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Staging the Classics in State-Socialist Hungary

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H-1041 Budapest
Kiss János utca 4/A.
E-mail: info@theatron.hu

Responsible for publishing: Magdolna Jákfalvi
Chief Editor: Árpád Kékesi Kun

This issue was edited by Árpád Kékesi Kun
Proofreading: Anna Sasvári

Associate Editors:
Gabriella Kiss, Vincze Muntag, Tamás Oláh,
Dorka Porogi, Gabriella Schuller

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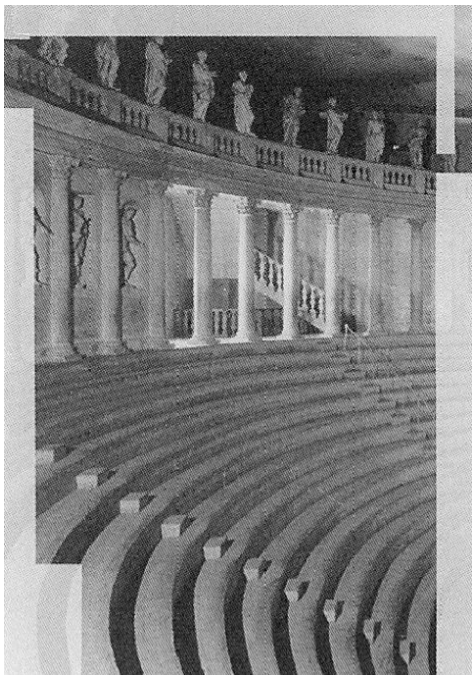

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Socialist Productions of *As You Like It* in Hungary

BÁLINT SZELE

Abstract: Theatre is political by nature, and productions always reflect the age in which they are born. This is especially true in the case of Hungarian socialism, where, after the 1960s, cultural policy left some freedom for theatres and reviewers; thus, doublespeak, stating the truth in a hidden form, was a well-tried mode of speech. This paper investigates four socialist productions of *As You Like It* together with the historical context: one in 1949, near the end of the communist takeover; one in 1954, at the height of hard-line communism; one in 1964 after the crushed Revolution of 1956; and one in 1983, near the end of socialism in Hungary. *As You Like It*, which first reflected the general optimism of socialist people and served to boost the morale of the nation in building socialism, gradually became a play representing the economic, moral, and political passivity and helplessness of the country. Each production had its unique characteristics, and each closely reflected the period of Hungarian socialism in which it was born.

Introduction

As You Like It was discovered relatively late in Hungary. Since the first performance in 1918 and the reprise of 1938, however, it has been one of the most popular plays and has had dozens of productions. In this paper, the focus will be on the productions of the period between 1949 and 1983, which is roughly equivalent to the period of communism and socialism in Hungary (1947–1989). The paper will offer a short analysis of the play, only focusing on the features relevant for this paper, and a historical summary to provide context for the productions analysed. The main interest is not in describing the productions of *As You Like It*, but in discovering Shakespeare's comedy in a socialist context and seeing how Shakespeare was used in theatres and how acutely the productions reflected Hungarian reality in the age when they were produced. The four productions to be discussed are those of 1949, 1954-55, 1964, and 1983.

As You Like It *and its brief history in Hungary*

As You Like It is one of Shakespeare's great comedies. It has been widely analysed by scholars;[1] this section summarises very briefly the characteristics of the play that are relevant for this paper. The play is basically a love comedy, which explores different themes of love and, at the same time, offers a satirical commentary on them. "In this play, the plot includes several storylines, meanings are deeper, the language is denser and more complex, and imagery loses its decorative function and becomes an organic part of the plot".[2] *As You Like It* can also be seen as a political play exploring power relations,[3] or a feminist play centred around Rosalinda and

[1] E.g. Agnes LATHAM, "As You Like It," in William SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes LATHAM, ix–xci (London: Methuen & Co, 1975); H.J., OLIVER, "Introduction," in William SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*, ed. H.J. OLIVER, 7–42 (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

[2] KÉRY László, *Shakespeare vígjátékai* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1964), 128.

[3] Andrew BARNABY, "The Political Conscious of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*," *Studies in English Literature* 36, no 2 (1996): 373–395, 374.

Celia.[4] In terms of literary form, *As You Like It* is a poetic play; it notably lacks low comedy,[5] and includes five full songs. These features may have made the play a natural choice for propagandists of the communist era. The political message is simplified into class struggle: "The civilised court is presented in an unfavourable light; it is a place where villainy, lust for power, and betrayal are daily practices, and where the purity and simplicity of nature is an attractive alternative with its goodness, equality, and happiness."[6] Impersonating Rosalinda's and Celia's characters is a great opportunity for young actresses, as they are stronger and more charming than most other heroines of Shakespeare's. Despite this, the equality of sexes did not surface in the production discussed.

In Hungary, *As You Like It* was almost unknown until 1938. This may be due to the fact that the first good-quality translation was made in that year by Lőrinc Szabó (1900–1957), one of the greatest literary translators in Hungary, and the play was produced by the National Theatre in Budapest. In 1831, when the Hungarian Academy of Sciences first listed the Shakespearean plays worthy of translation, *As You Like It* was not included in the 22-piece list. It was considered a minor, insignificant play, not just in Hungary, but in Germany, too. The first Hungarian translation (by Jenő Rákosi) appeared in 1870; however, being a low-quality text, it did not contribute to the popularity of the play. The first performance in Hungary was held on 18 January 1918. The contemporary taste did not find the play interesting enough: "the play, compared to other works of Shakespeare, does not have a rich plot that unfolds from scene to scene and offers no suspense to the audience."[7] In the summer of 1938, Antal Németh, the director of the National Theatre, commissioned Lőrinc Szabó to make a new, modern translation of the play. The play, directed by Antal Németh, opened on 17 December 1938. The text was published in a small volume, then amended and republished in the 1948 *Complete Dramatic Works of Shakespeare*, a year before the first post-WW2 production. In 1954, Lőrinc Szabó reviewed his own translation again, so the radio broadcast of 1954 and the production of the so-called *National Village Theatre* (Állami Faluszínház) in 1954-55 featured a slightly retouched, improved text, which was published in the socialist *Complete Shakespeare* of 1955. Since the 1938 reprise, the play has been one of the most popular and frequently produced plays in Hungary, with a dozen productions in Budapest and about thirty outside the capital, with a new production every 3 or 4 years. A new translation was made in 2006 by Ádám Nádasdy.

This paper examines the productions of 1949, 1954–55, 1964, and 1983 in Budapest on the basis of all available materials—recordings, if available, and theatre review[8]—and puts each production against a historical context to understand how the age itself was present in the theatre and how the reviews reflected that presence.

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[4] Robin SOWERBY, *William Shakespeare: As You Like It*, York Notes Advanced Series (London: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 103.

[5] Helen GARDNER, "Let the Forest Judge," in *Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It*, ed. J.R. BROWN, A Selection of Critical Essays, 149–166 (Houndmills: Palgrave Publishers, 1979), 150.

[6] TAKÁCS Ferenc, "Utószó," in William SHAKESPEARE, *Ahogy tetszik*, trans. SZABÓ Lőrinc, 149–155 (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1980), 153.

[7] SEBESTYÉN Károly, *Shakespeare: kora, élete, művei* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa kiadása, 1936), 175.

[8] These reviews can be found at the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (OSZMI) as newspaper cutouts, and some do not include page numbers.

Table 1. The productions analysed

Date	Theatre	Director
11 June 1949	National Theatre	Tamás Major, Endre Gellért
1 May 1954	National Village Theatre	Béla Both
30 May 1964	Madách Theatre	László Vámos
25 February 1983	Katona József Theatre	Gábor Székely

The pre-socialist production of 1949

Hungary took part in WW2 on the wrong side. After severe bombing by the Western Allies, the front finally reached Hungary in late 1944. The Soviet Red Army seized the country from Nazi Germany (which had occupied the country in March 1944) in six months and gradually took control, using the Hungarian Communist Party, led by Mátyás Rákosi, as its local agent. After a few years of ailing democracy, communist leaders gradually established a Soviet-style government and adopted a Stalinist ideology. Between 1947 and 1949, all opposition voices were gradually silenced, and Hungary became a Stalinist dictatorship. The production of *As You Like It* in 1949 can be understood in this context: the happiness of the country after the end of the war, together with the dark clouds gathering over the countries occupied by the Soviet Union.

The directors of the production relied on the best actors and actresses of the period. Lajos Básti played a likeable, romantic Orlando, and Ági Mészáros' Rosalinda was fresh and charming, a wise lady of the world; a critic noted that "no one else could play this role so well."[9] Zsuzsa Bánki was a kindly, over-earnest, and tender Celia, with very tasteful acting. Zoltán Makláry's Touchstone was playfully wise and offhandedly sensible, while Miklós Gábor played Jaques with a lot of skill and dedication: he impersonated an eccentric, lonely traveller, "who chose the angry man, the indignant snarler" from the possible interpretations of the role.[10]

It is worth quoting a review by Dezső Kiss, who described the relevance of the play in the time of the production, and elaborated on the communist Shakespeare cult, which was, it seems, almost compulsory in the period between 1949 and 1955. The upbeat of the review is an anti-capitalist "the sun is now setting above Great Britain," but then it quickly goes on to describe a new relationship between Shakespeare and the Hungarians: "It was not the old audience. The audience is now a cross-section of the new, workers' society, all layers of society from government members to simple factory workers, and they were all charmed and elevated by the immortal genius." Kiss adds that "the Shakespeare cult is unfolding powerfully from London to Moscow," and now "Hungarian workers and young intellectuals are also part of it." Theatres have the task of "giving a commentary on Shakespeare that fits the spiritual music of our time to the new Hungarian audience."[11] György Faludy, who also reviewed the performance, was more critical, perhaps alluding to the fact that the play was overly aimed at less literate audiences: in his opinion, "the text should have been given more respect and accompanied with acting and fun, instead of prioritising the acting.[12]

Most reviewers seemed to agree that *As You Like It* was a Shakespearean symphony of youth. This play is "sheer music, sheer melody,

[9] ERDŐS Jenő, "Ahogy tetszik," *Kis Újság*, June 14, 1949. All translations from Hungarian by the author.

[10] VASS László, "Független kritika az Ahogy tetszikről," *Független Magyarország*, June 13, 1949.

[11] KISS Dezső, "Shakespeare 1949," *Haladás*, June 13, 1949.

[12] FALUDY György, "Ahogy tetszik," *Népszava*, June 14, 1949.

sheer fire, and young passion."[13] The play "can tell a lot to today's people about a more natural, happy, and balanced life."[14] Probably this is close to what the directors intended to do: to provide some kind of youthful energy through Shakespeare's comedy. The play was staged after *Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the greatest comedies, and now the focus was on social changes; while Hungarian society was changing very rapidly due to politically motivated terror, on the stage "social and cultural differences disappear in the utopia of the forest."[15] Aristocrats in Hungary were treated as parasites; noble titles and ranks were prohibited by law (from 1946); members of the former nobility were being intimidated, and their property was confiscated, so the picture of exiled aristocrats living peacefully in harmony with the people of the forest looks like distancing such problems into the Middle Ages. Another critic said that "life is shown as it is: the artful lies and intrigues of court life are in opposition with the natural purity and sobriety of simple and artless human life,"[16] implying that the new Hungarian society of workers and peasants is better than the old one with its feudal-style class divisions.

In summary, it can be stated that the 1949 production was a popular, well-directed one, with good acting, and it already reflected the problems of the time: the opposition of the "poetic" and the "theatrical" Shakespeare,[17] the coexistence of social classes, and the conflicts brought about by the forced social changes.

As You Like It *during communist years*

From 1950, all publishing houses and newspapers were nationalised, and official literary politics favoured Marxist aesthetics and criticism, which imposed serious limitations on the freedom of literature and developed a one-sided socialist norm that had a negative effect on authors, public education officials, and readers.[18] The objectives of literature were also laid down in a five-year plan by Márton Horváth, the Communist politician who executed the party's Stalinist cultural politics in the Rákosi era, and who was a chief promoter of voluntarist cultural politics, finally leading to general schematism, who wrote the following:

> "The five-year plan determines the main directions and topics of our literature too. […] Democratic literature means literature that addresses millions, that is plain and of general interest. This is the literature of the new heroes of the people, living for the people. This is the new elevation, the literature of the pathos of building."[19]

Knowing their value in educating people, communists nationalised all theatres between 1947 and 1949 and gave them generous subsidies. Their independence was taken away, the repertoire was set centrally and it mainly focused on harmless or progressive plays that would promote socialist culture. A new canon was prescribed, but this still included Shakespeare, who, by this time, was seen as a national classic and, at the same

[13] KISS Dezső, "Shakespeare…"
[14] VASS László, "Független kritika…"
[15] KESZI Imre, "Ahogy tetszik," *Szabad Nép*, June 14, 1949.
[16] TURI András, "Ahogy tetszik," *Esti Szabad Szó*, June 12, 1949.
[17] See also: SZELE Bálint, "Translating Shakespeare for the Hungarian Stage: Contemporary Perspectives," *AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association*, 6 (2013).
[18] VASY Géza, *„Hol zsarnokság van": Az ötvenes évek és a magyar irodalom* (Budapest: Mundus, 2005), 17.
[19] HORVÁTH Márton, "Író-diplomaták," *Szabad Nép*, April 17, 1949.

time, a true representative of internationalism.

> "The new, complete Shakespeare aims at serving the cultural development of the Hungarian nation with weapons superior to the previous ones. Earlier, our bourgeois culture made significant progress in popularising Shakespeare, but, without a doubt, it is our people's democracy that has made Shakespeare's art available to broad masses of Hungarians. What would have been unimaginable 2-3 years ago is now undeniably real: besides our intelligentsia, masses of workers and peasants know and like Shakespeare, who is becoming a treasure of Hungarian folk art before our eyes. They know and like him—these words mean more than ever before; they mean that Shakespeare is seen as a revealer of the truth, a master of history and life, a teacher-poet."[20]

Shakespeare was a rewarding author: his feelings against feudalism were seen as preoccupation with class struggle in a time when the Hungarian nobility suffered discrimination and deportation (this latter from 1951). His heroic fight against oppressive forces, his humanistic ideals, and his social "realism" were cheered by ideologists. As the only acceptable style of the period was Social Realism, Shakespeare was very often called a "realist," with very little reason. Shakespearean heroes, to a certain extent, turned into predecessors of socialist heroes: people who acted and fought for their ideals.

Shakespeare's comedies offer great entertainment for any audience. As staging political plays had proved too dangerous in the late 1940s and early 1950s, comedies were seen as beneficial in two ways: they offered innocent entertainment and relieved some of the tensions in the rapidly changing Hungarian society. Early productions, like *Richard III* in 1947, represented the triumph of socialism over fascism and worked very well with the public. When the play was staged again in 1955, in the worst years of communist terror, it turned politically subversive: the play's resemblances to the realities of communist rule (terror, executions, intimidation, show trials, and, on the other hand, victorious propaganda. and self-adoration) struck a chord with audiences, who cheered for minutes on end, e.g., when the scribe arrived onstage with the prefabricated verdict.[21] The 1950 production of *Macbeth* demonstrated the same. The stage was crowded with explicit signs of tyranny: armed guards and spiteful informers. In 1963, a critic finally admitted that this was interesting and topical then, "right after the fall of Fascism and in the years of the rigidifying personality cult."[22]

In accordance with the official goal of educating people through Shakespeare, an adaptation of *As You Like It* was broadcast on radio in 1954,[23] and the inclusion of the play into the repertoire of the so-called "National Village Theatre" (Állami Faluszínház), which had been established in 1951 to hold theatrical performances in villages and towns far from city theatres, was approved. The play was performed all over the country 182 times.[24]

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[20] KARDOS László, "Shakespeare," in SHAKESPEARE, *Összes Drámái*, ed. KÉRY László, 6 Vols. 1:7–60 (Budapest: Új Magyar Könyvkiadó, 1955), 57.

[21] SCHANDL Veronika, *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-regime Hungary* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 17.

[22] MÁTRAI-BETEGH Béla, "Macbeth: Shakespeare-felújítás a Nemzeti Színházban," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 24, 1963, 4.

[23] More information about the broadcast: https://radiojatek.elte.hu/radiojatek/53652

[24] KISSNÉ FÖLDES Katalin, *Az Állami Faluszínház műsora 1951–1958*, Színháztörténeti Füzetek 12 (Budapest: Színháztudo-

The didactic nature of the performances was reflected in reviews, as if the reviewer had been watching the audience instead of the play. The critic György Vécsey said, for example, that "the faces of peasants, workers, and intellectuals equally reflect the joy of artistic experience." He presumed that the director had decided which characters were valuable and which valueless and presented the play thus to the audience. "How well they [the audience] understand Touchstone's witty remarks when he mocks the aristocracy!" he rejoiced.[25] Jenő Zólyomi added that "there is a need for not the one smoke-screened in an aristocratic, bourgeois manner, but the real Shakespeare, who, through his writings, is always the advocate of the oppressed,"[26]

Mihály Barota thinks that the dominant topics of the play are social injustice and love games and shares the opinion that "*As You Like It* gives everybody something to think about, grieve, contemplate, take pleasure in, and cheer up with,"[27] Both Zólyomi and Mrs. Szántó, however, focus on the social presence of the theatre itself and share a lot of information concerning organisation. Village Theatre is "an important cultural institution of our people's democracy, which presents progressive Hungarian and foreign pieces to masses of people," and also it is "a matchless cultural venture: it has given Shakespeare to the simple people of villages and hamlets," and this proves that "the great playwright is of the people and for the people."[28] The greatest perspective of the blooming Shakespeare cult, he argues, is "when village people learn from this author;" "simple village people, thousands of our workers laugh, rejoice, and cry" when watching the play. He concludes that the performance was "a great event and a joyful day in the cultural life of the town."[29] Mrs. Szántó, a woman who was a member and functionary of the Party, reveals how hard it was sometimes to recruit an audience. She states that "the Village Theatre is known and liked in all our villages" and it is a pleasure that "people sometimes literally besiege the ticket office; moreover, in villages, extra seats have to be installed to seat the audience." However, this is not true in Szombathely, which "has monthly performances with very low attendance," so "we had to do laborious agitation work all week to succeed, but the result speaks for itself: the Great Hall of the County Council was full."[30]

The writings presented above tell us about the enormous political forces put behind the Village Theatre and Shakespeare, who was seen as a teacher, and, consequently, people were seen as docile students. Still, the lighthearted acting and the inalienable value of *As You Like It* gave memorable moments to the public, and probably this was the main goal.

Socialist As You Like It *after 1956*

The worst years of hard-line communism lasted from 1950 to 1953, when the totalitarian state controlled almost everything, including literature and publishing. State terror, intimidation, executions, show trials, as well as famine and a brutal decline in living standards, were everyday realities. The death of Stalin in 1953 somewhat loosened the grip, and the ensuing events culminated in the Revolution of 1956 and Rákosi's downfall. From 1957 on, János Kádár (1912–1989), the

mányi és Filmtudományi Intézet, Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum, 1957), 13.

[25] VÉCSEY György, "Shakespeare – Esztergomban," *Színház és Mozi*, March 25, 1954.

[26] ZÓLYOMI Jenő, "Shakespeare Tolna megyében," *Tolnai Napló*, November 11, 1954, 4.

[27] BAROTA Mihály, "Ahogy tetszik," *Szabolcs-szatmári Néplap, Nyíregyháza,* February 13, 1955.

[28] ZÓLYOMI, "Shakespeare…," 4.

[29] Ibid.

[30] SZÁNTÓ Jenőné, "Shakespeare Vas megyében," *Tanácsok Lapja*, October 25, 1954.

new socialist leader of the country,[31] meticulously set up a unique political system in which citizens were emphatically asked to remain inactive in politics in return for a slightly higher standard of living. Balancing between the desires of the Hungarian people and dictates of the Soviet Union, Kádár gradually set up a fairly well-liveable political establishment, where "those who are not against us are with us." This is what many people call "Goulash Communism" (although, officially, Hungary was a socialist country, and there was no more talk of communism after 1956), and this is what made Hungary "the Happiest Barrack" in the Socialist Bloc. To support his establishment, Kádár invented the cultural system of "Ban, Tolerate, Support" (in Hungarian these are referred to as the three T's: *Tilt, Tűr, Támogat*). In such circumstances, art that was banned or tolerated was always more popular than officially supported art; artists and reviewers developed a form of doublespeak, which meant hinting at something without explicitly stating it, and required reading between the lines from audiences.

By 1964, the year of the next production in Budapest, the retaliations for the Revolution were over, order had been restored, the authority of the Party was reinforced, and people had begun to understand that socialism was to stay for a long time. To counterbalance this, the standard of living grew, modern flats were built, modern shops were opened, and Hungary began to produce buses, motorbikes, and television sets. Fashion also changed, and people had a chance to travel abroad. It was in such circumstances that Madách Theatre staged the play again. The play was very popular with the public, and somehow it represented the psyche of the nation, which balanced between a violent rejection of socialist politics and a happy embracement of higher standards of living. This balance is the basis of the Kádár Period, during which doublespeak was more and more frequently used to describe feelings and facts without police or officials sanctioning it, but with others understanding perfectly what one was talking about.

The production opened on 30 May 1964, featuring some of the best Hungarian actors. Rosalinda was played by Ilona Béres, who presented a charming, clever, cheeky girl who sees her exile as an adventure. She acted with irony, humour, and dignity, also incorporating some playful-fabular notes in her acting. Géza Tordy's memorable Orlando was characterised by a simple acting approach, a mixture of courage and pure love. Celia (played by Csűrös Karola) was a bit demure but naughty and flirty girl. Jaques, played again by Miklós Gábor, was a contemplative character, characterised by whimsicality, mockery, and philosophy.[32] János Körmendy's Touchstone was colourful, tasteful, and cleverly built up. The set was a small hill in the middle of the stage, with ascent and descent for the characters to walk on, and curtains were used around the stage to provide background.

It is quite amazing to see how the reviews of the play reflected upon the present concerns of Hungary as well as the performance itself. One prominent feature is the presence of contrasting feelings. The unnamed reviewer of the periodical *Köznevelés* (Public Education) states at the very beginning of her/his paper that *As You Like It* is not real comedy, "the tragic chords can also be heard," and that the play equally contains "weltschmerz, philosophism, and optimism."[33] Iván Sándor also emphasised that the play represented "both cheeriness and

[31] More about Kádár and his career: Robert GOUGH, *A Good Comrade: János Kádár, Communism and Hungary* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

[32] VAJK Vera, "Ahogy tetszik," *Népszava*, June 9, 1964, 2.

[33] N.n., "Az *Ahogy tetszik* a Madách Színházban," *Köznevelés*, July 9, 1964, 514.

gloominess."[34] The idea of using Shakespeare for education was still there, but in a milder form compared to 1949 or 1954. The reviewer of *Köznevelés* recommended that teachers go and watch the play with their students, and later they discuss what they have seen.[35]

Pál Kürti's rather political review gives a detailed treatise of contemporary Hungarian mood, using the production as an excuse to lament on current affairs. His language in the review is an excellent example of double-speak. "The forest accepts an unlimited number of émigrés," he says, adding that "in some hardly endurable moments of our lives, at least in imagination, everybody has already been an émigré,"[36] hinting at the fact that 200,000 people left the country after the Revolution. Another example is, "Jaques followed the exiled Duke and his followers into their emigration, but he in fact represents what today we usually call 'inward emigration'" (the term refers to an inward turning away from politics to somebody who does not accept the present ideology but does nothing to actively stop its spreading). When Kürti speaks about the usurping Duke and Charles, the wrestler, he marginally mentions that "dictators have used raw muscle force in all times," obviously referring to Kádár (and maybe Khrushchev). Kürti is brilliant in this review: he almost explicitly speaks about Soviet imperialism and what we now call the Kádárian Restoration, knowing that he is perfectly covered by the play itself. When he says the forest-dwellers "get under the colonisation of the courtly émigrés [this might also refer to the Muscovite politicians, who had spent time in Moscow before returning to rule Hungary] and share the fate of developing countries" or "Adam's speech airs all the suffering and sorrow of oppressed people," he uses the clichés otherwise used in the Party press, applying them to the play and, obviously, Hungarian reality. And the last stab, obviously at Kádár, who had returned from Moscow on 5 November 1956 with clear orders to pacify the country: "the old Duke is a little scared when he hears he has to go back to the court; the émigrés are unwilling to give themselves to the numerous political complications of restoring an *ancien regime.*"[37] Iván Sándor also explains the different modes of looking at contemporary reality: "the play does not conjure up what the naively simplifying eye can see about life; it shows more that which can be discovered only by people who know the simple secrets of life's everyday naturalness."[38]

In the 1970s, the deficiencies of the Eastern Bloc and Kádár's system began to surface: enormous foreign debts, lack of innovation, and an impossibility of political self-expression, coupled with a fall in living standards, which drove many Hungarians into the private economy, where they literally worked themselves to death just to be able to afford a trip abroad, a car, or a refrigerator. People became disillusioned and uninterested, many turned to alcohol and other drugs. Secret services continued to spy and report on people. In the 1980s, the obvious failure of socialism started new, underground political movements in the country, but the average citizen, having been trained to rely on the government's solutions, just became paralysed with fear of the future and lack of any hope to escape it. Soviet Premier Brezhnev died in 1982, and he was followed by an ageing and ailing Andropov, soon to die too (in 1984). Gerontocracy was taking over everywhere in the Eastern Bloc, and there seemed to be no future for socialism. Kádár was also disillusioned and weak, but he remained in office until spring 1988.

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[34] SÁNDOR Iván, "Ahogy tetszik," *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, no. 23 (1965): 4.
[35] N.n., "Az *Ahogy tetszik*...," 514.
[36] KÜRTI Pál, "Ahogy tetszik," *Magyar Nemzet*, June 10, 1964, 4.
[37] KÜRTI Pál, "Ahogy tetszik," 4.
[38] SÁNDOR Iván, "Ahogy tetszik," *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, no 23 (1965): 5.

The 1983 production and its reviews, again, are clear references to the Hungarian state of affairs and uncover an understanding deeper than what is present in the official Party press. Katona József Theatre cast a brilliant young actress, Dorottya Udvaros, to play the role of Rosalinda. Her acting was hailed as "breathtakingly natural and ideally artistic,"[39] it was characterised by "elemental charm, femininity, and disarming naturalness,"[40] and her Rosalinda was "clever and engaging, attractive and self-confident."[41] Sándor Gáspár's Orlando was a "naturbursch" type, pushy and timid at the same time; Ibolya Csonka's Celia was carefully presented with a lot of inner humour. László Szacsvay's Touchstone was a precisely sketched, classy court jester, comic and tragic at the same time. Miklós Benedek, one of the greatest actors at the time, played Jaques, with "more intriguing, militant bitterness than resigned melancholy," and his great speech, *All the world's a stage…* "was spoken with slightly less than hate."[42] Károly Eperjes, who played Silvius, can also be mentioned, as he had just started his career and was later to become one of the most popular actors in Hungary.

There are two minor themes the performance touches upon: alienation and resignation, both resonant to the realities of the 1980s in Hungary. Tamás Barabás stressed that "*As You Like It* stops a gap that comes from lack of emotions in our age."[43] Tamás Mészáros added that "everybody is suspicious and mistrustful," and "the players exist in uncertainty and look for certainty in each other's emotions."[44] But the main theme is lack of logic, motivation, and consequences: things just happen, and people just undergo them. As Mészáros puts it, in this play, Shakespeare "uses a 'rabbit out of a hat' type of dramatic mechanism to accidental, unpredictable, unexplainable events," the plot lacks causes and consequences, all behaviour is unmotivated: "things happen and people simply accept them."[45] László Sinkó's "Duke roams the open air with a shelter half on his shoulder; he never wonders anything, he never gets upset, as somebody who has realised that events are impenetrable and basically not important." When they tell him he can regain his dukedom, he stoically heads home, "if it so happened." This is how one would describe Hungarian society in the 1980s. In András Barta's review, "the Duke receives the news with the impassive acquiescence of a seasoned politician."[46] This is how one would describe János Kádár at the end of his career.

"Where are the cloudless, fabular, bucolically idyllic performances of the 50s and 60s?" asks Barta, who describes the production along similar lines to Mészáros, saying we should not look for logic where there is none, and he thinks it is Jaques who shows us: "humans are at the mercy of their fellow humans and nature", and accepting this "leads to fewer disappointments."[47] Jaques, however, also reminds us that "those who have experienced the atrocities of life so much should not so resignedly accept the handy appearances."[48] *As You Like It*, again, was a parallel to contemporary Hungary: the passiveness, helplessness, and bewilderment of people who cannot but accept their fate and watch events unfold without any chance of controlling them. The production ran until as late as 1987, which proves its immense popularity.

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[39] ALMÁSI Miklós, "Bájos örömök – áruhában," *Népszabadság*, March 25, 1983, 7.
[40] MÉSZÁROS Tamás, "Oly édes az élet?," *Magyar Hírlap*, March 5, 1983.
[41] BARTA András, "Ahogy tetszik," *Magyar Nemzet*, March 13, 1983.
[42] BARABÁS Tamás, "Ahogy tetszik," *Esti Hírlap*, February 28, 1983.
[43] Ibid.
[44] MÉSZÁROS, „Oly édes…"
[45] Ibid.
[46] BARTA, "Ahogy tetszik."
[47] Ibid.
[48] MÉSZÁROS, „Oly édes…"

Conclusion

Before starting to write this essay, I was convinced there was not much to write about *As You Like It* in Hungary, and I was the most surprised to find that the play is probably the best material to describe the relationship between Hungary and Shakespeare against the context of ever-developing socialism. Shakespeare's play lends itself to many interpretations, and those interpretations will summarise the age in which they were produced: the forced Shakespeare cult in 1949, the "democratisation" of Shakespeare and anti-aristocracy remarks in 1954, the mournful mood of 1964 together with the resignation to political passivity, and the feeling of affairs out of control as well as impending disaster in 1983, of which people could be no more than passive onlookers by then. Paradoxically, *As You Like It* is a Shakespearean comedy that shows us the tragic traits in Hungarian history exceptionally well.

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Antigone's Brothers. The Soviet Reburial

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI

Abstract: During the establishment of the Kádár era of state socialist Hungary and the emergence of a Hungarian ideological aesthetic that essentially internalized the Soviet cultural model—that is, in the years after the 1956 revolution—retaliation was the general tool of power. On 4 November 1956, Soviet troops marched into Hungary; by January 1957 fighting had ceased in the country, and the tabooing of revolutionary events began immediately. It would be a hopeless undertaking to detect, or even to look for, a moment of resistance in the acts of everyday communication, but an analysis of the cultural context of even a single theatrical performance reveals the human attention (and pain) present in civil situations. The tragedy of *Antigone* is a personal experience lived over decades because Sophocles' text carries the story of the communist martyr minister László Rajk, executed in 1949, and the story of the prime minister Imre Nagy, executed two years after the 1956 revolution, both buried secretly and hastily, only in the technical sense, without any ritual. The reburial of the dead of the previous eras played a decisive role in both of the two major political upheavals of the post-war decades in Hungary. But nothing can explain how Jean Anouilh's drama *Antigone* could have been performed at all in January 1957.

"Only the thoughts we don't say are honest."[1]

It is a well-known phenomenon in Hungarian social practice that the burial of the dead becomes a source of new confrontations instead of reconciliation.[2] The reburial of the dead of the previous eras played a decisive role in both of the two major political upheavals of the post-war decades. It is common experience that the liberation of remembrance, the utterance of forbidden names, breaks the language of power discourse, and consequently the granting of final honours to heroes breaks the order of power. In Hungary, Sophocles's *Antigone* is staged primarily in the context of this interpretative expectation.

For the Hungarian reader, the tragedy of *Antigone* is a personal experience lived over decades because Sophocles's text carries the story of the communist martyr minister László Rajk, executed in 1949, and the story of the prime minister Imre Nagy, executed two years after the 1956 revolution, both buried secretly and hastily, only in the technical sense, without any ritual. The denial of a proper funeral is an act of ultimate humiliation, where an earthly power intervenes in the post-mortem order. But this intervention, where the bodies are buried face down in unmarked graves in secret but markedly unholy places, as Sophocles records, does not obliterate remembrance but rather provokes it. The lack of a funeral itself becomes an object of remembrance.

Those to whom authorities deny burial might get buried later, sometimes more than once, and Sophocles gives Polyneices three burials. The rhythm of secret non-burials and ceremonial reburials mark crucial changes in the history of state socialism, and the Budapest performances of *Antigone* create a cultural

[1] This sentence, titled Anouilh, appears only in the Hungarian version; presumably it was the translator, György Galamb's own message.

[2] The research was supported by NKFHI-OTKA 142520.

community in the theatre that works as a memory machine.[3]

The best-known staging of *Antigone* took place at the National Theatre[4] in Budapest, three days after the proclamation of the Hungarian Republic, the act that marked the end of the shift of power and the triumph of democracy, and the public reburial of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of 1956, and his fellow martyrs, on 16 June 1989, the 31st anniversary of their execution. Presented at a sublime moment of political regime change, in the adaptation of István Eörsi,[5] while focusing on the will to bury the dead brother, pays tribute to the very recent act of reburial that broke a thirty-one-year-old nationwide taboo. The unexpected power of the performance, however, was emphasised by another performance of *Antigone*, thirty-two years earlier, which can be acknowledged from the perspective of this performance. In my study, I will point out this historical moment of cultural impact.

In January 1957, the largest theatre in Budapest presented *Antigone*. A surprising and incredible event, nothing can explain how Jean Anouilh's drama *Antigone* could have been performed at all and how it remained in the repertoire of the Vígszínház's studio until the end of the season. This took place only a few weeks after the revolution was crushed, and it was perhaps the unpredictable and incomprehensible mixture of stability and confusion that had led to this message of freedom. Rich in naturalistic imagery, this drama, after depicting bloody battles that are chilling in their detail, also evokes the stages of the decomposing decay of the corpse. For the people of Budapest in the weeks after the street fighting of 1956, all this was not aesthetic knowledge, but a physical experience. Of the performance, only a script and a few stage photos have survived, and a few reviews have been published. Yet it is possible to follow how the cultural order of the theatre was stabilised, and which theatrical-dramaturgical moments disrupted the standardised canon.

We know that the interpretive aura of *Antigone* is saturated with the idea of opposing forces. It is the relationship between Antigone and Creon, following Hegel's interpretation,[6] that holds the attention of analysts, and theatre productions tend to focus on the question: what are the moments that determine the communal and power dynamics of the polis? The Hungarian tradition of acting and reading, however, noticeably backs down at the event that creates the conflict and considers the action that makes the Hegelian opposition visible, the burial of Polyneices, not simply as a cause but as an end. In the Hungarian play tradition, *Antigone* has become the drama of the call for burial.

During the establishment of the Kádár era of state socialist Hungary and the emergence of a Hungarian ideological aesthetic that essentially internalised the Soviet cultural model,[7] that is, in the years after the 1956 revolution, retaliation was the general tool of power. On 4 November 1956, Soviet troops marched into Hungary, and by January 1957 fighting had ceased in the country,[8] and the tabooing of revolutionary events began im-

[3] Marvin CARLSON, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Michigan: UMP, 2003).

[4] Opening Night on 26. October 1989.

[5] István Eörsi, a philosopher and poet, spent almost four years in prison after 1956 for revolutionary activity, and did not receive permission to publish in the Sovietized political system for years.

[6] G. W. Friedrich HEGEL, *Ästhetik*, 2 Vols. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1965), 421.

[7] Michal KOPEČEK and Piotr WCISLIK, *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).

[8] TABAJDI Gábor and UNGVÁRY Krisztián, *Elhallgatott múlt: A pártállam és a belügy: A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990* (Budapest: Corvina–1956-os Intézet, 2008).

mediately. It would be a hopeless undertaking to detect, or even to look for, a moment of resistance in the acts of everyday communication, but an analysis of the cultural context of even a single theatrical performance reveals the human attention (and pain) present in civil situations.

Plans for the 1956–57 theatre season had been drawn up by the Hungarian theatres in the summer of 1956 (that is, months before the revolution or even the Rajk-reburial), and the press started talking about the authorised performances in the summer. This is how it is known that the Vígszínház, then known as the Theatre of the People's Army, planned to present Anouilh's tragedy *Antigone*. The director was Andor Ajtay, a well-known actor and director of the interwar years, and the premiere was announced for 11 November 1956, even as late as 18 October 1956 (that is, five days prior to the breakout of the revolution). At the time, the production was still described as a "tragedy of *Antigone* with a rebel heart,"[9] and the director envisaged "something new and different from the usual."[10] In the interviews at the beginning of October, the concept, inspired by a dialectical reading of Hegel, focused on the struggle between Creon and Antigone, the struggle between "the infidel and the believer, the disillusioned and the one just awakening to life."[11]

The choice of Sophocles's drama was certainly inspired by the official reburial of László Rajk, formerly Minister of Interior and more recently the Foreign Affairs of the Hungarian People's Republic. The politician, executed in 1949, was reburied on 6 October 1956, and the performance of *Antigone*, scheduled for six weeks later, was also supposed to be a tribute to the reburial, a production of a memorial that offered the audience a rehabilitation of the communist martyr through a reenactment of the act of confrontation and defiance. The will to burial represented in the tragedy is a clear, pivotal reference to the communist victim innocently executed in 1949. This performance would have acknowledged the process of justice: Rajk had to be buried, it was done, and the Anouilh performance was a reminder of what the community had already gone through. But 18 October 1956 was the last news on *Antigone*; five days later, the revolution broke out. And in the following weeks, everything that Sophocles imagined within the walls of Thebes became reality in Hungary: armed battles in the streets, brother against brother, Hungarian soldiers against Hungarian revolutionaries, until the arrival of the new strongman, appointed by the Soviets, János Kádár. 1957 was to be the year of retribution, forced reconciliation, and the reorganisation of a somewhat reformed dictatorship.

