fodor's work as not only an analysis of Csáth's artistic objectives but also a contribution to them. This is supported by his choice of a genre from Csáth's body of work that references the Art Nouveau, Impressionist, and later Expressionist movements of the period. The author presents Csáth as a multifaceted thinker who perceives music, imagery, and narrative as intertwined. The scope encompasses not only the protagonist but also Csáth himself, who seeks to convey his artistic universe.

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<sup>27</sup> FODOR, „Zách Klára...”, 285.

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## Get involved! Krétakör: *Crisis, Part III – The Priestess*, 2011

GABRIELLA KISS

**Abstract:** The twelfth production of the contemporary art centre Krétakör (Chalk Circle) was part of the “Crisis Project,” presented twice in its entirety and on view at the TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts, and the result of a societal therapy through interdisciplinary art. The current study reconstructs, employing the Philther Method, from the perspective of community theatre and education in theatre, this societal workshop. The analyses re-contextualise, for their own sake, the concept of *participation* by straining the boundaries of public education, understood as community art.

“Interaction is the only criterion.”<sup>1</sup> In 2008, the third piece in the reformulated Chalk Circle’s international project expounded upon this thesis, which can be read in Árpád Schilling’s work *Notes of an Escape Artist*.<sup>2</sup> It also shed light on the art pedagogy aspects of the commonly known fact that the significance of Árpád Schilling’s “happenings” was no longer expressed by their association with the word *theatre* but with the expressions *contemporary art centre* and *societal workshop*. By experimenting with conventional theatre-making’s working methods and means of reception, as well as the societal

discourses and material-technical practices that delineate these forms, the work of this creative company makes the scheme of its activity apparent in a singular way.<sup>3</sup> In the spirit of applied theatre’s self-determination, and cognizant of the phenomena of constructive pedagogy and *social turn*, they re-contextualise, for their own sake, the concept of *participation* by straining the boundaries of public education, understood as community art.<sup>4</sup>

### *Context of the performance in theatre culture*

The twelfth production of the new Chalk Circle, *The Priestess*, was part of the “Crisis Project” (presented twice in its entirety and on view at the TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts) and the result of artistic research based around a focus problem. Árpád Schilling’s legendary production of *The Seagul* (stripped of its final letter) provides the context of the work (conducted between June and October of 2011 in Prague, Munich, Budapest, and three workshops in Transylvania with the participation of adult amateurs and children

<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted with the support of the Bureau of Education (OH-KUT/48/2021), the Bureau of National Research, Development, and Innovation (K-131764), and the Theatre Pedagogy Research Group of the Gáspár Károli University of the Reformed Church (KRE 185/2022). Special thanks to Patrick Mullowney for the translation.

<sup>2</sup> SCHILLING Árpád, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései* (Budapest: Krétakör, 2008), 15.

<sup>3</sup> KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, „Apparátus/diszpozitívum”, in *Média- és kultúratudomány: Kézikönyv* [Media and Cultural Studies: Textbook], eds. KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Ernő, MOLNÁR Gábor Tamás and TAMÁS Ábel, 231–237 (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2018), 236.

<sup>4</sup> Ádám CZIRÁK, „Partizipation”, in *Metzler Dictionary of Theatre Theory*, Hg. Erika FISCHER-LICHTE et al., 242–248 (Stuttgart–Weimar: Metzler, 2014); Cf. CZIBOLY Ádám, ed., *Színházi nevelési és színházpedagógiai kézikönyv*, 154–155 (Budapest: InSite Drama, 2017).

14–16 years of age) in two ways. First, it is a direct continuation of the character Treplev's "aesthetics of positivism" as he searched for new forms.<sup>5</sup> The dialogue established among an experimental film (*jp.co.de*), a contemporary opera (*Ungrateful Bastards*), and a product of drama and theatre pedagogy (*The Priestess*) proves that scenographic sequences are also produced when the creator defines the concept of theatre "not as a museum or a temple, but much rather as a laboratory."<sup>6</sup> Second, it realises the dream of Treplev as he ponders Doctor Dorn's advice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "TREPLEV: She adores [the modern stage] and imagines that she is working for the benefit of humanity and her sacred art, but to me the theatre is merely the vehicle of convention and prejudice. When the curtain rises on that little three-walled room, when those mighty geniuses, those high-priests of art, show us people in the act of eating, drinking, loving, walking, and wearing their coats, and attempt to extract a moral from their insipid talk; when playwrights give us under a thousand different guises the same, same, same old stuff, then I must needs run from it, as Maupassant ran from the Eiffel Tower that was about to crush him with its vulgarity. [...] We must have [new forms]. If we can't do that, let us rather not have it at all." CHEKHOV, *The Seagull*, Act I. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> SCHILLING, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> "TREPLEV: Life must be represented not as it is, but as it ought to be, as it appears in dreams. [...] DORN: You chose your subject in the realm of abstract thought, and you did quite right. A work of art should invariably embody some lofty idea. Only that which is serious can ever be beautiful! [...] Use your talent to express only deep and eternal truths. [...] Every work of art should have a definite object in view. You should know why you are writing, for if you follow the road of art without a goal before your eyes, you will

The message of the dream is "You are immature," and the dreamer's calling obliges him to make the viewer curious. The goal of dreaming is to raise adults who are "free," because "they take interest, pay attention, question, communicate, and bear criticism," not "becoming flustered and frustrated, loathing, and even fighting" when "there is no one to decide for them what they must do."<sup>8</sup> According to our thesis, this anti-theatre (Kotte) was made apparent and indicated during what would traditionally be the curtain call<sup>9</sup> at the conclusion of Chalk Circle Theatre's *Seagull*, performed in the Cupola Hall of Fészek Club. Árpád Shilling's 2003 direction deprived audience members of the most conventional, least interactive, and most easily manipulated means of expressing their opinion, as the members of the company were already seated outside the hall and clapped at the spectators.<sup>10</sup> Eight years later to the day, the multi-media performance shown at TRAFÓ demonstrated further exploration of this path, which employs "theatre" for the purpose and goal of pedagogy and andragogy: "using the experi-

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lose yourself, and your genius will be your ruin." CHEKHOV, *The Seagull*, Act I.

<sup>8</sup> SCHILLING, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései*, 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> "In terms of method, 'anti-theatre' constitutes a background, before which actors perform and engage with scenographic sequences as theatrical forms. [...] Its content is not restricted by prohibitions, because it is concerned, for example, with the suspension of these, whereby it expresses a personal or societal stance vis-à-vis the theatre." Andreas KOTTE, *Theaterwissenschaft: Eine Einführung* (Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 260.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the 'old' Chalk Circle Company's so-called "theatrical projects", see KISS Gabriella, *A kockázat esztétikája* (Veszprém: VEK, 2006), 135–143.



ence of sociological studies to bring about creative community plays.”<sup>11</sup>

The three-member Gát family’s crisis management merely serves as a pretext for the realisation of “societal therapy through interdisciplinary art.”<sup>12</sup> The lives of this trio (the psychiatrist father, compelled to face ghosts of the past; the mother, who has not found her way as either an actress or a drama teacher; and the son, who has fallen victim to his parents inability to communicate) examine what it means to be a social being in the age of “tired Prometheuses.”<sup>13</sup> The bluff of a computer game that, referencing the self-immolation of Jan Pallach, promises the divine basis of human cooperation and “dynamic harmony”; the analysis of paternal control that becomes brute force; and the arch of the drama teacher, who ultimately flees from the problems of collaborative teamwork with family members, co-workers, and students—all provide an anatomy of the dysfunction within micro- and macro-communities.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, no part of

the trilogy becomes moralistic or preachy, and the reason for this can be found in the project’s goal of theatre pedagogy. On the one hand, it believes “in the power of theatre to effect change in the span of an average person’s lifetime.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, it is aware that, in order to accomplish this, the production must become a *vita activa* (Hannah Arendt) which confronts participants—professional and amateur actors, as well as the spectators—with the processes whereby the *zoon politikon* (political animal) is degraded to *animal laborans* (beast of burden).<sup>16</sup>

This is also behind the *Invoke Me!* installation, the unjustly forgotten frame of the *Crisis Trilogy*.<sup>17</sup> Through the ‘voice’ of photography and video-making, participatory research dissects situations that limit the minors’ freedom to make decisions.<sup>18</sup> The participants, aged 14–16, could express through ‘photographs’ (tableaux or moving pictures)

cally, it questions the position occupied by the individual in the immediate environment – in the family, the nation, society. Yet, reconsidering one’s role also occurs within the creative process that brings about *Crisis*. In fact, Árpád Schilling initiates a conversation, attempting to share the artistic duty among artists and community alike.” Sodja LOKTER in KRÉTAKÖR, *Crisis: A Trilogy* (Budapest: Chalk Circle Foundation, 2011), last download: 17.07.2023,

<https://archive.kretakor.eu/hu/search>.

<sup>15</sup> Philip TAYLOR, *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003), 93.

<sup>16</sup> HAN, *The Burnout Society*, 34–42.

<sup>17</sup> The pictures can be viewed in the online archive of the Chalk Circle (Krétakör): *Szólíts meg!*, last download: 17.07.2023, <https://archive.kretakor.eu/hu/search>.

<sup>18</sup> OBLATH Márton, CSOSZÓ Gabriella and VARGA Attila, „A fotóhang mint részvételi kutatási módszer”, in *A felszabadítás pedagógiája: A kritikai pedagógia elmélete és gyakorlata*, ed. UDVARHELYI Éva Tessza, 403–436 (Budapest: Közélet Iskolája, 2022), 404.

<sup>11</sup> SCHILLING Árpád, „Tanulj! Alkoss! Gondolkozz! A Krétakör edukációs programjairól”, in *Szakpedagógiai körkép III.: Művészetpedagógiai tanulmányok*, eds. BODNÁR Gábor and SZENTGYÖRGYI Rudolf, 131–146 (Budapest: ELTE, 2015), 135.

<sup>12</sup> CSÁKI Judit, „Pincétől a padlásig”, last download: 17.07.2023, *Magyar Narancs*, <http://magyarnarancs.hu/szinhaz2/apa-anya-gyerek-77566>.

<sup>13</sup> Byung-Chul HAN, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> “The *Crisis Trilogy* is a radical exploration of artistic expression. A photo exhibit that grows out of community theatre, which later evolves into a film, from a film into an opera, which becomes a theatre play that just as easily fits the definitions of public performance, circus, a film assembled from static pictures, and an installation. More importantly, however, *Crisis* questions the role it plays in the artistic community. Themat-

what they thought about family aggression, not limited to physical or emotional abuse. A static photo tableau established the basis of the project, depicting “inherited experiences and life strategies often incapable of being questioned and giving rise to relationships that could not be changed,” as the children considered them “the natural concomitant of the family unit.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, they had the potential to alter this impersonal, sealed context through improvised scenes (recorded on video) based on the photographs and autobiographical performance reflecting upon it. During the one-week camp, the creators of the photographs and the young performers experimented with bringing about an alternative model of cooperation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the focus was not necessarily the family—and not at all the photographs by Máté Tóth-Ridovics, which would reflect the artist’s pre-conceptions—but the personal stories of the young participants, i.e., questions concerning the relationship between individual and community that were important to their generation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> TÓTH-RIDOVICS Máté in KRÉTAKÖR, *Crisis...*

<sup>20</sup> BERNÁTH Flóra in KRÉTAKÖR, *Crisis...*

<sup>21</sup> He experimented on this with *A csillagász álma* [The Astronomer’s Dream] in 2006, *hamlet.ws* in 2007, and the so-called *Szabadulóművész project* [Escapologist-Project] between 2008 and 2011. Tamás Jászay also lists here the “multi-disciplinary performance” entitled *A szabadulóművész apológiája* [The Apology of the Escapologist], which premiered in Paris in 2008; the “adapted” Budapest version in 2009; the four-part concert series entitled *A szabadulóművész analógiája* [The Analogy of the Escapologist] in 2009 and 2010; the apartment theatre piece *Anyalógia* [Mother-Analogy] on male-female co-habitation and having a child in 2010; *Akadályverseny* [Obstacle Race], which modelled what can be learned from democratic game rules within a school or class in 2009; and *Új néző* [New Spectator], uncovering the possibilities of

Since, in the case of *The Priestess*, the art pedagogy carried out in the workshops was of vital importance, what constitutes the context of the production is *Notes of an Escape Artist*, which can be seen as the *ars poetica* of the new Chalk Circle. From our point of view, the content of this work, written in 2008, and its publication on a lesser-known forum are both important. After all, the text contains a “course description,” recounting a training session held by Schilling in the Csillag Forest of Komárom on July 9–25, 2007. The scheme of activities employed (in the service of art education and the training of students in acting and dramaturgy) made it possible for participants to create *études* (scenes) using their own lives as material. This course description is important for three reasons. First, it further developed the Chalk Circle’s experience with summer camps, thus preserving as an institution the company’s operation as a workshop. Second, it reinterpreted the world of those amateur theatre camps from the perspective of art pedagogy. In the 1980s, these camps regarded the work produced there as serious creations—innovative plays that arose not professionally but organically from nature.<sup>22</sup> Third, it makes it clear why the *Crisis Trilogy* became a model, by virtue of the fact that it ultimately was created in workshops<sup>23</sup> where

co-existence within a conflicted society in 2010. JÁSZAY Tamás, [Körülírások: Fejezetek a Krétakör Színház történetéből 1995–2011](#) (Szeged: PhD thesis, 2013), 60–62.

<sup>22</sup> DEME János and DEME László, „»Átpörgetni, felfedezni, előre menni.«: Beszélgetés Schilling Árpád rendezővel, in *Ha a néző is résztvevővé válna: Kísérletek a színház és a közönség viszonyának újragondolására*, eds. DEME János and DEME László, 81–110 (Budapest: L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2010), 82, 87.

<sup>23</sup> “Because of this, the actors are linked to numerous events in the camp vis-à-vis the potential performers. Sándor Terhes oversees morning exercises as the PE instructor. Lilla Sárosdi, as the drama teacher, leads

participants were awakened to their own experiences, so they could appear onstage as human individuals capable of formulating their right to independent decision-making through the medium of their personal stories.

This is the reason why this course description, disseminating the most important fundamental principle of contemporary student acting, should have immediately appeared in the columns of *Drámapedagógiai Magazin* (Drama Pedagogy Magazine) or in the Marczibányi Square's subsequent training programme in drama and theatre pedagogy (regardless of its author's status as artistic director and main director of the most successful repertory theatre on the Hungarian scene after the system change). It is on the latter forum that Árpád Schilling's professional work was featured three times. The first was by virtue of László Kaposi and Judit Szakall, two drama pedagogues who play significant roles in the nation's student acting.<sup>24</sup> The second was due to collaboration with Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Studio), which spawned from this and seeks to redefine its activity in terms of social dra-

acting games; and Lóránd Bartha, in the role of the priest, holds religious talks. Besides them, Bálint Juhász (from the Chalk Circle) and Misi Fazakas, Oszkár Mucha, and Bernadette Daragics (from the Stealth [Osonó] Company) hold jobs at the workshop. Members of the crew also include a cinematographer, a photographer, and a sound engineer. They shoot the documentary film of the rehearsal process." ANGYALFÖLDI Ede, „Angyalosi színházműhely”, last download: 17.07.2023,

[http://www.3szek.ro/load/cikk/43890/angyalosi\\_szinhaszmuhely](http://www.3szek.ro/load/cikk/43890/angyalosi_szinhaszmuhely).