And then, after a three-month hiatus, *Antigone* somehow appeared among the theatre news on 11 January 1957, with a rehearsal photo. Those three months incorporated the largest upheaval of state-socialist systems, and the nation was experiencing the most violent identity crisis in its post-war history. Between October 1956 and January 1957, the structure and language of the news changed, and even the periodicals reporting on the performance were still searching for the weight, or even the meaning, of the sentences written in the destabilised intellectual space. Publicists had to, first of all, justify what this drama and this theme were doing on stage. This reveals the techniques of obfuscation: for example, they wrote that *Antigone* was being staged "in a studio performance by the theatre's young people,"[12] which would mean that *Antigone* was being performed in a studio, as a young person's opportunity,[13] but the actors in the photograph were no longer young people. Miklós Szakáts, 37, Andor Ajtay, 54, and Nóra Tábori, 29, are shown on the front page in civilian clothes. (László

[9] n. n., "Egyperces interjú az *Antigone* rendezőjével," *Esti Budapest* 5, no. 246 (1956): 3.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] *Népszava* 2, no. 8 (1957): 2.
[13] *Népszava* 2, no. 15 (1957): 4.

Bánhidy, playing the guard, was 51; György Pálos, playing the chorus, was 37; István Szatmári, playing Haimon, was 32; and Mihály Erdélyi, in the role of the 2nd guard, was 62).

The news report therefore diminished the importance and significance of the show by referring to young people instead of established star actors. If we also look at the programme schedules beside the news, the most striking thing we see is the confusion of the programme schedules. We see that *The Taming of the Shrew* and one of the Hungarian classics, *The Mute Knight*, were on at the Vígszínház, but in January the theatres already tried to entice their old season ticket holders back. In their advertisements they were promising to make up for the cancelled performances, but they were asking patience from theatregoers,[14] because in a situation of upheaval and ongoing recovery they could only play a few days per week.

The year 1957 was a year of patience and reparations, a year of return to stability, when theatre could be attended again, when services, e. g. laundry, were gradually restored. Between the lines announcing the theatre shows, one can't even guess what kind of revolution and freedom fight had been taking place on the streets, but smuggled in between the news of the services, one can read that something had happened.[15] Since neither the repertoire structure nor the rhythm of the performances evokes the image of a shattered city or the unburied dead, the still constant sense of loss and pain, it is quite surprising that *Népszabadság*, the party newspaper, carried the news of *Antigone* on the morning of its premiere, 19 January 1957, with a photo on its front page. The picture, taken from the top right, shows a modern stage design and constitutes a small piece of colourful information under the headline "British military attaché expelled."[16] The contrast is disturbing and striking, but it is there anyway.

The first review took an unusually long time, five days, to appear, and by Thursday, 24 January, it was finally decided what kind of critical tone would accompany *Antigone*. The columnist of *Népszabadság* found that the purpose of the performance was nothing less than to "give news of contemporary French society."[17] The reviewer, before presenting the play in a way that was not free of generalities, maked it clear that "even in a world under capitalism, the best of the best still have a sense of non-compromise, a sense of vocation, as the writer calls it, a 'strange fever'."[18] The play evoked the Frenchness of "the twilight of capitalist society in a maelstrom of filth, disbelief, inhumanity, anarchism, and cynicism." The performance was visually French, the elegance of the costumes, the gestures of the actors, the hairdo, the plate-caps, all concretised and linked the story to Anouilh, and the story was not complicated, since "Creon and Antigone clashed over the question of happiness."[19]

In January 1957, *Antigone* was searching not for happiness but for truth after the greatest revolution of modern Hungary—but the words funeral or burial simply could not be written down; temporarily they lacked a written form. In the reviews, the word death was also associated only with Antigone, and her brother, whom she had to bury, was not to be known about. For the first time, on 26 January 1957, in one of the reflections, Antigone was described as the one who "assumes death."[20] But the act of burial and the word itself were taboo by then. In March 1957, for the first time, in an impromptu discussion in a

[14] *Népszava* 2, no. 2 (1957): 6.
[15] "Patyolat informs everyone that compensation for garments destroyed as a result of events after 23. October will begin on 15. January, 1957.," *Népszava* 2, no. 2 (1957).
[16] *Népszabadság* 2, no. 16 (1957): front page.
[17] KEMÉNY György, "Anouilh: Antigone," *Népszabadság* 2, no. 20 (1957): 4.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] F.P., "Antigoné: Tábori Nóra," *Magyar Ifjúság* 1, no. 4 (1957): 4.

journal wrote about the well-known dramatic situation of Antigone burying her brother. The critic, who was almost the only one to discuss the situation, was a young classical philologist who was enthusiastic primarily about Sophocles, but was immediately corrected by a skilled and respected translator.[21] It was then that a new kind of cautious discourse could be discerned, and that only experience could help to find one's way in the mixture of formulations and suggestions for reading techniques. It was then and there that straight talk, which could have been the lifeblood of communities and society as a whole, lost its raison d'être, once again after the second war.

Sophocles's drama was performed a few more times during the season, but at the beginning of the new season, in August 1957, an ideologist who was supposed to create the new aesthetics of the party, spoke out strongly: "Anouilh's *Antigone* which is a total failure [...] was put on the Hungarian stage as a completely original experiment [...] This drama, which the author wrote using all artistic means to defend the fascist Laval, is essentially reactionary." [22] So the flawed play, the French gloom, and the pessimism of capitalist society[23] became the linguistic and intellectual reference points, and from then on, whenever the name of Anouilh came up in the media (even in *Új Kelet*, published in Israel), these slogans dominated the discourse: the originals, the classics, must be presented to bring the ancient down to earth, in its originality,"[24] and Anouilh's presentation was a mistake, since he had only wtitten an adaptation of a classic.

It's worth returning to the question of how Anouilh came to be in the repertoire of the Vígszínház (at the time, People's Army Theatre) in the first place. Anouilh was a communist author; his adaptations and reinterpretations were well known. But after the premiere of his *Elektra* in 1945, his plays were not performed in Hungary for 11 years, until early 1956, and the premiere of *Antigone*, scheduled for the autumn of 1956, was postponed until January 1957.

On 18 October 1956, five days before the outbreak of the revolution, the director said of *Antigone*, "The play is not an everyday one. And studio performances are usually not only to test the skills of individual actors, but also to appeal to the public's taste with plays that are usually not on the programme."[25] By 11 January 1957, twelve weeks after its scheduled premiere, the drama had been "tamed into one of the outstanding works of modern dramatic literature."[26] The reviewers still invoked the French author's professionalism and linked his treatment of the subject to modernity, but the topicality of the situation, and thus the process of meaning-making, was hidden in silence, in collective knowledge.

We cannot determine in full certainty what was uttered on the stage on 19 January 1957 of Anouilh's sentences translated into Hungarian. Censorship may have interfered at some points during the performance, but I have found no documentation or record of this. However, there are several passages from the original text that can only be made sense of by the specific formulation, the specific image, and the interpretative power of the community. Below are a few examples of how cultural translation worked after Stalin's death in 1953 and what insights the linguistic automatism of translation can stimulate.

Anouilh himself introduces the characters in a prologue, and this enumeration and contextualisation does not require any translation softening; the Hungarian 1956 version also emphasises that the boy is pale and

[21] *Nagyvilág* 2, no. 3 (1957): 458–463.
[22] HERMANN István, "Színvonal és műsorpolitika," *Népszabadság* 2, no. 194. (1957): 4.
[23] dr. MARTON Gizella, „Színház," *Új Kelet* 38, no. 2820 (1957): 9.
[24] ARDÓ Mária, "Elévült klasszikusok?," *Magyar Nemzet* 14, no. 60 (1958): 7.
[25] n.n. „Egyperces..."
[26] *Népakarat* (later *Népszava*) 2, no. 8 (1957): front page.

dreamy.[27] However, in the days of the revolution, it was the very young, pale boy who became the iconic figure of the Budapest struggles, so much so that decades later, media memory also chose this pale, young boy, the local Gavroche, as the iconic figure of the revolutionary hero.

It should be stressed that at the time of the premiere, and for many months to come, Budapest was a wounded city. Even the devastation of the second war had not yet been completely cleared away; the bridges linking the two halves of the city had not yet been fully rebuilt, and once again tanks marched through the streets. Only eleven years after the siege of 1945, new shot wounds marked the walls of the houses, and even the sight of unburied dead on the streets was a very recent memory. At the time of the staging of this production at Vígszínház, the Hungarian words of Creon could not be understood from any other angle than that of the revolution: "...the rebel, the despicable Polyneices, let no one mourn him, and let him be thrown unburied to the prey of ravens and jackals, and if anyone dares to bury him, let him die a death of death."[28] In the English version: "The vultures and the dogs are to bloat themselves on his carcass. Nobody is to go into mourning for him. No gravestone is to be set up in his memory. And above all any person who attempts to give him religious burial will himself be put to death." In the original, the brother is "le vaurien, le révolté, le voyou",[29] and during the utterance of these abusive phrases, Anouilh leads all the actors off the stage, so that these threatening words are delivered in an empty space. Assuming from subsequent reviews, the Hungarian production followed this instruction; the threat was clearly addressed to the audience, bringing the opening scene emotionally close to the audience's experiential reality.

The January 1957 performance played a lot with the dialogues of the two sisters, then the lovers, then Creon and Antigone. In their shared scenes, Ismene and Antigone created a tension between utterance and implication. While the sisters built a family context around the duty of burial, the physical circumstances of death are meticulously depicted by Creon. It is he who reveals that the brothers were both burdened with dark, youthful sins, both hired assassins to kill their father, but fell to each other's weapons in battle at the city wall. When they were run over by the cavalry, "They were-mashed-to a pulp, Antigone",[30] and crushed beyond recognition. Creon buried the pieces that were the easiest to pick up, calling them Eteocles. In fact, he did not know which of the two was the unburied one.

Creon almost tortured the young girls, and, during the performance, the audience as well, of course, as he reminded them of their rather recent corporal and visceral experiences. In the Anouilh version, it was Creon who summed up the dramatic moment of reality-building (which, in the Sophocles version belongs to the chorus, Teiresias and the guard). Creon sees, hears, and smells, so that his monologue on the stench of the unburied dead became a prominent interpretative gesture in the post-revolutionary performance:

> "Don't think that I am not just as offended as you are by the thought of that – meat – rotting in the sun. In the evening, when the breeze comes in off the sea, you can smell it in the palace, and it nauseates me. My God! If it was up to me, I should have had your brother buried long ago as a mere matter of public hygiene. But if the feather-headed rabble I govern are to understand what's

[27] "garçon pale [...] qui rêve."
[28] Hungarian version, György GALAMB'S translation, manuscript, OSzMI, 43.
[29] Jean ANOUILH, *Antigone* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2008), 13.
[30] English ed., 29., "Ils étaient en bouillie." (French ed., 89.)

> what, that stench has got to fill the town for a month!"[31]

Anouilh's adaptation emphasises the relativity of events, but in the post-revolutionary presentation, everything became concrete. Anouilh's Creon addresses the guard when he brings news of the funeral: "I broke the back of the rebellion; but like a snake, it is coming together again…." In French: "L'opposition brisée qui sourd et mine déja partout"[32] the verb "undermine", ("miner"), is ambiguous; Anouilh speaks of the muddy ground in general, which is different of the Sophoclean desert in nature, but both Paris in the autumn of 1944 and Budapest in the autumn of 1956 understood mud as an allegory of filth. The city was covered (in Hungarian) with "muddy earth" and the unbearable stench of corpses spread above it.

The Hungarian translation mostly hardens Creon's character. In Anouilh's "That distinguished, powerfully built man sitting lost in thought is Creon, the King. His face is lined. He is tired."[33] Creon himself is described as:

> "Let me assure you that Thebes needs that boy a good deal more than it needs your death. … Your father was like that. For him, as for you, human happiness was meaningless; and mere human misery was not enough to satisfy his passion for torment. You come of people for whom the human vestment is a kind of straitjacket: it cracks at the seams."[34]

In French the "passion" is *pathétique personnel*, and in Hungarian it turns into *tragic hero*, and we can follow how the Hungarian version becomes a highly interpretive adaptation. The translation is at least twofold, since the Hungarian version of Anouilh's text was completed sometime in the summer of 1956, and then in January 1957 it was adapted for the stage in Vígszínház, so the context in which these sentences were revealed from January 1957 on was quite remote from the translator's decisions. Let us emphasise here that the translation's choices reveal a translator-creator well acquainted with the state-socialist operational framework, who, after Stalin's death, could openly identify the will to power with dictatorship.

This translation-for-stage by Galamb is honest and accurate, with neither passion nor fantasy overflowing. At a few points, however, it is precisely its unexpected deviations that reveal the low level of its freedom. Creon explains to Antigone:

> "Believe me when I tell you—the only poor consolation that we have in our old age is to discover that what I have just said to you is true. Life is, perhaps, after all, nothing more than the happiness that you get out of it."[35]

The Hungarian version translates consolation as justice, and prefixes bonheur with the adjective conciliatory. A similar syntactical quibble is encountered in the definition of Creon's position because the Hungarian translator seems unable to solve the problem of the insult cuisiner (cook). He translates it as "kitchen

[31] English ed., 25.
[32] English ed., 16., French ed., 50.
[33] English ed., 2., French ed., 11. "robust, aux cheveux blancs. […] il a des rides, il est fatigué."
[34] English ed., 21–22., French ed., 68–69. „Ces temps sont révolus pour Thèbes. Thèbes a droit maintenant à un prince sans histoire. […] j'ai résolu, avec moins d'ambitions que ton père, de m'employer tout simplement à rendre l'ordre de ce monde un peu moins absurde. […] les rois ont autre choses à faire que du pathétique personnel, ma petite fille."
[35] English ed., 30., French ed., 92. "tu vas me mépriser encore, mais de découvrir cela, tu verras, c'est la consolation dérisoire de vieillir, la vie, ce n'est peut-être tout de même que le bonheur."

servant", and fails to find the condescending, contemptuous tone that works well in Anouilh (with the connotation 'schemer, conspirator'). A few years after the premiere, this glitch provided a pretext for the cultural-political-ideological pundits to retrospectively reject the image that identifies Creon with the party leader.[36]

According to the script, the following sentences were also uttered at the 1957 performances, but the immediacy of these sentences could function as a kind of reminder, or rather as an archival document, against the constructed reality of the theatre. According to one of the guards, the "crowd has already surrounded the palace and is shouting in revolt"[37] and then, addressing Creon, urges, "Chief, the people are crowding into the palace."[38]

Moreover, from 2025, it is impossible to imagine the depth and force of these sentences delivered by the actor playing Creon on 19 January 1957: "Au lendemain d'une révolution ratée, il y a du pain sur la planche, je te l'assure. […] Je ne veux pas te laisser mourir dans une histoire de politique."[39] No record of any audience reaction has survived, as the critics presumably tried to defend both the company and their own community. We do notice that the Hungarian translation chooses the verb *elpusztul* ('perish') instead of *meghal* ('die') for the original *mourir*, but any assumption concerning the possible phonetic effect of the phrases would only be mere speculation.

The Galamb-translation is a stage translation that has never been published, not even in the representative Hungarian Anouilh volume of 1977,[40] even though *Antigone* is one of the best known and "most beautiful"[41] of Anouilh's works. If these sentences were uttered in the performance, they presumably found their context not in 1944, in Nazi-occupied France, but in 1956.

Director Andor Ajtay created a completely contemporary and distinctly French setting around *Antigone*. Anouilh abandoned Teiresias, the seer, and with him the supportive transcendental context, so that we see only games between people.[42] The staging was in the style of the post-war French art theatre, Vieux Colombier, a familiar form of theatre in Budapest, thanks to the repertoire and acting technique of the Hungarian Art Theatre between 1945 and 1948. A few contemporary furnishings and elements of space, such as a giant amphora,[43] indicated the presence of antique cultural ideals with gentle stylisation. The image of collaboration was created by the gendarme guard dressed in a Pétain uniform,[44] who was degraded by party critics into a hotel boy.[45] This shows quite clearly that the language of the press during the 1956 revolution and the Soviet military occupation afterward specialised in the act of sending a message rather than the message itself. The daily routine of textual comprehension tried to detect unexpected elements beyond the information conveyed, hidden in the context, and this makes our late attempts at understanding particularly difficult.

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[36] HONT Ferenc, "Harc az emlékekkel," *Kortárs* 5, no. 2 (1961): 254.

[37] Sentence of the Hungarian translator (48.) to reinforce the importance of the crowd outside.

[38] English ed. 36. French ed. 104. "Chef, ils envahissent le palais."

[39] English ed. 30. French ed. 76. "Would it have been better to let you die a victim to that obscene story?" The English translation considered unintelligible the concept of revolution, so it is missing from the play.

[40] VINKÓ József, "Anouilh-drámák magyarul," *Magyar Hírlap* 11, no. 1 (1978): 10.

[41] GYERGYAI, "Védelem Jean Anouilh ügyében," *Nagyvilág* 14, no. 7 (1969): 1084.

[42] See Andor TORMAI's photos here and here.

[43] See Éva KELETI's photos here.

[44] See Éva KELETI's photos here.

[45] VÁNDOR Tamás, "Tessék elképzelni," *Magyarország* 1, no. 6 (1957): 11.

For example, it can be seen from the announced programme that Antigone was in repertoire for about three months, and then in November 1957 the director, Andor Ajtay, in connection with a completely different production, said that "...after Anouilh's *Antigone*, the studio of the Hungarian People's Army Theatre was on hiatus for a while."[46] In other words, Ajtay's message about the temporary closure of the Studio is a half-sentence hidden in an interview, and this message in the *Esti Hírlap* in the autumn of 1957 is almost the only medial form of free speech.[47] The Studio was closed because the space of free play itself is always a reminder of freedom. This routine of power, of breaking the memory of the space, was used in 2022 by the Board of Trustees taking over the University of Theatre and Film Arts when it closed the Ódry Stage, whose very existence reminded all passers-by of the 71 days of resistance by students protesting the takeover.

Andor Ajtay had no other means but this message to remind his audience of *Antigone*, a play about the forbidden and tabooed obligation to bury the dead, and thanks to the 1956 revolution that was wedged between his rehearsal and his performance, it did not preserve the gesture of László Rajk's reburial, but the memory of the unburied dead lying in the streets during the 1956 revolution. And Andor Ajtay had no other way to recall Miklós Szakáts, the actor who had played Creon, who had been one of the leaders of the Revolutionary Committee of the Federation of Theatre and Film Arts during the revolution, and who had been arrested and interned at the end of the season, on 23 May 1957.[48]

Miklós Szakáts was recruited as an informant in the internment camp. He submitted his reports under the name Cyrano, and may have been employed by the CIA. These reports do not concern the performance of *Antigone*, but some of them can be used in the future as valuable sources for Hungarian theatre history. As an actor, Szakáts was a master of the old masquerading, likeness-assuming acting. In the rehearsal photographs of January 1957, he stands before the camera in civilian clothes, an overcoat, and a tie, like a gentleman in his thirties, and this posed image appears in the party newspaper barely eight weeks after the revolution was crushed. However, this image makes Creon difficult to identify, because we see Miklós Szakáts as a grey, bald, short-sighted, slightly obese man in an everyday jacket, almost imperceptible in his insignificance, while on the stage he presents a strong, cool, straightforward, determined ruler, because he plays Creon in heavy makeup, a wig and a beard, and no glasses.[49]

In the absence of contemporary sources, it is unexpected that decades later the Ajtay performance will be remembered as a huge popular success,[50] which "truly fascinated and shocked the Hungarian audience."[51] In the aftermath of the performance, we can follow how the stories of life were interwoven with the image of Anouilh and how the playing technique called double speech[52] took shape in Hungarian theatre. Double speech maintains the discipline of the text before

[46] n.n. "Interview with AJTAY Andor," *Esti Hírlap* 2, no. 264 (1957).

[47] Another example for the 'messaging': In January 1957 it was reported in the *Esti Hírlap*, that 'dr. Antal Németh will direct a classic play at the Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár, and in February Sophocles 'Antigone' was chosen. *Esti Hírlap* 2, no. 5 (1957): 2.

[48] SZAKÁTS Miklós, "Miért nem mentem haza," *Irodalmi Ujság* 20, no. 16 (1969): 3.

[49] See Éva KELETI's photos here.

[50] VINKÓ, "Anouilh..."

[51] GYERGYAI, "Védelem..."

[52] On Double Speech: Magdolna JÁKFALVI, "Identity-machines: The Nationalism of Hungarian Operetta between the Two World Wars," in *Operetta between the Two World Wars*, ed. Jernej WEISS, 165–178 (Ljubljana: Festival Ljubjana, 2021).

censorship, but during the performance, a common complicity develops in the confidential relationship between actor and viewer, a parallel world connected by metaphorising links, in which the viewer moves about freely and understands freely. The essence of the Hungarian state socialist theatrical context is that the participants all know what the messaging mode means, and it is not the aesthetics, pedagogy, etc. of the performance, nor the message itself, but the event and channel of the message that is to be sought for. In the press a party-ideological assessment returned to the Ajtay performance even on the fifth anniversary, saying that "In a society that implements socialism, by erroneously actualizing freedom and dictatorship, Creon can be mistakenly identified by the misguided public with popular state power, as happened in 1957 when Anouilh's *Antigone* was performed in Budapest." [53] The profane version (i.e. the one without Teiresias) of Sophocles's tragedy would never be played in Hungarian again, probably because there are so many unburied dead to be remembered in connection with it.

No more revolutions shook the community of state socialist Hungary. However, in 2020, three decades after the fall of communism, another rebellion had to start when the University of Theatre and Film Arts was forcibly transformed. The students occupied the building and defended their spaces and ideological values for seventy-one days, until the pandemic ended the collective fight. This opposition was commemorated with *Antigone* in 2022 by Dorka Porogi's production at the Radnóti Theatre: "We are in Budapest, in 2022, the king already lives in the palace, and Antigone, losing, fatherless, deprived of everything, buries her brother who fell in the battle."[54]

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[53] HONT, "Harc…"

[54] JÁKFALVI Magdolna, "Messzi-e a sivatag?", *Ókor* 23., 3–4. (2004) 86–93.

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The Wreath of Radiant Fire. The RSC's *King Lear* and its Influence on Hungarian Theatre

VERONIKA SCHANDL

Abstract: At the end of February 1964, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) performed two of its recent successes in Budapest: *The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Clifford Williams, and *King Lear*, directed by Peter Brook. It is no exaggeration to claim that these productions had a significant impact on the Hungarian theatre scene, profoundly influencing subsequent Hungarian stagings of Shakespeare's plays. Therefore, this essay aims to achieve two objectives: first, to examine the Hungarian critical reception of the RSC's *King Lear*, with particular attention to how contemporary reviews reflected on the novelties the production showcased. Second, it seeks to trace the broader impact of the RSC's visit on Hungarian culture and the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays.

Between 25–28 February, 1964, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) visited Budapest, performing two productions from their repertoire, *The Comedy of Errors* directed by Clifford Williams and *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook. The impact of their visit?

> "There were young directors who broke down in tears and wanted to give up their careers, and young actors who vowed to start anew. And, of course, there were many who, in a fever of despair or ecstasy, sought to validate their own truth through the example of Brook and his team. Some argued that simplicity was key, others that boldness was essential, some claimed the director was everything, while others in-sisted that the actors' culture was paramount."[1]

At least this is how actor Miklós Gábor described the immediate reaction the productions sparked within Hungarian theatrical circles. While the amount of crying and the emotional intensity he described might have been exaggerated, it is undeniable that the Royal Shakespeare Company's first visit to Hungary was a momentous event. Besides causing an immediate stir, it also significantly influenced subsequent Hungarian stagings of Shakespeare's plays in Hungary.

However, determining exactly the nature of this influence is somewhat challenging. Legend has it that one tangible outcome of the RSC's visit was that leather costumes became ubiquitous in Shakespeare productions across Hungary. Others claim that Brook's interpretation of *King Lear* directly inspired subsequent productions of the play. Yet, many of these claims are difficult to substantiate and may belong more to the realm of urban myths than to verifiable theatre history.

Therefore, this essay aims to achieve two objectives: first, to examine the Hungarian critical reception of the RSC's *King Lear*, with particular attention to how contemporary reviews reflected on the novelties the production showcased. Second, it seeks to trace the broader impact of the RSC's visit on Hungarian culture and the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. This investigation is especially important because, while the RSC's later visit to Hungary in 1972 has been thoroughly researched, the impact of their earlier tour re-

[1] GÁBOR Miklós, "Két előadás emléke," *Film Színház Muzsika*, 13 March, 1964, 4.

mains unexplored. By addressing this gap, the essay hopes to pave the way for further studies in this field.

King Lear – Reviews and Contexts

To commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) launched a tour of Eastern Europe in 1964. Starting in Berlin and continuing through Prague, the company arrived in Budapest on the 24th of February. They brought two of their recent successes: Clifford Williams's *The Comedy of Errors* and Peter Brook's *King Lear.* While both productions were well-received by Budapest audiences, *King Lear* made a far greater impact, stirring the somewhat stagnant waters of Hungarian theatre more profoundly than *The Comedy of Errors.* The generic differences between the two plays partially explain this disparity, but more important was the difference in the two directors' approaches.

Williams's direction utilised elements of commedia dell'arte, broad farce, and clowning, all of which resonated with existing Hungarian theatre traditions of interpreting Shakespeare. This approach echoed the work of one of the most prominent Hungarian directors of the post-World War II era, Tamás Major. His early directions of Shakespeare's comedies, including *Much Ado about Nothing* (1946), *Twelfth Night* (1947), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1948), and *As You Like It* (1949), were described by reviewers as "boisterous, full-bodied comedy"[2], characterised by "intense, crass, and rowdy"[3] humour. By the 1950s, Major had established a distinct comedic style that included over-the-top, almost burlesque comedy, bodily humour, slapstick, and a willing destruction of the fourth wall. As the manager and director of the National Theatre, his productions were frequently revived; therefore, it is not too far-fetched to assume that audiences could have recognised Williams's farcical rendering of Shakespeare's early comedy as something they knew and were able to decipher. Peter Brook's *King Lear*, however, was an entirely different experience. Hungarian spectators—many of whom were theatre professionals—were in for a culture shock.

Brook's reputation preceded him, and in pre-show interviews, he was repeatedly asked about his directorial concepts. In his responses, Brook outlined his intention to break away from 19th-century notions of Shakespeare and traditional theatre. He emphasised his decision to move beyond treating *King Lear* as a period piece, or a historical costume drama, instead situating the play in a non-realist setting where barbarism intersects with civilisation. To approximate the play to a more contemporary reality, he linked it to the works of Samuel Beckett, stating that "*Lear* is the archetype of the absurd theatre from which all good modern theatre originates."[4]

While Hungarian theatre practitioners frequently echoed the slogan of breaking away from 19th-century theatrical naturalism, knowledge of absurd theatre or Beckett's work was far less widespread, since apart from a few insiders, most Hungarian audiences lacked firsthand exposure to these works. During the Stalinist years, absurd theatre was viewed as the antithesis of everything socialist realist art—championed by the regime—stood for. While socialist realism was doctrinally based on ideas of humanism and optimism, the absurd was dismissed as a "form of spiritual decay that stripped humanity of its essence, the pinnacle of bourgeois decadence that transformed drama into

[2] KÉRY László, "Sok hűhó semmiért," *Magyarok*, July 1946, 408.
[3] H.I. "Sok hűhó semmiért," *Jövendő*, June 13, 1946, 8.
[4] GÁCH Mariann, "A lehetetlennel kell birkózni – mondja Peter Brook," *Film Színház Muzsika*, March 6, 1964, 4.

antidrama, unacceptable even in form."[5] As Róbert Takács observes, names like Beckett and Ionesco were invoked solely as warnings, embodying all that was deemed unacceptable. Unsurprisingly, absurdist plays were neither published nor performed during this period.

It was only in the late 1950s that the absurd theatre began to make a tentative appearance in Hungarian literary circles. For example, Eugene Ionesco's play, *The Chairs*, was published in the literary magazine *Nagyvilág* in 1959, and the same journal published an essay on Beckett's novels in 1962. This gradual thawing of attitudes reflected the changing cultural politics of post-1956 Hungary. After the failed revolution, the rigid Stalinist approach to cultural control was replaced by a more nuanced tripartite system, which categorised cultural works as "supported," "tolerated," or "banned." These classifications determined whether a work could be published or performed and under what conditions. The "tolerated" category, however, was intentionally fluid, creating an atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty. No explicit guidelines defined what was acceptable; instead, the regime relied on implicit taboos and the discretion of cultural officials. Within this framework, previously banned works by Beckett and other absurdist playwrights began to shift into the "debatable zone" of the "tolerated" category.

Notwithstanding these shifts in classification, none of the absurdist plays had been performed in Hungary prior to the RSC's 1964 visit. It is reasonable to suspect that most Hungarian audience members only had vague, secondhand knowledge of the works of Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco. Consequently, the changes Peter Brook introduced to *King Lear*, interpreting it through the lens of absurd theatre, were far more shocking and unorthodox for Hungarian audiences, who lacked the modernist theatrical context, than for their Western counterparts.

Let us examine how Hungarian critics reacted to Brook's *King Lear.* First and foremost, reviewers were stunned by the barren stage and the leather costumes Brook designed. By the 1960s, Hungarian stage design was moving away from strict naturalism, but Shakespeare was still performed in period costumes. Brook's worn-out leather garments, intended to convey both masculinity and elegance[6], were singled out in all reviews, seen as a radical departure from tradition. Critics noted how "every worn patch on the clothes, every crease weathered by rain and heat, radiates life,"[7] emphasizing the costumes as vital in bringing the production closer to contemporary sensibilities.[8]

Paul Scofield's portrayal of Lear also struck a chord with Hungarian critics. They noted how his relatively young, powerful, and active king stood in stark contrast to the aged, fairy-tale-like octogenarian Lears that had previously populated the Hungarian stages. Critics praised his "wild joie de vivre"[9] and noted how "through his suffering, a growing strength emerges in him; a certain physical and moral resilience, which, however, is

[5] TAKÁCS Róbert, "50 éve mutatták be Magyarországon Samuel Beckett Godot-ra várva című művét," Politikatörténeti Intézet Alapítvány, accessed: 20.01.2025, https://polhist.hu/programok2/50-eve-mutattak-be-magyarorszagon-samuel-beckett-godot-ra-varva-cimu-muvet/.

[6] GÁCH, "A lehetetlennel...," 4.

[7] MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, "Tévedések vígjátéka – Lear király," *Népszabadság*, February 29, 1964, 8.

[8] See also: KOLTAI Tamás, "Hogy kerül a csizma a színpadra?," *Élet és Irodalom*, March 7, 1970, 13.

[9] GYÁRFÁS Miklós, "Hamlet monológja a Royal Shakespeare Company színészeihez," *Film Színház Muzsika*, March 6, 1964, 4.

coupled with profound tenderness"[10]. Reviewers were particularly struck by Scofield's subdued and quiet delivery, even in the storm scene, where he spoke "sometimes in an almost whisper-soft manner."[11] This approach was a drastic change, different from previous Hungarian portrayals of Lear, characterised by bombastic displays of rage.

Critics likened Scofield's Lear to "the owner of a commercial shipping enterprise," "Hauptmann's Herschel carter"[12] or "a colonial general." [13] One critic went so far as to compare him to "[a] true autocrat with a bristly haircut, a veteran colonel-sergeant accustomed to a lifetime of ensuring no one dared utter a word in his presence and that his wishes were carried out as commands, [...] the type who knows he has grown old and understands that this grants him a unique position. (You might encounter him at a tram stop, shoving a pregnant woman off the stairs under the pretext that he is elderly.)[14] Yet, despite these unflattering analogies, critics unanimously acknowledged the tragic heights Scofield reached by the play's conclusion.

Some reviews identified Lear's tragedy as stemming from how power had distanced him from reality[15], while others focused on his journey from blindness to sight, marked by his growing empathy for the poor and homeless[16]. What all reviewers agreed upon was that, after seeing Scofield's performance, it was impossible to return to the traditional portrayals of Lear. As Tamás Dersi summarised, the general mode of reception was of celebration:

> "In editorial offices, print shops, barber shops, espresso bars, and social gatherings, the question was asked: are they really that good? Is it true that their performance is a rare experience? Well, the acclaim surrounding the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions was not exaggerated; the widespread rumour was true. The ensemble, with their outstanding performance, orchestrated a celebration when they appeared at Vígszínház."[17]

However, the recognition of the production's brilliance, with its depiction of *King Lear* as an early modern *Endgame*, led to a cognitive dissonance among Hungarian reviewers. They were compelled to celebrate the production while simultaneously condemning its artistic roots in absurd theatre. This struggle is painfully evident in several reviews. Some critics dismissed Brook's *Lear* as merely one possible interpretation of the play, cautioning that it should not be seen as definitive or followed by everyone.[18] Others criticised the production for misinterpreting Shakespeare's humanity, particularly in scenes like Gloucester's blinding. In Brook's staging, the servants' caring lines—"fetch some flax and whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face"[19]—were omitted, leaving Gloucester to stumble offstage, bleeding, as the house

[10] KÉRY László, "A stratfordi Shakespeare-Társulat Budapesten," *Nagyvilág* 9, no. 5 (1964): 787.
[11] KÉRY, "A stratfordi...," 788.
[12] MOLNÁR GÁL, "Tévedések vígjátéka...," 8.
[13] GÁBOR Miklós, "Bizonytalanságok egy bizonyosságról," *Új Írás* 6, no. 9 (1966): 106.
[14] TAXNER Ernő, "A Royal Shakespeare Company – Budapesten," *Jelenkor* 7, no. 6 (1964): 565.
[15] GÁBOR, "Bizonytalanságok...," 107.
[16] DOROMBAY Károly, "Színházi krónika," *Vigília* 29, no. 3 (1964): 181.
[17] DERSI Tamás, "A Royal Shakespeare Company vendégjátéka," *Esti Hírlap*, February 29, 1964, 2.
[18] See e.g.: MÁTRAI-BETEGH Béla, "Korhűség és korszerűség," *Magyar Nemzet*, March 1, 1964, 11.
[19] William SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, The Folger Shakespeare, accessed: 20.01.2025, https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/king-lear/read/3/7/

lights came up. Critics condemned this omission as an interpretative mistake. Similarly, the final scene, in which Edgar drags his brother's corpse offstage while the storm gathers momentum in the background, drew criticism. Péter Molnár Gál jokingly compared the production to the horror genre, quipping that it "made Alfred Hitchcock seem like a gentle storyteller in comparison."[20]

Literary critic and Shakespeare scholar László Kéry was more severe in his critique and was eager to distance himself from the existentialist moments of the productions. Echoing earlier Marxist condemnations of absurd theatre, Kéry relegated Brook's *Lear* to the realm of "decadent Western bourgeois culture," claiming that:

> "Beckett and his contemporaries absolutise the "sense of life" experienced by a segment of Western intellectuals—the feeling of disintegration and decline—attempting to elevate resignation to decay, aimlessness, and a sad yet pitifully ridiculous sense of abandonment into a peculiar "philosophy" they consider a "human situation." [...] Not only has the hero disappeared from modern bourgeois literature, replaced by the anti-hero, but even the ranks of characters with normal minds and senses have thinned. They've been displaced by the simple-minded, the clinically insane, prematurely aged children, infantile old men, alcoholics, perverts, and others. In Beckett's work, this tendency reaches its extreme. Half-witted vagabonds, senile old men, and physically and mentally impaired human wrecks carry on dialogues and monologues built on the comedy of absurdity and despair. While moments of artistic truth may occasionally shine through, the overall effect is a distorted image of a world seen through a distorted lens. The primary "guarantee" of this falsification lies in these allegorical human substitutes themselves. They are deprived not only of human dignity but almost of any possibility of becoming truly human. Each is irrevocably and hopelessly barred from being what they should be. At best, they are still capable of suffering."[21]

Kéry rejected the absurdist existential tones in Brook's direction as fundamentally oppositional to Shakespeare's humanistic worldview. He attributed the narrowing down of the play's broader range to Polish academic Jan Kott's essay entitled "King Lear, or *Endgame*," which Peter Brook had consulted. In this essay, Kott approximated the cruel tragedy of *King Lear* to Beckett's play, *Endgame.* While largely unknown to Hungarian readers, it was familiar to some literary scholars who had accessed it through French or English translations. Meanwhile, in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, Kott's readings of Shakespeare had already been criticized by leading Shakespeareans.[22]

Kéry and other Hungarian critics were grappling with a paradox: how could a production as excellent as Brook's, which Kéry himself lauded, be based on an interpretation he found so repulsive? Kéry resolved this dilemma in a way that was echoed by other reviewers. He contended that the production succeeded *despite* its Beckettian or Kottian influences. In his view, because Brook retained much of Shakespeare's text, the play itself resisted a narrow existentialist interpretation, allowing Shakespeare's humanism to shine through and ultimately dismantle the absurdist elements.

Other critics came to similar conclusions:

[20] MOLNÁR GÁL, "Tévedések vígjátéka...," 8.
[21] KÉRY, "A stratfordi...," 788.
[22] See: Madalina NICOLAESCU, "Kott in the East," in *Empson, Wilson Knight, Barber, Kott – Great Shakespeareans Volume XIII*, ed. Hugh GRADY, 130–153 (New York: Continuum, 2012).

> "Some local critics, and even more so the press reactions following the Royal Shakespeare Company's tour in Poland, trace Peter Brook's interpretation of *King Lear* back to Jan Kott's Shakespeare studies, which have garnered significant international attention. (Brook himself does not deny this assumption.) However, this influence can only be formal, as the Polish author is primarily concerned with the problem of dehumanisation, seeking connections between Samuel Beckett and Shakespeare for this reason. For Peter Brook, however, the most important thing is humanity. The stark, almost barren stage design may indeed seem to symbolise a dehumanised world, yet on this stage, profoundly human passions and emotions rage. Flesh-and-blood characters move about, and the living voice and movement so command our attention that the symbolic nature of the stage design loses its significance, receding into the background to better serve the expression of ideas. [...] Amidst all the horrors, Shakespeare's Renaissance belief in humanity is proclaimed, contrasting Beckett's sense of hopelessness by emphasising the necessity of moral renewal. This production is extraordinarily intense because every moment is born from the clash of opposites, and through this, the true Shakespearean image emerges—a portrayal of life's swirling chaos, unembellished and raw."[23]

This is how, in a "now you see it, now you don't" trick, Hungarian reviewers "domesticated" Brook's absurdist ideas by aligning them with existing notions of Shakespeare's humanism. In doing so, they celebrated the production's innovations while framing it as confirming preexisting interpretations—interpretations that Brook's production, they also agreed, in fact, rendered obsolete.