<sup>24</sup> Árpád Schilling was an actor in the Round Table [Kerekasztal] Theatre Company, based in Gödöllő; and his first direction, *Vérnász* [Blood Wedding] by Garcia Lorca, took place at the Origin [Origó] Student Stage.

ma.<sup>25</sup> The third is precisely related to the *Crisis Trilogy*. Indeed, in the cases of *Ungrateful Bastards* and *The Priestess*, Schilling had a serious need for instructorial assistance from the drama pedagogues he himself had selected.<sup>26</sup> Hence, it is no surprise that, when taking part in the “Theatre – Drama – School” conference organised by the Professional Methodology Centre of ELTE BTK [Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities] in 2015, it was not he but the Chalk Circle that held the plenary lecture. One year later, this event received the Princess Margriet Award for Culture from the European Cultural Foundation; since, as a foundation, they consider it important for instructors, drama teachers, mentors, and student teachers, who do the ‘everyday’ work of public education, to ask themselves the very same question that the drama teacher in *The Priestess* could have posed to her students, the priest, to her own child, to her husband, and to herself: “In a democratic vision of school, is it allowed to jump on the teacher's desk?”<sup>27</sup>

#### *Dramatic text, dramaturgy*

Nevertheless, Lilla Gát (introduced as Lilla Sárosdi, arriving at the poverty-stricken

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of *New Spectator* [Új néző], see JÁSZAY, *Körülírások...*, 102–114.

<sup>26</sup> This assistance was provided by János Kardos and András Sereglei (in the case of *Ungrateful Bastards*), Flóra Bernáth (in the case of *Invoke Me!*), and members of the Stealth [Osonó] Theatre Workshop: Misi Fazakas, Oszkár Mucha, and Bernadette Daragics (in the case of *The Priestess*).

<sup>27</sup> The conference program was accessed 17.07.2023,

<https://www.btk.elte.hu/content/szinhasz-drama-iskola-cimu-konferencia.e.1710> Cf. SCHILLING Árpád, „Színházi nevelés, drámapedagógia a Krétakör gyakorlatában”, in *Dráma, pedagógia, színház, nevelés*, eds. Júlia ECK, József KAPOSI and László TRENCSENYI, 306–312 (Budapest: OFI, 2016).

Transylvanian village with the toil of PE classes) seeks the answer to a different problem: "I have to know what a life without applause is good for." Moreover, this question, formulated at the end of *Ungrateful Bastards*, is not resolved by the final film clip in *The Priestess*, where she is interviewed in front of the Thália Theatre. "I don't know... Well, yes... It's possible," says the actress, who escaped from Budapest to the village, then from the village to the capital. Of course, this apparent uncertainty is not necessarily a failure, at least from the fictional character's point of view. The text—made up of personal stories, interviews, and the participants' improvisation—is rather a score, an investigation into the conditions whereby those who are exploited, who are marginalised, who are deprived of agency and cultural opportunities, and upon whom violence is committed come to *know* what life is good for.<sup>28</sup> These five faces of oppression are made visible by the theatre pedagogy convention known as *forum theatre*, placing the right to decide, to guide, and to interpret, in the hands of the invisible and the exploited, signified by the word "Stop!" In the hands of the three actors and sixteen adolescents, "Stop!" is heard seven times in the course of *The Priestess*. That is, the acting and viewing participants (the latter being *spect-actors*) seek together "solutions and new means of escape in the struggle against oppression".<sup>29</sup>

Since Forum Theatre must always comprise at least a dramaturgical motif that counts as a political or societal failing, it seems self-evident that the focus of onstage events would be the villagers' nerve-racking helplessness or the decision of the drama

teacher who escapes both to and from the setting. In this forum, two questions come under examination: (i) "How can we help someone on their path when even they are not sure where they are going?"<sup>30</sup> and (ii) "Why does convention always win out? [...]" The environment simply cannot stand upheaval, whereas Lilla, who cannot bear failure, returns to the capital.<sup>31</sup> Yet, is it only Lilla Gát who suffers this oppression? Such oppression is not necessarily the result of "a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules,"<sup>32</sup> be they psychological or sociological in nature. The fact that, out of the seven times "Stop!" is heard during the show, the first and last are voiced by Lilla Gát hints at a more complicated dramaturgical structure of oppression.

"What happened here? Don't answer. We've gone over this scene a hundred times with the children, and they immediately say this and that. This 'stop, what happened' is just a signal. In the show, we will use it to signal who has the right to direct. Now I'm directing. For the time being," says Lilla while we see a handshake. The PE teacher, who has the class of 16 students run in concentric circles and punishes them with push-ups for lack of equipment, shakes hands with the order-disturbing teacher, who stinks up the big hall of the TRAFÓ with petrol fumes and titters like a teenage girl at the man's surname (Terhes), which literally means *pregnant*. Thus, in the form of a kinetic stat-

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Iris Marion YOUNG, "Five Faces of Oppression", in *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance*, eds. Lisa HELDKE and Peg O'CONNOR, 37–63 (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Augusto BOAL, "The Early Forms of Forum Theatre", in Augusto BOAL, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian JACKSON, 241–249 (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> UGRAY István, "Egyre sokasodó kérdőjelek", last download: 17.07.2023, <http://7ora7.hu/programok/a-papno/nezopont>.

<sup>31</sup> CSÁKI Judit, "Apa, anya, gyerek", *Magyar Narancs*, last download: <http://magyarnarancs.hu/szinhaz2/apa-anya-gyerek-77566>.

<sup>32</sup> YOUNG, "Five Faces of Oppression", 39.

ue, we are presented with the question: with their differing concepts of order and means of establishing it, can they cooperate? With their differing attitudes towards teaching, can they understand each other? The second “Stop!” tests this. Frozen in tableau, ‘Uncle’ Sanyi slaps someone in the face in order to end the chaos, verging on a fight, which erupted when he left the class to have a cigarette. Yet, the drama class—where they seek alternative solutions, opportunities, and the causes of aggressive and non-aggressive *communication*—comes to an end with one of Forum Theatre’s boldest examples of a “Stop!”,<sup>33</sup> as it tests the viewers’ *constructivity*. Indeed, one of the child performers, Attila Komán, suddenly sits outside the circle of chairs and initiates a conversation with the TRAFÓ audience about what they have seen. His questions focus on the significance of the drama class, which disturbs the fiction (the story of the Gát family), the narrative (introduction of relationships and life in the vil-

<sup>33</sup> “[...] for the discussion offered by Attila Komán in the production, the artists acted out possible questions and developments several times. Schilling, Fazakas, and the helpers often played difficult-to-handle viewers and extreme situations, so Komán would be prepared for the worst. However, during the rehearsal process, it became clear what questions he could ask the audience with sincere curiosity—because they were, in fact, his questions—and what he could not, often those that were supplied to him. Ultimately, they left the latter out of the production. After all, it remains a primary stance for Schilling that the only dialogue and business for children onstage should be their own, which they themselves stand for. Thus, what they go through on stage is not merely playacting, but the conveying of thoughts and questions.” NYULASSY Attila, „Próbana-pló – semmi sem véletlen”, last download: 01.07.2023, <http://7oraz.hu/hirek/probanaplo-semmi-sem-veletlen>.

lage), and the education system (the “banking concept” of distributing knowledge<sup>34</sup>) alike. “What do you think is happening here onstage? What is your opinion of the young people’s role in this play? And outside, in real life?” Whatever we answer, the conversation with the audience is by all means deepened with the following game, based on personal stories, and the fourth “Stop!” The students Emese, Erzsi, Kati, and Márti tell four stories about being orphans, their relationships with their guardians or foster parents, how they ended up in the orphanage, and their life there. This time, Attila does not ask our opinion of what we have heard. Instead, he is curious about what we think. Which child lied the most *creatively*? In fact, one of them lives with her parents.

The penultimate “Stop!” is also heard from a child, and perhaps he is most at a disadvantage because he must confront his own mother. Balázs Gát disturbs the “sincerity-building” drama class, in which Lilla, by means of the unfinished sentence technique, has the children say silently to themselves (and she, of course, to herself) when they feel good or bad, what is most important to them, whom they love the most, what their greatest loss in their lives has been, and what their biggest dream is. That is when the son steps in to ask his mother to let him go back to Budapest because he cannot bear “how everyone looks at us like pitiful losers”. Lilla—who has been so careful with her words, the personification of tact and patience, ensuring the safest of spaces for her pupils—is irritated and aggressive with her son. The choreography of the children’s bodies attests to this alarming contrast. The students seated on the floor watch mutely how this adult—who, as a teacher, made known to them the hierarchies of practicing power, typical of the PE teacher and pervasive in the

<sup>34</sup> Paulo FREIRE, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra BERGMAN RAMOS (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 71–86.



practices they learned in the orphanage or the village—is incapable, as a mother, of being a partner to her child. Also, the production's penultimate film clip composes this very same fear, arising out of precisely the same contradiction, into an "organic picture." The teacher goes up into the church tower, where she argues with the priest, who is hiding there. At a certain point, the projector goes dark, and we see the two people fighting in the theatre space. Between them stand the mute and alarmed children, turning their faces to the priest, who practically rescues them from the woman who is out of control, crying and shouting.

This second "Stop!" from Balázs serves to inform us that his father *took care of* his peace of mind (such as it was), while Lilla's final "Stop!" ends the performance, making us aware that our applause has significance. After all, the actress (played by Lilla Sárosdi, taking her bow) was seeking the meaning of a life without applause, which she failed to find in the village.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the production's

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<sup>35</sup> "Although Schilling had a strong vision for how the show should end, the reaction of the first audience altered that. Originally, Komán would have brought the evening to a halt with the familiar "Stop!" but then the viewers clapped, so they themselves ended the production. Then, the director rectified this with such assurance in the framework that, if the viewers activated themselves and were so inclined, they, too, could say "Stop!" However, if they did not, the events onstage would still come to an end. After all, the show intended to somehow address civil action—that we should join in and take responsibility for our thoughts and their consequences—and the audience did this. While Schilling did not intend to end the show this way, the framework allowed for such a possibility, and he seized it. The viewers continued to conceive of this thought. Naturally, when it became part of the performance, immediately, on the second occasion, the viewers did not end the scene, although, in

dramaturgy, inspired by Forum Theatre, showed that if anything is capable of producing a mature, democratic, self-governing community, then it is the six C's: communication, cooperation, concentration, creativity, constructivity, and consideration. This is the "competency as a facilitator" that every pedagogue with a diploma in drama education possesses,<sup>36</sup> even without the status of "priestess."

### Staging

While theatre critics unanimously claimed that "the framework of *The Priestess* is a protracted drama pedagogy session,"<sup>37</sup> it is more productive to regard it as the product of an art pedagogy project, conducted over three workshops and divided into twenty sequences. In this case, the production documents a working process where the participants vary greatly in terms of age, social position, socialisation, and worldview: adults, children, and adolescents; religious and not affiliated to any church; those coming from families and those residing in an orphanage; Hungarians from both Transylvania and Hungary, as well as Romas. Consequently, at stake in the project is whether, in the course of the work undertaken in Sfântu Gheorghe, Angheluș, Băile Tușnad, and at TRAFÓ, the practices of self-governing (grown habitual and automatic through internalised experiences of power and having posed an obstacle to cooperation and coexistence) become out-of-the-ordinary.<sup>38</sup> This becoming extraor-

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talks held afterward, it was clearly expressed that this was in the air. Hence, the director preserved this game." NYULASSY, „Próbanapló...".

<sup>36</sup> Monica PRENDERGAST and Juliana SAXTON, *Applied Drama: A Facilitator's Handbook for Working in Community* (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 1–17.

<sup>37</sup> JÁSZAY, *Körülírások...*, 124.

<sup>38</sup> Michel, FOUCAULT, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lec-*

dinary (or *uncanny* in the sense of Foucault) is key to the situation of theatre-making, in which everyone is certain of their personalised function, which delineates the sphere of responsibility; yet, it also authorises “everyone to act within these limits according to their best judgment.”<sup>39</sup> In this manner, the direction builds upon the alienating rhythm of *études* which reveal the so-called immutable authenticity of reality. In the process of creation, it shows the unchanging nature of reality within a community that has only experienced hierarchies.

For a significant portion of the production, viewers of *The Priestess* see film clips, yet movie-watching, in the classic sense, is only manifested twice. In total darkness, like an overture, we see a short film introducing the village. On one hand, a herd of cattle passes in front of the sunrise; there is plenty of mud, a shabby bus, etc. On the other hand, a white Opel emphatically comes into the camera’s focus, first arriving and then departing. With knowledge of the second part of the *Crisis Trilogy*, we can interpret what we see. The car belongs to the father, who is moving his wife and son out to this Transylvanian backwater. As Lila will use EU money to work as a drama teacher and Balázs will attend school, they will only be able to visit him during breaks. Yet, the car can also be seen as a motif of escape, which shapes the lives of the father and son, not just the mother’s. Both the psychiatrists of *Ungrateful Bastards* and the “Jan Pallach” of *jp.co.de* (who creates a virtual reality and de-

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*tures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, trans. Graham BURCHELL (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). Cf. Ruth SONDEREGGER, „Foucaults Zyniker\_innen: Auf dem Weg zu einer kreativen und affirmativen Kritik“, in Isabell LOREY, Gundula LUDWIG and Ruth SONDEREGGER, *Foucaults Gegenwart: Sexualität, Sorge, Revolution, Presence*, 75–92 (Wien–Linz–Berlin–London–Zürich–Málaga: transversal texts, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> JUHÁSZ Bálint in KRÉTAKÖR, *Crisis...*

stroys it along with himself) are unable to take care of themselves or others. It is under the same circumstances that we later see a documentary clip edited like a news report, in which two older men talk about one of history’s more authoritarian forms of community creation: farm collectivisation, whereas two youths discuss their own solitude: the village’s insularity, lack of prospects, boredom, and bigotry.

This technique of establishing authenticity, linked to the two distinct film genres, juxtaposes these three video clips. Moreover, each can be glimpsed in full vitality onstage, reflected upon in scenes created by professional and amateur actors. This is first seen in one of the camp’s recorded drama games. The children, standing in a straight line, each receive a role card identifying their gender, age, occupation, and social status.<sup>40</sup> Then, they take one step forward or remain in place, depending on whether Lilla Sárosdi/Gát’s statements apply to their role.<sup>41</sup> As one

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<sup>40</sup> “I am a 56-year-old unemployed woman with two children. / I am a 40-year-old, alcoholic, homeless man. / I am a 60-year-old Roma woman who cannot read or write. / I am a 15-year-old girl with six siblings, living on a farm. / I am a 9-year-old Roma child attending a special-needs school. / I am a 7-year-old orphan boy who has trouble studying. / I am a ten-year-old student in the capital, attending a famous school. / I am a 60-year-old herdsman with five children, living in a village. / I am a 19-year-old drug dealer and drug addict. / I am a 65-year-old priest in a village. / I am a 28-year-old flight attendant with no family. / I am a 50-year-old university professor in the capital. / I am a 50-year-old famous film star. / I am a 44-year-old minister with no family.”

<sup>41</sup> “I have my own room at home. / I am certain I will easily find work—if not now, then when I grow up. / I regularly spend my summers at the seaside. / I never have to use social aid. / I regularly go to the hairdresser’s. / I have only had success in school. Go ahead

would suppose, in this personified sociometry, a small group confidently pulls ahead of the others. This shows that they are not left behind in society; however, they grow immersed in the arising differences as hierarchies become stabilized. This research result makes it more personal when the teacher, who employs inclusive means in drama class, falls silent in one scene, as Janka, who is not even willing to sit beside her Roma classmates, states that her two dreams are that “there should be no Gypsies here at all” and that “they should leave this village forever.” In the second instance, a reporter asks locals, playing fictional members of the class, what they got out of the drama lessons (actually run by Lilla Sárosdi and truly experienced in the camps), as well as why Lilla Gát finally gave up and returned to the capital. Symbolically, the opinions expressed by the ‘self-portrayed’ residents draw the viewer’s attention to the man who (unlike Lilla) has been with them since the beginning and stayed with them, and whose calling is to transmit values and build a community, just like those of a (drama) teacher.

ATTILA: I’ve thought a lot and realised that it’s simply impossible for something big—for something to be bigger than a bunch of people, than a state, than a union. That is, there shouldn’t be anything bigger. It’s impossible. And then I started reading the Bible, and now I would say that, yes, I’m a Christian.

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and think it over, Attila. / Handling some official matters has never caused me trouble. / I regularly eat in restaurants. / I think life is beautiful. / I regularly go to the theatre. / I have a laptop. / I read the news every day. / My favourite TV show is *X Factor* [a talent-search program]. / I smoke cigarettes. / I regularly go to church. / I feel good about myself.”

REPORTER: So you’re saying that working with the drama teacher brought you closer to religion?