The publicity surrounding the RSC's visit ensured that references to Beckett and Kott reached a wider audience. I argue that the critical reception of Brook's direction helped spark broader conversations about these authors, paving the way for their works to appear in Hungary. In 1965, philosopher Ágnes Heller published a lengthy review of Kott's book *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* in the journal *Valóság*, calling it her "favourite Shakespeare book." [24]. Her in-depth analysis spurred translations of chapters published in literary journals, culminating in a full translation of the book, published in 1970. Kott's interpretations of Shakespeare deeply influenced a generation of Hungarian theatre-makers who emerged in the 1970s, leading to a series of Shakespeare productions "out-Kotting"[25] one another.

While Jan Kott quickly gained canonical status in Hungary, the authorities continued to keep a close watch on absurdist plays. Nevertheless, after 1964, a general thawing in that field is also visible. In 1965, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* made its Hungarian debut in the small studio space of the Thália Theatre in Budapest, a production that was followed by a heated debate on the play's artistic merits in literary journals. Although further stagings of Beckett's plays were halted or relegated to amateur ensembles, his works became a topic of critical discussion. As Róbert Takács explains, "This was the peculiar revenge of the 'circular publicity.' [...] If something passed the initial filter—for instance, by being published in a small-circulation journal—it became a point of reference and,

[23] TAXNER, "A ROYAL...," 566.
[24] HELLER Ágnes, "Kortársunk, Shakespeare," *Valóság* 8, no. 6 (1965): 88–93. f
[25] Wilhelm HORTMANN, "Shakespeare on the political stage in the twentieth century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, eds. Stanley WELLS and Sarah STANTON, 212–230 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219.

within a few years, could potentially be considered for release as a book or adapted into a theatre production."[26] Especially after Beckett received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, his works began to be reclassified as "realist" and were slowly published in Hungary, too.

As demonstrated, one indirect consequence of Brook's *King Lear* was the introduction of Jan Kott's ideas and absurd drama to a wider Hungarian public. However, the question remains: how did the RSC's production directly influence Hungarian theatrical performances? The answer is manifold, and the scope of this paper does not permit an exhaustive exploration[27]. Instead, it will present a few select examples to outline the broader context. Theatrical memory recalls how, following Brook's production, costumes underwent significant changes, ushering in the so-called "leather age"[28] of theatre in Hungary. We intend to look beyond these leather façades to explore how interpretations of Shakespearean plays evolved after the RSC's visit. Theatre practitioners openly embraced inspiration from Brook's work, as actor-director Tamás Major aptly summarised:

> "Watching the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance, I was struck by the thought that following artistic trends is not merely a right but a duty for the artist. However, if one imitates these trends superficially, they become a plagiarist; yet if they internalise and live them, they become an artist in the truest Shakespearean sense of the word."[29]

The following sections will examine two examples to illustrate how this philosophy was put into practice, showcasing the ways Brook's direction influenced Hungarian interpretations of Shakespeare.

King Lear, 1964/1967/1974, National Theatre[30]

In a daring and unusual move, just three months after the RSC's visit, the National Theatre of Budapest premiered a *King Lear* in May 1964.[31] Even contemporary reviewers wondered how the director, Endre Marton, would navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of not copying Brook while also not ignoring the innovations he had introduced.[32] Judging by the 1964 reviews, it seems that Marton successfully avoided both pitfalls—but let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us examine the production in detail and consider the critical reactions.

Visually, Marton was undoubtedly inspired by Brook. The characters wore heavy woollen

[26] TAKÁCS, "50 éve..."

[27] One intriguing example of Brook's influence on Hungarian theatre can be seen in the career of director Tamás Major during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Major was well-versed in Brechtian theatre and frequently employed its techniques, a closer examination of his Shakespeare productions from this period reveals that many of his artistic choices—both in the selection of plays and their staging—bear a striking resemblance to Peter Brook's approach, perhaps even more so than to Brecht's. Unfortunately, such an analysis would stretch the limits of this paper.

[28] CZIMER József, "Csizma a divat," *Kortárs* 14, no. 6 (1970): 981.

[29] Major Tamás, "Okulni kell a vendégjátékból!," *Film Színház Muzsika*, 13 March, 1964, 6.

[30] For a detailed analysis of the production see: Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "The Final Performance of the Old National Theatre: Endre Marton: *King Lear*, 1964," in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 95–104 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021), accessed: 20.01.2025, https://real.mtak.hu/164884/1/AmbiguousTopicalityaPhiltherofState-Socialist.pdf

[31] See here.

[32] NAGY Péter, "A magyar Lear királyról," *Élet és Irodalom*, May 30, 1964, 9.

costumes, reminiscent of the RSC's leather gear. The scenery was designed by Czech artist Josef Svoboda,[33] who envisioned an almost barren stage framed by black curtains, with giant rectangular prisms moving up and down. These prisms sometimes denoted rooms on the stage, while at other times they projected cold white light onto the stage. This innovative and visually striking stage design, however, was not utilised by the production and was deemed a failure even in the otherwise enthusiastic reviews.

In terms of interpretation, the casting of Lajos Básti, then 53, as Lear, also showed Brook's, and more specifically Scofield's, influence. However, it is worth noting that Básti was not the first middle-aged actor to play Lear in Hungary. Just weeks before the RSC's visit, Gábor Mádi Szabó had taken on the role in Szolnok at the age of 52.[34] So, it might have even been his example that prompted the casting choice in the National Theatre.

Básti's Lear aimed to depict how power corrupts all who hold it, showing his gradual return to his true self after relinquishing it. While most reviews praised the production for softening the harsher elements of Brook's *Lear* and restoring Shakespeare's humanist vision,[35] the concept also received some criticism. In a review that linked the stage events to contemporary history, Gábor Mihályi commented:

> "The director's contemporary interpretation of *King Lear* as the foundation for staging the play feels debatable. Endre Marton stated in an interview that he aimed to depict how a person, cast out from power, comes to realise life's truths and, stripped of their royal mantle, becomes a truly virtuous individual. However, history offers few examples of fallen leaders learning from their defeats; more often, it shows them clinging even more tightly to their flaws."[36]

Mihályi continued by enumerating various interpretative shortcomings of the production. Yet even his somewhat critical review concluded that "[t]he National Theatre's production of *King Lear* is a high-quality, prestigious, and beautiful performance, even if it cannot quite compete with Scofield and his company's essentially unparalleled production."[37] This review stands out as a rare dissent among the otherwise overwhelmingly positive responses. Most critics celebrated the production as a worthy reaction to the challenge posed by Brook's groundbreaking direction. For Básti, *Lear* became the defining role of his long and illustrious career. After his death, in a moment of inspired mythmaking, the author of *Képes Újság* even fabricated a timeline to claim that "[t]he world-renowned English director Peter Brook, during the early 1960s when his Royal Shakespeare Company performed in Budapest, remarked that Básti's acting, even in Hungarian, would hold its own on any stage in England."[38]

The production was revived in 1967 and again in 1974, a decade after its initial premiere. However, the show did not age well, as evidenced by the critical reception, which disparaged both the production as old-fashioned and Marton's directorial vision as limited and inconsequential. They also called attention to how it failed to build upon the innovations introduced by Peter Brook. We have a 1977 TV recording of the production in

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[33] http://www.svoboda-scenograph.cz/en/productions/

[34] Indeed, it is hard to determine how much the Szolnok performance, which also featured a young László Mensáros as Gloucester and a modern backdrop as scenery, all elements that could have influenced Marton in equal measures as Brook.

[35] See e.g. NAGY, "A magyar Lear...," 9.

[36] MIHÁLYI Gábor, "Három Shakespeare előadás," *Nagyvilág* 9, no. 8 (1964): 1261.

[37] MIHÁLYI, "Három...," 1260.

[38] GYENES András, "Szegedi Szabadtéri Játékok 1977," *Képes Újság*, July 16, 1977, 15.

which the voice and the diction of the actors still impress the viewer, yet their performance functions more as a soundscape than as meaningful dialogue. As Árpád Kékesi Kun observes, "our present-day theatre bares hardly any similarity to the performance recorded more than five decades ago. Acting presents us with a multitude of meaningless ingredients", including frequent shifts in diction from one sentence to the next, unnatural pauses in unexpected places, as well as "the regular lack of reactions, that would be expected as a sign of psychological realism, following substantial utterances".[39] The 1974 revival, which even contemporaries questioned—Ernő Taxner humorously suggested, "I can only explain the renewal of Endre Marton's *King Lear* direction from ten years ago at the National Theatre by the severe shortage of plays"—suggests that the production may have been flawed from its inception.

From our perspective, the National Theatre's 1964 *King Lear* appears more as a tribute to the past than as a progressive continuation of Brook's legacy. The enthusiastic critical response it received reveals more about the traditions of Hungarian Shakespearean productions than any discernible influence of Brook on Hungarian interpretations of *King Lear.*

Hamlet, 1962/1964, Madách Theatre

At the time of the RSC's visit, the most popular Shakespeare production in Hungary was *Hamlet* at the Madách Theatre. Directed by László Vámos, it had already been running for two years and had already become iconic. This *Hamlet* was not only the Shakespeare production Hungarian audiences adored but also the one the RSC cast members and accompanying British journalists attended during their tour. As a result, Vámos's *Hamlet* received an unusual level of international attention, with enthusiastic reviews appearing in British newspapers. J.C. Trewin, writing for the *Illustrated London News*, called the production one of the most exciting performances of his life,[40] while Ossia Trilling of *The Times* described it as "one of the best *Hamlets*" he had ever seen.[41] The Hungarian reception was equally enthusiastic. The production is remembered in theatrical memory as the formative Shakespeare experience for a generation of theatregoers, running 288 times between 1962 and 1967. It also became synonymous with Miklós Gábor, the actor playing Hamlet.

Despite its star-studded cast, the production was unequivocally a one-man show, consciously built around Gábor. His portrayal became iconic, not only because of his established reputation in both film and theatre but also due to his interpretation of Hamlet as a disillusioned intellectual. Gábor's Hamlet was the superior intellect of his stage Denmark, a character defined by his versatility and ability to surprise those around him. Tragic yet comedic, grotesque yet ironic, his portrayal embodied a modernity that resonated deeply with audiences and critics alike. Reviewers praised Gábor's ability to portray a contemporary Hamlet:

> "The most distinctive feature of his performance is that it portrays a modern Hamlet. […] Hamlet, after all, is a figure wrestling with contradictions, plagued by doubts and inner turmoil, seeking truth, often ironic, intellectual, always unpretentious, and free of pathos—traits that closely resonate with contem-porary individuals. Moreover, Miklós Gábor's interpretation brings his character closer to today's audience. He presents the Danish prince in a way that makes us see ourselves as Hamlet, with the stage of his tragedy not the

[39] KÉKESI KUN, "The Final Performance…," 101.
[40] KOLTAI Tamás, ed., Madách Színház: *Hamlet*, programme note, 38.
[41] KOLTAI, ed., Madách Színház: *Hamlet*, 38.

> castle of Elsinore, but his own self—the actor's and the viewer's soul."[42]

Critics praised Gábor's "daring shifts in the rhythm of his speech and performance," his "brilliant speech technique" and the "unadorned simplicity with which he dissolves the distance between stage and audience." [43] They highlighted the "intimacy"[44] and "the lack of pathos"[45] in his performance.

A 1963 TV recording of the production, preserving the original cast in black and white, complicates the contemporary narrative surrounding its modernity. Seen today, the production appears slow, theatrical, and staged, making it difficult to discern the freshness that so captivated its original audience. The production's foundation lay in Hamlet's soliloquies, which Gábor delivered with minimal movement and a lyrical style akin to film voiceovers. He employed sustained poses and exaggerated gestures—reminiscent of silent film acting—to encapsulate the emotional dynamics of his speeches. Hamlet's perpetual theatricality and self-aware reflection on his circumstances were influenced by Brechtian *Verfremdung* and sought to convey mood through evocative images rather than psychological realism.[46]

However, the primary inspiration for Gábor's Hamlet was Laurence Olivier's 1948 film. Entire scenes mirrored Olivier's staging, reflecting his enduring influence in Hungary, where his interpretation was considered the gold standard of Shakespearean performance as the only Western Shakespearean production available after 1945. By the 1960s, however, Britain had moved beyond Olivier's conventions. New trends in Shakespearean performance, led by younger actors like Richard Burton and David Warner, rejected the formulaic traditions of the earlier generation. The foundation of the RSC in itself symbolised this shift.

Accustomed to Olivier, it is no surprise, then, that Gábor was deeply shaken after seeing Brook's *Lear*, particularly Scofield's interpretation of the title role, and immediately recognised the limitations of his own portrayal of Hamlet. In his diaries, published in parts from 1968 onwards, Gábor documented his ongoing struggle in which he grappled with Brook's ideas:

> "I'm crushed. I can't take joy in what I see. My vanity, my Hamlet, my image of Shakespeare all protest but find no arguments. Brook's ensemble bows, hand in hand, smiling, while the audience roars. Where do they find the energy for such enthusiasm? I glance at those around me. But I'm clapping too: Brook's gaze cuts through us: he's won! From tomorrow, I'll have to play like this too. And: I don't want to play like this! I don't want this! Self-defence and homage clash within me. But secretly, I already know I'll appropriate Brook—and just as secretly, I'll keep singing my own tune. I know very well that my irritation stems largely from Brook's power: I'd be foolish to deny his existence just because he challenges my established views. And yet Brook can do nothing else but serve me with what I need."[47]

While Gábor's personal adjustments to his *Hamlet* remain undocumented, the production itself underwent significant changes following the RSC's visit. Director László Vámos, inspired by Brook's portrayal of Regan in *Lear*, reimagined Claudius as a "man of commanding stature, who, despite seizing

[42] CSERÉS Miklós, "Az új Hamlet," *Ország-Világ* 6, no. 5 (1962): 19.
[43] CSERÉS, "Az új Hamlet...," 19.
[44] ILLÉS Jenő, „Hamlet királyfi," *Film Színház Muzsika* 6, no. 5 (1962): 7.
[45] Ibid.
[46] GÁBOR Miklós, *Tollal* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1968), 38.
[47] GÁBOR, "Bizonytalanságok...," 106.

the throne through fratricide, aspired to rule as a good king. He was a 'smiling villain,' adept at winning over the court and the queen to his side."[48] Ferenc Bessenyei was cast as Claudius, matching Gábor's Hamlet in stature and skill. Other changes included removing the drop curtain between scenes, simplifying costumes for a more everyday appearance, and discarding Gábor's iconic blonde wig, an homage to Olivier.

Research into these revisions is complicated by the scarcity of records from the updated production, since most surviving documentation pertains to the 1962 version. Furthermore, the contemporary appeal of the production—the way it was seen to reflect on the political context of 1956—is largely inaccessible to modern audiences. Critics noted that Gábor's Hamlet embodied the disillusioned intellectual, a character who did not seek the throne but was willing to die for truth. His Hamlet found joy in duelling and conversing with the players, relishing moments of "philosophical lightness."

Ultimately, this *Hamlet* represented an artistic dead end, similarly to the National Theatre's *King Lear*, with its innovations neither sustained nor revitalised by subsequent productions. Hungarian Shakespearean theatre found renewal not in Vámos's production, but in the countryside and in amateur theatres founded at universities. Among a new generation of directors, inspired by different artistic movements, not the RSC's visit.

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[48] MIHÁLYI Gábor, *Hamletekre emlékezve* (Budapest: Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1976), 24.

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The Seagull that Transformed Staging Chekhov in Hungary Gábor Székely: *The Seagull*, 1971

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN

Abstract: A few months after Gábor Székely's appointment as the chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1971, the premiere of *The Seagull* opened a new chapter not only in the life of a small rural theatre, but also in the stage history of Chekhov's plays in Hungary. The production immediately attracted national attention, and together with Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of the same play, opening in Kaposvár a few weeks earlier, prompted a reassessment of the Stanislavsky tradition, which had been a strong canon for Chekhov's plays in Hungary during state socialism. *The Seagull* in Szolnok did not make any significant changes to the text of the play, yet it developed a unique reading, the exploration of which was considered primary in its reviews. Avoiding any overt updating, Székely's *mise-en-scène* orchestrated the performance of *The Seagull* for the perceptual experience of the spectators of the 1970s and brought a turn to the decades-old conventions of playing Chekhov. The essay examines why this production occupies such a strong position in theatre history and how it could break and create tradition at the same time.

Context of the performance in theatre culture

A few months after Gábor Székely's appointment as the chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1971, the premiere of *The Seagull* opened a new chapter not only in the life of a small rural theatre but also in the stage history of Chekhov's plays in Hungary. Almost half of Székely's theatre works are connected to the town of Szolnok: 16 of the 35 productions he directed in Hungary were staged at the Szigligeti Theatre, and his *Seagull* has the most prestigious place in theatre memory. Székely established a "meticulous attention to detail" and "an absolutely different way of working" that was virtually unknown in the rural theatres of the 1970s,[1] and his rapid rise to prominence was primarily due to this, rather than to the support of cultural policy. When *The Seagull* opened, Székely had already spent two full seasons at the Szigligeti Theatre and had created such outstanding works as *The Toth Family* and *Cat's Play* (both by István Örkény), so it was obvious that he would be given the post of chief director after the sudden departure of Gábor Berényi. The 1971/1972 season was Székely's first in this position, and *The Seagull*, the third production of the season, really opened a

[1] Márta Jánoskúti, who worked with Székely on several occasions, recalls that the "meticulous attention to detail" that Székely brought to Szolnok was unusual, because "we usually met directors who were terribly superficial, and some of them did not have a single thought about the work they were staging. And the actors were mostly worn out by falling from one role to another. The work became mechanical. It was into this atmosphere that Gábor came, who was completely alien to it and dictated an absolutely different way of working." NÁNAY István, "Nánay István beszélgetése Székely Gábor színészeivel és tervezőivel," in *A második életmű: Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*, edited by JÁKFALVI Magdolna, NÁNAY István and SIPOS Balázs, 177–222 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó – Arktisz Kiadó, 2016), 188.

new era and took a major step towards the creation of a much desired "theatre oasis of culture."[2] The benefits of Székely's one-year tenure as chief director are also indicated by the title of an article published about the Szigligeti Theatre in May 1972, evaluating the season that was just coming to an end: "A first-rate theatre."[3]

At the time of its premiere at the Szigligeti Theatre, *The Seagull* had already had a stage history of almost 60 years in Hungary, but it had not yet been performed in Szolnok. (However, Chekhov was not unknown to the audience in Szolnok, thanks to Gábor Berényi's productions of *Three Sisters* in 1962 and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1967, both with an excellent cast.) Gábor Székely's production of *The Seagull* in 1971 immediately attracted national attention, and together with Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of the same play, opening in Kaposvár a few weeks earlier, prompted a reassessment of the Stanislavsky tradition, which had been a strong canon for Chekhov's plays in Hungary during state socialism. It is striking how vehemently the reviews of these two productions called this canon into question, pointing out that it had not really originated with Stanislavsky himself and that false notions and misconceptions had determined the *mise-en-scènes* of Chekhov's plays so far. The destabilisation of the canon is also shown by frequent references to "live theatre," "today's Chekhov," and "the true legacy of Stanislavsky," which critics mention in connection with the stagings of Székely and Zsámbéki, stressing that "we have not seen a real, healthy, moving, and truly impactful Chekhov performance on our stages for many years."[4] Although critics noted that some recent productions had freed the stage from meticulous naturalism, neither István Horvai's *Uncle Vanya* at the Víg Theatre in Budapest (1970) nor Endre Marton's *Ivanov* at the National Theatre (1971) had been able to break away from atmospheric dramatic conventions. Nor did György Lengyel's 1966 staging of *The Seagull* in Debrecen open a new path, even if in many respects it anticipated the approach of Székely and Zsámbéki. This production dissolved realism with a "special stylization,"[5] loosened "the already familiar tradition of the 'fourth wall'," and used tulle curtains instead of set walls.[6] It also broke the closure of representation in the moments when characters confessed their own fate, not always talking to their stage partners but letting the audience know their feelings and thoughts.

Gábor Székely's *Seagull* in Szolnok and Gábor Zsámbéki's *Seagull* in Kaposvár showed a strong deviation from these antecedents and were praised by contemporary criticism together. Not only did the two productions show similarities, but also the careers of the two directors: they both graduated from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, at the same time and became the youngest chief directors of the country (Székely at 27, Zsámbéki at 28). In addition to their parallel Chekhov productions, however, the critics also placed Ottó Ádám's *Seagull* at the Madách Theatre, Budapest (premiered on 28 January 1972), the less successful work of an artist belonging to an older generation. The peculiarity of the reception of these three *Seagull*s is that they were addressed by critics

[2] The expression of Gábor Székely. See RÓNA Katalin, „Fiatal rendező-nemzedék: 'Három lehetőségünk van'," *Film Színház Muzsika* 15, no. 49 (1971): 13. Cf. also Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "'World Theatre in Szolnok' During the 1970s: Gábor Székely: *The Drake's Head*, 1973," *Theatron* 16, no. 4 (2022): 81–95.

[3] PÁLYI András, „Egy igényes színház," *Magyar Hírlap*, May 25, 1972, 6.

[4] PÁLYI András, „A két *Sirály*," *Színház* 5, no. 3 (1972): 11–14, 11, 12.

[5] SÓS Endre, „Két *Sirály*: Csehov színműve a Déryné Színházban és a debreceni Csokonai Színházban," *Magyar Nemzet*, April 1, 1966, 4.

[6] ABLONCZY László, „Még egyszer a *Sirály*ról: Megjegyzések a rendezésről és a színészi játékról," *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, April 17, 1966, 6.

as paradigmatic examples of the intersection of aesthetics and politics. On the one hand, in the somewhat simplistic sense that "the theatre director always engages in politics willingly or unwillingly, because his/her relation to a play necessarily reflects his/her relation to the world."[7] On the other hand, in such a way that the subtext (as understood by Stanislavsky and frequently mentioned in connection with Chekhov), which is not inherent in the plays but is the creation of the director and the actors, always embodies a peculiar worldview and even a philosophy of art. Insisting on the idea of politicising through Chekhov, critics treated *The Seagull* as a drama of resolution, in the performance of which "the question of the social conception of art cannot be circumvented."[8] Therefore they emphasised the opposition arising from that dramatic figure's approach to art the directors seem to sympathise with, since "Treplev and Arkadina, Nina and Trigorin cannot be right at the same time."[9] When examining the directors' programmes and concepts considered to be condensed into the productions, parallels, contrasts, and serious generational differences were revealed: *The Seagull* of Kaposvár was supposed to be a call for making theatre in a workshop; the one in Szolnok was seen as the triumph of "the efforts of talent" and "an attitude imbued with real life," while the Budapest one was regarded as a "saving of values and beauty."[10] In light of the conceptual and stylistic similarity of the two rural *Seagull*s, even the choice of the play was found symbolic, while the loud hammering and building of the stage at the beginning of both performances was found metaphorical: the destruction of the so-called Chekhovian atmosphere, which expressed "the highly talented theatre directors' creed and determination to create theatre."[11] Accordingly, both productions were interpreted as a program statement, "a chief director's opening speech," an identical opinion about theatre.[12] This approach was reinforced by Gábor Székely's calling his *mise-en-scène* "a personal confession" about his desires and ideas, his "*ars poetica* about modern theatre always ready for renewal in content and form."[13] A year and a half later, he also claimed that *The Seagull* is a standard work for those who choose theatre as their profession, clearly stating all the requirements "on the basis of which theatre must and can be made."[14] The program Székely laid down through Chekhov in 1971 was formulated as follows: "words must mean what they mean; we must always play out one truth and choose to do so even if it's not the most effective."[15] This is the summary of the intellectual unpretentiousness that distinguished Székely's *mise-en-scènes* in Szolnok after *The Seagull*, his departure from the frivolity of thought and superficial Brechtianism that characterised the stagings of his master, Tamás Major, and the maximisation of the social stakes of theatre.

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

The Seagull in Szolnok did not make any significant changes to the text of the play, yet it developed a unique reading, the exploration of which was considered primary in its reviews.

[7] KOLTAI Tamás, „Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok: A rendezői 'szövegalatti' három Csehov-előadásban," *Nagyvilág* 17, no. 5 (1972): 775–779, 776.
[8] Ibid., 775.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 779.
[11] PERÉNYI Balázs, „Lelőtték-e a Sirályt? A kilencvenes évek *Sirály*-előadásai," *Ellenfény* 5, nos. 1–2 (2000): 2–10, 2.
[12] KOLTAI Tamás, „Színházi esték: *Az utolsó hősszerelmes* – A *Sirály* Szolnokon," *Népszabadság*, January 21, 1972, 7.
[13] N.N., „Céltalan élet nem lehet tiszta," *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, November 28, 1971, 6.
[14] BÁTKI Mihály, „Tájékozódás a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban," *Élet és Irodalom* 17, no. 20 (1973): 7.
[15] Ibid.

No new adaptation was made: the text used was the one translated into Hungarian by Gyula Háy more than two decades earlier. The *mise-en-scène* kept the internal logic of the plot in mind, so little of the dialogues was omitted. (Only one review mentions a "curtailed text", which is a mistake, and the critic may have misunderstood the up-tempo of the performance.[16]) The goal was to build "a coherent and intelligible stage world" around the text,[17] starting from the subtext and making it as complex and precise as possible. However, autotextuality was coupled with pervasive ideotextuality,[18] since the psychological subtext was placed in the centre, and the essentially psychological events were shown to go beyond themselves, i.e., they were given topical overtones without any actualisation. In this way, Chekhov's "struggling heroes [also] made the dilemmas and feelings of contemporary intellectuals and dissidents" audible.[19] In addition, most comic elements were left unexploited, since Gábor Székely, who claimed that Treplev's "tragedy is poignant," did not stage *The Seagull* in accordance with its genre, i.e., not as a comedy.[20] Thus, the production in Szolnok focused on Treplev and Nina, on "the choice of their fate and its contemporary aspects," and through Treplev's dissatisfaction, it questioned the "routine solutions and prejudices" of the theatre of the time.[21] Only one critic called it a "violent directorial concept," seeing it as exclusively formal and stating that the staging did not convey "the complexity, beauty, inspiration, and deep poeticism that Chekhov expresses. Neither in the psychology of the young, nor in the environment, nor in creating atmosphere and dramatic tension."[22] All other critics took the opposite view.

A striking feature of the reviews about *The Seagull* in Szolnok is their focus on the reading of the drama. In contrast to Chekhovian productions in the 1950s and partly in the 1960s, it was no longer ideological legitimation that was important, but the stage director's interpretation, which represents a major shift in critical reception. Many of the reviews of *The Seagull*s made at the turn of 1971 and 1972 compared the various readings and created a generational contrast between the directors, such as the one between Nina–Treplev and Arkadina–Trigorin in Szolnok and Kaposvár, and brought out Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki victorious against Otto Ádám. In the case of *The Seagull* in Kaposvár, several critics mentioned the lack of strong relationships: the break with the concept of the Chekhovian "still water,"[23] which reduces the characters to helpless strugglers or victims to be pitied, and instead the creation of figures tormenting and torturing each other, thus destroying everything between and around them. This gives rise to the "drama of human disconnectedness," where art cannot flourish in the midst of negative human feelings (jealousy, vanity, indifference, etc.). Thus, "the sensitive Treplev is destroyed by the harsh reality of the loss of ideals, and Nina is submerged in the swamp of mediocrity."[24] In terms of staging and acting, *The Seagull* in Szolnok was similar to *The Seagull* in Kaposvár, which spoke with "cruel sobriety and impetuousness," but it conveyed a different interpretation of the play.[25] Gábor Székely's staging elaborated the relationships of the

[16] Cf. BARTA András, „*Sirály*: Csehov színműve Szolnokon," *Magyar Nemzet*, December 16, 1971, 4.
[17] PERÉNYI, „Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...," 3.
[18] Patrice Pavis's terms. Cf. Patrice PAVIS, „From Page to Stage: A Difficult Birth", in Patrice PAVIS, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Cultures*, 24–47 (London–New York: Routledge, 1992).
[19] PERÉNYI, "Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...," 4.
[20] N.N., "Céltalan élet...," 6.
[21] BARTA, "*Sirály*...," 4.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Cf. SZERB Antal, *A világirodalom története*, Vol. 3. (Budapest: Révai, 1941), 286.
[24] KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...," 777.
[25] Ibid.

figures in a complex way and contrasted an artistically and humanly almost dead couple or generation (Arkadina and Trigorin) with another, clearly talented couple or generation (Nina and Treplev). Treplev had an "ecstatic innovative program" instead of a superficial artistic vision, detached from the praxis, but he proved to be "a talent unable to survive," unlike Nina, in whom "talent triumphed," albeit at the cost of great suffering.[26] In contrast to the strong reading of Székely and Zsámbéki, Ottó Ádám's staging renounced the uniqueness of *Konzeptregie*, making it seem as if there was no interpretation at the Madách Theatre, Budapest.[27] Presumably, the play was staged only because of the versatile possibilities offered to the actors, but it came across as a "misinterpreted bestseller," unlike the works of the two young directors, which aimed to reveal the "anti-bestseller," a play that was decidedly unsettling.[28] Some critics thought that Anatoly Efros's image of Chekhov influenced the reading of *The Seagull* in Szolnok and Kaposvár, presumably because the program guide of the Kaposvár performance included a quotation from Efros, but no one went into the parallels in any depth. The references seem to have served only to legitimise the aspirations of Székely and Zsámbéki by touching upon a new current of Soviet theatre.

Staging

Avoiding any overt updating, Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scène* orchestrated the performance of *The Seagull* for the perceptual experience of the spectators of the 1970s and brought a turn to the decades-old conventions of playing Chekhov. *The Seagull* in Szolnok (as well as the one in Kaposvár) already signalled this turn with its opening: with the lack of a sustained moment and atmosphere.[29] The aforementioned Chekhov productions by István Horvai, Endre Marton, and György Lengyel had already done away with naturalism, but Székely and Zsámbéki were the first to eliminate the so-called "Chekhovian atmosphere" when they began their productions with loud hammering and the carpentry of the stage on stage built for Treplov's play. However, in Szolnok, the backdrop had also disappeared, and the mood-shattering hammering was carried out visibly and audibly by the set workers.[30] The conventions of Stanislavski's theatre were clearly replaced by those of Brecht's: the image of the stage on stage was reinforced by the consciousness of theatre in the theatre, and the alienation thus taking place was also facilitated by the objective working lighting. Several critics noted that not only was the blackness of the stage more penetrating in Székely's *mise-en-scène*, and not only were the lighting effects colder than in Zsámbéki's, but the whole production was "more starkly composed,"[31] "more extreme and more harsh."[32] From the very first moment, the audience at the Szigligeti Theatre saw "a relentless destruction of illusion" in a "radically anti-Chekhovian production,"[33] as the usual gloomy pace and uneventfulness were replaced by agitation, loudness, and bluntness. The tension erupted in broad movements, perpetual motion, and even running, so there was no trace of "languid reverie," "the melancholy of soft movements" and "pretty talk."[34] The production was unusually fast-paced, and the impulsive events taking place in just over two hours translated Chekhov's play into "the experience of the

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] PÁLYI András, "Három *Sirály*-előadás," *Magyar Hírlap*, February 5, 1972, 7.
[29] Cf. KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok…," 776.
[30] Ibid., 777.
[31] MAJOROS József, "Vitában Csehov-színjátszásunkról," *Színház* 7, no. 9 (1974): 27–31, 28.
[32] PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*", 12.
[33] MAJOROS, "Vitában Csehov-színjátszásunkról," 29, 28.
[34] KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok…," 776.

contemporary nervous system."[35] The critics did not agree on the result of the elimination of conventional staging: some described "depoetization" as a failure,[36] or a flawed concept, and considered it a fatal error to deprive the performance of its 19th-century characteristics. Ottó Ádám's staging at the Madách Theatre did not lack this atmosphere and poetic beauty, yet it remained superfluous, because it did not elaborate psychological reactions or analyse the situations precisely.[37] There, in contrast to *The Seagull*s in Szolnok and Kaposvár, "the external image of the performance followed the tradition of the preservation of forms," but the meticulous physical actions of previous Chekhov productions were replaced by "motionless sitting and idle standing," and the pauses were filled "not with tension, but with cricket chirping and wind hissing."[38] For this reason, *The Seagull* at the Madách Theatre was not even considered to be a "modern Chekhov," unlike the other two, for which several critics used this adjective.[39] However, the production in Szolnok was visibly not updated: it mainly used the techniques of historical staging, but avoided its pervasiveness and combined selective realism with slight stylisation. Its loud opening foreshadowed a tense drama, full of passionate outbursts, but due to the historicism applied without exaggeration, "the tensions, anger, and discontent of the present" were not shown directly but covertly.[40]

Székely's staging was based on an admittedly simplified (but not vulgarising) reading of the play, which based the events of *The Seagull* on the confrontation between two generations and made it clear which of the generations represented the positive and which the negative side in the opposition between new art and empty routine.[41] This highly tendentious interpretation really gained ground in the second part of the performance, where acting further developed the relationships of the characters, and "the raw, hard clashes were charged with emotion," so "the boisterous gestures and running around showed the desperate attempt of the characters to hold on to each other".[42] The *mise-en-scène* also made a subtle distinction between the members of the young generation: the sensitive and talented Treplev, who lacks a sense of reality, and Nina, who realises her abilities at all costs.[43] Some critics insisted on the misunderstanding that *The Seagull* in Szolnok amplified a single voice, "Treplev's impatient voice," but in the end it was the women of the young generation who took the floor from him: Nina and Masha, who became the real protagonists.[44] Others have rightly pointed out that Treplev's attitude could not be central to Székely's staging, since this Treplev "created an almost caricaturistic impression with his piecemeal gestures and rough outbursts of anger."[45] Instead, the production "focused on Nina, who was able to overcome her disappointments."[46] From *The Seagull* of the Szigligeti Theatre, Nina's voice was heard most clearly, and her great confession in the last act did not sound like an exalted self-ideology, but a manifestation of faith and confidence (without any Christian overtones) that

[35] SÁNDOR L. István, "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza: Székely, Zsámbéki, Schilling *Sirály*a," *Ellenfény* 9, no. 2 (2004): 4–10, 7.
[36] BARTA, "*Sirály*...", 4.
[37] KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...," 778.
[38] Ibid.
[39] For example, KÓCSAG Piroska, "A *Sirály* Szolnokon," *Esti Hírlap*, December 9, 1971, 2.
[40] PERÉNYI, "Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...," 3.
[41] SÁNDOR L., "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...," 8.
[42] KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...," 7.
[43] Ibid.
[44] PETERDI NAGY László, "Csehovot játszani," *Színház* 7, no. 7. (1974): 33–38, 33.
[45] MAJOROS, "Vitában Csehov-színjátszásunkról," 29.
[46] Ibid.

proved stronger than the dissipating illusions.[47] Nina in Szolnok was perfectly compatible with the socialist ideal of man, towards which, by underlining her desire for a "meaningful and humane life full of art," critics guided Nina's recognition. However, there was no trace of party-state ideology in the production in Szolnok, so the "poetry of true humble talent" in Nina was ultimately described as romantic theatre, and the production was regarded as fighting against empty routine and "fuelled by the romanticism of the young artists' creed."[48] How this manifested itself can hardly be ascertained, because the reviews are full of references to directorial rigour, and less so on the details of the performance. The critics did not highlight a single scene, not a single characteristic moment, so it is not known how Treplev's ominous performance took place on the plank stage, which was heavily carpentered in the first minutes.

Acting

The Seagull in Szolnok (along with the one in Kaposvár) was appreciated "primarily as an initiative concerning the style of acting":[49] as the emergence of a language of performance that became the vernacular of Hungarian theatre in the following decade. According to a much later assessment, put somewhat vaguely, "Székely and Zsámbéki made a break with the tradition of rhetorical theatre and created a more complex, [...] much more theatrical way of performance, in which 'the interaction of words, gestures, actions and sight' was decisive".[50] In fact, instead of the slow-motion ping-pong with replicas according to the conventions of what Hungarian theatre people bitingly call "acting with drilled legs,"[51] Székely's productions were determined by a verbal (and sometimes even physical) struggle from a heightened nervous state, with heightened expressivity, involving the actor's physical and the stage's visual means of expression with a force similar to words. However, we hardly know how acting took part in the mutual and combined effect of word, gesture, action, and sight, because although the critics evaluated the performance of the actors/actresses in *The Seagull*, they did not provide much information about the means of creating characters. In other words, they rarely gave such details as the one where Ágnes Hegedűs (Arkadina) organised a whole little extravaganza around lighting a cigarette in order to disrupt Treplev's and Nina's theatre performance with malice.[52] Yet we know that the harmonisation of the actors' habits and acting styles, as well as the "nuanced elaboration of the relationships between the characters,"[53] which are still determining factors of making theatre in Hungary, became essential components of the language of performance required by Székely from his actors and actresses. The seriousness with which ensemble acting was incorporated into the rural theatre of the 1970s can be deduced from the few statements in the reviews about performances that did not apply it at all or did so

[47] CSÍK István, "*Sirály*," *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, December 10, 1971, 5.
[48] PÁLYI, „A két *Sirály*," 12.
[49] Ibid.
[50] SÁNDOR L., "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...," 9. The source of the phrase between the inner quotation marks: PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 13.
[51] Cf. the recollection of the famous actor, György Cserhalmi: "[Székely] wanted to create in the actor a state of nerves that originated in the Central European condition of the time, stemming from an attitude of lying in wait, on the alert, watching everywhere, defensive, rejecting, and repelling, but which in certain moments—when fate brings a woman and a man together in love—could expand into something like magical poetry." NÁNAY, "Nánay István beszélgetése...," 212.
[52] Cf. KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...," 777.
[53] SÁNDOR L., "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...," 10.

with little or no precision. For example, the description of a production staged in Szolnok six months before *The Seagull* states that "the sparkling dialogues often lacked the partner's reaction: the actor or actress, having finished his or her own text, left the play and waited excitedly for the cue as a neutral observer and only then began to act again. In football terms, he/she was standing still, waiting for the ball..."[54] The critic described these shortcomings as disturbing because they highlighted that the actors "can only cope with the style of French salon-comedy and salon-farce as long as they have a concrete text."[55] In the role of Puzsér, "the irresistibly cheeky, unadulterated, unscrupulous, and sentimental burglar" (in Ferenc Molnár's play *The Lawyer*), József Varga D., the audience favourite in Szolnok, "does not build a character [...] on whom the humour of the play is based. He stays afloat, exploits only the opportunities of the moment, has some points, but fails to create individuality."[56] This acting style, which was often criticised in other performances too, barely enforced the minimum of the realistic building up of a character and ensemble acting: those two components that formed the basis of acting in Gábor Székely's stagings. His highly distinctive directorial vision "was not really matched by the whole ensemble" in *The Seagull*,[57] yet the performance was evaluated as an essential phase of a learning process.