ATTILA: Yes, clearly.

LEVI: It also brought me a little closer, but rather, it’s helped me not to offend others who are more religious than me.

It was an essential directorial decision to have the role of “Father Lóránd” not played by one of the Chalk Circle’s stars at the time, but by a young creator who provided an intellectual workshop and home for theatre research and experimentation, an actor in the Stealth (Osonó) Company, and a master-class teacher on the drama faculty of the Sándor Plugor Arts Lyceum in Sfântu Gheorghe. Closest in age to the adolescents, Lóránd Bartha’s status as a mediator occupied with *positivism* indicates an opportunity for cooperation between the priest and the priestess. Indeed, the “reverend father” reacts to the needs of the youths expressed in the film, and he addresses the concept of community in his theology class. However, he does this within the very rigid, traditional framework of head-on instruction. For example, he initially makes dialogue impossible by turning his back to them. Moreover, his valid questions are neither open nor based on lived experience.<sup>42</sup> Thus, despite his good intentions, the actual content of the answers produced in this sterile pedagogical environment makes the execution problematic. Also addressing this problem (courses in methodology for those training in religion or theology) is the scene that, with the aid of a microphone, takes place at the site of confession.

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<sup>42</sup> “And what is a community? / How many people do you need to make a community? / What types of communities do you know? / What do you think makes a good member of the community? / What do you think is a bad member of the community? / Are you a good member of the community, Attila? / What community would you like to belong to?”

The barely, if at all, audible voice is amplified, thus indicating its broadcast to a supposed public. Even without the TRAFÓ's large audience, this tends to blaspheme against the confessional, indeed reflecting critically on its intimacy. Levi's admission parodies confession when, at Father Lóránd's questioning, he tells how he tried out for and reached the final of *X Factor* [a talent-search programme] by singing the folksong *Tavaszi szél vizet áraszt...* ("Spring winds raise the tide of water...") incredibly off-key. It draws attention to the impossibility of direct conversation when three young people whisper into the microphone the emotions that they could only speak aloud or think over in drama class; what is more, feelings that they must keep secret in theology class. After all, how can Ági tell the man, seen as the father of the church's order, that the drama teacher made her realise that she needs faith in her life, but she is incapable of accepting the power of forgiveness, and she does not want to seem like a fanatic, either? Or can Kiki admit to a Catholic priest that she is in love with Father Lóránd? Is Joli sinful for wishing to be rid of her brown skin because, based on her personal experiences, white people more closely resemble the representation of God? Also, the confessing priest's replies (or his silences) over the microphone are empty,<sup>43</sup> and yet the production's most natural scene hinges on the nature of his being there with them. Liberated laughter accompanies little Charlie's joke when the Roma child from Órkő unsuccessfully attempts to put the reverend father, who "always looks so sad with his bulging eyes," in a brighter mood.

### *Acting*

The actors of the new Chalk Circle are not pros at impersonating or embodying any characters. Instead, they are artists capable

<sup>43</sup> "You should love someone in all situations. / *The priest does not answer.* / Go and bring someone else joy."

of directing themselves so responsibly that Schilling refers to them as "shamans, teachers, and mediums" in his *Notes of an Escape Artist*.<sup>44</sup> In the case of *The Priestess*, Rimini Protokoll's 'message' article from *ABCD* sheds light on an especially valid dimension of these comparisons and concepts in the case of *The Priestess*. Lóránd Bartha, Lilla Sárosdi, and Sándor Terhes (playing characters that bear their own private names), as well as the minors (from the Roma settlement in Órkő, the Saint Francis of Déva Foundation's home in Băile Tuşnad, the People's Art School in Sfântu Gheorghe, the acting class of Sándor Plugor Arts Lyceum, the orphanage in Târgu Secuiesc, and middle schools in Braşov and Miercurea Ciuc) are "ambassadors" of problems and situations.<sup>45</sup> They are the 'everyday experts' in the micro-societal context that shapes their daily lives, conveying this through self-representation.

Lilla seeks a location and space for theatre and acting, which she wishes to be a place of education [*Bildung*], referred to as a moral institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, as a drama teacher, she establishes a "funhouse of democracy" in a village school<sup>46</sup> and experiences how it is when no one applauds her for "acting, performing, recounting, moving, radiating, miming, teaching, and ultimately

<sup>44</sup> SCHILLING, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Rimini PROTOKOLL, *ABCD* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2012), 8.

<sup>46</sup> In an editorial written in the spring of 2010, Árpád Schilling christened this complex research format – which is artistic, intellectual, and focused on the present, the "funhouse of democracy," where the theatre artists serve as animators and catalysts. SCHILLING Árpád, „Demokrácia-játszóház”, last download: 12.10.2011, <http://www.komment.hu/tartalom/20100504-velemenyo-osszefugg-a-szinhaz-es-a-demokracia-valsaga.html>.

communicating".<sup>47</sup> Supporting her contract and seeking cooperation with her, Father Lóránd, who has a sense of calling, demonstrates the complex of problems that a young priest wishing to connect to his young parishioners fights in his own religious order. In the drama teacher's words that constantly offend him, "You make people ridiculous, so you can hold God over them, and that way you can use them." Meanwhile, the sixteen minors, growing up here and now, do what they have no right to do within the classroom walls. They pay attention, play, articulate, and clash opinions—acting and speaking. Thus, she has the potential to be a "cultural terrorist" or "biological bomb",<sup>48</sup> because she realises in the meantime that her present role is that of a sacrificial victim. In the meantime, she experiences that, as participants in the project and residents of the workshop camp, they are capable of changing and effecting change.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, not one of the impressively large number of reviews noticed that, in the fundamentally choral staging, the motif of making a sacrifice appears twice, only not in relation to Lilla or the minors. Both times, the crucifix is formed from the body of the supervisor, who demonstrates a dictatorial attitude at odds with both the drama teacher and the priest, who, as teachers, embody facilitating and proselytising postures, respectively. At the start of the show, Sándor Terhes raises his arms to his mid-chest, and thus he repeats the words of the resurrected

Christ addressed to Mary Magdalene, who wished to embrace his legs: "Do not touch me."<sup>50</sup> He preserves the diameter of the running circle, thereby preserving the children's physical health. He protects his own position of authority and keeps himself far from what, if said aloud, would cause his collapse. This, in fact, occurs when he makes a self-admission with his body spread out on a beam,<sup>51</sup> and he delivers the sentence that explains the superiority of Lilla, just as she feels like a sacrificial victim:

PE TEACHER: Don't get upset! Your colleagues can't help being so stupid.

DRAMA TEACHER: But why do they do this to me?

PE TEACHER: Because you can leave here anytime, and they cannot.

Then, Lilla goes up to Sándor slowly, but they do not repeat their first shared scene. There is no handshake, no laughter, and no "Stop!" For a while, they stand facing each other before both exit. Moreover, this visual dramaturgy, especially evocative in 2023, could explain why the trilogy's first working title was "Jesus Project," and the second was "Catafalque".<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> SCHILLING, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> "The surer the hands we entrust the framework of the play to, the more secure the setting we create for self-expression becomes—and now I'm speaking about those whom society traditionally deprives of the right to self-expression. I can aid the process of democraticization [...] by creating opportunities for marginalised social groups to tell their stories." CSÁKI, „Pincétől a padlásig”.

<sup>50</sup> *Noli me tangere* ["Do not touch me" in Latin]. *The Gospel According to St John* 20:14–18.

<sup>51</sup> "I have two children, three geese, and a wife. I'm sick of it all. The trash lies in a heap next to the woods. The selective bins are completely empty. They steal. Eighteen tiles have already been lifted from the terrace. It's hopeless. I keep a spider behind the out-house. Every morning, I take it as a living fly. I know what it's like to come down here. I came down here twenty years ago. This is all that's left. I have a puli dog. I call him the Devil. He's six years old. No one has asked why I named him Devil. Not even my wife."