The character of Nina clearly stood out from the production, not only because of the interpretation of the play but also because of Erika Bodnár's exceptionally powerful acting. The director claimed that Nina's fate serves as a lesson that "there is no pain that life can cause—even in the form of love—for which meaningful, creative, human work cannot be a useful remedy".[58] Although Nina is at the beginning of her life, "she is the only one in the play who lives a *real* life and dares to experience *everything* in its fullness. She is willing to go to hell, immerse herself in passion and suffering, and then rise above them."[59] So Erika Bodnár played the "victorious" Nina, but she also shed light on the Pyrrhic nature of her victory: that "although fate reveals the possibility of ascension, she is in fact a victim too. A shot, bleeding seagull, like the other two young people."[60] But Nina's suffering never turned into sentimentalism, and the performance was given a special colour by the "few grotesque touches" and a subtle critical attitude with which Erika Bodnár indicated Nina's overly naïve infatuation in the first two acts.[61] Her acting remained "simple, unpretentious, and convincing,"[62] even if some considered it rather uncharacteristic compared to the conventional approach to her figure.[63]

In the case of Lajos Kránitz, who played Treplev, most critics mentioned the robustness of the actor's physique as a hindrance. However, some stressed the young man "bursting with vitality"[64] and the rewards of departing from the usual soft, almost Hamlet-like figure: that the contrast between Treplev's powerful physique and his fragile rebellion only enhanced the impact of Kránitz's performance.[65]

The adjectives "tough" and "tart" dominated the reviews of Ágnes Hegedűs,[66] and the characterisation of the "snappy" actress

[54] István Csík, "*Doktor úr*," *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, April 10, 1971, 5.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Pályi, "Három *Sirály*-előadás," 7.
[58] N.N., "Céltalan élet...," 6.
[59] Koltai, "Színházi esték...," 7. (Emphasis in original.)
[60] Peterdi Nagy, "Csehovot játszani," 34.
[61] Csík, "*Sirály*," 5.
[62] Ibid.
[63] (barna), "Színházi esték: *Sirály* – szárnyak nélkül," *Nógrád*, December 23, 1971, 4.
[64] Pályi, "A két *Sirály*," 14.
[65] Csík, "*Sirály*," 5.
[66] Koltai, "Színházi esték...," 7; Pályi, "A két *Sirály*," 14.

was clarified through the description of Arkadina as "capable only of mock-softness."[67] The performance of Hegedűs, who played the last role of her life in Szolnok, was evaluated by most as "memorable," "very good," even "flawless,"[68] and knowing the perfectionism of the actress, it certainly was, and not a "casting misstep."[69]

Neither was László Huszár's Trigorin, although the actor had to play a figure alien to his character, and he was accurate in his portrayal of the "willful, soft" writer, but less so in his "enervated intellectualism."[70]

In addition to the four actors and actresses mentioned, Gyöngyi Bürös's sternly self-contained Masha, whose sudden, fragmentary movements revealed "feminine softness," was described as an "excellent performance," while Zoltán Papp's Medvedenko as "a hit both in his despair and aggressive patheticness."[71] Although the others were not rendered invisible by the interpretation of the play, they were certainly relegated to the background, so in their case, beyond a few comments and brief evaluations, the reviews do not inform about the ways of character building at all.

Stage design and sound

The visual world of the performance was based on the director's idea that "Chekhov's theatre is the theatre of fantasy," and "the expression of [its] intellectual essence" does not require a naturalistic milieu.[72] According to Székely, "[Chekhov's stage] is a stage without a curtain, an open stage of dramatic action and thought, a stage of reality free of formalities."[73] In the stage history of the Russian dramatist's plays in Hungary, it was in Szolnok (and Kaposvár) in 1971 that it became obvious that "the stage environment according to the Meiningen school is not at all an integral part of Chekhov's world," and that an object or piece of furniture can acquire an unusual dramatic charge if its function is "not to create an illusion, but to express the meaning and atmosphere of a given situation."[74] This was beautifully realised in *The Seagull* in Szolnok, and the critics found its "magic of space" fascinating, its visuals exceptionally suggestive and even more expressive than the acting.[75] The bare stage lacked both a detailed interior and an elaborate *plain air*. In Kaposvár, Gábor Szinte used a white square in the background of the black stage to refer to the lake, but in Szolnok, Miklós Fehér removed any indication of the stage landscape.[76] At the beginning of the performance, Treplev's makeshift stage (a simple wooden platform) and two white benches were set up by the technicians in front of the black backdrop in a working light that did not change later. The scene did little to suggest the milieu and twilight atmosphere of the garden; it did not conceal that it was only a bare stage, and its sombre brightness was provided by spotlights that were clearly visible: Brecht's concept prevailed instead of Stanislavsky's. For the scenes taking place inside, a table and some chairs were brought to the foreground, but the elements bordering the house, the furnishings of the rooms, were missing, and the makeshift stage in the background remained visible. Although this stage no longer had a function, it became almost a symbol: "a symbol of young and authentic theatre, a symbol of nascent art".[77]

The open stage, the open rearrangements, and the noise of working that started the

[67] BARTA, "*Sirály*...," 4; KOLTAI, "Theatre evenings...," 7.
[68] KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...," 7; PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 14; CSÍK, "*Sirály*," 5.
[69] (barna), "Színházi esték," 4.
[70] KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...," 7; CSÍK, "*Sirály*," 5.
[71] CSÍK, "*Sirály*," 5.
[72] N.N., "Céltalan élet...," 6.
[73] Ibid.
[74] MAJOROS, "Vitában Csehov-színjátszásunkról," 29.
[75] PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 14.
[76] Ibid., 11.
[77] PÁLYI, "Három *Sirály*-előadás," 7.

performance destroyed the atmosphere associated with *The Seagull* by the stage directions of the play and the productions of almost three-quarters of a century. However, the standard lighting shrouding the makeshift stage and the white benches in a foreboding, gloomy light created another, equally powerful atmosphere, highlighting Székely's own *ars poetica* of the theatre.[78] The space also linked the production to the newest ways of staging Chekhov by hinting at Josef Svoboda's set designed for Otomar Krejča's *Ivanov* (Prague, 1970),[79] which remained unchanged and did not separate the outside and the inside: the performance space was bordered by a fence made of unplaned boards; inside were sofas and armchairs covered with green plush, candlesticks, and some other elements that barely marked the interior.[80] There was less furniture on the stage of *The Seagull* in Szolnok, but the objects were placed in closeup more often than the actors, as they drew "dramatic lines of force."[81] E.g., the seagull, with its wings unfolded, held and then left within the circle of a spotlight in front of a white bench; the white cushion thrown to Polina and left for minutes in closeup; and the oil lamp placed on the floor, around which Dorn and the others sat listening to Treplev's narration about the past two years of Nina. Some critics saw Nina's whiteness embodied "in the whiteness of the objects, in the shot seagull as well as in the exposure of the benches or in the accentuated presence of the white oil lamp", and claimed the symbolic nature of the components of the performance space beyond their everyday meaning.[82] Nelly Vágó's costumes were also different from the 19th-century milieu, and although the characters were not dressed in modern clothes, they were closer to the second half of the 20th century than to Chekhov's time. However, this can be mostly deduced from the few surviving photographs of the production, because the critics did not mention the costumes at all.

Impact and posterity

Few performances occupy such a strong position in theatre history, and few have such a far-reaching history of effect as *The Seagull* in Szolnok, which broke and created tradition at the same time. It was not played more than other productions and was not taken on tour to smaller settlements of Szolnok County. It had only one or two guest performances in major provincial towns of the region, but it was not a success there. It did not make it to Budapest, so the theatre people of the capital could only see it if they travelled to Szolnok during its short run. Of the nine reviews and essays published about the production, two were unfavourable and described it as a failure, reproaching its creators for ignoring the conventions of playing Chekhov. The others were decidedly positive, and two longer analyses, examining the relationship between *The Seagull*s in Szolnok, in Kaposvár, and in Budapest, contributed greatly to the fact that Gábor Székely's staging soon gained serious value. The prediction of the critic of *Színház*, who saw Székely and Zsámbéki's search for a new path as a far from isolated phenomenon, came true when he wrote that "they open a page in the history book of Hungarian theatre that will be worth looking back on from a wider perspective."[83] The great era of the two rural theatres (in Szolnok and Kaposvár) that soon became legendary began with these *Seagull*s, as they (and the theatre in Kecskemét, where József Ruszt became chief director in 1973) became "the training ground of the new Hungarian theatre."[84] The two

[78] PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 12.
[79] KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...," 7.
[80] Jarka BURIAN, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 42.
[81] PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 14.
[82] Ibid.
[83] PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 12–13.
[84] Tamás KOLTAI, "Egy korszerűtlen maximalista," *168 óra* 13, no. 38 (2001): 39–41, 39.

productions "radically transformed the views on the 'Chekhovian style'"[85] and replaced the tradition of staging Chekhov which had been marked by Endre Gellért, István Horvai, and Ottó Ádám since the end of WW2. However, *The Seagull*s of Székely and Zsámbéki gradually built up a new tradition of playing Chekhov, which eventually became a canon in the legendary productions of the Katona József Theatre.[86] Thus, they foreshadowed such paradigmatic productions as *The Wood Demon* (1982), "one of the style-defining productions of the Katona József Theatre" (directed by Gábor Zsámbéki), Tamás Ascher's *Three Sisters* (1985), "the greatest (international) success of a theatre in its heyday, a synthesis-creating Chekhov performance,"[87] and *Platonov* (1990, also directed by Ascher), "the last 'great' performance of the Katona, which was facing a company reorganisation and artistic renewal."[88] The two *Seagull*s were still regarded as an "inevitable point of reference" for Chekhov productions of the 1990s and early 2000s,[89] and the Krétakör Theatre's highly successful *Siráj*[90] (directed by Árpád Schilling in 2003) was praised as a production fuelled by the same theatre-creating creed as the productions thirty-two years earlier. (Schilling graduated as director from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, in the class of Gábor Székely in 2000, and the program of his *Siráj* referred to the works of his former master and Gábor Zsámbéki.) At that time, there was already a consensus that "the latest era of Hungarian theatre can be counted from 1971,"[91] and that the two young directors' *Seagull*s "can be clearly marked as possible starting points of a new epoch of theatre."[92] The politically motivated smear campaign launched against Székely and his most prominent colleagues after his departure from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (2020) tried to shake this consensus, without success.

The direct sequel to Gábor Székely's first staging of Chekhov also premiered in Szolnok in 1974: *Three Sisters* amplified the partly generationally motivated restlessness and nervousness that had already strained *The Seagull* to the extreme. After that, Székely did not direct Chekhov for twenty-two years, but his last production in Hungary was also based on a (less frequently performed) play by the Russian dramatist. *Ivanov* (Új Theatre, Budapest, 1996) became the end point of a series starting with *Timon of Athens* (1976) in Szolnok and exploring the contempt for human behaviour and the way of the world, with the resulting self-destruction in several outstanding performances. In contrast to István Horvai's last Chekhov (*Ivanov*, Pesti Theatre, 1995), which seemed to be a thing of the past, Székely's *Ivanov* was able to make a still living and functioning tradition visible in a highly dynamic and deeply moving production full of first-rate acting.

At the beginning of 2022, a new *Seagull* opened at the Szigligeti Theatre for the 50th anniversary of the first premiere of the play in Szolnok. The staging of Kriszta Székely, who graduated in the class of Gábor Székely and Viktor Bodó in 2015, was a revelation after the long period of management by Péter Balázs, who preferred entertainment over artistic

[85] PERÉNYI, "Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...," 3.
[86] SÁNDOR L., „Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...", 8.
[87] Cf. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "Remembrance of a Landmark in Theatre History: Tamás Ascher: *Three Sisters*, 1985," in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 177–188 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church – Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021).
[88] PERÉNYI, "Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...," 2.
[89] Judit CSÁKI, "A pucér Siráj," *Magyar Narancs*, October 30, 2003, 22.
[90] The production had a deliberately distorted title (roughly as *The Seagul* in English), since 'seagull' is written as 'sirály' in Hungarian.
[91] KOLTAI, "Egy korszerűtlen maximalista," 39.
[92] SÁNDOR L., "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...," 4.

quality and tried to gain popularity by all means. The award-winning production differed in every aspect from the performances of the Szigligeti Theatre between 2007 and 2021, addressed the generational problem without any simplification, and linked it to the issue of artistic self-assertion, which was already in focus of the 1971 *Seagull*.[93] This was also manifested in the casting, as the roles of Nina and Treplev were played by two recent graduates of Freeszfe,[94] alongside older members of the Szigligeti Theatre. Gábor Székely's *Seagull*, which had prepared the rise of the theatre in Szolnok at the beginning of the 1970s, could hardly have received a more fitting tribute than Kriszta Székely's *Seagull*, which opened a new path for the Szigligeti Theatre fifty-one years after Gábor Székely's *Seagull*.

Details of the production

Title: The Seagull. *Date of Premiere:* 3 December, 1971. *Venue*: Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* Gábor Székely. *Author:* A. P. Chekhov. *Translator:* Gyula Háy. *Composer:* Zoltán Jeney. *Set designer:* Miklós Fehér. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó. *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Ágnes Hegedűs (Arkadina, Irina Nikolayevna), Lajos Kránitz (Treplev, her son), József Máriáss (Sorin, Irina's brother), Erika Bodnár (Nina), István Kürtös (Shamrayev, the manager of Sorin's estate), Olga Koós (Polina, his wife), Gyöngyi Bürös (Masha, their daughter), László Huszár (Trigorin, writer), Endre Peczkay (Dorn, doctor), Zoltán Papp (Medvedenko, teacher), Rudolf Jantsek (Jakov, servant).

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[93] Cf. the director's words: "[The production] will talk about how the younger generation is hindered by the older one from breathing and learning at their expense. About the protective, apathetic attitude of the past generation and its artistic midlife crisis. The older generation is very difficult to move from their positions, not only in theatre but in many other areas of life." N.N., "*Sirály* – Székely Kriszta rendezése a szolnoki Színházban," *Színház Online*, 15 March, 2022, https://szinhaz.online/siraly-zekely-kriszta-rendezese/, accessed 24.06.2024.

[94] Cf. „The aim of the Freeszfe Society is to create an autonomous artistic space to guard the 155-year-old tradition of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest (SZFE). We have built this community to provide an inspiring environment and opportunities for those who no longer tolerated the lack of dialogue and the crushing of artistic freedom. [In 2020] the privatisation of SZFE was accompanied by immense national and international protests and expressions of solidarity with the ousted academic staff. In our society, the former and current students, teachers, and employees of SZFE work together in the spirit of free creation." https://www.freeszfe.hu/about_us/, accessed 24.06.2024.

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Resisting Peter Weiss: A Non-Marxist Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* for the Late 1970s

ZSÓFIA EMMA SZILÁGYI

Abstract: My study on János Szikora's 1978 staging of *The Trial* seeks to explore the factors that contributed to the growing prominence of neo-avant-garde theatre-making and a kind of counterculture in the National Theatre of Pécs at the end of the 1970s. Additionally, it examines how the production caused such a stir that it eventually led to an actual lawsuit. Szikora's ideas about his production were so resolute that, despite having Peter Weiss's dramatised version available, he and Géza Morcsányi chose to create their own adaptation instead. Szikora (according to his own statement) aimed to preserve the diversity of impressions evoked in readers by Kafka's novel. However, a journalist from *Népszabadság* twisted the director's words, claiming that Szikora was essentially "reproaching" Weiss for his Marxist interpretation of Kafka.

With János Szikora's staging of Kafka after Tibor Déry's *The Giant Baby*,[1] the National Theatre of Pécs seemed to provide a stable space for neo-avant-garde theatre-making and a kind of counterculture, even after István Paál had left the institution.[2] Before Paál's[3] employment as a director in Pécs (1975),[4] there was no precedent for a professional theatre to employ an amateur artist.[5] Róbert Nógrádi, the director of the theatre in Pécs, could probably not do so without the permission of

[1] Tibor Déry's *The Giant Baby* is a grotesque, even absurd drama that explores the problems of human nature and society through symbolic scenes. Its protagonist is a gigantic, instinct-driven infant who represents the human hunger for power and the selfishness of civilisation. Written in 1926, the play shows the influence of the avant-garde, particularly Expressionism and Dadaism. The play's informal style and absurdist humour reflect on the turmoil of the modern world, while posing provocative questions about humanity's evolution and social impasses. Cf. Tibor DÉRY, "The Giant Baby," trans. Imre GOLDSTEIN, in *Modern International Drama*, Vol. 20, 5–48 (Binghamton: Max Reinhardt Archive, State University of New York, 1986).

[2] István Paál (1942–1998) was a Hungarian neo-avant-garde theatre-maker, a follower of Jerzy Grotowski. His overtly critical and radical conception had a great influence on Hungarian theatre. His productions were not only theatre events but also intellectual ones, and he is credited with introducing the community theatre form. Cf. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "The Danse Macabre of »Democratic Dictatorship«: Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango* in State-Socialist Hungary," *Theatron* 17, no. 4 (2023): 62–74, https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2023.4.62

[3] István Paál unsuccessfully applied to the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest in 1968, while he was the director of the University Theatre of Szeged between 1960 and 1975. Cf. MAGYAR Fruzsina and DURÓ Győző, „Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal," *Színház* 11, no. 10 (1978): 32–35.

[4] "It was an unexpected turn of events that the National Theatre of Pécs invited me to stage a play as a guest, thanks largely to the personal commitment and flexibility of the theatre's management," said István Paál. Ibid., 32.

[5] BARTA András, "A mai magyar színházról – tíz tételben: Beszélgetés Szikora Jánossal," *Mozgó Világ* 12, no. 5 (1986): 103–112, 105.

the leading cultural politician of the Kádár era,[6] György Aczél, just as Szikora could not have staged "the most revolutionary Hungarian avant-garde play" (as the director called *The Giant Baby*)[7] without it. However, it was not just Pécs that gave an opportunity first to an amateur (Paál) and then to a professional (Szikora) young theatre-maker. Rather, by the end of the 1970s, state-financed rural theatres had become more open and experimental, abandoning "stylistic monotony."[8] Their productions began to reject the ideal of "soothing, beautiful, harmonious performances," giving way to the representation of "disharmonious, restless, and not always 'artistic' reality."[9]

From 1962, Róbert Nógrádi tried to create a theatre in Pécs whose program policy, while satisfying audience demand, increasingly emphasised diversity, bolder, more irregular plays and styles that were not necessarily well established at the time. Nógrádi did not see the theatre's task as the consistent implementation of a strong director-principal vision. He believed that the ideal was to have a variety of theatrical ideals represented by directors who differed in taste but agreed on the main issues.[10] The National Theatre of Pécs wanted to become "the best theatre ever" of the 1970s,[11] presenting plays, either authors or works, which "could just as well be staged in Budapest, the capital city."[12]

The overall perception of the 1978/79 theatre season in Pécs turned out to be mixed. István Nánay's interview with Nógrádi, evaluating the season, highlights the fact that while "a radical series of changes began in Hungarian theatre life, [...] they only partially affected Pécs."[13] Although there were signs of strong artistic ambitions in Pécs, Nánay says that "there were also undeniable signs of artistic stagnation."[14] At that time, there were five divisions working simultaneously in Pécs: opera, operetta, drama, puppet theatre, and children's theatre. The 1978/79 season brought together a wide variety of productions, aiming to satisfy an exceptionally broad range of audience preferences. Comedies, popular Hungarian plays, farces, and children's performances were on the programme, alongside the obligatory Soviet plays, operettas, musical plays, and ballet performances, all of which attracted large crowds. Nógrádi admitted that the 1978/79 season was indeed less successful in terms of attendance, which he attributed primarily to offering too much (in his own words) "poetic theatre."[15] He considered the succession of *The Trial* and Strindberg's *Dream Play* to be excessive.[16] However, despite the challenges, the director remained committed to the long-term artistic ambitions of the theatre, even though the division into sections and the genre- and style-based diversity later on did not contribute to the development of a clear profile. This "lack of profile" is also reflected in the mixed results of the 1978/79 season, even though the National Theatre of Pécs lived on in the public consciousness as the cradle of contemporary Hungarian drama.

Already during his college years, Szikora distinguished himself with a formal language

[6] REGŐS János, "Úgy döntöttem, hogy rendező akarok maradni: Szikora Jánossal Regős János beszélget," *Szcenárium* 3, no. 9 (2015): 65–83, 73.
[7] Ibid.
[8] KOLTAI Tamás, "Évadok után, évadok előtt," *Színház* 11, no. 9 (1978): 1–4, 2.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] CZÍMER József, "Nógárdi Róbert emlékezete," *Film Színház Muzsika* 33, no. 29 (1989): 6–7, 7.
[12] Ibid.
[13] NÁNAY István, "A közönség szolgálata és a nyitottság: Beszélgetés Nógrádi Róberttel, a pécsi Nemzeti Színház igazgatójával," *Színház* 12, no. 9 (1979): 33–35, 33.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 34.
[16] Ibid.

that was very different from the theatrical ideas of the masters there.[17] The avant-garde and amateur theatre were both fundamental to his theatrical vision. Unlike István Paál, Szikora was admitted to the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, although, as a law student, he had started out in the amateur theatre scene earlier, as a member of the Brobo group (1969–1974), which "moved towards explicitly visual art performances."[18] The group worked on the creation of a specific theatrical language, "where word, sound, gesture, and musical effects are juxtaposed and organised in an almost syntactical system."[19] Szikora thus created performances with the Brobo in opposition to stage realism and in the spirit of the neo-avant-garde. His interest in performances and happenings[20] was also influenced by the fact that in 1973, he saw the *Petőfi-rock* in Wrocław,[21] and met István Paál, with whom he later maintained a close relationship.[22] For Szikora, the unusual spectacle of theatrical performance[23] was "not merely a matter of routinely conveying the thought content of a drama"[24] and "the elements were not a vulgar formalism."[25]

In light of all this, it is no coincidence that Szikora chose Kafka's world for his first professional theatre works. Szikora was particularly depressed during his college years, so for his last college exam performance, he was looking for a play that could express (in his own words) his "depression," his sense of life at the time. This is how he chose Rózewicz's play *The Hunger Artist Departs* based on Kafka.[26] Critics noted that Szikora was preoccupied with "the defeats of human struggle" and "the fundamental questions of human existence."[27] But because these "questions of

[17] REGŐS, "Úgy döntöttem, hogy…," 73.
[18] Ibid.
[19] GERVAI András, "Az éhezőművész nem megy el… Beszélgetés Szikora Jánossal," *Mozgó Világ* 6, no. 12 (1980): 74–79, 75.
[20] „In the 1970s, theatre movements began to emerge and, after their disappearance, entered the theatre's bloodstream, […] with something so different from the official Hungarian theatre […]) we are trying to create theatre here, that it is actually crucial for us to take into account the past, which is primarily your activity and the intellectual environment in which your activity could be created,"[20] – said Szikora about the Kassák Theatre during the roundtable discussion held at the Artpool Studio on May 22, 1984. N. N., "Beszélgetés a Kassák Színházról 1984. 22-én az Artpool Stúdióban," *Artpool*, Spring 1985, 45, accessed 22.10.2024, https://artpool.hu/Al/al11/KHS-1.html
[21] *Petőfi-rock* is one of the legendary performances of the University Theatre Szeged, staged by István Paál on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Sándor Petőfi's birth. The performance was based on three of Petőfi's poems and his diary of the revolutionary days, supplemented with letters and reports sent by the imperial police and a network of informers to the Council of Governors and the Palatine of Hungary. Cf. "Paál István visszaemlékezése," in *Felütés: Írások a magyar alternatív színházról*, ed. VÁRSZEGI Tibor, 64–69 ([private edition]: 1990), 66.
[22] REGŐS, „Úgy döntöttem, hogy…," 70.
[23] "No doubt, the visual aspect has priority, the most important thing is that the text stimulates my imagination […], this internal imagery leads to a unique kind of inner cinema […], for me, the text on its own means nothing" – said Szikora. GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész…," 74.
[24] MÁTYÁS Győző, "»Minő veszély, hogy az ember szabad!« A *Hamlet* győri előadásáról," *Mozgó Világ* 8, no. 1 (1982): 33–39, 33.
[25] MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, "Ántiszínház és antiszínház: Déry Tibor drámája Pécsett," *Népszabadság*, May 31, 1978, 7.
[26] GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész…," 75.
[27] TARJÁN Tamás, "Galambok: A *Rómeó és Júlia* a miskolci Nemzeti Színházban," *Népszabadság*, February 8, 1984, 7.

existence are few and simple, the way in which the works are realised" is crucial.[28]

"Kafka's acceptance in Hungary was delayed by long decades: when he had already been discovered in Western Europe, his acceptance in Hungary, like in other socialist countries, was delayed by ideological suspicions of Marxism."[29] In the Rákosi era, "Kafka was not even mentioned."[30] The first Hungarian edition (*The Judgement*) was published in 1957, and only from 1963 onwards could further works by the writer be published.[31] "Meanwhile, the international debate on Kafka among Marxists was unfolding, which sought to replace the earlier categorical rejection with a more nuanced and 'understanding' position."[32] In 1958, György Lukács took the initiative to discuss the Kafka question and acknowledged the writer's talent, even seeing him as one of the most significant figures of "modern decadence," but in the spirit of socialist realism[33] he continued to reject Kafka's works as "avant-garde, anti-realist literature serving as a mediated apologetic of capitalism."[34] Kafka's writings (published in Hungarian from 1963 onwards) were immediately put on the stage. They first appeared in 1963 in one of the occasional programmes of the Budapest Literary Stage, where an excerpt from *The Trial* was adapted into a scene.[35] Three years later, in 1966, the Thália Theatre in Budapest presented a stage version of *The Trial* by Jean-Louis Barrault and André Gide,[36] and in 1968 the National Theatre staged an adaptation of Kafka's *America* by Max Brod, directed by Endre Marton. The latter production divided the critics, who criticised the essentially realistic approach.[37] Marton had incorporated Kafka into an essentially realistic theatrical language that was being experimented with at the time in some plays by Peter Weiss at the Hungarian National Theatre. Although critics respected the fact that "he did not emphasise the elusive drama, but sought the impossibility of the glamorous stunt,"[38] on the whole, he "failed to capture the dreamlike character of Kafka's visions—the essence of Kafka's work," and what was achieved was merely "a grotesque story of the helplessness of the Chaplinian little man."[39] Nine years later, János Szikora was far from interpreting Kafka in terms of the concept of alienation. In his production of *The Hunger Artist Departs* at the Ódry Stage, the Theatre and Film Academy's own theatre, "there was more scepticism and incomprehension than enthusiasm."[40] The audience may have found it hard to cope with the "eerie madness," (a term in a critique), which resulted from the contrast between "breath-

[28] GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész…," 74.

[29] GYŐRFFY Miklós, "Kafka és Magyarország," *Alföld* 59, no. 8 (2008): 76–85, 79.

[30] Ibid., 80.

[31] In 1963, *Letter to my Father* (trans. Ede Szabó), in 1964, *The Castle* (trans. György Rónay), in 1967, *America* (trans. István Kristó Nagy), in 1968, *The Trial* (trans. Ede Szabó). Ibid., 80–81.

[32] "In the 1950s, the dogmatic communist cultural policy considered Kafka's work a harmful and forbidden phenomenon, simply because the existentialists saw Kafka as »their prophet«." Ibid., 81.

[33] The task of art is to reflect reality through the human experience, thereby contributing to the defetishization of the alienated world. See FEKETE Kristóf, "Lukács Kafkát olvas," *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* 64, no. 2 (2020): 155–175, 156–157.

[34] Ibid.

[35] BARABÁS Tamás, "Az Irodalmi Színpad és az irodalmi színpadok: Szállj költemény," *Népművelés* 10, no. 10 (1963): 29.

[36] N.N. "»Zsebszínház«," *Esti Hírlap* 11, no. 236 (1966): 2.

[37] N.N., "A kallódó," *Tükör* 5, no. 23 (1968): 19.

[38] LÉTAY, "Kafka…," 8.

[39] MIHÁLYI Gábor, "Évadvégi gondolatok," *Nagyvilág* 13, no. 9 (1968): 1423–1427, 1426.

[40] PÁLYI András, "Egy színháztalanított színpad," *Színház* 11, no. 5 (1978): 15–17, 15–17.

taking and [...] ridiculous,"[41] but the auditorium filled up[42] on several occasions, showing that there was interest in a theatrical vision that had hitherto been little or unheard of.

After the positive reception of Szikora's college performance (*The Hunger Artist Departs*) and his first professional theatre performance, *The Giant Baby*,[43] the new work by Kafka was expected to be in the right hands, as well as attract considerable professional attention. Szikora's vision of the production of *The Trial* was so specific that, rather than stage a dramatised version by Peter Weiss, he created his own transcript with Géza Morcsányi, which László Rajk, who had previously designed the set for *The Hunger Artist...* Szikora's choice of play was undoubtedly motivated by his recognition of the serious theatrical potential of Kafka's text, which he was the first Hungarian playwright to exploit in order to wage war on the realistic theatrical reading of Kafka. In other words, he was trying to achieve precisely what, according to the critics, the production in the Hungarian National Theatre had failed to do ten years before. According to Szikora, Weiss's adaptation is a narrow interpretation of the novel that forcibly restricts the story to a particular age[44] and "seeks to make evident the forces that haunt and oppress K. with a Marxist didaxis"[45] whereas Kafka has a much more universal[46] validity. Moreover, the previous stage adaptations had sought to represent his world in the "most puritanical way, deprived of sensual life matter," hence the need for an adaptation that "does not seek to interpret Kafka, but leaves him in his mystical opacity."[47] However, the experience of staging the play made it clear that it is precisely this "evocative and corporeal" character that the theatre has difficulty in reproducing.[48] According to Szikora, the staging of *The Trial* offered intellectual excitement,[49] but despite its extraordinary visual quality, it could not really transform the intellectual experience into sensual excitement. Szikora was therefore faced with the "impossibility of adaptation,"[50] so that "Josef K.'s theatrical calvary deviated in detail from Kafka's vision, even if it was close to it in its final result."[51] For the director, this proved once again—and this was Szikora and Morcsányi's main principle for adaptation—that "it is not slavish fidelity, but a full knowledge of the self-concepts of the new genre and the essence of the original work, a full experience of it, and a combination of the two that can produce a true artistic result."[52]

But positive critical acclaim is in vain if a staff member of one of the most important organs of the Hungarian press misinterprets an interview given by Szikora, thus affecting both the image of the director and his productions. To prevent this potential defamation, Szikora therefore files a "press correction" lawsuit against *Népszabadság*. The background of the case is that one of their journalists, E. Fehér Pál, published an opinion piece titled "Surprises While Reading" in connection with the Szikora interview that

[41] RAJK András, "Az éhezőművész elmegy," *Népszava*, January 13, 1978, 6.
[42] SIMONFFY András, "Figyelem Szikorát," *Élet és Irodalom* 22, no. 3 (1978): 13.
[43] SZILÁRD István, "Fiatal művészek," *Dunántúli Napló*, December 9, 1979, 9.
[44] SZILÁRD István, "Franz Kafka és *A per*," *Dunántúli Napló*, November 26, 1978, 8.
[45] GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész nem...," 76.
[46] SZILÁRD, "Franz Kafka...," 8.
[47] GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész nem...," 76.
[48] Ibid.
[49] "It is also because of Kafka's inexhaustible depth – which I hope I have not shallowed – that I find this the most thought-provoking of all my productions. This feeling is not diminished by the fact that I do not consider the production as a whole, like *The Hunger Artist*... to be very good." Ibid.
[50] NÁNAY István, "*A per* – idilli tájban. Kafka-bemutató a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban," *Színház* 12, no. 2 (1979): 12–15, 12.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 12–13.

appeared in the December 1980 issue of *Mozgó Világ*".[53] In the KISZ[54]-supported journal, the journalist finds it surprising that Peter Weiss should be "reprimanded" for his Marxist interpretation of Kafka[55] and criticises Szikora's self-confidence with a noticeable gibe. And this has been a problem for the director because E. Fehér's words suggest that the director makes his own adaptations of Kafka because he believes he knows more about theatre[56] than Weiss or Rózewicz, even though Szikora himself says in the interview that he doesn't think any of his Kafka adaptations are very good.[57] Furthermore, the journalist twists the director's idea of the relationship between acting and inspiration[58] and wryly comments that the director feels like a "paid opposition" while directing in a leading position at the Kisfaludy Színház in Győr.[59] And because the newspaper did not respond to Szikora's lawyer's request for a preliminary correction,[60] the case went to court. He won the case at first instance; the court ordered *Népszabadság* to rectify the situation, but the newspaper appealed to the Supreme Court (Curia of Hungary), where the director was dismissed on all points, and *Népszabadság* won the case.[61]

Although Szikora's words were not sufficient (in court) to refute the journalist's claims, his arrangement was all the more able to disprove them. For the director, the era of

[53] E. FEHÉR Pál, "Csodálkozások: olvasás közben," *Népszabadság*, January 18, 1981, 13. Noémi Herczog discusses the case of Szikora and Pál E. Fehér through the interview with Erzsébet Bogácsi. HERCZOG Noémi, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika a Kádár-korban* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2022), 203–204.

[54] Hungarian Young Communist League (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ).

[55] "1./ In the interview quoted by the author, [Szikora] did not criticize Peter Weiss, but only his adaptation of Kafka, not »because he is a Marxist«, not »because he tried to interpret Kafka according to the principles of Marxism«, but because he is didactic." Quote from a letter of 31 January 1981 from Szikora's lawyer to the editor-in-chief of *Népszabadság.* Manuscript. Source: archives of János Szikora.

[56] "2./ [Szikora] did not claim in the interview that »Peter Weiss does not understand the stage«." Ibid.

[57] "3./ He also did not declare – especially not »confidently« – that »he knows the theatre«. On the contrary, on several occasions during the interview he expressed his critical displeasure with his own productions." Ibid.

[58] "4./ Contrary to what is written in the article, [Szikora] did not claim that »in real theatre, artists only act when the hour of inspiration has come«." Ibid.

[59] "5./ He did not say during the interview either that he felt like a »paid opposition«, »because a year after graduating from college, he was appointed to a senior position in the country's most modern theatre building«." Ibid.

[60] "As the facts stated in the article are untrue, I request that the Editor-in-Chief, Comrade T., provide me with a correction within eight days, failing which my client would be forced to initiate civil proceedings to protect his rights." Ibid.

[61] "The first instance hearing is scheduled for March 12 at 11 a.m. In the afternoon of 11 March, the lawyer is informed that the place and time have been changed. The hearing will be held on 12 March at half past two in the afternoon in the main courtroom. No verdict is announced but it is announced that it will be announced on 18 March at 13:40. On 18 March at 11 am a phone call is made that there is no verdict but a new trial is ordered. The judge tells the lawyer that she had a conflict of interest and therefore a new judge is needed. The new judge is an economic judge, a member of the party, and the new trial is announced for 10 a.m. on 24 March 1980." Handwritten note by János Szikora. Source: archives of János Szikora.

The Trial (the early 1910s) was still a "bourgeois idyll", but for him, "this superficial tapestry of beauty was penetrated by human filth, the signs of the war that was about to break out."[62] The setting for the performance was accordingly an idyllic landscape: a white-lit stage with bright green hills[63] framed by a grove of real pine trees.[64] Although the stage of *The Trial* was "neither narrow nor grey, no labyrinth, lacking gates, doors, passages, dead ends, and low attics,"[65] it was not without the familiar realistic props of the Kafka world. In the green meadow that served as a playground, details of bourgeois interiors and elements of bourgeois life appeared: elegant clothes, porcelain sets, and period furniture,[66] iron washbasins, mirrors, skinned animal skulls, antlers, gilded antique armchairs and tables.[67] But the vast space, lacking the intimate complexity of the room's decorations, maintained a chaotic, surreal state. It was not the first time the director had adapted Kafka's text in nature; his college exam production, Różewicz's adaptation of *The Hunger Artist Departs*, was also the first time the actors had been forced to move constantly by an outdoor[68] paternoster. Both of László Rajk's sets evoked nature, but he made no secret of his artistic vision, and this duality—and the resulting tension—defined the visual world.[69]

Szikora has captured the perpetual motion of the Kafkaesque world by making the performance both natural and artificial, realistic and magical, and oscillating between the serious and the ridiculous, the concrete and the abstract. Moreover, the audience was made aware of all this from the very beginning of the performance: the idyllic green landscape begins to distort as, in the ghostly, shimmering light—in which the outlines of the trees are just visible—a "silhouette appears in the depths of the stage."[70] First we can only see his hat, then, as he steps up the hill from behind, the whole man, stooping slightly, but with a relaxed stance.[71] Walking stick in hand, the man slowly, ceremoniously marches through the bushes when suddenly[72] from the right, then from the left and left front, another dark shadow in uniform emerges from the trees.[73] By the time Josef K. reaches the front of the stage, he has almost been surrounded by the others, and the first words are uttered: "My breakfast!". In this opening, the centuries-old ritual of civil life is almost instantly obliterated by the arrest procedure, with the two courtroom mewls, the onstage strangers staring at him, and the officials acting like monkeys. With this opening scene and "a few minor characters, Szikora created the atmosphere of the performance, the grotesque atmosphere of Kafka's world, since K. was not so much disturbed by the arrest as by the figures swarming around him, especially the old men peering out of the windows of the house opposite [a recurring topic in the novel]."[74] The similarly counterpointing scenes were imbued with Gustav Mahler's "majestically flowing symphonic scores," composed by István Mártha (a frequent

[62] N.N., "F. Kafka: *A per*. Pécsi Nemzeti Színház 1978," *Dunántúli Napló*, November 19, 1978, 6.
[63] ZAPPE László, "Történelem a színpadon: Jegyzetek új bemutatókhoz," *Népszabadság*, February 4, 1979, 13.
[64] TARJÁN Tamás, "Franz Kafka: *A per*," *Kritika* 8, no. 3 (1979): 34–35, 35.
[65] N.N., "Régi ismeretlenek," *Tükör* 15, no. 53 (1978): 28.
[66] TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka…," 35.
[67] NÁNAY, "*A per*…," 13.
[68] HARANGOZÓ Márta, "Doktor díszlettervező: Beszélgetés Rajk Lászlóval," *Esti Hírlap*, April 12, 1989.
[69] TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka…," 34.
[70] NÁNAY, "*A per*…," 13.
[71] Ibid.
[72] VÁNCSA István, "Credo, quia absurdum: Pécsi Nemzeti Színház: *A per*," *Film, Színház, Muzsika* 22, no. 49 (1978): 6–7, 6.
[73] NÁNAY, "*A per*…," 13.
[74] Ibid.

collaborator of Szikora's from the Brobó period onwards), and the effect of the images was deepened by the music's "sometimes grotesquely mocking, sometimes dramatic motifs"[75] — as revealed in the reviews of István Nánay and István Váncsa.

At the end of the opening scene of *The Trial*, the lights were dimmed, the actors in the first scene continued their actions with slow movements, while the stagehands were still doing their job. While Weiss wrote closed scenes, Szikora composed merging ones, thinking not so much in scenes as in images, which evoked the episodic character of the novel. Scene changes involved a comic rearrangement of the sets, creating a sense of incompleteness, permanence, and action that had already begun.[76] The production worked with a unified set, but the furnishings that appeared in it constantly changed the overall picture. The set changes were often made by the actors, who were responsible for moving and rearranging the various pieces of furniture, objects, and equipment; however, this did not change the basic scenery.[77]

János Szikora and László Rajk made the performance timeless with stylistic features and artistic references that transcended the ages.[78] The unchanging backdrop of the stage is an image inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), a landmark of modernist cinema. The ominous photograph not only reveals the traces of a mysterious murder but also raises the question of how much we can believe what we see or whether there is any point in seeking the truth if it is only available in vague details. In *The Trial*, as in Antonioni's film, the derailment of the simulation of reality contributed to upsetting the conventional notion of the stability of reality and the corresponding order of perception. The critics of the performance also saw Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* as evocative of Bosch's world, but also of Dalí's surrealism,[79] and yet the whole was organised into a unified vision.[80] The performance thus sought to make a sensual impact with all its means.

The performance "almost forced the spectator to replace the 'horror' of what was happening behind the 'beautiful' surface with associations of his own experience."[81] The production did not provide a tendentious interpretation of Kafka's novel (which was actually expected in the Hungarian theatre of the 1970s). Since Szikora placed the whole story in a dream reality beyond logic, where improbable, irrational sequences alternated, the performance was not metaphorical, did not refer to historical situations, and certainly was not actualised.[82] Rather, it was a profound, thoughtful adaptation of Kafka's novel.[83] He did not apply the mechanism of double-speak and thoroughly tested the audience's reception norms of the era. The clock on the stage, the mythological picture, the phallus sculpture covered with a red shroud, etc.,[84] did not carry meaning in themselves but rather became part of a cultural landscape that was inscribed in the natural landscape. However, their co-existence, their apparent incompatibility, and their striking chaos provided a good basis for playing on the absurd humour of the novel.

Critics of the era were surprised to find that while "most theatrical adaptations of *The Trial* are sombre and difficult to digest,"[85] the grotesque elements of Szikora's staging reinforce the ridiculous and tragic figure of Josef K. The wobbling table on the bumpy lawn, the monkey-like empolyees at the

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

[81] SZILÁRD István, "*A per*: Franz Kafka-bemutató a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban," *Dunántúli Napló*, December 10, 1978, 9.
[82] VÁNCSA, "Credo, quia...," 6.
[83] TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka...," 35.
[84] SZILÁRD, "*A per*...," 9.
[85] Ibid.

arrest, the often awkward and uncomfortable figures on stage, the prison chaplain in a balloon, and the many strange contrasts all suggest sequences that make you smile, and if we add to this Mahler's music, which "expresses a tremendous inner effort and struggle,"[86] one can imagine the critics' statement that "laughter was often heard in the theater, which is one of the best recommendations for the reception of the production."[87]

The "highlight" of the performance was the closing scene. The stage emptied after the dome scene, and just as at the beginning of the performance, Josef K. came in from the back in the bright light, followed by a very tall and a very short man.[88] K. silently got rid of his clothes; the men meticulously folded everything, put K.'s clothes into a bag, and then, stripping down to his underwear, K., who was covering his body with "routine cold movements," was pushed to the floor, held down, and stabbed in the heart.[89] The men wiped the knife and, holding the black bag in their hands, walked out, side by side. After their grotesque silhouettes slowly disappeared from the stage and briefly went dark, a giant fountain lit by a sharp, almost offensive white light burst from the centre of the stage, while almost jubilant music played — as we learn from the reviews. The column of water shot up almost to the fly loft, and this spectacular stage *Auferstehung* could be a symbolic image of the spiritualism the director had in mind in Kafka's work, which he had drawn from Musil, Rilke, and Mahler, as well as of the unbearable violence inherent in the religious-historical notion of purification through sacrifice.

Szikora's adaptation technique, which also strongly affected the visual aspect, appealed to the representation of the source work with "maximum formal faithfulness,"[90] as in the case of his previous perfomance The *Giant Baby.* "The events of *The Trial* are in fact set in a world behind the words, which can only be perceived through intuitive feelings", but Szikora believes that "the actors have overcome this difficulty".[91] However, "the text did not exactly contribute to the actor's satisfaction," as the nearly forty actors (with the exception of K.) only played minor roles; most of them had a few sentences of text and a few minutes of stage presence.[92] For this reason, the ensemble play, which was considered a standard at the time, did not (because it could not) develop.[93] Rather, the staging illustrated the fact that Kafka has no real, individualised characters, that the figures that appear are likenesses of each other, or as the literary historians describe them: allegorical figures.

Szikora, "whether directing texts by Déry, Kafka, Viant," Genet, or Beckett, always sought a theatrical realisation that "made the audience abandon their preconceptions."[94] His choice of plays was quite different from that of the previous generation of directors: Szikora did not direct Shakespeare, Molière, and Chekhov, but works by authors who belonged to or were inspired by the avant-garde.

Szikora found himself confronted with the impossible when (unlike Weiss) he did not just transpose the text of *The Trial* into another medium,[95] but "heard and amplified the grotesque noises of the work and worked through the theatrical means of Josef K.'s calvary."[96] The result was that "this vision, although different from Kafka's, became similar to him."[97] The performance was thus considered a significant achievement in the period following István Paál's arrival from the National Theatre

[86] ZAPPE, "Történelem...," 13.
[87] SZILÁRD, "*A per...*," 9.
[88] NÁNAY, "*A per...*," 14.
[89] Ibid., 15.
[90] SZILÁRD, "*A per...*," 9.
[91] N.N., "F. Kafka...," 6.
[92] VÁNCSA, "Credo, quia...," 7.
[93] NÁNAY, "*A per...*," 13.
[94] PÁLYI András, "Pécsi színházi esték," *Jelenkor*, 23, no. 5 (1980): 442–448, 446.
[95] NÁNAY, "*A per...*," 12.
[96] TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka...," 35.
[97] NÁNAY, "*A per...*," 12.

of Pécs, both in Szikora's work as a director and in the series of Kafka stage adaptations.[98]

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"Indian Legend" vs. "Indian Show". Károly Kazimir's 1978 Hiawatha

MIKLÓS PÉTI

Abstract: In 1978 Károly Kazimir directed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* in the Theatre-in-the-Round in Budapest. Characteristically for Kazimir's work, the production catered to a mass public but was at the same time challenging and, in certain aspects, slightly provocative. This essay provides some important historical, cultural, and political contexts for the interpretation of Kazimir's experimental staging of *Hiawatha*.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem about Native Americans, *The Song of Hiawatha*, was put on stage in 1978 for the 20th anniversary of the Theatre-in-the-Round in Budapest. Directed by Károly Kazimir, one of the prominent experimental directors of the Communist era, the production—like almost all of Kazimir's works—was bound to stir controversy among critics and the audience. In this paper I will present what can be recovered from Kazimir's original concept as well as some important cultural contexts for its appreciation. As we shall see, the seemingly innocent subject of Native American myth and folklore had the potential to polarise responses as a consequence of which the production and its critical reception form a model case of the interaction between Kazimir's directorial art and communist cultural policy.

The Budapest Theatre-in-the-Round and Kazimir's "theatre of popular education"

Born in 1928, Kazimir graduated from the College of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest in 1953, the year in which the hardline communist dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi slowly started to crumble (a process that eventually led to the 1956 revolution). After a few years of acting in the country, he became director of the National Theatre in Miskolc where he won recognition by staging Sophocles's *Antigone* in 1955 and József Katona's *Bánk Bán* (widely regarded as the first "Hungarian national drama") in 1957.[1] These early productions already show a glimpse of what became Kazimir's lifelong project: actualising the classics, endowing their seemingly stale and bookish wisdom with fresh significance.

In the long run, this project necessitated the constitution of a new theatrical space; thus, in 1958, Kazimir started the Budapest Theatre-in-the-Round for his experimental productions. After visiting various European theatres and studying theatrical history extensively, it was in the Paris Théâtre-en-Rond (founded by Paquita Claude and André Villiers) that Kazimir found a suitable model for

[1] The production of Katona's play seems to have been an act of indirect resistance. Premiered on 10 January 1957, barely 2 months after the quelling of the revolution and amid ongoing rearguard fighting with the Soviet troops in Miskolc, performances were held in the afternoon but were still sold out. The audience interrupted the performance with the long applause for the monologue of Tiborc (a peasant character complaining about the misery of the people), and the lead actor, Attila Nagy, was (re)arrested in March. See PÁRKÁNY László, "Térdeplő Thália," *Miskolci Színházi Esték*, no. 64. https://szinhaz.hu/2006/12/14/terdeplo_thalia, accessed: 11.03.2025.

the realisation of his general artistic concept.[2] Using the abandoned exhibition spaces of Budapest City Park,[3] the new venue would feature performances where actors "felt as if they were in the same room with the audience" and could therefore "free themselves from clichés, forced gestures that is, theatricality in the wrong sense."[4]

This transformation of the conventional connection and interaction between actors and spectators went hand in hand with Kazimir's attempt to redefine the general purpose of theatrical performances. Kazimir considered television a serious challenge to contemporary theatrical culture (even though he knew "that the role of television will be different in the life of a socialist country than in the western world"), therefore, he set out to create "complex theatre" for "the masses."[5] The result was a "theatre of popular education" (*népművelő színház*) in which canonical works of Hungarian and world literature were put on stage in front of large audiences.[6] The theatre started with the staging of Sophocles's *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* in 1959 and was in operation until 1990, when the final production was Ludwig Holberg's *The Political Tinker*.[7] From 1968 the theatre's programme also included stage versions of epic poems, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1968) or John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1970), and from around the same time, Kazimir started to look beyond the canons of Western European literature to stage *Kalevala* (1969), *Ramayana* (1971), the Turkish shadow play *Karagöz* (1973), or *Gilgamesh* (1975).[8] For Kazimir, the success of *Kalevala* showed, epics are "not superhuman, complicated and inaccessible pieces of literature, but works which are very much connected to the thought and life of the people and which carry within themselves the promise of dramatic enterprises."[9] Perhaps that is why in 1978 he chose another epic work, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Theatre-in-the-Round.

The Song of Hiawatha *and its reception in Hungarian culture*

Published in 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha* is one of the most well-known of Longfellow's works. It is a narrative poem of a little more than 5000 lines which features Native American characters, chiefly among them the poem's eponymous hero, Hiawatha, and his love Minnehaha.[10] Longfellow was drawing on ethnographic accounts, authentic Ojibwe sources,

[2] KAZIMIR Károly, *Világirodalom a Körszínházban* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1975), 44. Kazimir elsewhere also mentions the Russian director Nikolay Pavlovich Okhlopkov (who revolutionized modern theatrical space by seating the audience on the stage) as a source of inspiration for the non-traditional stage arrangement of the Theatre-in-the-Round, see KAZIMIR Károly, *A népművelő színház* (Budapest: Magvető, 1972), 156–157.

[3] During its more than three-decade-long history the Theatre-in-the-Round occupied several former exhibition pavilions on the territory of the Budapest International Fair.

[4] KAZIMIR, *A népművelő színház*, 157. Unless otherwise stated, translations of Hungarian texts are by the author.

[5] KAZIMIR, *Világirodalom*, 90, 92.

[6] Performances usually took place in the summer.

[7] A full list of performances, complete with casts, is provided in the database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. A list of the titles of performances can be found in KAZIMIR Károly, *Thália örök* (Budapest: Szabad Tér, 1998), 124–125.

[8] On Kazimir's *Paradise Lost*, see Miklós PÉTI, *Paradise from behind the Iron Curtain: Reading, Translating and Staging Milton in Communist Hungary* (London: UCL Press, 2022), 19–64, 150–272, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2kg15tf

[9] KAZIMIR, *Világirodalom*, 120.

[10] On *The Song of Hiawatha* as a candidate for the "American epic," see Charlotte KRETZOI, "Puzzled Americans: Attempts at an American

as well as his own imagination to create what he professed to be an "Indian Edda," a collection and partly artistic recreation of Native American myth.[11] Written in trochaic tetrameters, the poem is directly inspired by *Kalevala*, but it was also its author's intention to conceive it as "a kind of American Prometheus."[12] What is more, as James McDugall points out, besides the oral tales of the Native Americans, *The Song of Hiawatha* also engages another strand of early American traditions, the graveyard poetry present in the "rude inscription[s]" (Longfellow's term) of the Puritans. As a result, through the merger of "two radically different and somewhat antithetical pre-Revolutionary cultures," in *The Song of Hiawatha* America emerges as "a poem written in a lost natural language that the poet must recover and decode."[13] Almost all of these distinctive qualities of the poem have, however, also served as bases for criticism: the colonial appropriation of Native American lore, the general atmosphere of "childishness" pervading the narrative, and the poet's heavy indebtedness to European literature have regularly been brought up against *The Song of Hiawatha* – together with the commonplace verdict of artistic mediocrity.

Unsurprisingly for an epic work, *The Song of Hiawatha* has strong dramatic potential. Its evergreen themes couched in suspenseful narratives of myth, the emblematic characters it features, and the smoothly flowing meter all render Longfellow's poem eminently stageable, so much so that, as Alan Trachtenberg points out, "in many ways, the staged Hiawatha fulfils the poem."[14] It is not surprising, then, that performances of *Hiawatha* took place in the United States from the late 19th century on, often with Native American actors using pantomime and indigenous languages. In certain cases, a successful enterprise was built on these performances, which empowered Native Americans to participate "in their own story of survival" rather than acting out a "white colonial fantasy."[15] Such efforts to appropriate the cultural currency of "Indianness" were part of a wider "Hiawatha Revival," which "captured American imaginations in the decades around 1900 with a [...] prolific, graphic, and ritualised [representation of the *Hiawatha* story] in pageants and films," and which, importantly, took place in a period critical from the perspective of the Native communities (i.e. the era of forced assimilation).[16] These attempts were revived in the new millennium: between 2006 and 2008, the Garden River First Nation put *Hiawatha*

National Epic Poem," in *The Origins and Originality of American Culture*, ed. Tibor FRANK (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), 139–148, 144–146.

[11] Henry Wadsworth LONGFELLOW, *The Song of Hiawatha* (New York: T. Nelson, 1855), 107.

[12] The phrase appears in Longfellow's letter to Leonard Freiligrath, April 25, 1855. *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with Extracts from His Journals and Correspondence*, ed. Samuel LONGFELLOW, 3 Vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company), 2:286.

[13] James MCDOUGALL, "*The Song of Hiawatha* and the Ruins of American Literature," in *Reconsidering Longfellow*, eds. Christoph IRMSCHER and Robert ARBOUR, 71–85 (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 74–75.

[14] Alan TRACHTENBERG, *Shades of* Hiawatha: *Staging Indians, Making Americans 1880–1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 58.

[15] Katy Young EVANS, "The People's Pageant: The Stage as Native Space in Anishinaabe Dramatic Interpretations of Hiawatha," *MELUS* 41, no. 2 (2016): 124–146, 139, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlw009

[16] Michael David MCNALLY, "The Indian Passion Play: Contesting the Real Indian in Song of Hiawatha Pageants, 1901–1965," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 105–136, 112, 131, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0031

on stage again.[17] Quite independently from these stagings, British theatre director Michael Bogdanov came out with his own version of *Hiawatha*, a production primarily intended for a children's audience, in the Royal National Theatre in London in 1980.[18]

Kazimir admits to no knowledge of previous productions of *Hiawatha* and, thus, claims to do pioneering work.[19] The question comes up: why, then, of all epics, did Kazimir choose this particular piece to celebrate an important anniversary of the Theatre-in-the-Round? What was there in this nineteenth-century narrative poem—which some had written off as poor imitation, but others as outright plagiarism of *Kalevala*[20]—that captured the director's imagination? To what extent could he build on the Hungarian audience's previous knowledge or expectations? Some answers to these questions are, of course, provided by the production itself (together with Kazimir's reflections and the various critical responses), but first a brief look at the Hungarian reception of Longfellow's work in general and *The Song of Hiawatha* in particular is necessary.

Longfellow's poetry was known and translated among Hungarian literati as early as the 1860s, and by the 1870s he was reckoned to be "the most popular foreign poet in Hungary."[21] His popularity among critics had, however, waned by the early 20th century, and the great generations of the *Nyugat* writers were already rather dismissive of the qualities of his poetry. Dezső Kosztolányi, for example, points out that "he is only our Sunday entertainment, a delightful afternoon reading," while Mihály Babits compares his "supercilious eclecticism" to the way "American billionaires collected priceless pieces of art in their homes from American museums."[22] In the 1950s, there were some attempts to revaluate Longfellow's legacy: a reading of excerpts from his works, including *The Song of Hiawatha*, was staged in 1957 by Irodalmi Színpad (Literary Stage, a theatrical company specialising in performances of literary works) to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth. The production was well received: a review in the magazine *Film, Színház, Muzsika* pointed out that Longfellow's works are "deeply rooted in the problems of his own day" and that he "steps up against the oppression of blacks, social inequalities, and the obstacles to cultural progression; sometimes rather naively."[23] In the same year, Tibor Lutter, the foremost Marxist-Leninist English Studies scholar of the day, reappraised Longfellow's work, arguing that his work is characterised by a noble *aurea mediocritas*, and its significance is in creating and solidifying the national ideal, rescuing

[17] See https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/garden-river-first-nation#Culture, accessed: 11.03.2025.

[18] On the cast and production dates of Bogdanov's adaptation, see https://theatricalia.com/play/8fr/hiawatha/production/pmf, accessed: 07.03.2025. A 1980 LP recording and a 1984 TV drama of Bogdanov's production were also published. The show also toured in the UK, see ANON., "Festival Comes of Age," *Theatre Ireland* no. 4 (1983): 34. It is a question whether Bogdanov knew about Kazimir's *Hiawatha*. Pauline Steel singled out Bogdanov's production as an eminent example of how drama can be used in education. See Pauline STEEL, "Staging drama from a director's point of view," *Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 2 (1988): 76–83.

[19] KAZIMIR Károly, "Hiawata éneke," *Magyarország*, April 23, 1978, 26.

[20] See Ernest J. MOYNE, Hiawatha *and* Kalevala: *A Study of the Relationship between Longfellow's "Indian Edda" and the Finnish Epic* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1963), 71–110.

[21] Lehel VADON, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Hungary," *Eger Journal of American Studies* 1 (1993): 129–136, 130–131.

[22] Ibid., 133–134.

[23] A. G., "Longfellow-est," *Film Színház Muzsika*, no. 3 (1957): 5.

American literature from provincialism.[24] Despite these efforts, what Lehel Vadon pointed out in 1997 still rings true today: Longfellow's "place in literary history and the evaluation of his achievements are still uneven and controversial," and were presumably so when Kazimir was preparing his production of *Hiawatha*.

Hungarian renderings of *The Song of Hiawatha* closely follow the course of this uneven critical reception. In the 1880s, two translations of Longfellow's epic were published, by Ferenc Bernátsky and Gyula Tamásfi, respectively. Both translators were highly enthusiastic about the work, which, besides the general nineteenth-century fondness for Longfellow's restrained and civilised poetry, can also be interpreted as a late reverberation of the Romantic preoccupation with the national epic. Thus, in a note to his translation, Bernátsky calls Longfellow "one of the most significant of America's poets" who became the "Homer of Indian tribes going extinct," while in his preface, Tamásfi points out that the poet deserves double praise: for arousing sympathy with the oppressed Native Americans (and by extension, also American slaves) as well as by preserving their myths.[25] After these interpretations, in the first half of the twentieth century, *Hiawatha* seems to have largely faded from the Hungarian literary consciousness, although a choral piece entitled *The Lament of Hiawatha* by composer Sándor Vándor testifies to the theme's enduring significance. In 1958, however, a new translation of *The Song of Hiawatha* was published in the "Gems of World Literature" series of the Móra publishing house. An anonymous endnote to this small volume (perhaps by the translator, András Fodor, or Tibor Lutter) portrays Longfellow as "the poet of the rising bourgeoisie," a kind of secondary Romantic poet who, however, has a lot to say "to progressive circles in the West and to countries in the peace camp [i.e. communist countries]." *Hiawatha*, the "epitome of the unwritten poetry of Native Americans exiled from their land," is, thus, the poem among Longfellow's works that "best stands the test of time" and in which the poet "declares peace in his own way between the victors and the defeated."[26] For Kazimir, "this beautiful translation was the strongest argument" for staging *Hiawatha*, together with the fact that Longfellow was inspired by the Finnish epic: "scientifically perhaps this cannot be taken seriously, but *Kalevala* is to some extent also our [i.e. Hungarians'] own ancient history from a very distant past.[27]

The 1978 production of Hiawatha

Hiawatha: North American Indian Legend in Two Acts was premiered on 7 July 1978 at the Theatre-in-the-Round. The script was based on András Fodor's translation, adapted to stage by Kazimir.[28] The cast included some of the well-known young actors of the day (mostly actors from the Thália Theatre): András Kozák as Hiawatha, Andrea Drahota as Nokomis, and Cecília Esztergályos as Minnehaha.[29] As it was customary for productions in the Theatre-in-the-Round, performances took place through the summer with

[24] Tibor LUTTER, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," *Magyar Tudomány* 64, no. 5–6 (1957): 169–174. On Lutter's career, see PÉTI, *Paradise from behind the Iron Curtain*, 90–120.

[25] Wadsworth LONGFELLOW Henrik, *Hiawatha*, trans. Ferenc BERNÁTSKY (Budapest: Mayer Lajos, 1883), 167–168; LONGFELLOW Henrik, *Hiavata. Indus hitrege*, trans. Gyula TAMÁSFI (Budapest: Franklin, 1885), 5.

[26] Henry Wadsworth Walt DISNEY, *Hiawatha, a kis indiánus*, trans. Malusev CVETKO (Zagreb: Mladost, 1960).

[27] KAZIMIR, "Hiawata éneke," 26.

[28] Unfortunately, the script of the production has not survived.

[29] The full cast with photographs and links to some reviews is available at: https://resolver.szinhaztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI54289 Accessed 11.03.2025.

a few stagings in the Thália Theatre during the autumn season.

For most Hungarians in the twentieth century, knowledge about Native Americans came not from Longfellow's poem but rather from the popular novels of Karl May and James Fenimore Cooper. Western films, some of which were produced in the Eastern Bloc (the so-called "Red Westerns" or "Osterns"), also played an important role in shaping the audience's expectations. Kazimir viewed his staging as a corrective move to such stereotypical representations, and to accomplish this decolonisation of Native American myth, he travelled to America and to France to do research on folklore material and asked actors to study footage from Indian reservations to be able to reproduce "authentic" behaviour and movements. Music accompanying the performance was played on instruments resembling Native American woodwinds and percussions, and its motifs were inspired by Indian songs. The entrance hall of the Theatre-in-the-Round featured a special exhibition on the past and present life and customs of Native Americans.[30] Although he insisted on authenticity, Kazimir refused the idea that his performance would descend to the level of an "Indian revue, an ethnographic show": "we are striving to create an authentic semblance [...] but we do not forget that in essence we are always playing Hungarians, even when we try to present the cultural treasures and national characteristics of faraway peoples."[31] Perhaps this is why he chose to weave into the script a romantic ballad presenting a story from rural Hungarian life by the nineteenth-century Hungarian poet János Arany, *Tengeri-hántás* (Cornhusking).

It seems, then, that in accordance with his project of the "theatre of popular education," in *Hiawatha* Kazimir aimed at some common denominator that transcends cultural and political differences. He points out that *Hiawatha* rises above all stories about the Indians, since it is a story "which Longfellow wrote, but the Indians lived it, suffered it, working joyfully, going extinct, and eventually turning into totem poles."[32] To illustrate the universal appeal and significance of the work, he quotes the following lines from Longfellow's "Introduction":

> Ye whose hearts are fresh and simple,
> Who have faith in God and Nature.
> Who believe, that in all ages
> Every human heart is human, [...]
> Listen to this simple story,
> To this Song of Hiawatha![33]

Significantly, the Hungarian translation of the last two quoted lines is "Hallgasson a nyílt beszédre, / Hiawata énekére" (Listen to the speech spoken openly, / to Hiawatha's song).[34] In Kazimir's interpretation, Longfellow's "simple story," thus, becomes an explicit testimony to universal truth based on "a deeper understanding of other peoples."[35] Just like in the 1970 production of *Paradise Lost*, the attempt to represent an idyllic state of human society is far from apolitical: Kazimir explicitly

[30] ANON., "Hiawata sztori: Indiánok a Körszínházban," *Hétfői Hírek*, February 27, 1978; GARAI Tamás, "Hiawata sztori. Indiánok a Ligetben," *Hétfői Hírek*, June 12, 1978.

[31] GARAI, "Hiawata sztori: Indiánok a Ligetben." According to Garai, the South Dakota *United Tribes News* published an enthusiastic report on the preparations for Kazimir's production, but I could not find any such article in the newspaper's online archives.

[32] KAZIMIR Károly, "Kinek ajánlja Kazimir Károly a *Hiawatát*?," *Népszabadság*, June 25, 1978, 11.

[33] LONGFELLOW, *The Song of Hiawatha*, 2–3.

[34] KAZIMIR, "Kinek ajánlja..." In Fodor's translation the implications of Hiawatha's song are slightly less universal, as the text reads: "Hallgasson *e* nyílt beszédre," i.e. Listen to *this* speech spoken openly." LONGFELLOW, *Hiawata*, 8, emphasis mine.

[35] KAZIMIR, "Kinek ajánlja..."

contrasts the world of Native Americans with those of the "hobby-Indians" presented in Western magazines and points out that his production is an opportunity to get to know "the prehistory of an incredibly brave people who were daring even to the point of self-sacrifice" but whose descendants now build skyscrapers without fear."[36] His recommendation to the audience that *Hiawatha* "arriving on wings of the Western winds" (a mildly politically charged trope in communist Hungary) should be "received with cordiality and with good intentions," since Native Americans "had a hard time surviving their first encounter" with white men is also indicative of his approach.[37] In Kazimir's interpretation, *Hiawatha,* besides being a resounding testimony to universal human values, is also a gentle gesture of cultural resistance against historical oppression, as well as an act of reclaiming modernity through indigenous traditions.

Viewed from the perspective of communist cultural policy, Kazimir's revision of historically prevalent practices of staging and performing Native Americans could be interpreted both as a reaffirmation of, and a critical reflection on, the status quo. As a consequence, *Hiawatha* elicited mixed responses: although it was a great success among the audience, the immediate critical reception was divided as to the coherence, authenticity, and, most of all, the relevance of the production. There were critics who found Kazimir's vision of Native Americans rewarding: István Juhász, for example, praises the production for creating "the impression and experience of *total theatre*" and for being "void of any forced actualising and hinting."[38] Similarly, György Kriszt points out that Kazimir "gives a picture of the often falsely presented world of the Indians," and the performance raises the question "Why can't we live in peace with each other?" although the staging "indicates precisely later conflicts and helplessness in society."[39] The most positive assessment, however, is provided by Emőke Nagy, according to whom Kazimir "by magic, turns poetry into life and stage acting poetically beautiful." The appearance of white men on stage forming a line of "marble-cold faces in tuxedos and top hats" is, according to Nagy, a cathartic moment in which "yearning for human integrity and purity is mixed with compassion in us."[40]

Other critics were less impressed. László Szále, for example, admits to a general sense of uncertainty concerning the production: he praises Kazimir's efforts to "free classics from their book prisons," but in the case of *Hiawatha,* this, he contends, risks "re-locating the work in another cell, that of the theatre."[41] According to Gábor Hajdu Ráfis, Kazimir's production "lacked internal energy" and was like an "Indian revue [...] appealing to our childhood selves." He closes his piece with the somewhat enigmatic suggestion that perhaps a reflection on "what people liked about the production" would be "sobering" to both critics and the director.[42] Similarly, K. T. writes off the performance as "the fashion revue of extremely expensive clothes," while according to Miklós Apáti (who feels "very sorry for our Indian friends"), the gesture of

[36] Ibid. To compare the representation of Adam and Eve in Kazimir's production of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, see PÉTI, *Paradise from behind the Iron Curtain*, 19–64.

[37] KAZIMIR, "Hiawata éneke."

[38] JUHÁSZ István, "Hiawata: Indián legenda a Körszínházban," *Új Tükör*, July 23, 1978, 29, emphasis in the original.

[39] KRISZT György, "Hiawata: Indián legenda a Körszínházban," *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, July 13, 1978, 4; emphasis in the original.

[40] NAGY Emőke, "Hiawata éneke," *Egyetemi Lapok*, July 17, 1978, n. p.

[41] SZÁLE [László], "Hiawata a Körszínházban," *Magyar Ifjúság*, August 25, 1978, 39.

[42] HAJDU RÁFIS Gábor, "Indián legenda: Longfellow Hiawatája a Körszínházban," *Népszabadság*, July 12, 1978, 7.

Native Americans singing about the Hungarian homeland (in János Arany's ballad) before the coming of the whites is an "ill-thought-out pseudo-political gesture."[43] Perhaps the most characteristic response to Kazimir's *Hiawatha* can, however, be gleaned from the juxtaposition of two critical pieces on the page of the daily *Magyar Hírlap*. In the left column of the page, Pál Geszti's review of Sidney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* praised the "devastating realism" of the film's representation of "the true face of American secret services" and "the world's most ruthless, most conscienceless, and most immoral power."[44] By contrast, in the right column, András Lukácsy criticised Kazimir's *Hiawatha* for being "a faint, but gaudy shadow of Longfellow," a "mere show" whose quality did not reach the high level of the *Kalevala* production of 1968 and whose director was blinded by his previous success.[45] The difference between these two reviews illustrates how Kazimir's method, which was certainly less directly critical of modern capitalism (or in the jargon of the day, "imperialism"), could become problematic for a cultural policy bent on prioritising politically "correct" and unambiguous messages.

Kazimir's "Indians" and Playing Indian in Communist Hungary

The bemusement of Kazimir's critics might reflect a more general ambivalence in communist countries towards Native Americans. As Milla Fedorova points out, Soviet cultural perceptions of the indigenous population of America were not always favourable: the colour "red" attributed to Indians did not necessarily associate them with the "real" reds, the proletariat.[46] Nor would the hardships Native Americans have endured compare sufficiently in the eyes of communist theorists and travel writers to the persecution of Blacks in slavery, not the least because, as Boris Pilniak implies in his travelogue, Indians had "cravenly come to terms with their condition."[47] Further, since the tradition of "playing Indian"—with all its implications of animistic spirituality, exemption from the laws and traditions of Western civilization, and organic unity with nature—was bound to be countercultural even in the West,[48] it is not a surprise, that in the mainstream cultural policies of Eastern Bloc countries the prevalent cultural representation of Native Americans remained that of the "noble savage" inherited from 19th century novels. There were, however, notable challenges to such dominant ideological positions. In Hungary, for example, the cultural practice of playing Indians became "a metaphor for political resistance as well as environmental consciousness."[49] This practice originated from the Indian camps organized by Ervin Baktay in the 1930s in the Danube Bend, and continued, quite independently, in the gatherings of "Indians" led by singer-songwriter Tamás Cseh in the Bakony Mountains from the 1960s. Even in the more lenient 1970s, such activities amounted to protest, and frequently involved

[43] APÁTI Miklós, "Sasszárnyú ólomkatonák," *Kritika*, July 15, 1978, 4–5.
[44] GESZTI Pál, "A Keselyű három napja," *Magyar Hírlap*, July 20, 1978, 6.
[45] LUKÁCSY András, "Körszínház-show," *Magyar Hírlap*, July 20, 1978, 6.
[46] Milla FEDOROVA, *Yankees in Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York: America and Americans in Russian Literary Perception* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 165–166, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501758171
[47] Ibid., 166.
[48] Philip J. DELORIA, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), esp. 128–180. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153606
[49] Katalin KÜRTÖSI, "To 'hunger … for wild sensations': 'playing Indian' in Hungary," *The Central European Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2021): 25–41, 39.

conflicts with the authorities as well as, to a lesser extent, some of the locals.[50]

We might surmise (although I cannot ascertain it) that Kazimir was aware of these special Hungarian traditions and the complexity of views surrounding them. But even if he did not know about the "Bakony Indians" led by Cseh, his attempt to revise culturally dominant representations of Native Americans along ideas of authenticity, cultural universals, and ecological values had most certainly resonated with some of his audience (as well as a number of his critics) who were familiar with the cultural and political complexity of what it meant to be an "Indian" in the Hungary of the 1970s. In creating the Theatre-in-the-Round, Kazimir was unapologetic about creating a political theatre that is "not meant to be a theatre of daily politics," but much rather a "theatre engaged in socialist politics from a strategical perspective."[51] Viewed in such a light, his attempt to transcend the local and temporal political constraints of his time in a production dedicated to expounding the universal and timeless implications of local knowledge is an emblematic example of striking the right proportion between the "destruction and the potential creation of values," a method he associated (but only implicitly identified) with the avant-garde.[52]

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[50] Ibid., 34–35.

[51] KAZIMIR, *Világirodalom*, 188.

[52] KAZIMIR Károly, *Páholyon kívül* (Budapest: Szabad Tér, 1990).

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Living Objects on the Periphery of Hungarian Theatre in the Second Half of the 20th Century. Géza Balogh: *The Nose*, State Puppet Theatre, 1979

MÓNIKA GODA

Abstract: In the second half of the 20th century, the State Puppet Theatre emerged as a prominent national institution, offering a diverse program for both children and adults in Budapest and abroad. The founding of the Experimental Studio in the mid-1960s marked a significant turning point in the theatre's evolution. Among its key initiatives, the series of etude-sequences aimed to critically engage with societal issues. One of the most notable productions in this regard was the 1979 staging of Gogol's *The Nose*, directed by Géza Balogh, which incorporated innovative techniques such as Bunraku-style puppets, oversized masks, and dynamic, animated set elements.

The performance was inspired by the short story of the same title, first published in 1836. Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol's fantastical tale about the St. Petersburg official Major Kovalyov, whose nose leaves his face and develops a life of its own, was adapted into a black theatre production featuring masks[1] and bunraku puppets, based on a concept by director Géza Balogh[2] at the Experimental Studio of the State Puppet Theatre. After extensive preparations, the production came to life, somewhat diverging from the original concept.[3]

The State Puppet Theatre and Its Experimental Studio

The history of artistic puppetry in Hungary officially began with the formation of the Mesebarlang troupe, though its members were not initially professional puppeteers. Many of them were later recruited by the newly founded state-run theatre, which had a singular mission: to provide entertainment for children, particularly those of preschool age. The State Puppet Theatre was established in Budapest in September 1949, following the nationalisation of theatres, and became the only theatre institution in Hungary to operate continuously until 1989. It set a record not only for its longevity in Hungarian theatre

[1] Masks and black theatre elements were already used in the performance of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* in 1978.

[2] Géza Balogh was hired as stage director and head of the Puppeteer Training Centre at the State Puppet Theatre in 1975. After 1992, he continued working at the Budapest Puppet Theatre and also as a researcher at the Hungarian Theatre Institute until his recent retirement. *The Nose* is considered his most important production, alongside *Rózsa and Ibolya* (1978, 1992) by János Arany and József Gáli; *Master Peter's Puppet Show* (1982) by Manuel de Falla; *King Ubu* (1985), based on *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry; *The Jungle Book* (1991) by Rudyard Kipling; *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1993) with music by Modest Mussorgsky; *The Miracle of Saint Nicholas* (1994) by Jean Bodel; *The Big Friendly Giant* (1996) by Roald Dahl; *The Cat with a Giraffe Neck* (1998) by István Kormos; and *Bluebeard's Castle* (2004) by Béla Bartók. He was awarded the Mari Jászai Prize in 1982.