<sup>52</sup> SCHILLING Árpád, „Prologue”, in *Crisis...*



*Stage design and sound*

If you seriously believe that community projects working with participatory and amateur theatre forms are primarily “traces of connections among various backgrounds,”<sup>53</sup> then the task of the visual world of the production is to conjure the living spaces of the groups affected by the focus problem. That is, the “existing space” and its aural component need not illustrate what we hope will undergo change here and now, but, with the aid of singular signifying elements, they must help bring to life the imagined sights and sounds within the actual confines of the stage. (It is telling that, “For performances in the countryside, Schilling decided to place the black ballet mats on the stage white-side-up. The effect of this simple change was ‘it’s as though the viewers are witnessing an experiment carried out in a laboratory.’”<sup>54</sup>) In the case of *the Priestess*, the projection of previously recorded visual material at the start gives us the picture of a Transylvanian-Roma-Hungarian village so tucked away that it could be anywhere in Central Eastern Europe, and where, thanks to the recordings of children being creative in the Chalk Circle’s camp, a youth club, only dreamt of by the girl working in the local pub, was realised. Among the planes drawn on the TRAFÓ’s main stage, the gymnasium is conjured with the clomp of shoes running in circles, push-ups done pantingly, and sprints accompanied by a whoosh. A circle of chairs and the dragging of chairs, as well as the relaxed postures, summon up the drama class, while the microphone conveys the atmosphere of the protestors’ podium and that of the confessional, contrasted with the projected image of the church’s interior. In other words,

<sup>53</sup> SCHILLING, *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Lóránd Bartha Quoted by JÁSZAY Tamás, „Krizisben A papnő: Egy helykereső előadás emlékezte”, last download: 07.07.2023, <https://jatekter.ro/?p=31804>.

the spectacle and sound give rise to opportunities for modes of thought, speech, and behaviour, which (although one commonly encounters such productions in the TRAFÓ building) bring to the strange not what is ‘good’ or ‘best’, but what is ‘worthy of attention’. Instead of being a venue for holding competitions and giving prizes, it provides a free space for ‘encounters’ without concrete aims or stakes.

*Impact and Posterity*

Symptomatically, one of Lilla Gát’s last sentences in *Ungrateful Bastards* was misquoted by nearly every critic: “I have to know what good is *theatre* without applause,” instead of *life*. All the while, as Tamás Jászay’s doctoral dissertation first made me aware, *The Priestess*, which was performed 28 times by the spring of 2013, could have explained to the profession the implosion of the Chalk Circle Theatre, the most successful company at the turn of the millennium. The critical response to the *Crisis Trilogy* proved that they understood and accepted it and that the politics of anti-theatre could (and, what is more, did) have a place in cultural life (e.g., at the TRAFÓ).<sup>55</sup> Thus, when a “performance and media art studio” with a great past—a “structural model” and a “talent-nurturing program”—placed itself onstage, it made visible

<sup>55</sup> “In every one of the projects after 2008, the true main character is the viewer, who cannot plan or count on anything beforehand, for whom the creators often present only the building blocks of a potential theatrical production. Yet, the combination of those elements and the creation of a viable, comprehensible work of art out of them depend at least as much (if not more) on the will of the audience, just as a creative community play depends on the (theatre) experts conducting it.” JÁSZAY, *Körülírások...*, 115.

the “nameless instance of the order”,<sup>56</sup> which is capable of “determining, orienting, cross-pollinating, forming, leading, and regulating the behaviour, habits, opinions, and discourse of Mankind and living substances”—all in all, the concept of theatre.<sup>57</sup> It is an “invisible theatre” (or, as Agamben wrote elsewhere, a “zone of indistinction”) that gives rise to “New Theatre Realities”<sup>58</sup> hence “making it possible, with the aid of artistic means, to formulate more questions relevant to generations growing up.”<sup>59</sup> This was also confirmed when the majority of professional writers voting for the Theatre Critics’ Awards cast their votes for *The Priestess* (which premiered during the Wiener Festwochen in 2011) in the category of “best independent theatre production,” from among the three Chalk Circle productions that received nominations.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, recognition has only become unavoidable in 2023, in light of the “Future Prize,”<sup>61</sup> which

<sup>56</sup> André EIERMANN, *Postspektakuläres Theater: Die Alterität der Aufführung und die Entgrenzung der Künste* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Giorgio AGAMBEN, „What is a Dispositive?“, lecture delivered at the European Graduate School, Switzerland, 2005, last download: 28.06.2021,

<https://aszem.info/2017/02/giorgio-agamben-mi-diszpozitivum/>.

<sup>58</sup> In Wrocław in the spring of 2009, Schilling accepted the recognition of “New Theatre Realities”. Cf. JÁSZAY Tamás, „Semmi művészet?“, *Színház* 42, no. 6 (2009): 60–61.

<sup>59</sup> SCHILLING, „Prologue...”.

<sup>60</sup> In an open letter, the artistic director declined the critics’ nomination, stating that *independent* is not an aesthetic but a financial category, which called for the elimination of the “best independent production” category. Cf. JÁSZAY, *Körülírások...*, 125–126.

<sup>61</sup> In 2022, the 35-year-old Round Table [Kerekasztal] Theatre Company and the 25-year-old Káva Cultural Workshop jointly received The Future Prize from the Theatre

showed that a significant portion of the art theatre audience seated in the TRAFÓ and watching *The Priestess* was faced with the essence of theatre education and the tools of drama pedagogy. Moreover, the performance’s canon-establishing significance also arises from the Chalk Circle’s use of its image to draw attention to an area of expertise unjustly neglected in the common knowledge of Hungarian theatre, not to mention the consciousness of the nation, even as late as 2011.<sup>62</sup>

### *Details of the production*

*Title:* The Priestess (Crisis Trilogy, Part III). *Date of premiere:* October 23, 2011. *Veneu:* TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts. *Director:* Árpád Schilling. *Director’s assistant:* Bálint Juhász. *Authors:* the actors and all the participants in the Chalk Circle Company’s “Crisis Project”: Márton Gulyás (producer), Ildikó Ságodi (production leader), Lóránd Bartha, Bernadett Daragics, Mihály Fazakas and Oszkár Mucha (from the Osonó Theatre Workshop), Krisztián Pamuki (camera operator, editor), Bence Hutlassa (sound engineer), András Pires-Muhi (casting), Máté Tóth-Ridovics (photography). *Dramaturg:* Árpád Schilling. *Actors:* Lóránd Bartha (Father Lóránd), Lilla Sárosdy (Lilla Gát), Sándor Terhes (‘Uncle’ Sanyi), sixteen amateur actors (14–16-year-old students), and the spectators and participants at all the performances.<sup>63</sup>

Critics’ Guild for their introduction of TIE (Theatre in Education) to the nation.

<sup>62</sup> Tamás Jászay first alerted me to this fact in “Krisisben A papnő...”.

<sup>63</sup> The script, dated November 20, 2011, was accessed on 17 July 2023 at <https://archive.kretakor.eu/hu/search>. The recording of the performance was accessed on 17 July 2023 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmnzNXi-cl4>.

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## The Transylvanian Postdramatic Theatre of Radu Afrim

IMOLA NAGY

**Abstract:** One of the leading figures of contemporary Romanian theatre, director Radu Afrim has been working with Hungarian companies for more than a decade, producing more than a dozen performances, which has its own significance under the circumstances that in his director's theatre, the text is never taken for granted, be it a pre-existing and pre-chosen dramatic text or the product of a collective effort. Nevertheless, due to his peculiar, non-hierarchical handling of all the theatrical devices, where equally intensive attention is accorded to each one of them, his productions always fall under the category of postdramatic theatre. We are dealing here with two aspects of contemporary Eastern European theatre: the blurring lines between director's theatre and collective production and the multiethnic character of it. As an aesthetic experience, his performances may be best described using Gilles Deleuze's terms of aspects and perceptions.

"I started directing because I wanted to combine painting, poetry, architecture, and literature. [...] [F]or me a work is good when it manages to break as many of the textbook rules of directing as possible. When it contains a sufficient dose of energy of uncertain provenance and a slice of ephemerality is delivered by heavy goods vehicles, [...] if the relationships between the characters are completely unpredictable, then it's almost perfect."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cristina RUSIECKI, *Radu Afrim: The Fabric of Fragility*, trans. Samuel W. F. ONN and Eugen WOHL (Bucharest: Entheos, 2016), 198.

Radu Afrim's directing career started in 2000. One of the most controversial productions of these early years was *Three Sisters. An (Un-)commonly Free Adaptation of Chekhov's Play*, staged with the Andrei Mureșanu Company at the Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe, in 2003.

"While at the start of his career the old-guard theatre critics were fiercely hostile towards his new approach to directing, in just a few years Afrim won the UNITER Award for Directing (the most prestigious distinction in Romanian theatre) twice: first in 2006 for his production of *Plasticine* at the Toma Caragiu Theatre in Ploiești, then in 2007 for *joi.megaJoy* at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest. [...] In 2008, he was awarded the Coup de Coeur de la Presse Prize at the Avignon Theatre Festival (Off) for the production of *Mansarde à Paris ou les detours Cioran* staged in Luxembourg. In 2009, the German foundation KulturForum Europa awarded him the *Prize for European Cultural Accomplishments*. [...] In 2009, his production of Fausto Paravidino's *The Sickness of the Family M.*, first staged at the Timișoara National Theatre, was invited to give a series of ten performances at the Théâtre de l'Odeon in Paris. In 2011, Afrim directed *When the Rain Stops Falling* by Andrew Bovell, at the Cuvilliés Theater in Munich, a production acclaimed by both the media and the public."<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, Afrim won the UNITER Award for Directing once again for his staging of *Tran-*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 22.



*quility* with the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre Târgu-Mureş.

The Romanian theatre director had been working with Hungarian companies for more than a decade, producing a dozen performances. This has its own significance under the circumstances that in Afrim's director's theatre, the text is never taken for granted, be it a pre-existing and pre-chosen dramatic text or the product of a collective effort. Nevertheless, due to his peculiar, non-hierarchical handling of all theatrical devices, where equally intensive attention is accorded to each one of them, his productions always fall under the category of postdramatic theatre.

Also, we are dealing with two aspects of contemporary Eastern European theatre here: the blurring lines between director's theatre and collective production and its multiethnic character. Regarding the first aspect, Panna Adorjáni summarises this phenomenon as follows:

"The East-Central-European viewpoint reveals that when textbook definitions of devising and collective creations as performances that rely on the creativity of actors and are not based on texts and certain techniques of producing theatre are presented as such that necessarily lead to collective creations, it becomes possible to identify the spirit of collective creation in cases that in their own context have a completely different meaning."<sup>3</sup>

As for the other aspect, taking into consideration that postdramatic never meant that the text/speech is not important, on the con-

<sup>3</sup> ADORJÁNI Panna, „Kollektív alkotás kontra rendezői színház: A kollektív alkotás és *devising* történetének és elméletének áttekintése a rendezői színházi paradigma perspektívájából”, *Theatron* 17, no. 1 (2023): 132–146, doi: [10.55502/the.2023.1.132](https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2023.1.132). All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

trary,<sup>4</sup> we presuppose it is not by chance that the director is working with companies that use a different language than his own, especially if we think of his long-term coproduction with the Hungarian company in Târgu-Mureş. We will examine these aspects by looking into Afrim's rehearsal process and analysing some of his most emblematic *mise-en-scènes*.

Afrim directed five performances with the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureş between 2014 and 2021, achieving significant critical and public acclaim. These are the following: *The Devil's Casting* (2014), devised performance; *Tranquillity* (2015), based on Attila Bartis' novel of the same title and the connected drama entitled *My Mother, Cleopatra; Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt* (2016), devised performance; *Drunks* (2018), based on Ivan Viripajev's drama, and *Grand Hotel Retrobird* (2021), devised performance. In September 2023, Afrim staged his sixth performance with the Tompa Miklós Company: *The Meaning of Emma's Life*, by Fausto Paravidino.

<sup>4</sup> „What is emerging in the new theatre, as much as in the radical attempts of the modernist 'langage poétique', can therefore be understood as attempts towards a restitution of chora: of a space and speech/discourse without telos, hierarchy, and causality, without fixable meaning and unity. In this process, the word will resurge in its whole amplitude and volume as sonority and as address, as a beckoning and appeal (Heidegger's 'Zu-sprache'). In such a signifying process across all positings (Setzungen) of the logos, it is not the destruction of the latter that is happening but its poetic—and here theatrical—deconstruction.” Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London–New York: Routledge, 2006), 145–146.

*Rehearsal Process*

Afrim creates audio-visual heterotopies where the aural dimension has an ambient-generating function. The chosen soundscape must have such an intense atmosphere that it instantly creates a space in which the rehearsal may start. This is the usual beginning of every rehearsal, regardless of whether there is a dramatic text on which the performance will be based. If there is a text, it will be introduced in the rehearsal process at a later point and will be subject to unforeseeable changes. There are no readthroughs or any kind of rehearsal, for that matter, except working ones.

The first encounter of the Hungarian company with the director is remarkable, judging by the individual interview with Katalin Berekméri, the leading actress and artistic director of the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureș, who won a UNITER Award for Acting in *The Devil's Casting* in 2014, taken on July 22, 2023.

The company was faced with a theatre concept and a working method that are essentially different from anything they had met before. In 2014, the company was prepared enough to pick up the rhythm of work, the tempo, and to be able to meet those professional expectations which the director expected from the actors and the whole creative group. They fairly quickly understood Afrim's sense of taste and validity and prepare themselves to use a completely new method of acting. The actors have to be able to present radically different states of mind with abrupt changes. He or she must be very mobile, dynamic, and flexible, and he or she must possess good concentrating and improvising skills. The initial improvisations connected to the impromptu situations sketched by the director have to be accompanied by ultra-spectacular props and costumes. The complete creative team must be present from the beginning, ready to work, and willing to use their respective skills and instruments in abundance. The redundant

elements are cut out later on. A state of readiness and partnership is expected at all times from all collaborators to be able to follow the director's working method. The creative team has to rely on and trust its intuitions and instincts. Everybody has to be brave enough to plunge into the situation, since Afrim doesn't allow time for thinking, ponderation, and judging.

Afrim quickly diverts the actors' attention from themselves, from their fears, uncertainties and self-centeredness, because they must concentrate on the work, on the solving of the problem, and the task they receive, which requires his entire skill of concentration. The director allows a much shorter time for character-building and for finding and developing a valid acting solution than other directors. Therefore, the actors must channel their energies in a totally different way, but the solution is much more intensive and concentrated. Afrim doesn't discuss character-building, but the plot development might be the result of a collective effort, especially regarding the humorous elements. Instead of psychological dissection, he expects spontaneity, since the work happens on the stage, not in the mind. Working with him is overwhelming and exciting at the same time for those actors who intuitively understand his working method and are able to maintain the state of readiness he works in, and expect others to do as well.

Everything has to be exaggerated (movement, gesture, facial expression, volume of speech, etc.), but he relies on the actor's intelligence, taste, sense of humour, and internal sense of judgment of how and how much they show on the stage. The actor is supposed to go to the extreme, be that humorous, grotesque, or absurd, or to reach the borderline of melodramatic, but stop there. When an actor is ready, willing, and able to work with Afrim, he comes up with 4-5 solutions in order to help them and create situations where they can bring out the most of themselves. Besides the skills necessary for free improvisation and a strong sense of

humour, a zest for acting is required from the actor. The pleasure of acting has to be discernible in their performance. And, of course, the actor has to be ready for complete changes of everything during the rehearsal process, themselves, their solutions to the script, as well as scenery and sonority.