[3] Géza BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon: A Mesebarlangtól a Budapest Bábszínházig* (Budapest: Budapest Bábszínház–Vince Kiadó, 2010), 138.

history but also for the number of productions it staged. In the early years, the theatre quickly grew into a large institution, offering continuous performances for audiences of all ages across the country.[4]

From its founding until 1958, the State Puppet Theatre was directed by the visual artist László Bod, who invited several of his colleagues—many of whom had been marginalized by the art world—to join the company. Among them were Lili Ország, the designer of *The Nose* adaptation, Anna Márkus; József Jakovits; and other members of the group once known as the European School. In this way, the State Puppet Theatre became a refuge for artists struggling to navigate the post-World War II era.[5] From the outset, it developed a strong artistic identity and a reputation for high artistic standards.

Following the visit of the world-renowned Russian director Sergey Obraztsov and his Moscow Puppet Theatre in Budapest in 1950, the institution came under significant influence from their artistic approach. This encounter led to the introduction of an adult program that included cabarets and operettas while emphasising the grotesque nature of the puppet.[6] The bold initiative undertaken by the State Puppet Theatre resonated with the Hungarian public's demand for humour, serving as a form of entertainment theatre.[7] While Obraztsov's work was largely embraced by the cultural authorities, the satirical nature of this new style proved challenging to reconcile with the socialist ideals prevailing in the 1950s.[8]

Since the early 1960s, the State Puppet Theatre has evolved into a national institution, offering a diverse program both in Budapest and abroad. During Dezső Szilágyi's three-decade tenure, often regarded as the golden age of the institute, significant improvements took place. Following a reorganisation—partly facilitated by the return of members who had previously left for Győr—the company began to expand. In 1960, a two-year Puppeteers' Training Course was established to train the next generation, and by 1965, the company's membership had grown to 50.[9] Achieving professionalism was also a key priority in developing a unique style for the theatre, one that was deeply influenced by the ideas of its director, Kató Szőnyi.[10] The repertoire was primarily rooted in Hungarian folk culture and tales, alongside adaptations of major stories and legends from world literature.

1964 was a landmark year for the adult program, as the adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* introduced a new style of production. Its success paved the way for subsequent adaptations of musical works, including Béla Bartók's *The Wooden Prince* and *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and *The Soldier's Tale*, and Zoltán Kodály's *János Háry*. In addition to musical performances, experimental adult productions were featured in the theatre's program.[11]

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[4] See István Nánay's Editorial Introduction in *Art Limes* 16, no. 3 (2019): 5–7.

[5] See also the conception of the exhibition under the title *Shelter for Prohibiteds* installed at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in 2020.

[6] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 72.

[7] The most referred successes of this period were: *Star Parade* (the first performance designed to adults in 1951) by Dénes Kovács, Albert Vajda and Szilárd Darvas; *The Galoshes of Fortune* (1951) by Matveiev after Hans Christian Andersen; *The King Stag* (1951) by Jenő Heltai after Carlo Gozzi; *New York, 42nd Street* (1953) by János Erdődy and *Gods in Love* (1955) by Szilárd Darvas and Béla Gádor after *Beautiful Galatea* by Franz von Suppé. See also the article on State Puppet Theatre in the *World Encyclopaedia of Puppetry Arts* at the webpage of UNIMA.

[8] NÁNAY, [Editorial Introduction], 7.

[9] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 91–92.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Various techniques were employed in these performances, including shadow theatre

The establishment of the Experimental Studio in the mid-1960s marked a pivotal moment in the history of the State Puppet Theatre. This development was driven by the integration of various techniques, such as masked acting and the open (puppet) acting style—approaches already in use across Europe—often within a single performance, replacing the previously uniform stylistic approach.[12] Géza Balogh was one of the key directors who advanced these techniques, experimenting with their potential combinations. Through these efforts, the State Puppet Theatre made its debut on the international theatre scene in the early 1970s.

Puppets and Clowns
The Conclusion of a Celebrated Series

In the Experimental Studio Workshop,[13] etudes were primarily created from the ideas of company members or adapted from classical and contemporary works.[14] This trend was later reinforced by productions of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker (1978)*, Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1982), Jarry's *Ubu King (1985)*, and also Gogol's *The Nose* in 1979.

The initial concept was to present Gogol's *The Nose* and Peter Handke's *Kaspar Hauser*[15] in a single performance—two parallel parables designed to explore how one can adapt to the existing order. Reflecting on his original vision for the main character, the director explained, "The idea behind combining these two works was that both protagonists desire to be someone else. Gogol's Kovalyov wants to return to his former self before his nose disappeared, while Handke's Kaspar longs to be like other people—a copy, a duplicate, a man of mass production, lacking individuality, the socialist archetype."[16] However, this concept was abandoned after a private preview,[17] during which *Kaspar Hauser* was deemed unsuitable.[18]

Gogol's highly improbable story was eventually presented by the State Puppet Theatre as part of a performance featuring six pantomime plays with music titled *Puppets and Clowns*. András Kenessei's report in *Magyar Hírlap* highlights the contradiction: While the title suggests light-hearted content, as is often the case with the adult productions the Puppet Theatre has regularly featured in its program for over ten years, "these plays are

(Örkény: *The Óbuda Twins*), object theatre (Mozart – Urbán: *Little Trivia*), and black theatre (*Beckett: Thirst*).

[12] NÁNAY, [Editorial Introduction], 7.

[13] About the Experimental Studio and the reform in Hungarian puppetry, see VARGA Nóra, „Szilágyi Dezső és az egyik első magyar bábesztétika: Az Állami Bábszínház felnőtt Kísérleti Stúdiója," *Art Limes*, no. 3 (2016): 5–9.

[14] For example Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words* (1966 and 1979); Sławomir Mrożek's *Strip-tease* (1966); Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *An Angel Comes to Babylon* (1967); Benjamin Britten's *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1970).

[15] The only element that materialised from this idea was Lili Ország's stark, Kafka-inspired stage design, her drawing on Kaspar's puppet figure.

[16] See the interview of Viktória Szántó with Géza Balogh about the work in the Experimental Studio of State Puppet Theatre on the webpage of the Hungarian Theatre Institute.

[17] In a discussion at the Theatre Arts Association meeting, the ministry representative initially opposed the staging of experimental works but ultimately gave approval, with the condition that the number of performances be strictly limited.

[18] The reason was that works by Peter Handke were not welcomed for stage adaptation at the State Puppet Theatre. This was not the first time a performance had been altered for political reasons at the theatre. The Experimental Studio's first etude sequence, titled *Puppets and Men*, originally included an adaptation of Eugène Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano*, which was later replaced by Wolfgang Weyrauch's *Japanese Fishermen*.

simultaneously intensely serious and absurdly ridiculous. The methods of realisation differ from play to play—each one unique—and all contribute to the performance's success."[19] The lineup included two of Samuel Beckett's *Act without Words*, Frigyes Karinthy's short story *Circus*, and morality plays. One of these featured two Pierrot plays, also directed by Géza Balogh, while the other, titled *Spheres and Cubes*, was based on ideas by Róbert Bánky, who also performed a role in *The Nose*.[20]

The opening lines of the *Puppets and Clowns* show leave no doubt that the State Puppet Theatre is pursuing a clear mission: to hold a mirror up to society. The earlier works, referenced in the review under the title (*To the Stage) Translated Meaning* as the precursors to the 'and' series[21], "were built around a central theme and presented, through various scenes, the relationship between man and the reality surrounding him. They portrayed the different forms of behaviour that arose from his aspirations and conflicts—even revealing his true nature through the puppet bodies and disguises he assumed. […] Man […] dons the clown's costume and disguise; he enters the external world, using the circus spotlight to cast light on his contemporary image."[22]

Puppets and Clowns, which also featured a staging of *The Nose*, was part of a series within the State Puppet Theatre's adult program. The Experimental Studio made its debut in 1966 with *Puppets and People I,*[23] a set of three one-act plays. This was followed by *Puppets and People II*[24] in 1972, which included seven puppet etudes, then *Objects and People*[25] in 1975, and *Faces and Masks*[26] in 1976. After these four productions, a sequel had to wait three years, despite rehearsals for *The Nose* already having begun in 1977.[27] Nevertheless, this remarkable series seems to have been a growing success among a generation of young people searching for new directions in contemporary puppet theatre, with the 1979 production—including *The Nose*—marking the series' conclusion.

From Synopsis to Final Script: The Extended Journey of a Brief Presentation

In the absence of available recordings, the analysis of the performance can only rely on

[19] KENESSEI András, „Bábuk és bohócok", *Magyar Hírlap*, 12 May, 1979, 6.

[20] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 229. *Puppets & Clowns*, premier on the 20th of April in 1979; Bánky: *Spheres and Cubes*, Balogh: *Two Pierrot Plays*, Gogol – Balogh: *The Nose*, Beckett: *Act Without Words I-II*., Karinthy – Szilágyi: *Circus*.

[21] ISZLAI Zoltán, „(Színpadra) átvitt értelem," *Élet és Irodalom*, 5 May, 1979, 13.

[22] Playbill to the etude-sequence. Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, Bábtár. Inventory nr: 5-9-C

[23] *Puppets & People I. – three one-act plays by the Experimental Studio*, premiered on the 7th of March in 1966; Weyrauch: *Japanese Fishermen*, Beckett: *Act Without Words*, Mrożek: *Strip-tease.*

[24] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 226–228. *Puppets & People II (seven puppet-grotesques by the Experimental Studio),* premiered on the 14th of January in 1972; Kosztolányi: *The Monster*, Itallie: *Motel*, Urbán: *Composition*, Beckett: *Act Without Words*, Örkény: *The Óbuda Twins*, Gyárfás: *Small Sample Play*, Ligeti – Szilágyi: *Aventures*.

[25] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 228–229. *Objects & People* premiered on the 16th of April in 1975; Balázs: *The Easy Man*, Buzzati: *Crescendo,* Shaár – Szilágyi: *Chair History*, Gyárfás: *Drops*, Mrożek: *Strip-tease*, Mozart – Urbán: *Little Trivia.*

[26] *Faces and Masks (four muscal grotesques)*, premiered on the 5th of March 1976; Sztravinszkij: *The Soldier's Tale,* Ligeti – Szilágyi: *Aventures,* Prokofjev: *Classical Symphonie.*

[27] GRÉCZI Emőke, „Jakovits sárkánya, Ország Lili orra: Avagy képzőművészek a bábszínházakban," *Art Magazin* 12, no. 9 (2015): 40–47.

contemporary press coverage and a handful of photographs. However, a significant part of the conceptual development—indeed, the entire preparatory process, from initial conception to final realization—can be traced through the various versions of the script, as well as the puppet and set designs preserved in the Budapest Puppet Theatre Archive. These documents offer a glimpse into a much richer creative vision than what was ultimately conveyed in the performance itself, which was rooted in the realistic world of Gogol's protagonist. There is little doubt that the creators were particularly focused on this, as evidenced by Balogh's own translation, accompanied by the director's instructions, which was published in 1978[28], a year prior to the premiere of *Puppets and Clowns*.

Reading the first synopsis, dated January 1976, it is evident that certain ideas were successfully realised. However, it also highlights the extent to which changes had to be made during the production's preparation, even though the core elements of the original director's concept remained intact.

Initially, the play was conceived as a compact puppet pantomime, incorporating only a brief moment of dialogue and short monologues. The director remained open to the potential of masked performance, not the fusion of these two genres, which ultimately formed the basis of the final production. Furthermore, the noises, sound effects, musical interludes, and human voice all functioned as equal components within a unified auditory composition. Third, the protagonist of *The Nose*, who in the original short story bears a resemblance to the protagonists of Franz Kafka's novels (the shared 'K' is no mere coincidence), is more explicitly connected to the characters from *The Trial* and *The Castle* in this adaptation. Fourth, the weight of Kovalyov's suffering, which ultimately leads him to despair, is accentuated by the unconventional set elements designed by Lili Ország,[29] notably the towering doors and labyrinthine structures.

Regarding the characters, Pelageya Grigorievna, the daughter of Madame Alexandra Grigoievna Podtochina, was given greater prominence in the play than in the short story. As the only female character, she made a strong impression on stage in the initial script. This thirty-page version, written in 1977, began with a ball scene (instead of the street scene originally envisioned in the synopsis) and featured several dialogues, the length of which was significantly shortened by the time the script reached its final, approved version. The extracted dialogues predominantly occured in the advertising office, the police chief's office, and the Collegiate Assessor's home, where he was visited by the doctor (scenes six to eight) – locations that were likely intended to enhance the atmosphere of Kafka's bleak, bureaucratic world.

The final version also excluded the two dog figures that appeared and sniffed around Kovalyov. These animal characters, crafted to be notably human-like, partook in a noisy and dramatic love affair. Their voices would have been heard constantly—at times singing a duet, at others yelping and whining. Beyond the scripts, the blueprints indicate that they were meant to be a dominant presence on stage, in stark contrast to the more subdued figures of the clerk, policeman, and doctor.

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[28] *Attikai sóval-borssal. Két klasszikus komédia* / Arisztophanész: *Lüszisztraté*; translation: Devecseri Gábor & Gogol: *Az orr. Groteszk játék*; translation: Balogh Géza. Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, Budapest, 1978. (*Színjátszók kiskönyvtára*)

[29] Internationally known Hungarian painter Lili Ország, who had worked in the Atelier of the State Puppet Theatre for more than a decade, was given the opportunity to design the scenery for *Japanese Fishermen* by Wolfgang Weyrauch in 1966, based on her own ideas. This production was also staged at the Experimental Studio. After her exhibition in Tel Aviv in 1977, she was hired as a designer at the institute.

It is also significant that the barber Ivan Yakovlevich, a key character in the short story, was entirely absent from the original conception of the adaptation. Instead, the focus shifted to the comedic love story and the compelling presence of the dominant female figure, emphasising the struggles that the narrow-minded, submissive man was powerless to overcome.

Despite the omissions, press reviews from both daily and weekly outlets unanimously highlight the 'brilliance' of adapting Gogol's short story *The Nose* into a masked pantomime, deeming it the highlight of the 1979 production.[30] In Balogh's adaptation, Major Kovalyov returns to his bed after the ball scene, and then his nose "undergoes a transformation according to the more fantastical principles of black theatre."[31] While the absence of the nose became a vivid reality in the narrative, on stage it was represented by the nose puppet, which took on an independent life through the bunraku technique.[32]

However, the framing device remained intact: after the main character's triumphant dance upon regaining his nose, the replacement nose vanished again, and terrifying gates flooded the stage, finally overcoming the nose-less Kovalyov. During the performance multiple noses appeared: nose-puppets that represented subordinates in the nose-dominated world, converging into a mass before the increasingly powerless protagonist. The show, "with excellent rhythm, full of tension"[33], saw "the surprises [...] deliberately build upon each other, culminating in ever more complex forms"[34], leading to a sarcastic conclusion.

Unconventional Staging: Masked Performance and Set Animation

The surviving images of *The Nose* present a grotesque, nightmarish, dreamlike world, where characters wear oversized masks and navigate through immense objects. The sets appear almost alive, all designed to torment the protagonist as he traverses a labyrinth of doors and gates. However, the most striking element is undoubtedly Platon Kuzmich Kovalyov's colossal, animated nose, which, in the words of Péter Molnár Gál, "is a masterpiece. It has clinical origins, yet it is far from repulsive. It resembles a prehistoric nose—a prehistoric artifact."[35]

The performers' acting was also widely praised, with unanimous recognition for the silent actors' skill in synchronising their movements with the sounds, making it appear as though they were speaking the words themselves. Their grotesque, oversized masks "played a peculiar game with proportions: Kovalyov's increasingly desperate love interest, Pelageya Grigorievna, was portrayed by a man of considerable stature, while the protagonist was played by a delicate woman".[36]

Although Péter Molnár Gál, reflecting on the performance decades later, described the pantomime movements, dominant in the acting, as "deaf and dumb,"[37] this comment implies that, in the absence of a choreographer, the movements lacked a cohesive system and were likely performed by actors without formal dance training. According to the critic from *ÉS*, among the "puppeteers performing and manipulating the puppets in an extraordinarily complex manner",[38] Ildikó Kazinczy and János Vanyó stand out. They are described as "large-headed human puppets, creating a chilling illusion of being mere movable

[30] ISZLAI, „(Színpadra) átvitt értelem," 13.
[31] MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, „Bábszínháztörténet," in *Bábszínház 1949–1999*, ed. BALOGH Géza (Budapest: Budapest Bábszínház, 1999), 59.
[32] Ibid.
[33] KENESSEI, „Bábuk és bohócok," 6.
[34] ISZLAI, „(Színpadra) átvitt értelem," 13.
[35] Ibid.
[36] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 139.
[37] MOLNÁR GÁL, „Bábszínháztörténet," 59.
[38] ISZLAI, „(Színpadra) átvitt értelem," 13.

structures, manipulated from behind by invisible figures in black velvet, breathing life into the objects."[39]

Like most critics, the director highlights the crucial role of the dynamic stage spectacle: "The sets came to life, with the hero—helpless, nose-less, tormented, and broken—trudging through his calvary before our eyes. But the true protagonists were the doors and gates. Amidst a labyrinth of all kinds of doors—collapsed room doors, prison cell doors, and grand palace gates—Platon Kuzmich Kovalyov wandered through his hopeless journey."[40]

Lili Ország's recurring theme of the labyrinth, in her final theatrical work, was not abstract but vivid and unsettling—a representation of bureaucracy and an alienated world. The designer "discovered Kafka within Gogol's nightmarish tale, infusing the production with her own tortured, painterly vision. It encapsulated [...] the overwhelming anxiety of a man at the mercy of his utter helplessness, a fear that refuses to cease."[41] The unsettling horror of the everyday nightmare was softened by the serenity of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C Major* (Op. 48), which served as the central musical motif of the etude. This piece was featured twice in the performance—during both the opening and final ball scenes, where Pelageya and Kovalyov danced. All sources acknowledge the significant contribution of composer János Decsényi who received an award for his work on *The Nose* adaptation.

The production's power stemmed not only from its striking visual elements but also from the innovative director's concept, which incorporated surrealist features. A central innovation lied in Iván Darvas voicing all the roles himself, achieving "astonishing transitions and brilliant execution."[42] The director's aim was to convey that "there is no clear distinction between inside and outside; everything unfolds within the consciousness—or rather, the subconscious—of a single subject."[43] As Veronika Darida observes in her study titled "Bábmenedék – Ország Lili az Állami Bábszínházban", while this approach allowed for the stage to embody dreams and the subconscious, the dream sequences diverged from surrealist traditions in their lack of instinctive action. "Instead, they expose human vulnerability and the anxiety inherent in every social order—individual fears that uphold an illusory structure, one that can be shattered at any moment."[44]

A Cherished Memory from the Early Days of Hungarian Artistic Puppetry

Critics universally regarded the production as on par with the novel itself, deeming it worthy of Gogol. Zoltán Iszlai offered high praise, highlighting the contributions of the creative team: "János Decsényi, the composer, whose precision and boundless imagination were unmatched; Lili Ország, the mask and set designer with an exceptional affinity for her craft; Iván Darvas, who brought the text to life through his distinctive vocalisations—sneezing, cooing, singing, and more—all captured on a tape recorder with a captivating, dissonant rhythm; and Géza Balogh, who directed the entire production with a sleepwalker's

[39] Ibid.

[40] BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 139.

[41] BALOGH Géza, „Ország Lili falai," *Criticai Lapok*, 2003, https://www.criticailapok.hu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=33918

[42] KENESSEI, „Bábuk és bohócok," 6. The adaptation of Sławomir Mrożek's *Strip-tease* (1966) was also a mask play, featuring just a puppet and two actors, with their dialogue voiced by a third actor. See BALOGH, *A bábjáték Magyarországon*, 134.

[43] Ibid., 139.

[44] DARIDA Veronika, "Bábmenedék: Ország Lili az Állami Bábszínházban," *Art Limes* 17, no. 1 (2020): 5–15.

certainty… each of them more than met the task."[45]

Despite the positive reception, the show had a short run. Regrettably, due to incomplete administrative records at the State Puppet Theatre, a detailed history of its performances has not been preserved. Nevertheless, the fact that productions from the Experimental Studio were typically not kept on stage for extended periods offers a plausible explanation. The show reappeared in a mid-1980s revival of *The Nose*, which featured a re-staging of previously performed etudes.

This production, titled *The Masquerades*[46], reintroduced the Experimental Studio's most successful works: a musical puppet show by György Ligeti, *Adventures*, Ferenc Liszt and Gyula Urbán's *La Campanella* and *Love Dreams*, as well as two etudes from the *Puppets and Clowns* series—two textless scenes by Beckett and the morality plays *Spheres and Cubes*. Surprisingly, *The Nose* was not included among the productions that toured abroad. This omission can likely be attributed to the prominence of the textual elements and the logistical difficulty of transporting its substantial set.

Details of the Production

Title: The Nose (Puppets and Clowns). *Date of Premiere:* 23 April, 1979. *Venue:* State Puppet Theatre, Budapest. *Director and Dramaturg:* Géza Balogh. *Author:* Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol. *Translator:* Imre Makai. *Set and costume designer:* Lili Ország. *Composer:* János Decsényi. *Sound designer:* István Horváth. *Voice:* Iván Darvas. *Company:* Ildikó Kazinczy (Kovalyov), János Vanyó (Pelageja Grigorjevna), Gyöngyi Blasek, Ildikó Meixler, Róbert Bánky, Péter Bognár, Miklós Dörögdy, Attila Magyar.

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NÁNAY, István. „Editorial Introduction". *Art Limes* 16, No. 3. (2019): 5–7.

[45] ISZLAI, „(Színpadra) átvitt értelem," 13.

[46] *Masquerades*, premiered on the 15th November, 1986; Bánky – Dubrovay – Maros: *Spheres and Cubes*; Beckett: *Act Without Words I-II.*, Ligeti: *Aventures*, Liszt – Urbán: *La Campanella*, Liszt – Urbán: *Love Dreams*, Gogol – Balogh: *The Nose.*

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"I live out of all order". György Hernyák: *Falstaff*, Grange Theatre, 1982

TAMÁS OLÁH

Abstract: In 1982, the Vojvodina-based Grange Theatre presented *Falstaff*, a play adapted from two parts of William Shakespeare's historical drama *Henry IV* and some scenes from the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Instead of being a battlefield of noble intrigue, the production became a series of etudes with an ironic tone, often culminating in inferior pub humour. The games of power are as vaguely distant from the common people appearing on stage as Yugoslav party politics are for the village audience of the performance. Director György Hernyák was interested in clashes. His direction is based on the physicality and intense gestures of the performers. He views "great history" from a perspective familiar to the Hungarian villagers of Vojvodina, and thus the profane layers of Shakespeare's universe become dominant.

Context of the Performance in Theatre Culture

The absolute majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina live in villages and small towns.[1] This is why the Hungarian-language theatres established in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the Second World War—first in the name of socialist popular education, and later purely to satisfy audience demand and increase ticket sales—moved out of their own buildings from the mid-1940s. The company of the Popular Theatre of Subotica (Szabadka), founded in the autumn of 1945, began its regional touring almost immediately, in January 1946.[2] Although this was primarily a propaganda move and certainly a demonstration of the democratic nature of Yugoslav minority cultural policy, it undoubtedly had a significant impact on the life of the Hungarian community in Vojvodina.

Almost simultaneously, only 35 kilometres from Subotica, the County's Hungarian Popular Theatre of Bačka Topola (Topolya), founded in 1949, began to tour and even surpassed the theatre of Subotica in popularity. The company regularly performed in the surrounding villages and on state estates. While in the second half of the 1950s they were seen by 6–8,000 spectators every year in their hometown and reached more than 20,000 people during their travels. In their last season, they had more than 37,000 spectators altogether.[3] The County's Hungarian Popular Theatre existed until 1959. At that time, according to the official justification, due to the reorganisation of the state administration system (i.e., the merging of certain counties), the company was merged with the company of Popular Theatre of Subotica,[4] which could further strengthen its regional programme by creating entertaining performances that were specifically adapted to the needs of rural audiences and could be performed in parallel. Touring became more and more a part of the institution's image, and it is no exaggeration to say that it was the theatre's

[1] The essay was written with the support of OTKA (PD 146626).

[2] VUKOVICS Géza and GEROLD László, "A Szabadkai Népszínház 20. évfordulója," *Magyar Szó*, 31 October, 1965, 14.

[3] See VIRÁG Gábor sr., *A topolyai Járási Magyar Népszínház, 1949–1959* (Novi Sad: Forum, 2011).

[4] Many recognised the systemic withering away of Hungarian culture in Yugoslavia behind this gesture of power.

primary role until the end of the 1960s. At that time, approximately 430–450 performances were staged in a season (ten months). The vast majority of these were performed on rural stages and in community centres.[5]

Since, as far as we know, only four professional theatre-makers remained in Vojvodina (or returned there) after the Second World War,[6] the professional companies of the Popular Theatre in Subotica and the County's Hungarian Popular Theatre of Bačka Topola were, for decades, made up of the most talented amateur actors of the time, either through auditions or personal invitations by managers. Although few week-long courses in directing and acting had been offered since the 1950s, they were primarily aimed at training cultural workers in the countryside and not at developing the members of the theatre companies. The training of minority-language actors in the Federal Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, leading to a university degree, only began in 1974 with the opening of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad (Újvidék).

The Grange Theatre (Tanyaszínház) was founded in 1978. Frigyes Kovács, one of the two founders, graduated that year from the first Hungarian-language drama department of the Academy of Arts in that year, and György Hernyák was the first Hungarian-language student of directing at the same institution. Both were of rural origin, first-generation intellectuals. In the summer of the same year, the Grange Theatre—certainly the first independent (semi-)professional minority theatre company in Yugoslavia—began its unique operation in the region. The basics have remained unchanged to this day. Every summer, the company regroups for a production, which, after a few weeks of rehearsals, is performed twenty-five to thirty times during a tour, lasting about a month and a half. Their performances take place in rural market squares, school playgrounds, pub yards, and football fields. After the applause, they dismantle the stage, take a rest, and in the morning continue on to the next village, where they start stage building again. Apart from the sound and lighting technicians, they have no technical staff to help them and no backup workers either. The actors build and paint sets, weld, do carpentry, sew costumes, and make wigs and props. The backbone of the company is made up of students of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, who are joined by professional actors on a voluntary basis and by invited amateurs.

A peculiarity of actor training in Vojvodina is that academy students must acquire the acting apparatus and behaviour required by the unusual playing conditions of the Grange Theatre very early on, in the summer following their first academic year.[7] Moreover, each student will have the experience of living and making theatre in this creative community, which operates according to its own rules, and they experience coming into direct contact with the diverse but identity-sharing communities of their wider homeland during their annual tours.

Although, as we have seen above, touring was part of the practice of Hungarian-language theatres in the region in the mid-twentieth century, the young theatre-makers who founded the Grange Theatre were venturing into unexplored territory when they decided to perform in Hungarian villages in Northern Vojvodina, where no community centres or other community spaces for performances had ever been built and therefore had been avoided by professional companies. Thus, the aesthetic needs of the population of these small villages were unknown to the company. They offered their performances to audiences

[5] LOVAS Ildikó, "Interview with László Pataki," *Novi Sad Television*, 1993, 1. min.

[6] Sándor Sántha and Mihály Kunyi were actors, Rezső Nyáray was a director, and Béla Garay was an actor and director.

[7] Sometimes years before they could step onto the stage of a permanent theater.

who had never before encountered any other form of theatre, and this had a decisive influence on their horizon of expectations and the way they received them.

In 1982, Angéla Csipak, the first dramaturg of the Grange Theatre, recalled the first five years of the company's activities on the pages of the Híd periodical while self-reflexively analysing their own programming policy: "For a long time we believed that the only viable way, the psychologically absolutely valid method, was to educate the audience on the basis of the gradual principle; however, it is more likely that it was the most obvious, the easiest solution."[8] The dramaturg described a journey of experimentation and trial starting with the short scenes performed in the early years to *Falstaff*, which premiered in 1982 and was created from the first and second parts of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and segments of the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Playing Shakespeare in the village dust had been an ideal of the company from the very beginning. In an interview in 1980, the leader of the company, Lajos Soltis already set the desired goal publicly: "We will get to Shakespeare!"[9] Why it is the English author who became the company's etalon is not entirely clear. If we look at the programmes of the professional theatres in Vojvodina that performed in Hungarian from their inception until the beginning of the 1980s, we can see that their repertoire hardly included any Shakespearean plays. The Novi Sad Theatre, founded in 1974, for example, did not play any of the author's texts. Popular Theatre of Subotica had only six Shakespeare plays on its programme from 1945 to 1982 (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1953; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1955; *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1964; *Richard II*, 1971; *Romeo and Juliet*, 1976; *The Tempest*, 1980),[10] and the County's Hungarian Popular Theatre of Bačka Topola staged *Hamlet* in 1959.[11] Endre Lévay, the founding editor-in-chief of the journal *Híd*, however, began his review of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1953 by saying that "in any young theatre in the world, the appearance of Shakespeare on stage is a milestone in the development. Until the skill and artistry of the ensemble have approached these peaks, his works cannot be touched by untrained hands." He called the playwright "the immortal of the spirit", and described the first Hungarian Shakespeare performance in Vojvodina as a milestone, a celebration.[12]

Despite Lévay's enthusiastic rhetoric, we cannot claim that the Shakespearean theatre aesthetics had a prominent place in the Hungarian-language theatre tradition of Vojvodina, but it is worth recognizing that the former Globe Theatre's operation had many similarities with the Grange Theatre. The Elizabethan Era public theatres were also open to all who could afford to buy tickets. And buying tickets was not a major financial burden. The cheapest tickets could be bought for as little as a penny, the price of a quarter of a gallon of beer,[13] and as a result the Globe's audience was a representative cross-section of London's population at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, from the footmen to the courtiers. And the performances were enjoyed by both men and women.[14]

From the very beginning, in addition to vertical social stratification, the audience of

[8] CSIPAK Angéla, "Ötéves a Tanyaszínház," *Híd* 46, no. 9 (1982): 1072–1077, 1073.

[9] VIDA DARÓCZI Júlia, "Tanyaszínház másodszor," *Magyar Szó*, 24 July, 1980, 12.

[10] KÁICH Katalin. *A színész és a színjáték dicsérete: A szabadkai Népszínház magyar társulatának első 40 éve* (Subotica: Életjel, 2016), 181–190.

[11] VIRÁG, *A topolyai Járási Magyar Népszínház*, 128.

[12] LÉVAY Endre, "Shakespeare-bemutató a szabadkai Népszínházban," *Híd* 17, no. 4. (1953): 289–294, 289.

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[14] Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, "Színház az egész világ," in Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, *A dráma*

the Grange Theatre was also extremely diverse in terms of age. The free productions, which were accessible to all, are still attended by people of all ages, from very young children to the oldest inhabitants of the villages. It is therefore not surprising that the structure, thematic, and atmospheric richness of the productions are closely related to the Shakespeare productions of the former Globe. They are a good blend of impish comedy and philosophical, lyrical sublimity.

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

Angéla Csipak's adaptation utterly simplified the explicitly complex plot of the two-part history play. Csipak removed several characters (e.g., Lady Percy) and merged the remaining minor roles. Nevertheless, the production moved around twenty characters, so several actors played two roles. The scenes of the political (King Henry and his circle) and personal (Falstaff and his circle) threads, which ran in parallel, were emphatically separated, leaving the story extremely fragmented. In this way, the Falstaff scenes from the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* were easily inserted into the extremely short episodes, thus reinforcing the comic thread. Csipak cut out almost every monologue about war plans and tactics. The passages describing political power relations were really simplified. Therefore, the rebellion of the English lords was probably only traceable to fans of 15th-century English history. Instead of a battlefield of noble intrigue, the production became a series of ironic etudes, often degenerating into barroom humour. The games of power were as obscurely distant from the common folk of the stage as Yugoslav party politics were for the performance's village audience. Of the nobles, the only one who had a major role was Falstaff, the outsider, big eater, and drunken womaniser who became the central character of the adaptation. Critics, however, said that Lajos Soltis's portrayal of the knight-errant turned him into a complex figure, an intelligent clown.[15] The focus thus shifted from the courtly people to the people of the inns, and the pub culture of mediaeval England took on a specific local flavour in Vojvodina.

Staging

It is a surprising decision that, for the first time at the Grange Theatre, György Hernyák was not staging one of Shakespeare's comedies, but rather one of the Bard's less frequently performed plays. It is clear that he based his concept on the figure of the company's iconic actor, Lajos Soltis. Hernyák created a distinctly fragmented performance. He separated the simplified scenes with emphatic darkness and drum rolls. In his review, literary critic Imre Bori compared Hernyák's stage compositions to comic book panels.[16] The director showed only what was absolutely necessary to understand the events as they unfolded, the conflicts as they took shape, and the opponents' plans as they hatched. The clashes were the focus of his interest. As a result, there were only a few monologue scenes in the performance, and these were mostly spoken by the title character. His direction relied on the physicality and intense gestures of the performers. The knights wielded heavy axes and metal swords and protected themselves during duels with small round shields. Although these actions seemed genuinely risky, thanks to the well-rehearsed choreography, Hernyák left room for irony even in moments of heightened tension. The death of Henry Percy (Árpád Bakota) was more comic than tragic. Bakota took the murder weapon—Nándor Szilágyi's (Prince Henry) longsword—under his arm and fell onto the stage. (FIG. 1.)

története, trans. KISS Gabriella, 105–114 (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2001).

[15] BORI Imre, "Shakespeare a tanyán," *Hét Nap*, 6 August, 1982, 12.
[16] Ibid.

It is clear that for Hernyák the interactions of the lower classes were more important than the political games. In his production, he looked at the "great history" from a perspective familiar to the Hungarian villagers of Vojvodina. This way the profane layers of Shakespeare's universe became dominant, which was underlined by the occasional unexpected appearance of bartenders, prostitutes, and drunks in the audience, who were happy to engage in loud and boisterous conversation with the spectators. For example, the drunken Pistol (Frigyes Kovács) asked some people, "Who are you?" The audience was asked to define themselves in relation to Shakespeare's characters, and clearly, they identified most easily with Falstaff (Lajos Soltis) and his servant Bardolph (Levente Törköly), who ate roast chicken with fatty mouths, drank wine from huge goblets, and commented on the games of the powerful in the struggle for the throne with the apparent simplicity of folk wisdom. (FIG. 2.) Two years after the death of Yugoslavia's "eternal" president, Josip Broz Tito, this was the perspective of Hungarian viewers in Vojvodina.

Acting

Compared to previous Grange Thetare performances, the monumental size of the stage allowed large entrences and the actors took advantage of this. They burst into the space with great energy. Often, they started from the back of the audience and ran onto the stage at an intense pace (FIG. 3.)

The open-air conditions required the performers to replace the psychological-realistic gestures they were using in permanent theatres with more intensive—sometimes quite caricature-like—facial expression and movement. This, of course, went hand in hand with an increase in the volume of speech.

Imre Bori said in his review that, except for Lajos Soltis in the title role, the actors almost without exception played Shakespeare with 'scholastic respect.'[17] And although the characters speaking in the blank verse had indeed tried to portray the noble virtues in their sublime and the intriguing moments in their vile, they sometimes confounded the audience's expectations with ironic gestures.

The language of the prose-speaking barmen, on the other hand, was very close to the audience's own language. (István Vas's translation was used.) In this familiar language, Soltis presented the wise-cracking, comic figure of the hero, who was long disillusioned with the power games of the great, as a complex personality with his own contradictions. His Falstaff was a down-to-earth character, emphatically subordinate to his body. He was at home among the common people but also capable of seeing and revealing the bigger picture. The nobleman was a similar character to the actor who portrayed him and who had been running the Grange Theatre since the previous year.

Among the performers in the crowds, the drunken Pistol (Frigyes Kovács) repeatedly engaged in conversation with the viewers, who were said to be eager to participate and answer his questions loudly and wittily.[18] In this way, they became even more closely connected, even verbally, to the events on stage and the characters that took part in them. (FIG. 4.)

Stage design and sound

The action took place on a square plank stage, divided into two levels parallel to the audience. At the top, in the centre of the space, was a three-meter-wide, slab-shaped platform, about fifty centimetres high, covered on all sides with dark, rough poster. The sides of the stage structure facing the

[17] Ibid.

[18] CZÉRNA Ágnes, *Tanyaszínház: A harminc évad története (1978–2008)* (Novi Sad: Forum, 2009), 47.

audience were also covered with dark material. Behind the platform was a door-width curtain, made of the same fabric as the backdrop, which served as a doorway for the scenes in closed rooms. Only King Henry and Prince Henry were allowed on the platform. Stairs led down from the front of the stage to the audience at either end. In the centre, there was a long, narrow plank connecting the stage and the ground level of the audience, who were arranged in a horseshoe shape around the playing area. The performance space was thus completely empty, except for the central platform and an occasional stool. The absence of back walls reinforced the familiar visual sights of the pre-determined spaces of the villages visited on the tour: there were corn fields, school and church buildings, tree-lined streets behind the Shakespearean figures, and the summer night sky of Vojvodina overhead. This solution was also reminiscent of the Globe Theatre in London, where the actors' performances were framed by the details and decorations of the familiar building rather than by illusionary sets.

Although historicist intentions were completely alien from the set design, they were evident in the costumes. The actors wore hemp shirts, men's trousers, full-length gowns and cloaks, leather boots and accessories, and even chainmail hauberks, which were of course more symbolic than historically authentic. Their colourful eclecticism, however, drew the audience's attention to the actors' gestures and the physicality of the performance. The appearance of Árpád Bakota, who played Henry Percy, was particularly iconic. He wore black leather boots and briefs with slings reminiscent of a wrestler's singlet, revealing much of his otherwise naked body. His head was shaved bald and he held a huge battleaxe. (FIG. 5.)