*Emblematic examples of  
Afrimian mise-en-scènes in Târgu-Mureș*

While two of the performances with the Tompa Miklós Company between 2014 and 2021 started with the director's encounter with the texts (*Tranquility*, a novel of the same title, and the drama version of it, written by Attila Bartis, and *Drunks*, a play by Ivan Viripajev). The remaining three productions, at first glance, seem to have been dealing with childhood memories. The devised performances—*The Devil's Casting* (2014), *Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt* (2016) and *Grand Hotel Retrobird* (2021)—evolve around a child's experiences during socialism in the 1970s, in a multiethnic Transylvanian town, right after the changes in 1989 and thirty years later. But as Deleuze's befitting words describe:

„We write not with childhood memories but through blocks of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present.”<sup>5</sup>

„The artist is a seer, a becomer. [...] He has seen something in life that is too great, too unbearable also, and the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it, so that the corner of nature or districts of the town that he sees, along with their characters, accede to a vision that, through them, composes the perceptions of that life,

of that moment, shattering lived perceptions into a sort of cubism, a sort of simultaneism, of harsh or crepuscular light [...].”<sup>6</sup>

It seems that both production and reception of the performances rely on transformative principles, which can be best described using the Deleuzian terms of affects and perceptions. „By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations.”<sup>7</sup>

In a retrospective interview about Afrim's oeuvre (more than 60 productions so far), published by the acclaimed Romanian cultural magazine *Dilema veche* in March 2023, the following question was asked: “In which one of your performances would you like to live for a while?” The director's prompt answer was: “In *Retrobird*. The block of flats of my childhood, with everything it comes.”<sup>8</sup> So Afrim's most outstanding “block of sensations” is a block of flats (an apartment building) in *Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt*, to which we will refer as the first *Retrobird*.

The first *Retrobird's* scenery (designed by Irina Moscu) is dominated by a two-story building (or block) with small flats with windows and interior stairways. The performance unfolds in the flats, stairways, in front of the building, and on top of it. The storefront life, with no intimacy but a lot of Balcan vitality led by its inhabitants, is a well-spring of surrealistic and grotesques elements. The building sometimes shows its sad, two-dimensional side, not unlike an herbarium; other times it almost explodes from the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>8</sup> Marius CHIVU and Ana Maria SANDU, „I am a Fan of Fragility: Interview with director Radu Afrim”, *Dilema Veche*, no. 985 (2023): 17–18.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh TOMLINSON and Graham BURCHELL (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 168.

clashes, meetings, and frictions of the heavily-laden lives. It took about two days to build it, and it stands there in its heavy physical presence during the three-and-a-half-hour performance. The spectatorial curiosity is duly satisfied in this multiplied peepshow. Each window serves as a small stage, and something is happening in all of them. We are witnesses of micro-stories, long gone fragments of life. Textures of memories congeal from shreds of noises and lights. The narrator (living in an unidentified time) swaps places with her child counterpart from the time of the performance. From the disappearance of Laura, one of the girls living in the building, to the preparation of the inhabitants for the visit of the Ceausescu couple, everything becomes weightless, as the collective memory of the community. Are we participating in a remembering or a forgetting process, or both at the same time? Somewhere between the desire and nostalgia for a home that perhaps never existed and an ironic (self)reflection in the fashion of the retro.

The scenery is packed with atmosphere generators: 1970s clothing fashion, magnetophone, herbarium, basket-ball, as well as the sonority: songs from ABBA, Boney M, and references to TV serials such as *Sandokan*, *Dallas*, *Valley of Memories*, etc. The sound- and light-design produces percepts such as the noise of the heels of the departing mother, the chirping of the birds at dawn, the shattering of the streetlights by the kids, kaleidoscope-like disco-lights, and others. The block also serves as a projection surface. The optical illusions generated by videomapping connect to the daydreaming and figments of the imaginations of the inhabitants. Moreover, they can endow the illusion of depth on two-dimensional elements as well as the illusion of movement on static objects. Thus, a poetic tension builds up between the illusion of movement and the fatal motionlessness of the herbarium. The block works like a vertical stage too, on which a virtual stage is projected, and the

play unfolds at the cross-section of the two stages as an extended reality. The projections simulate the changing lights of the passing days as well as of the seasons and of local storms. The ghostlike bouncing of the projected basketball gives place to the appearance of the light-bird. When darkness falls on everything, we see in a crack a light passing through the virtual stage with the contour of a bird.

At a decisive moment in the first *Retrobird* (2016), a little girl asks her older neighbour what retro means. According to the answer, if the girl writes about what is happening here and now, in thirty years it will be retro. And this is the idea that led Afrim to direct a second part of *Retrobird* five years later.

The starting situation of the *Grand Hotel Retrobird* is that the little girl, Mioara, from the first part, now a professor of literature in Belgium, revisits her hometown during a sabbatical. She books a room in her old block of flats, which has turned into a hotel; they have changed the wallpapers—a poignant theatrical representation of the changes in Romania after 1989.

The second *Retrobird* is also a devised performance; thus, the script is being born during the rehearsal process with the participation of the actors. Acting precedes speech; thus, body, language, and all of the sign processes are in constant shift and displacement relative to one another. We can never be sure what came up first—a gesture, a piece of costume, a prop, or a fragment of sound—and the text reacts to that (ironically, humorously, mockingly), or the other way around. On the other hand, Mioara is writing a book in her hotel room, and whatever she is writing happens more or less on the stage. The instant staging of the text is emphasised in as many ways as possible. For example, Amaryll, one of the constant guests, sometimes utters the written words together with the writer; the text sometimes notes that the man in white dress is bored of playing a woman, in which case acting precedes the text; or Vilmoska, the old child, lets the spec-

tator decide whether he will revive after the party or not. The script is contradictory, places us under pressure, changes the tone or smashes whatever we see, and never turns up the way we would expect. A high degree of unpredictability, idiosyncrasy, sudden semantic changes, and playfulness characterise it. The way it works influences each system of signs, and the other way around, depending on the situation and its participants.

The performance requires an intensive presence from each actor. The actors, using all of their tools (movement, speech, vocal expression, gestures, mimics, etc.) must be able to produce effects. Instead of representing something or somebody—"No role-playing!" is the most often heard instruction during the rehearsals—the actor should vibrate on stage and should convey enormous vitality and zest for playing. In other words, the intensity of their presence should prevent any coagulation of forms (characters). Zita (Csaba László, who received a UNITER Award for Acting for his performance) is the wife of the hotel manager. Most of the play happens in the reception area of the hotel because that is the place where everyone comes together. And this area is Zita's playground. Played by a man, she is a temptress who needs to entice everybody who shows up in the reception area. She is the motor of all the action that happens there, and the confabulator of the guests' micro-stories. But Csaba László's theatricalized body expands into the whole reception area; the tempo of his movement and speech and his ever-changing intonation guide the spectator's attention somewhere else. While the main action of all the figures is their appearance and disappearance in and from the hotel, since Zita's motional presence creates the space, the emptiness that remains after her disappearance is palpable. Vilmoska, the old child, played by László Zsolt Bartha is another example of how the attention of the spectator is directed behind representation, according to which Vilmoska is a retarded child, un-

tended by his parents. But the acting is not aimed at producing emotions (sympathy, regret), but at generating effects. His fast-paced speech in the party scene is juxtaposed by a similarly paced movement (kind of a weird dance), but with a different rhythm that produces a strange awareness that also draws attention to the fact that the retarded child perceives most of what is going on around him. The experiments of the subversion of the logic of representation weave through and haunt the entire performance with as many variations of duplications—spectral presences, and splitting into halves, for which only theatre is able to provide a joint space—as possible. Examples include the child and adult Mioara's presence in the same place; the thoroughly stylized figure of Vilmoska, the old child; the old and young body of auntie Teréz; the abject duplication of the Juhász brothers; the appearance of the doppelganger of the cleaning woman when she almost gets raped; the schizoid tension between Amaryll's body and mind, due to which we see a suffering simulacrum; and the constant struggle to create the female simulacrum.

In his work with the Tompa Miklós Company, Radu Afrim often turns to his own personal experiences, memories, sensations, and atmospheres, but he never handles them in a documentary manner. We encounter here the Afrimian version of the Transylvanian experience of facing one's own stranger, otherness, known unknown, and the openness that comes with the constant search for an identity in a director's theatre, which transforms all the perceivable elements of this experience into a discernibly stylized theatrical system of signs.

Afrim builds up blocs of sensations, which are compounds of perceptions and affects. The perceptions never have to resemble an "original" reference but should recreate the intensity of the experience. His interest lies in pinpointing the underlying forces that contribute to the birth or the becoming of perceptions. Likewise, affects aren't simply



affectations or emotional responses of the subject (be that the actor or the spectator). They are much more pre-subjective forces that pass through the subject of experience and change it. Afrim constantly pushes the limits of sensations, destabilises “normal” perception and affection, and avoids clichés. With the intensity of the sensible, new “blocks of sensations” may emerge.

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