There was no pre-recorded music during the performance, but the scenes were separated by darkness and an increasingly nervous drumbeat. Except for these pauses, white lights illuminated the stage and the audience.

Impact and posterity

Since the early 1980s the Grange Theatre has developed into a cultural movement. The company's performances became key events in the life of rural communities, and often the most important village festivals and celebrations were organised around the company's annual guest performances. The performances also provided an opportunity for representatives of other artistic disciplines to visit small Hungarian villages in Yugoslavia with their own artworks. In 1982, on the opening day in the village of Kavilo (Kavilló) an exhibition opened of photographs by the photographer Anna Lazukics,[19] and the then 25-year-old Josef Nadj (Nagy József), who later became a world-famous dancer and choreographer, but at that time was studying at Marcel Marceau's school in Paris, performed a solo dance etude.[20] The fifth tour was also accompanied by the Forum Book Publishers' book-selling van and the Hungarian and Serbian language press's unceasing interest. The weekly newspaper *Hét Nap* published three reports on the tour's stops, while the daily *Magyar Szó* published nineteen.[21] In 1982, the short-lived Serbian company of Grange Theatre (Salaško Pozorište), led by the young Haris Pašović, was also founded. It lasted only one season and performed the fairy tale *Johnny Peppercorn* (Biberče) a few times in the sporadic Serbian area of northern

[19] The first female photo journalist of Yugoslavia.

[20] During the tour, he performed the pantomime solo in Gornji breg (Felsőhegy) and Mali pesak (Kishomok) before the show. The promotional materials do not mention him as a pantomime artist, but refer to him as the "Parisian Rubber Man."

[21] CZÉRNA, *Tanyaszínház…*, 199–200.

Vojvodina, independently of the original Hungarian language company.

Although the first five years of the Grange Theatre's work cannot be considered a closed period, the solutions that *Falstaff* clearly demonstrated are some the most striking features of a constantly evolving theatrical language that, with a few exceptions, still define the company's productions. Similar to Elizabethan dramas, the Grange Theatre's performances also combine character comedy, coarse, low-brow humour, and intellectual content. For this reason, the productions are often built up of loosely connected etudes, usually tied together by musical interludes or acoustic signs. It is also important that the performances often respond to contemporary public or political phenomena by using allegorical and metaphorical strategies.

Hernyák's initiative did not start a renaissance of Shakespeare performances in Vojvodina, but after *Falstaff*, the Grange Theatre's company staged three more of Shakespeare's plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1998; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2003; *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, 2011). These all being comedies is typical. Although *Falstaff* remains in the theatre maker's memory as a great success and creative achievement, recent interviews with former spectators about the work of the company reveal that after the humorous performances of previous years, Shakespeare's historical drama was received with bewilderment in 1982. The production was performed in 18 places and was seen by a total of 8,700 spectators.[22]

Details of the production

Title: Falstaff. *Date of premiere:* July 21, 1982. *Venue:* Kavilo. *Director:* György Hernyák. *Author:* William Shakespeare. *Translator:* István Vas. *Adaptation:* Angéla Csipak. *Set designer:* György Hernyák. *Costume designer:* Éva Pataki. *Light technician:* Rudolf Bálint. *Sound technician:* László Lakatos. *Organizers:* Irén Ábrahám, Angéla Csipak, László Törteli. *Company:* Company of the Grange Theatre. *Actors:* Valentin Venczel (Henry IV), Lajos Soltis (Falstaff), Nándor Szilágyi (Henry, Prince of Wales), László Törteli (Poins / Snare), Károly Keszég (Worcester), Árpád Bakota (Henry Percy / Lancester), Levente Törköly (Bardolph), Irén Ábrahám (Mistress Quickly), István Bicskei (Glendower), Péter Szedlár (Vernon), Frigyes Kovács (Blunt / Pistol), Elizabetta Bicskei (Dolly Tearsheet / Clarence), Dušan Polovina (Servant).

[22] Ibid. 170.

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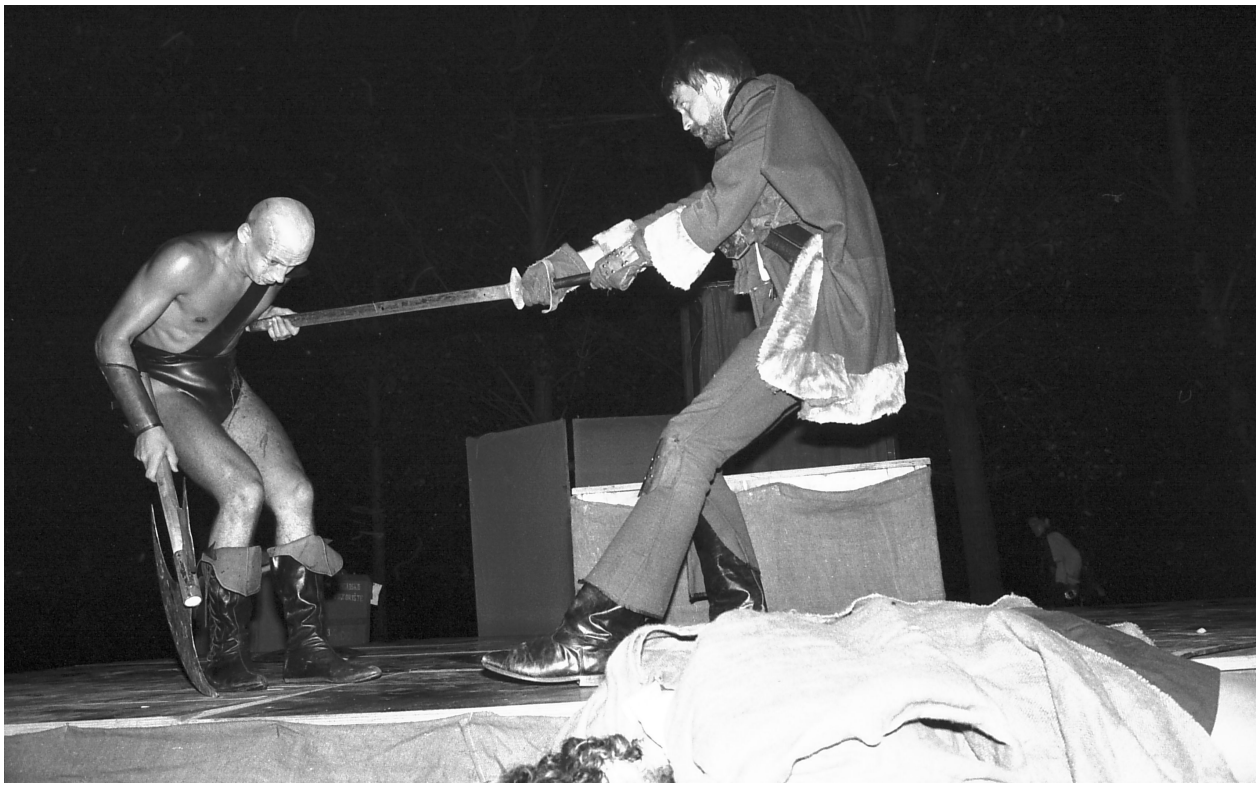

FIG. 1. Árpád Bakota (Henry Percy), Nándor Szilágyi (Henry, prince of Wales)
Photo: László Dormán, 1982; Source: Archive of László Dormán

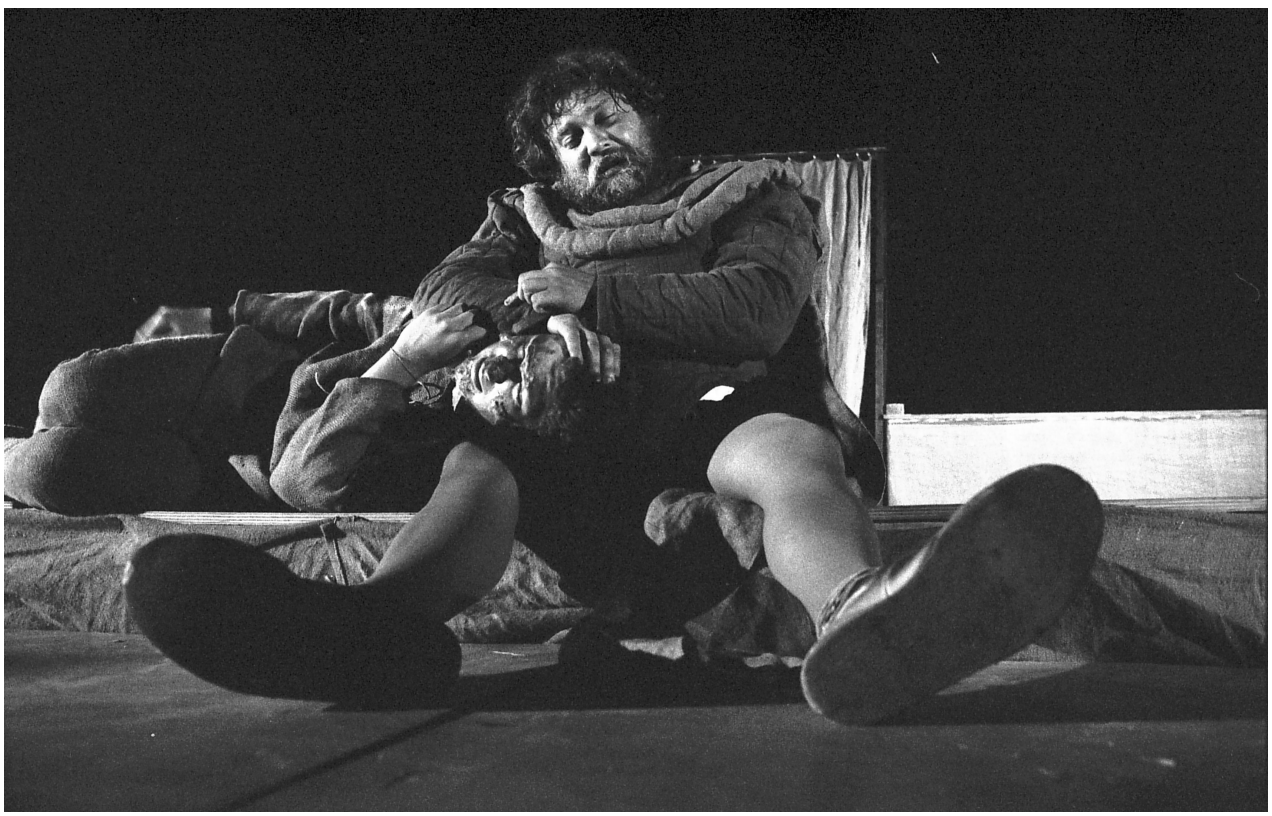

FIG. 2. Levente Törköly (Bardolph), Lajos Soltis (Falstaff)
Photo: László Dormán, 1982; Source: Archive of László Dormán

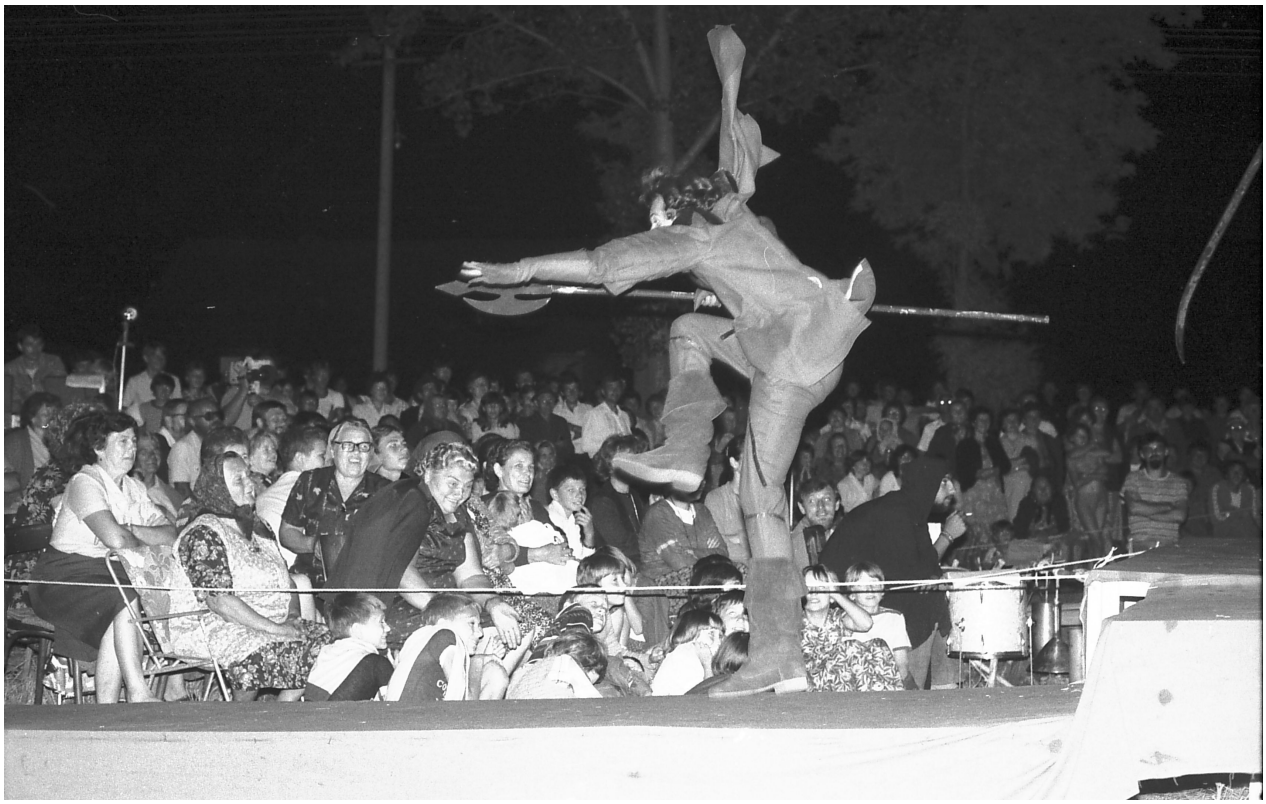

FIG. 3. Törteli László (Poins)
Photo: László Dormán, 1982; Source: Archive of László Dormán

FIG. 4. Árpád Bakota (Lancester), Károly Keszég (Worchester), Péter Szedlár (Vernon);
Photo: László Dormán, 1982; Source: Archive of László Dormán

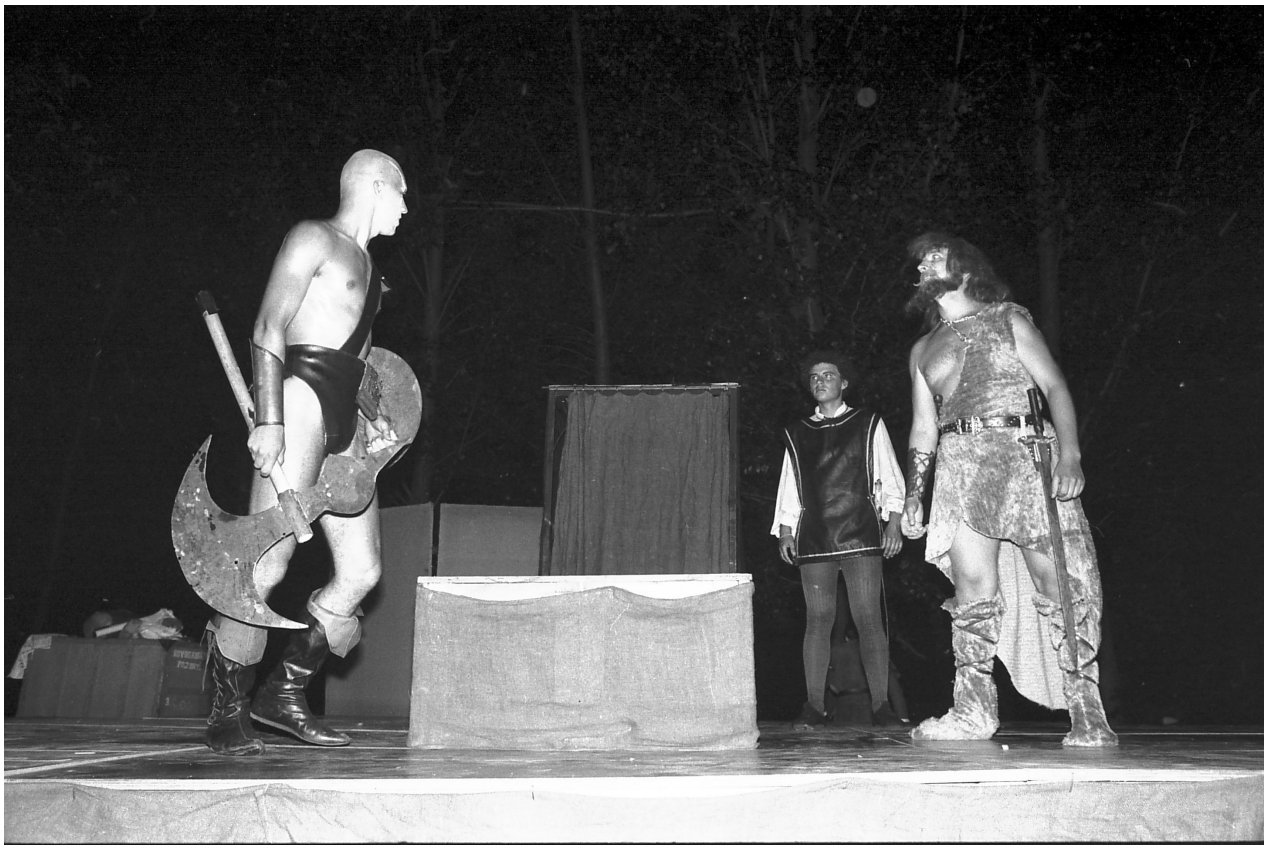

FIG. 5. Árpád Bakota (Henry Percy), Péter Szedlár (Vernon), István Bicskei (Glendower); Photo: László Dormán, 1982; Source: Archive of László Dormán

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The Real Government Inspector. Gogol's comedy at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest (1987–1994)

LÁSZLÓ PETERDI NAGY

Abstract: In the 1980s, when Hungary was fighting its final and seemingly successful battle against the Soviet occupation, the best, bravest theatres were supporting this fight with high-quality performances of classical Russian dramas, which made a great impact on the culturally sensitive part of society. Indirectly, these performances revealed the reasons and goals of the national uprising in 1956. More importantly, the reason behind the failure of the "regime change" as well. They pointed out why gaining and accepting freedom is insufficient in itself. People need to "deserve" freedom. They must be able to practice freedom and transform it into a new, modern national identity. Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1987 at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest grabbed the very essence of this process of historical importance under the so-called Velvet Revolution. During its 7-year run, the production became a very important factor that contributed to the country's positive national identity to blossom.

"How pitiful our Russia is!" (Pushkin)
"Don't curse the mirror if your image is crooked!" (Gogol)

The above two quotes can be perceived as deliberately misleading. Even if, as I hope, sooner or later we will recognise the deeper connections hidden in them. To make matters more complicated, the bloodthirsty oppressor of the Decabrist uprising, the "honorary" censor of the court historian, Mr. Pushkin (and the indirect provoker of his later death), Tsar Nicholas I. was present at the premiere. When the curtain fell, he was the first to applaud and remarked to his entourage, "Well, this was a hit at us, especially at me!" This means that he too interpreted this tragic comedy like the people of the fairs, to whom it had been played for years, based on the scenario of an already forgotten Ukrainian writer. Certainly not in the way Pushkin did in the above quote, when Gogol read the first chapters of *Dead Souls* to him: "How pitiful our Russia is!" He might have even said to himself: "The glorious conqueror of Napoleon!"

Pushkin himself was thinking about *The Government Inspector* a lot. But only *Dead Souls* convinced him that it was Gogol who could write it. "Our hohol," as Mr. Court Historian introduced him to his friends, would keep on visiting the rehearsals in the Maly Theatre for more than a decade and wrote numerous studies with the title *How to play The Government Inspector?* Then he decided to put the unfinished second volume of *Dead Souls* on fire not long before his death. Well, in the empire of a reform-loving tsar, everything is a little different than elsewhere.

An interesting antinomy of our theatre history is that in the 1980s, when the country was fighting its final and seemingly successful battle against the Soviet occupation, the best, bravest theatres were supporting this fight with high-quality performances of classical Russian dramas, which made a great impact on the culturally sensitive part of society. The audience's willingness to purchase tickets at much higher prices is also proof of that. Indirectly, these performances revealed the reasons and goals of the national uprising in 1956. More importantly, the reason behind the failure of the "regime change" as well. They pointed out why gaining and accepting freedom is insufficient in itself. People need

to "deserve" freedom. They must be able to practice freedom and transform it into a new, modern national identity.

Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1987 at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest[1] grabbed the very essence of this process of historical importance under the so-called Velvet Revolution. During its 7-year run, the production became a very important factor that contributed to the country's positive national identity to blossom. In the very last scene of *The Government Inspector*, Zsámbéki presented us the contemporary character of the late Kádár-era, the character with whom Gogol had been coping until his death: the "благородное лицо" or to put with a slight exaggeration: the "positive hero."

This character represents the conflicts that characterise all countries in Eastern and Central Europe. The reformers masked as inspectors are actually agents of the old/new elite, and their role is to protect the elite from the botherings of businessmen, journalists, and voters. And when the elite realises that this won't work, they would apply the old, deadly weapons again.

Among the malevolent "pig faces" who are laughing at the mayor's failure appear Gábor Máté, one of the bait inspectors, a dedicated representative of the new generation, and calls them—as did Khlestakov, the "professional" courtier—to follow him one by one and give an account of their work, preferably in a tangible way. He is not a person who can be easily appeased.

However, he makes a mistake: he is convinced that the officials will follow. In this miserable basement stairwell named perestroika, he mistakes the shaft of the elevator stopped for repair for a door and enters.

The intemperate Director of Education looks around to see if everyone agrees, then politely presses the red button that unlocks the above-hung booth... The blades of the rusty fan continue to spin indifferently. Everyone thinks that the problem is solved. But it isn't!

"Russian misery is very similar to Hungarian misery",[2] explains Zsámbéki only two years before the premiere of *The Government Inspector* at a conference talking about the importance of Russian dramas, which became intellectual building blocks for the new Hungarian theatre. This realisation, even after the downfall of perestroika, had the beneficial effect of Russian dramas on our way of thinking, which, since 1956, had revolved around the torn-up street stones, but we were still not sure what to do with them.

In the summer of 1982, right after the "Polish events" the Kaposvár Theatre won the Grand Prix at the BITEF in Belgrade with the production of *Marat/Sade* directed by János Ács. The setting was based on a photo showing Corvin Lane (where severe fights took place during the revolution in 1956) with the torn street stones. "The audience's previous attitude had changed. It wasn't simply an interesting, unusual performance; it was rather a program statement. People arrived by buses and cars in long lines. It almost looked like a demonstration; the crowd was celebrating; there was standing ovation each night,"[3] the director recalled years later. The international success of the *Marat/Sade* of Kaposvár

[1] Date of premiere: December 18, 1987. Director: Gábor Zsámbéki. Set designer: Zsolt Khell, Costume designer: Györgyi Szakács. Actors: Péter Blaskó (The Mayor), Juli Básti (Anna Andreievna), Ági Bertalan (Maria Antonova), János Bán (Khlestakov), József Horváth (Osip).

[2] PETERDI NAGY László, ed., *Kortársunk a mai színpadon: Az 1984. december 4–5-én megtartott Magyar–szovjet elméleti konferencia anyaga* (Budapest: Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1985), 61. (My translation – L.P.N.)

[3] GAJDÓ Tamás, "Jelentős korszakok – emlékezetes pillanatok: A magyar színházművészet fontosabb törekvései az 1970-es évektől 1989-ig," in *Színház és politika: Színháztörténeti tanulmányok, 1949–1989*, ed. GAJDÓ Tamás, 307–346 (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 320. (My translation – L.P.N.)

made academician Béla Köpeczi, Minister of Culture, devote an analytical article to the "problematic spirit" of the performance.[4] The manager of the theatre, László Babarczy was reprimanded by Deputy Minister Dezső Tóth. Anyway, it was too late. Gábor Máté, who played the Herald, was holding a blood-stained stone in the finale of *Marat/Sade*, sobbing loudly.

This was the last thing the former producers of the "velvet revolution" needed!

Now they needed a new "theatre revolution" to catch the wind out of the sails of the Polish national uprising, so that they could feed the people even when there is no more Kádár-cooked internationalist goulash soup. First, they thoroughly analysed the "Polish events", then decided to engage people with theatre. In the end our "culture-politicians", who considered themselves experts in the field, started to believe that the Polish dock workers surrendered to Józef Szajna and Jerzy Grotowsky's "poor theatre", not to General Jaruzelski's flamethrowers. The decision was made: let's import "absurd" and "grotesque", "poor" and "director's" theatre urgently in transferable rubbles.

The President of the People's Front and Minister of Cultural Reform approved the performances. He would send his secretary to the premieres on behalf of himself. But people were reluctant to fill the basement and attic theatres for some reason. Finally, someone had an idea: what we need is newly discovered talents! Soon they managed to find two gifted Gábors: Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki. The debut was Chekhov's *Seagull*, both in Kaposvár and in Szolnok.[5] They turned out to be like some Impromptu at Versailles: a sarcastic, scratchy, and adolescently cruel indictment against the well-fed fiscals and tax collectors of art, also against the "comrade in charge," who expected gratitude, not criticism. The Gábors refused to make theatre for these cunning old folks, but for the young engineers and sore-eyed junior doctors who lived in new housing estates without grandmothers to drop off their children at on Sunday matinees. They sat in the stalls to see a new Shakespeare, a new Molière, or a new Chekhov on stage, then picked up the children from the cloakroom and walked to their one double- and one single-room flats.

Being Sunday, on the way home, they stopped at the confectionery to buy ice cream for the next generation of regime-changing inspectors. All this, in less than a quarter of a century, far beyond the original intentions of both reformer parents and cunning grandfathers, resulted in a positive outcome. When these children grew up, they had to hire a babysitter to watch their kids, but they still filled the Katona and the Örkény Theatres.

A talented generation of theatre makers was playing classical Russian dramas once again to express its views on the world. Advice from Gogol and Ostrovsky, Chekhov and Dostoevsky were conveyed by Ferenc Karinthy in Szeged, István Eörsi in Kaposvár, and Géza Fodor in the Katona József Theatre. These directorial, sometimes "merely" dramaturgical, or even set design trouvailles gradually condensed into a new ethos as well as a new aesthetic.

Well, this wasn't what the "reform secretaries" wanted to achieve. It didn't fit in Gorbachev's ideological mainstream. Meanwhile, after Wenceslas Square in Prague, tanks appeared in Tiananmen Square in Beijing too. In Hungary the miracle mill burnt down in *The Wood Demon* and the forests of *Uncle Vanya* could not be saved either.

Those young artists who conquered the National Theatre but soon after were expelled never cooperated afterward. In Tamás Ascher's

[4] KÖPECZI Béla, "A forradalom értelmezése – Marat ürügyén," *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (1983): 23–25.

[5] See Árpád Kékesi-Kun's essay „*The Seagull* that Transformed Staging Chekhov in Hungary: Gábor Székely: *The Seagull*, 1971" in this issue.

Three Sisters, which won a prize in Paris,[6] they seemed to dance as individuals, with perfect confidence and great choreography, just like the actors in Ottomar Krejca's performance in Prague. One has the feeling that these young people have somewhat grown old. That everything that was greeted as the new theatre, in fact the "director's theatre," left from the imported "regime-changing" theatre. Even the directors were troubled by this realisation. Zsámbéki's *The Government Inspector* unexpectedly splashed right into this blurry, intellectual cocktail of vodka and whisky like a political, professional, and artistic hit! It took two decades to mature, plus 7 years of extra time for the audience to fully comprehend.

Let us recall what Zsámbéki said about Russian drama (the "silent actors" of which consider Shakespeare their national playwright up to this day): "I don't know how one could summarise why people love Russian plays. I would say that Russian misery is very similar to Hungarian misery, but we never had those classic playwrights, who could have written those plays. But it's not just that. […] the most important thing for me when I was directing Russian plays was that raw, brutally honest attitude when confronting reality. Yes, this is exactly it: there is something very decent, fundamental, and natural in these plays that is able to grab and stir people. Moreover, they can resonate with us due to their self-explorational and self-digesting disposition."[7]

This statement was made less than a year after the premiere of György Spiró's successful new play, which had also been directed by Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theatre: *The Impostor* (1983) with the old Tamás Major, the leading figure of state-socialist theatre in the 1950s, in the role of the Master (Tartuffe/Bogusławski). A performance like this used to get the most support under György Aczél's system of "3 Ts" (promote/tolerate/ban).[8]

The Master, who had been superannuated from the Narodowy in Warsaw, did a guest appearance in the invaded Vilnius for a significant amount of money in the title role of *Tartuffe*. The local Poles were looking forward to the performance, and so were the Russian invaders. The Gubernator instructed the director to turn in the giant portrait of Tsar Alexander I at the end when the police officer informs Orgon about the royal pardon so that he can address his humble thanks directly to the tsar. This atmosphere of servility made Bogusławski play a joke on everyone. So, when he met the Gubernator in the interval, he informed him that the actor playing the police officer was planning not to appear to announce the royal mercy; thus, there would be nothing to say thank you for. The actor was immediately arrested, of course, and instead of poor, panicked Orgon, Tartuffe/Bogusławski recited the exaggerated, ridiculous tirades of gratitude to the portrait. The Polish audience was overwhelmed with the ending. Scandal was complete; national pride was satisfied.

Spiró and Zsámbéki gave a final twist to the story worthy of Fellini's camera. The tsar had had himself crowned King of Poland a bit earlier, and there was nothing that could be done about it. The Master took his honorarium and left for Warsaw. In the morning the stagehands were dismantling the set of *Tartuffe*, while the actors were discussing the previous night in the cafeteria. Most found it

[6] Cf. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "Remembrance of a Landmark in Theatre History: Tamás Ascher: *Three Sisters*, 1985," in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 177–188 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021), accessed: 20.01.2025, https://real.mtak.hu/164884/1/AmbiguousTopicalityaPhiltherofState-Socialist.pdf

[7] PETERDI NAGY, ed., *Kortársunk*…, 61. (My translation – L.P.N.)

[8] See Cristina CUEVAS-WOLF and Isotta POGGI, eds., *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2018).

incomprehensible, even suspicious. "It is impossible that the Master has changed that much," they said. "Why would he make trouble and then just leave?" Then a half-sober stagehand remarked, "We've been sent another Bogusławski!" Suddenly the whole story made sense. Probably it had been a Russian provocation. "We must have had too much on our account. Oranges, bananas! Expensive fur coats in Váci street, then the Solidarity in Gdansk! They had to come up with something other than cheap vodka."

And there was István Horvai, too, who had been to Moscow as a young man and realised how much more the "silent" voices of the Russian "Silver Age" a hundred years ago had known about the world and themselves than we do. He attempted to adopt these ideas on stage in the 1950s and 1960s in Chekhov's Budapest home, the Víg Theatre. Back then the Víg Theatre was called Theatre of the Hungarian People's Army, and Mátyás Rákosi had his own lodge in it. This "elite" was the one of whom he expected to have the European knowledge and "Eastern" sensibility of Chekhov's intellectual heroes. Later he realised how pointless this was, and then he would try to pass these values on to the "uncorrupted" university youth in Veszprém.

Horvai staged *The Impostor* in 1988, shortly after Zsámbéki's *The Government Inspector*. He put the "message" into Rybak's mouth (the young actor who was expelled from the theatre by the Gubernator) and it went like this: "Well, we were here once! And now we move on!" Only God knows where he was going but this sentence remained a call for those of us who remained here: "Keep going! Move on!"

About the same time, at the World Literature Institute in Moscow, similar thoughts were expressed in my fellow aspirant, Mikhail Epstein' thesis on Russian postmodernism. "The earliest postmodern tendencies appear in the semi-western, half-eastern cultures, where the New Age arrived late and was unable to consolidate. They faded away prematurely to give way to the newest postmodern order. [...] Similar vicariousness is present in America too, which absorbed architectural, literary, and artistic styles from all over the world, mainly from Western Europe."[9]

As someone who was living in a village by the Danube, opposite Paks, at the defence of Epstein's thesis, I felt entitled to ask why "mainly" from Western Europe? Why not from Central and Eastern Europe, where people had accumulated significant experience during decades of useless "competition"? After all, this was the very reason why, in that dense atmosphere of the late Kádár era, when György Aczél limited spiritual food coming from the West, we needed the Russians that much! Didn't a few things happen here, in Central and Eastern Europe, in those decades, too? Wasn't it then that we embraced the essence of the Russian version of "middle-class drama," the old/new renaissance comedy of Goldoni, that was defined as "grotesque" by Western theorists and lyrical by Gorky? The greatest Russian playwright, who emerged from Gogol's *Overcoat*, A.P. Chekhov is the one who took this essence to the level that became the standard for drama around the world.

Another fellow aspirant of mine, Viktor Yerofeev, known for his short novel *Russian Beauty*, also wrote his dissertation on Gogol and came to the same conclusion. The secret of the author of *The Old World Landowners*, Gogol, is "the smile that shines through the tears" (Yerofeev). This is what captivated Pushkin and the capital's audience. In technical terms: "atmosphere", "multivocality", "multilevelity", "subtext", and some say "self-digestion". It isn't some cheap sentimentalism or fake humanism but the art of portraying the capability of accepting one's fate that Hungarians (besides their own history) could acquire with the help of Russian writers.

[9] Mihail EPSTEIN, *A posztmodern és Oroszország* (Budapest: Európa, 2001), 66–67. (My translation after M. Nagy Miklós's Hungarian translation – L.P.N.)

Pushkin himself was a victim of a "stealth regime change." You can spot the characteristics of each East-Central European "regime changer" in *Eugene Onegin*, when the author introduces his hero: "He wears a Harold cloak and comes from Moscow".[10] Tatiana refuses him in the end, and most readers would agree with this. Still, it isn't that simple. Yeltsin, for example, did not get along with him and was forced to let Putin take his place. But this only caused more problems.

Undoubtedly, Nicholas I was the first to recognise the secret of the "velvet revolutions": everything must be mixed well so that everything remains unchanged. After sending his military officers, who once occupied Paris, to Siberia, he persuaded Pushkin to move to the capital and be his historian under his censorship. Remember the tsar applauding enthusiastically at the premiere of *The Government Inspector*? Yet, Gogol would rather sit on a "troika bird" and fly to Rome. *Dead Souls*, a new genre, a tragic comedy emerging from Russia ruled by its self-absorbed, petty, narrow-minded elite, was written in Italy. Is there an explanation for this contradiction?

There was a time when Russians and Ukrainians worked together on this contradiction. They found something that worked for a while: "the smile through the tears." This is where Pushkin spotted his "hohol" friend's genius. This is the reason he specifically wanted him to write *The Government Inspector*. And he was right. Either due to the Italian climate or the tsarist scholarship, that sad, yet life-affirming smile is there. This special smile has to radiate on stage each and every time. But Gogol was unable to make it happen again in *Dead Souls*. Simply, he couldn't find the right character. Take Chichikov, who buys up dead serfs as if they were compensation tickets. By the end we truly get to despise him. Or take the old patrician in the second volume, who tries to save this pitiful customs officer from prison. He isn't any better either.

Gogol, the eager "hohol" wanted to identify with the tsarist system at all costs, with the system whose alienation he revealed so brilliantly. He kept on looking for a "positive hero." But this could not change the terrifying truths in the least. And this is sad. "If only once, drunk, he [Chichikov] smiled broadly!" Gogol exclaims. Nevertheless, the Italian landscape, the Italian people, and perhaps the wine too, made him believe that despite all their vileness, Chichikov and his business partners had more vitality than the glorious tsarist apparatus with its opposition together. This contradiction can truly make us smile.

This contradiction is the base for Oleg Tabakov, director of the Moscow Art Theatre, to build his *Dead Souls* around in 2006. The play was dramatised by Bulgakov and took place in Tabakerka (Tobacco) Theatre. In the remake, Chichikov becomes a positive character. "He is the first capitalist born on Russian soil, who realised that one can make money not only by exploiting natural resources", Tabakov explained to the press. He stressed that doing so is more than simple fraud. At the end of the play, when Chichikov fails, it's not the old patrician he visits but his own family in the countryside. On a real troika pulled by real horses, which rumbles through the stage. This sight made the audience applaud as hard as Nikita Mikhalkov's dramatic, yet grossly comical TV version of *The Government Inspector* had, back in 1966.

Russians want to live no matter what happened or is happening to them. They still have the vitality and joy of life needed to survive and play their role in a theatre either called "people's capitalism" or "controlled democracy".

Neither Bulgakov nor Tabakov altered the last minutes of *The Government Inspector*. However, acts are not only created by authors; they are created by all participants of

[10] In Henry Spalding's English translation: "A Russian in Childe Harold's cloak," accessed 13.11.2024, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23997/23997-h/23997-h.htm

the play, too. Both in Russia and Hungary. This kind of miracle took place in Zsámbéki's *Government Inspector* during its unusually long last minutes. The shattered Mayor asks the giggling officers, "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves!" In this moment something happens between the exhausted stage and the frozen audience. On the stage, the apparatus comes to heel and quickly ensures the Mayor of their loyal cooperation. Down there, the audience is looking around puzzled to see who will start to applaud. We realise that this indecisive, speechless crowd above and below is us, and we certainly don't deserve a standing ovation. So, we start to get ready to leave in silence. This is the way we thank our stage partners who have made us realise this. They come out to the silent applause, and we do the real applause. Standing and together.

The regime change took place less than a year later; not the way we imagined. It should have taken many more years, but there was no choice. So it was what it was, cut and dried. Every beginning is difficult. The Katona's *Tartuffe* in 2001 (also directed by Zsámbéki) helped us considerably to find our way around the "real inspectors". His "inspector" arrives as a police officer to convey the pardon of Louis XIV. He is accompanied by guards in smoked glasses. It becomes clear that he is not one of those idealist university "inspectors". He is a smooth-mannered professional who has a great future ahead of him. He shakes hands with the grateful Orgon, handcuffs the troublemaker, and kisses the hand of "the lady of the house". On his way out he helps Tartuffe back on his feet almost casually. We all get the message. "He might be needed again."

I think the tendency will be going further with Zsámbéki's community theatre idea. Everyone knows the scenario, our national fate. We can display and experience it on stage together. This sacred act of strengthening common identity is referred to as "sacred theatre" by director József Ruszt.

Gábor Máté, the Katona's present director, proved to be the "good inspector" Gogol was searching for so desperately. The time has come for the descendants of the former Kaposvár audience to take over and introduce the characters of the future on stage.

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Staging *Woyzeck*. Thoughts on Readings of *Woyzeck* for the 'Age of Participation'

GABRIELLA KISS

Abstract: Hungarian theatre history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the standpoint of reception and creativity, tradition and innovation have two classics of unquestionable significance: Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Büchner's *Woyzeck.* Living in a theatre culture that takes pleasure in the politics of involvement, it is not surprising that, in the 2017/2018 theatre season, three young directors simultaneously undertook the presentation of the best-known fragment in European drama history. In terms of influence, though, it is interesting how these 'Z-generation' productions reflect upon two legends of the drama's performance in our nation: Stúdió K's direction in 1978 and that of Krétakör (Chalk Circle) in 2001. The current study examines how directors Attila Vidnyánszky, Jr (Stalker Group), Mátyás Péter Szabó (Közért Company), and Máté Hegymegi approach Büchner's unfinished piece. Can one locate in them a point of integration that structures the dissemination of theatrical symbols (both verbal and nonverbal) into a 'transparent order'?

"Theatre is an extremely unique phenomenon. […] It endures and comments upon changing societal relations," writes Andreas Kotte in one of his theatre history works.[1] This process—the play of reception and creativity, tradition and innovation—is laid bare by contemporary directions of the classics. From this standpoint, in Hungarian theatre history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are two dramas of unquestionable significance: Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Büchner's *Woyzeck.* If we acknowledge the spread of interactive performance formats as one of the main characteristics of contemporary Hungarian theatre,[2] then it is worth focusing on the 1836 text. After all, this classic of German Romanticism is the first example of the so-called *open drama form* (Volker Klotz). In this manner, it represents *sui generis* "the end of the Scheherazade paradigm of storytelling".[3] The plot "disintegrates into a kaleidoscope of aspects," and it is not the structure, but only "the visual element […] that completes the narrative arch on a textural

[1] Andreas KOTTE, *Theatergeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 395/397.

[2] Cf. Gabriella KISS, *Let's participate! Széljegyzetek a dráma- és színházpedagógiai múltjához és jelenéhez*, Károli Books (Budapest: KRE–L'Harmattan, 2024).

[3] This state is characterised by the self-analysis of the prosumer, in which the reconstruction of a closed narrative interests neither the creator nor the audience, and it is not motivated by the desire for closure. The meaning and significance of their stories, created and evaporating in collective solitude, is not in the finished product but in the processing of the production, located in the optimisation of the visual dramaturgy in the Self. Cf. Nina TECKLENBURG, *Performing Stories: Erzählen im Theater und Performance* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 24–36; Johannes, KUPP, "Theaterpädagogik im »Zeitalter der Partizipation«?," in *Partizipation: teilhaben/teilnehmen*, eds. Christoph SCHEURLE, Melanie HINZ and Norma KÖHLER, 25–36 (München: koaped, 2017).

level".[4] As a result, it provides just as much opportunity for the *re*construction of the central plot thread (built upon motivations and consequences of infidelity) as the *de*construction of the story. That is, it is a directorial decision how to manifest the profoundly metaphorical language of the drama's text, as a theoretical montage of events or in the form of an organic work of art.

Living in a theatre culture that takes pleasure in the politics of involvement, it is not surprising that, in the 2017/2018 theatre season, three young directors simultaneously undertook the presentation of the best-known fragment in European drama history.[5] In terms of influence, though, it is interesting how these 'Z-generation' productions reflect upon two legends of the drama's performance in our nation: Stúdió K's direction in 1978 and that of Krétakör (Chalk Circle) in 2001. These are two works that, in their own time, could have immediately received the Péter Halász Prize for being:

> "uncomfortable, unpleasant, challenging, controversial [...] striving to broaden the potential themes and performance language of contemporary theatre; shifting the conventional rubric of performance; from time to time self-critically rethinking creative methods; making structural demands and societal expectations that influence both creations and institutions subjects for examination—all in order to shake up our thoughts, to question the conventions and boundaries that we take for granted, and to show what today's theatre can possibly be!"[6]

In Tamás Fodor's direction for Stúdió K, we may seek the murder's motivation not in the drama's metaphysical-philosophical dimension but in its sociological reading, best indicated by its spatial concept, which breaks with the traditional voyeur format. The site-specific production plays out among us in the strictest sense, half a metre away. In scenes that transpire in the public space, the roles of tavern-goers or those loitering in front of the Barker's soapbox are given to us. We dance together with the stage figures; in the intermission, we can fill up on lard-smeared bread and Quarry-brand (Kőbányai) beer with them. As a result of the viewer's position, which is freely chosen, it is, in principle, up to us which scene we observe and how we react to the two or three explicitly aggressive (sexual) acts, which unveil the motif of murder and intimacy.[7] Literally and symbolically, the story is performed in the amoral institution of the Barker's soapbox; and yet, although they become aware of this, the viewers (who may soon recognise themselves not only in the figures of the drunken lads and loose lasses, but as one among them) cannot interfere in the events for two reasons. First, it is because, at the start of the show, the Barker performs the tragic love-triangle story with puppets dressed in clothes identical to the stage figures, as a result of which the scenes become not only a theatrical illustration of events we already know, but also the causally linked sequence of a closed, consistent plot. Second, the production begins outside with the Barker's

[4] Cf. Volker KLOTZ, *Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama* (München: Carl Hanser, 1960), 106–116.

[5] Cf. SÁNDOR L. István, "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza: Székely, Zsámbéki, Schilling *Sirály*a," *Ellenfény* 9, no. 2 (2004): 4–10; SÁNDOR L. István, "Az igazi bűnökkel szemben: Büchner és a Woyzeck Magyarországon," *Ellenfény* 23, no. 6 (2018): 2–6.

[6] Péter Halász Prize, accessed: 06.06.2022, https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=hal%C3%A1sz%20p%C3%A9terd%C3%ADj&epa=SEARCH_BOX

[7] Cf. SÁNDOR L. István, *Szabadságszigetek* (Budapest: Selinunte, 2023).

words: "Step right up! It will be great. The show will soon begin." We step from quasi-reality *into* the performance space (the 'puppet show'). Consequently, the theatrical representation—though not in the accustomed manner, frontally and far from us, but right up next to us and among us—is ultimately inescapable.

W – Worker's Circus by Árpád Schilling was quite the opposite. Through the actors' bodies—blended with language, text, and images—it expressed not only the fragmentary nature of Büchner's text and the variability of its stories but Woyzeck's vision as well.[8] In Chalk Circle's physical theatre performance, the body is a (main) character, and not only because the actors' work constitutes the show in the spirit of the new circus and movement theatre aesthetic. On the basis of scenes, the action (mostly visualised as acrobatic acts) was developed through the company's improvisations; exercises in concentration, status, and balance.[9] It is also because the production was able to make the energy field palpable, which is necessary if one is to comprehend the gestures, body positions, and stage pictures devoted to presenting and interpreting the given micro-situation or psychological condition. Everything that we see and hear indicate a given figure's state or the dramaturgical function of the situation or theme, stereotypically, metaphorically, or as an archetype. However, the theatrical reflex of identification imbues this with atmospheric power. For example, we identify the weights tied to Woyzeck's feet as he runs in circles – first as an open Bible, then as two crumbling bricks crashing into each other. The sexual poses become acrobatic spectacles; the exposed secondary sexual traits and genitalia become kilos of meat. The shapes of the actors' bodies acquire the significance of

[8] "[…] *sui generis*: raw, its fragmentation is its make-up, not its detriment," and later: "Büchner's *Woyzeck* is one of the first works in the dramatic arts that is essentially fragmented and not in a biographical or historical sense. Its rare form lends it variability, so one need not view it as rigid or final. It always offers new opportunities for consensus creation. The web of connections and the direction need not be granted in terms of the actual production. It can be divided up and directed differently on each new occasion." BALASSA Péter, "»Mint egy nyitott borotva…«: Georg Büchner *Woyzeck*-töredékéről és a szegények atropológiájáról," in BALASSA Péter, *A másik színház*, 79–122 (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), 101/105

[9] "Árpád Schilling: So, we determined not to invite guest artists for this production, only Krétakör actors, so we could return once more to the working method we had almost completely forgotten since *Little One.* István L. Sándor: The point of this method is that the actors improvise the play's scenes, and various games or actions develop from the situations. What is the advantage of this approach?

ÁS: It is important to emphasise that we are talking about *Woyzeck*, or the process as it applies to *Woyzeck.* This time, we went much further than with the previous shows, *Baal* or *Little One.* With those, we only approached the theme with improvisation. Now we were on a very determined formal search, and, using our results, we wished to discover ever newer paths. […] Through the chain of linked scenes, one can get to know the improvisational technique: the play's scenes were interpreted as various actions or physical deeds. For example, Marie and Woyzeck's relationship is indicated by their game with the tub and the water in it. The Captain and Woyzeck's relationship is shown by how the latter bathes and feeds the former. These 'games' often look like physical attractions – for example, the fire-breathing scene or when the Doctor and Woyzeck converse, jumping and flipping on the spring mattress of a soldier's bed." SÁNDOR L. István, "Határhelyzetek: Beszélgetés a *W – munkáscirkusz* alkotóival," *Ellenfény* 6, no. 6 (2001): 22–27, 21.

figures, their physical flesh and muscle, and their energy of presence. Consequently, not only the manifest forms, themes, thoughts and ideas come to the centre of the audience's attention, but also the embodiment, which is commensurate with abstraction.

Overall, both legendary shows counted on viewers who went to the theatre "[…] to see what they were not allowed to see."[10] Just as *99.6%*, *HOOMELAAND*, *KŐ-KŐ-KŐ*, the 2019 series of actions by the students who occupied the University of Theatre and Film Arts, as well as *Game Changer*, *Closer*, and *Living the Dream with Grandma*—it is true of them, too, that they expose the authoritarian might of the type of dramaturgy that fears offending the boundaries entrusted to 'the' theatre. Instead of endeavouring to "standardise and normalise the feelings evoked by the work, interrupting processes that endanger house operations,"[11] they strive to be unpredictable and unfinished. This, in turn, prompts the spectators to reconsider their habitual mode of reception, the basis of which is theatrical representation's "transparent ideal" (Aristotle).

Do these three latest directions offer the opportunity of *involvement*, which is the same as criticism of the dispositive?[12] Do they initiate a dialogue with each other regarding viewing strategies—be they passive-oppressive, passive-conservative, post-passive and active witnessing, or immersive?[13] In the crossfire of audience viewpoints, at odds with themselves and each other, do they expose the viewpoint of the first person plural (white, cis-, healthy, and educated), which Carrie Sandahl called the "tyranny of the neutral?"[14] We receive answers to these questions if we examine how the directions Attila Vidnyánszky, Jr (Stalker Group), Mátyás Péter Szabó (Közért Company), and Máté Hegymegi approach Büchner's unfinished piece. Can one locate in them an integration point that structures the dissemination of theatrical symbols (both verbal and nonverbal) into a 'transparent order'?[15]

In the themed sixth edition of the journal *Ellenfény* from 2018 entitled *Woyzeck Then and Now*, Zoltán Kondorosi stated as fact, "the new productions deal with the base material more freely."[16] Our thesis is that all

[10] Jérome BEL's *bon mot* quoted by BERECZ Zsuzsa, "Táncképesség: Az ArtMan Egyesület munkájáról," *Színház* 50, no. 4 (2017): 10–13, 13.

[11] Nikolaus MÜLLER-SCHÖLL, "Polizeiliche und politische Dramaturgie," in *Postdramaturgien*, eds. Sandra UMATHUM and Jan DECK, 209–230 (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2020), 220.

[12] It is no accident that for Irit Rogoff, the classic of "critical theory," the paradigmatic example is the gesture of turning away, or the moment when (in the museum or theatre) "the observer becomes independent of previously predictable participation and, what is more, the accepted possibilities for action, practicing criticism on the institutionalised practice brought to life by following the etiquette of appreciating artwork". Cf. Irit ROGOFF, "Looking Away: Participation in Visual Culture," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin BUTT, 117–134 (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2008). Cf. Ádám CZIRÁK, „Partizipation," in *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, eds. Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, Doris KOLESCH and Matthias WARSTAT, 242–248 (Stuttgart–Weimar: Springer, 2014).

[13] Sarah, WHATLEY, "Dance and Disability: The Dancer, the Viewer, and the Presumption of Difference," *Research in Dance Educations* 6, no. 1 (2007): 5–25, 18.

[14] Cf. Benjamin WIHSTUTZ, "Disability Performance History: Methoden historisch vergleichender Performance Studies am Beispiel eines Projekts über Leistung und Behinderung," in *Neue Methoden der Theater-wissenschaft, eds. Benjamin* WIHSTUTZ and Benjamin HOESCH, 109–132 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020).

[15] KLOTZ, *Geschlossene und offene Form*, 109.

[16] KONDOROSI Zoltán, "Kiszolgáltatottak és megnyomorítottak," *Ellenfény* 23, no. 6 (2018): 28–33, 31.

three productions play a dual-natured game: Stalker Group at the National Theatre (being "post-Meiningen"), Közért Company at MU Theatre "New Theatrical," and Hegymegi at Szkéné physical theatre. For one thing, we truly feel (mainly thanks to the formal language employed) that "they often stage unique variations."[17] Moreover, mostly through visual means, a distinct frame of reference for the *Woyzeck* narrative is quite emphatically presented. By multiplying, concealing, and replaying certain connective points at varying speeds and rhythms, these directors unsettle the viewers who wish to know the story's beginning, middle, and end. Consequently, all three productions approach the fragmentation of Büchner's work from its 'unfinished' state. Yet, it is not fragmentation itself, but the fragments that comprise the shows' dramaturgical starting points,[18] becoming points of orientation in three very different productions of *Woyzeck*, which nonetheless all exist in collective loneliness.

Attila Vidnyánszky, Jr.'s production, still on the National Theatre's repertoire in 2024, is "based on a true panel story."[19] The title character (portrayed by Márk Nagy as a multicultural performance of Stanislavsky's concept of Public Solitude) not only embodies solitude in the strictest sense of the word but also construes it as a virtue. The dual-framed piece makes the young man both the nucleus and counterpoint of this two-hour *trip.* He never curses, speaking the lines (which, only in his case, derive from Büchner) in Hungarian with no foreign words, while the rest of the cast (the Stalker Group at that time) improvise in Serbian, Croatian, Romanian, and 'Hunglish.' Leaning on the wall and clutching his child, he watches as the others' maimed bodies literally overflow the intimate space, while the atmosphere is established by the clip-like, dynamic choreography made up of acrobatic elements, intensified gesture and speech, and action sped up with stroboscope and UV light.[20] The figure's reflexivity is demonstrated in one of the show's key scenes. The man, preparing buttered bread for his hungover wife (who protractedly repeats, "I work in a tobacco shop, but now I'm on maternity leave.") presents to the Doctor, who relishes aberration, a model of his South-American home. While he precisely describes the place where he and the people closest to him live, the coked-up community of the panel house illustrates what is said, as elements in a *Google Maps* program come to life, entering and exiting through the openings in the walls of the Attila Kaszás Hall.[21] Later, they mount the stage through the walls or the

[17] Ibid.

[18] This is confirmed by two creators' refusal to use the "compiled version" by Gábor Thurzó and Zoltán Halasi, assembled from outlines and main drafts, working instead with the facsimile translation by Csaba Kiss or their own literal translation of the original text.

[19] This is a play on words referring to panels in a series of (possibly religious) paintings and the so-called panel houses, which are cheaply constructed mass housing units that proliferated throughout Eastern Europe under the Communist regime.

[20] "The path into the world of *Woyzeck* is through the brawling youths, who address the viewers and try to score. They give the audience so much sensory stimulation; it is difficult to get bored, even if these scenes become repetitive after a point and are not necessarily logically motivated. Yet, this activity is strictly asymmetrical. Viewers are just objects of interaction, never true participants. They may mount the stage, if given permission, but then they can only move based on actors' instructions, thus remaining in children's roles. They pelt Woyzeck with peas (only cautiously, of course) when instructed to do so. Thus, they play us like an elementary school class." NAGY Klára, "Rocksztárok: A Sztalker Csoport portréja," *Színház* 52, no. 4 (2019): 18–21, 9.

[21] This studio space in the National Theatre building is named after a famous deceased actor.

refrigerator, traversing what constitutes, for themselves and Marie, the real world, be it soap operas, prime-time shows, home renovation programs, porn, or nature films. As figures like Dumbledore and Gandalf, but most of all Señor 'Ciao-Ciao' Drum Major, they create a pseudo life sphere where only a few, relatively slow, and therefore intimate moments lend it a sense of reality. By virtue of these sequences, they are the moments from Woyzeck and Marie's coexistence when the viewers' gaze, accustomed to the multimedia chaos, simply rests on the two actors observing each other and performing everyday acts, such as spreading butter on bread and then on each other. Thus, the infidelity is experienced close up, as is the murder, which is staged as an embrace.[22]

This montage technique, defining Büchner's fragments as episodes repeated over and over, undoubtedly brings the nerves of viewers used to 'classical' theatre spectacle and sound to the breaking point. What is more, the rhythm is very akin to the speed with which surfers on Instagram register and change images. This most likely accounts for the show's large number of young fans. With these tableaux, which are unbelievably energetic and utterly theatrical (or 'South American' insofar as it conjures a state of soap opera addiction), it differs from Mátyás Péter Szabó's and Máté Hegymegi's directions, albeit not in the same way.

In the case of Mátyás Péter Szabó at MU Theatre, spectators are surrounded by a snow-white lawn. The production, which takes place among black boxes that can be moved and played with, is an "intellectual game [staging] the illogical visionary world of a soul tormented by madness.".[23] The static play of the abstract spatial design provides a layered snapshot of the drama's fragments. For example, the Drum Major, stepping on boxes, enchants Marie, who gazes up from the ground, but is later elevated from her inferiority with shoes (instead of earrings) and spatial elements carried to her feet. The constant noise of packing boxes (the shoving, pulling, and sliding of spatial elements, as well as the slamming of lids open and closed) provides an aural tapestry, intensifying the production's consistently spooky sound. The symbolism defines Woyzeck and Andres, dressed alike in white, as mutual alter egos in contrast with the Captain and Doctor, wearing black costumes; in addition to Marie, who wears purple and climaxes to the accompaniment of a confetti cannon. The caring Fool, who cradles the small child, has no place in this world. The Doctor, as a mental hygienist, becomes an increasing burden. The parable of the essentially metaphoric nature of language and the unfathomability of reality is not spoken by the Grandma but by Andres, played by 'Palkó,' whose name refers both to the actor (Pál Kárpáti) and the smallest, poorest hero of folk tales. That is, this Nietzschean anti-fairy tale that illustrates Woyzek's alienation (practically a pre-figuration of Christ) becomes, in this case, the origin of a very topical twenty-first-century identity narrative. The key to this is how Közért Company worked with Péter Kárpáti's improvisation method during rehearsals.[24] The characters'

[22] Cf. "The perception in a Big Cit and the turned impatient seek acceleration and find it in the theatre." Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt a. Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999), 102.

[23] BALASSA, "»Mint egy nyitott borotva…«," 82.

[24] "In traditional improvisation, the scene's dramaturgy is predetermined. Let's say a couple lies in bed at night, but the woman cannot sleep because she wants to break up, and she wakes the man. Such a traditional breakup scene generally goes quickly. If the actors are inspired and pay attention to each other, it can even be moving. Yet, it could only be more moving if the man actually realises, she wishes to leave him in the course of the story. Then, his breath truly stops, he becomes defenceless, and every reaction is spontaneous, surprising even to himself. He

behavioural analysis, nourished by the given actor's life experience, not only influenced the text but also 'locked' Woyzeck's identity performance emphatically in the first person singular personality. In addition, the singularity of the story is emphasised by the epilogue. In a canon, the actors read out murders that actually happened in their lifetimes, to which the following could apply without exception:

> "A young man in his late 20s, already estranged from his family, is, however, incapable of fulfilling the expected male role in his own family. He is compelled to do work where there is no chance of promotion and no chance to resign, experiencing daily humiliations from his superiors. In exchange for survival, the young man is utterly at the mercy of the system."[25]

Similar to Mátyás Péter Szabó, Máté Hegymegi also constructs his production by concentrating on the title character's identity narrative. The wisest and most placid (practically omnipotent) figure in this world—standing grey in a sea of black, woven of dimly and intermittently lit images—is the Barker/Fool. Woyzeck is the only character who hears what he says. He prompts Franz Woyzeck where to hide the knife, and, in the final stage picture, he changes places with the man, whose age only he knows. His position, reporting on this world without God or free will (testifying to the knowledge of Büchner, who was versed in Nietzsche) is occupied by the tree situated in the centre of the stage picture and rising from a circular-shaped pit with its roots of braided ropes. This stark set element not only lends the Biblical motifs of Woyzeck's vision a logical unity, but it also arranges the show's vectorial movements into concentric circles. Although the Szkéné's circular stage is incapable of rotating, the actors' movement of scenery creates a kinetic rotating stage, thanks to which everyone without exception is locked in their personal spheres, revolving around a "devastated Paradise."[26] The homes of the Captain, the Doctor, Marie, and the two soldiers (Woyzeck and Andres) are represented by one piece of furniture each (twin chairs from a hospital waiting room, a lampshade attached to an IV stand, a window frame, and a tub, respectively) while the often slow-motion circular movement constantly pulls the ground out from underneath them. What is also palpable in the Hegymegi direction is the killing in the prologue, staged as a sexual act beside the tree trunk and repeated three times with increasing carnality and vehemence, signalling that this is Woyzeck's only possible decision: murder. Also, this murderous embrace, which liberates this (abstract) world from sin and mankind from its (actual) mortal coils, will last until the body of the man (bearing the burden of a backpack full of rubble) and the woman (nursing a rope baby while unable to pray under a window frame held by the Drum Major) occupy their bloody resting place in the cavity under the tree's roots.

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knows it is not real, just improvisation, but due to the unexpected traumatic twist, he lacks the intellectual power to go on shaping the events artistically. Thus, he loses perspective and simply lives the situation. This is one basis of our technique – that none of the cards are on the table, there is no clear situation, and all the actors know only as much as they would wish to know if all this happened to them in real life." KÁRPÁTI Péter, "Létezés-impró: A valóságszimulációs improvizáció," in *Dogmaszínház: Egyfelvonásosok*, ed. HERCZOG Noémi, 7–20 (Budapest: SzFE, 2019), 9.

[25] SZABÓ Mátyás Péter, *Woyzeck*, accessed 03.08.2023, https://www.theater.hu/hu/szinhazak/szinhazi-bazis--230/eloadasok/woyzeck--10132.html

[26] TÖRÖK Ákos, "Emberpanoptikum: A *Woyzeck* Hegymegi Máté rendezésében – Szkéné Színház"," *Színház* 51, no. 11 (2018): 21–24, 22.

In this case, too, staging the title character's alienation comprises the production's point of integration. Just as Márk Nagy's Woyzeck's "billboard-loneliness"[27] places the focus on him in contrast to the multimedia chaos, and Zoltán Szabó is singled out by his character's lily-white self (which, like a protective shield, resists cloning), Erik Major's acting becomes the focal point, as it ceaselessly differs from the acting technique that surrounds him. He has nothing to do with the self-centred psychological realism of the Captain (who delivers his monologues as a reclining patient undergoing therapy) or the female Doctor (who is often reminiscent of the cold, confining Refrigerator Mother archetype). The older actors' psychological role interpretation acquires weight because both the raw, energetic gestures and Erik Major's abstract series of movements (for example, during the shaving, when he slowly climbs into every possible part of the chair provided) place palpable quotation marks in the manifestation of physical acts. Yet, this showcased artificiality endows it with the enclosed air of a puppet show, typifying the Ringmaster's scenes and the Drum Major's testosterone-filled vitality. Their aggressive roughness provides an exquisite counterpoint both to the obedient meekness in the young man's expression and the choreography built upon contact dance. Woyzeck, while lying on the Fool, exercises his prize-worthy aberration; or, when leaning and draped on Andres' body in the tub or above the pit, Woyzeck strives to move as much and however the empirical situation and gravity allow.

It is symptomatic how these directions spotlight or neglect the dual-layered reading of Büchner's text: as a drama or an allegory of mankind. For example, at MU Theatre, the lines of *Woyzeck* referring to Christ's age reduced to legendary numbers ("Hence, today I am 30 years, 7 months, and 12 days old.") remain untouched. At Szkéné, the spoken information ("I am 25 years, 7 months, and 12 days old.") corresponds to that of Daniel Schmolling, the military barber executed in Leipzig on 27 August 1824. In Vidnyánszky Jr.'s direction, Márk Nagy gives his own date of birth as Woyzeck's. That is, the directions of the Z Generation preserve their Woyzecks from the variety of life that surrounds them, thus endowing them with a central function.[28] The first is removed from the unbridled orgy of 'true-story' applied scene improvisation, conceived during rehearsals at the National Theatre. The second is isolated from the MU Theatre's boxes, which are presumed to be real and (according to the rewritten fairy tale) "are used only one day of the year when the time comes for them to be decorated with flowers, passed from hand to hand amidst great celebration, only to be thrown away and stomped in the mud the next day." The third is delivered from the petrified world of Franz Woyzeck, who runs around the uprooted Tree of Eden in Szkéné Theatre but is also running from himself.

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[27] This is a reference to the poem *Négysoros* [Four-line] by János Pilinszky: "Sleeping nails in the ice cold sand. / Nights soaked in billboard-loneliness. / You left the lights on in the corridor. / Today will my blood be shed." Translated by Anna Klein.

[28] It is exciting to view this meek alienation as three variations of the "personal despair" typical of the trend called "Neo-Identity". Cf. HERCZOG Noémi, "Újszemélyesség: A kortárs magyar színház új irányai," *Színház* 48, no. 4 (2015): 7–13.

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British Theatre in the Age of Anxieties: The Dystopian Turn

MÁRIA KURDI

Merle TÖNNIES and Eckart VOIGTS, eds. *Twenty-first Century Anxieties: Dys/utopian Spaces and Contexts in Contemporary British Theatre*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022. 260 p.

The present book is volume no. thirty-two in the series "*CDE (Contemporary Drama in English) Studies*" (current series editor: Annette Pankratz), which is affiliated with the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English. In terms of the established practice of the society, they hold meetings hosted at respective universities across the German-speaking countries every year, where the participants are experts of drama and theatre from other parts of Europe too. Selected papers from these conferences or workshops make up the material of the CDE volumes. The society also started a peer-reviewed journal, *JCDE* (*Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*), which is operated by an international editorial board. Thus, uniquely, Germany can boast of having important forums of dedicated scholarly research into contemporary drama in English. The studies in the volume reviewed here focus on contemporary British theatre from the special viewpoint of representing twenty-first-century anxieties of different sources and are authored by scholars—from Germany, Britain, and elsewhere—who bring a considerable range of approaches and opinions to the discussion of the main subject and its corollaries. While they tend to deal with drama texts primarily, some of the authors call attention to the innovative features of certain performances staged within or outside theatre buildings.

"Anxieties" in the title of the book are identified and commented on at some length by all of the authors who point to them, explicitly or implicitly, as a source of negative inspiration for the playwrights and theatre makers explored in the contributors' respective papers. It is, of course, difficult to isolate a group of just twenty-first-century works that respond to specific anxieties, given that eminent playwrights who feature in several papers of *Twenty-first Century Anxieties*, Caryl Churchill (1938) and Martin Crimp (1956) in particular, have built up an oeuvre that has developed for decades up to the present. Their respective works of many years demonstrate continuity in several ways, for instance, tending to anticipate anxieties more fully experienced by humankind only in the 2000s. Also, the present collection testifies to the legacy of especially the "in-yer-face theatre" of the 1990s, referring to Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh, and others, while even some recognisable haunting of the well-made-play, which has had a long history in the British theatre world, can be traced in post-millennial British drama. Concurrently, brand new voices are considered, those of authors who come up with a variety of striking formal and often genre-defying innovations to vividly stage feelings of unease caused by chaotic and unexpected climate changes, political insecurity, and unpredictable environmental catastrophes, affecting both the society and the individual on a scale not experienced and recorded before.

In their introduction, editors of the present book, Merle Tönnies and Eckart Voigts, highlight the relevance of using the terms "dystopian and utopian spaces and contexts" of the title to the discussion of the ways in which authors of twenty-first-century British "eco-drama" address the anxieties which have become part of our everyday life. They say that "[f]rom the 2000s onwards, dystopian theatre seems to be a central form that has managed to give political concerns an adequate

space" and, therefore, dominates the contemporary stage, whereas utopia, as traditionally held by many, showing "visions of a perfect and idealized world, may lack essential ingredients of drama" which makes poor theatre. However, Tönnies and Voigts add that utopia carries a new potential for the stage these days by finding its way into dystopian plots and dramaturgies as a hopeful vision of resistance to situations of apparently unavoidable danger (3-4). The characteristic interconnectedness of utopia and dystopia, suggested to be dissimilar to their usually more separate presence in other literary genres, becomes a major thematic line in the volume. Most of the contributors ambitiously formulate their own standpoint regarding this relation through analyses of selected contemporary British plays and their dramaturgies. Also, several contributors underline and confirm the observation and idea that it is neoliberal politics and its disruptive social consequences, which generate anxiety in individuals over sensing, albeit not always consciously, the lack of any kind of alternatives. These two interacting parallel strands constitute the shaping forces behind much of contemporary British drama, manifest in the dystopian/utopian spaces' impact on dramaturgies and the anxieties within neoliberal contexts, impacting the choice of themes.

The first paper in the collection, *"Something's Missing": Feeling the Structures of Project Neoliberal Dystopia* by Elaine Aston, sets the tone by stating that utopia and dystopia are "[t]wo interconnecting threads of a double-sided fabric," suggesting that they can even coalesce. She also expounds how that strong link can be understood in theatrical practice: "[…] when theatre engages with the social lacks created by the social inequalities and injustices of the world there is, it has the capacity to elicit utopian yearning for an alternative world that is not yet but might be" (11). Aston places "neoliberal governmentality" in a critical light as she relies on Fredric Jameson's idea that neoliberal methods of maintaining power relations have "worked hard to maintain the belief that there is no alternative," and "the one way we have been able to imagine change is 'in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe'" (19-20). Thus, as she assumes, the unshakeably dominant rule of neoliberal ideology and discourses have generated polarising practices and feelings of dissatisfaction. The play text the critic addresses in some detail is Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016), in which three elderly women are talking with each other in a garden. An Edenic scene, one might presume, but also calling to mind both Beckett's *Come and Go* (1976) with its flower-named female protagonists imparting secrets two by two about the third woman and the timeless birthday party at the beginning of Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), where the women characters talk past each other. As in the earlier Churchill play, the dramaturgical strategy in *Escaped Alone* relies on monologues too, contrasting the seemingly collective yet fragmented conversation. These give voice to "individual terrors" in Aston's wording (21), complemented by monologues of Mrs. J, an outsider to the company, which convey a more general feeling of impending catastrophe. Aston's reference to moments of "intensified affect" (22) describes the nature of Mrs. J's inserted texts precisely, which function as indicators of a half-hidden context behind the characters' sense of some menacing future even worse than the present. *Escaped Alone* experiments with new forms of character construction, in line with Cristina Delgado-García's claim that the term "character" needs a redefinition since much of contemporary British playwriting exposes "a discontent with ideas of subjectivity formulated around a solid idea."[1] Also, Mrs. J's oblique presence and menacing speech addressed at no one, introduces an element of

[1] Cristina DELGADO-GARCÍA, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin–Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 11.

the surreal into the drama, reminiscent of the start of *Top Girls*.

Comparably with Aston's ideas, another contributor, Trish Reid in her *Dystopian Dramaturgies: Living in the Ruins*, refers to political scientist Wendy Brown's book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: the Rise of Undemocratic Politics in the West* (2019), according to which, as Reid's words run, "while it seems clear that neoliberals and neoliberalism prepared the ground for the ruined political landscape we now inhabit, they are not necessarily its cause, at least not in a straightforward sense" (89). Prominent among Reid's examples is *Victory Condition* (2017) by Chris Thorpe, in which a nameless young couple are on the scene talking not to each other but at the audience in overlapping monologues. As Reid contends, the disjunctions in the drama "work on a number of levels and the fragmentary structure of the performance reflects the ruined history from which it arises," showing the characters alienated not only from each other but also from themselves. Nevertheless, Reid sees a utopian moment in the expression of some "egalitarian sentiment" in the Man's monologue, which "gestures towards the possibility of a better future" (95). Believe it who may, Beckett would probably say.

The paper by Anette Pankratz, *Civil Wars and Republics in Contemporary (Dystopian) Drama*, looks at works that put forms of resistance to the socially dividing effects of the neoliberal present on stage, and it is Rory Mullarkey's *The Woolf at the Door* (2014) which she introduces as a highly complex play text. Pankratz claims that the innovative technique of the playwright lies in evoking history by merging past, present, and future while treating the revolutionary acts of the people against what they think to be their enemies with a lot of irony. For instance, the English Civil War is evoked "by way of two reenactors," implying that "the historical revolution seems to have regressed into a performance devoid of meaning." There is also "comic incongruity" in Mullarkey's representation of the revolution in the here and now, Pankratz observes, because "[i]t is unclear who is fighting whom" (155-157). The author also emphasises the device of "carnivalesque reversals: the staid middle-classes turn revolutionaries; the abject move to the apex of the sociopolitical pyramid," and, for her, the play "does not present alternatives, but a shrug and a laugh" (160, 161). More than just a shrug is offered, though not a real alternative, by naming the homeless ethnic *Other* who finally becomes the new ruler, Leo Lionheart, suggesting that history may repeat itself, despite what seems to be a positive change for the moment.

Other contributors to the collection depart from some theoretical basis to ground their paper in for an exploration of the utopian/dystopian theatrical representation of the apocalyptic crisis humankind is facing. Vicky Angelaki foregrounds the spatial approach in her paper *Environment, Virus, Dystopia: Disruptive Spatial Representations*, initially emphasising that it enables a redefinition of how the dystopian mode works in the theatre. Further on, she explores the significance of space basically in two plays: Martin Crimp's *In the Valley* (2019) and Liz Tomlin's *The Cassandra Commission* (2019), which draw power from "allusion and their expansive visual horizons" (44). More importantly, Angelaki offers a new look at Churchill's *Escaped Alone* inspired by space-centred considerations. The scholar describes its strategy of throwing "spatio-temporal linearity into disarray" through "the shifts in time, space, and tone between the segments depicting the four women in the garden and Mrs J's interjecting monologues, which shift us someplace else altogether, however indeterminate" (52). Joining this, Julia Schneider's paper also tackles space in its dramaturgical importance, confirming the view that "utopias and dystopias are by definition spatial concepts" (73). Their spatiality is illustrated by the analysis of Cecilia Ahern's *Flawed* series (2016), in which a "flawed," racially *Other* character contests the dystopian space by "highly performative" (80) acts and

the creation of spaces of resistance (84) to the given constraining power relations. Foucault's *Of Other Spaces* is one of Schneider's critical sources, and features in the theoretical underpinning of some other papers too.

In '*To Watch Is Not Enough': Utopia, Performance and Hope(lesness)* Nicole Pohl argues that "performance art can be and perhaps should be both ethical witnessing and utopian performativity," as its response to the environmental crisis calls for the ethical gesture of sympathy and also action to achieve some transformative change. To expand on her belief in the positive nature of utopian desire as a catalyser of embodied critique via performance of the dystopian present and the ramifying problems generated by the uncontested rule of anthropocentrism, she adds: "[e]thical witnessing can exist even in hope(lessness), as it creates meaning, a sense of responsibility, agency, and potentiality, even if it is for a post-human world" (29). The concretising realisation of "utopian performativity" in Pohl's carefully defined understanding is then explored in some very recent plays and theatre events. Her reference to one of these demonstrates how a performance artist, Lisa Christine Woynarski, "underscores human embeddedness in ecological systems, and transforms material agency to non-human (or more-than-human) species" (37) in a devised piece titled *The Celebrated Trees of Nashville, Tennessee* (2012).

The paper *Towards a Genealogy of the British Feminist Dystopian Play* by Paola Botham draws on applicable theories of feminism. Botham contends that the "British feminist dystopian play [is] a form of political theatre [...] a progressive endeavour" in contrast with "anti-utopia as a reactionary one" because it resists closure, that is, the kind of ending conceived in terms of the ruling dystopian order. Moreover, she attributes "catachrestic" power to feminist dystopias on stage (68), borrowing a rhetorical figure from the analytical toolbox dealing with the subtleties of often women's poetry. Looking at Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* (2008), which she describes as a feminist play, Botham underscores that resistance to the male-dominated dystopian order is presented ambivalently in the play; patriarchal power does not have an end but shifts from one man to another while the female protagonist "liberates herself, yet in a violent and individualistic manner" (69). Her killing the second man who also cheats her can be called revolutionary, and the end of the play uses the iconography of the sea as feminine power where she wades into the cleansing cold water and imagines a potentially different, utopian future, which defies the pervasive rule of the dystopian present.

The title of Peter Paul Schnierer's paper speaks for itself: *Visions of Hell in Contemporary British Drama* places the theme in a broad context, surveying the iconography of purgatory and hell in Western culture, art, and theatre from Dante onwards. Among the cultural forms, drama can be distinguished by its largely ironical treatment of the diabolical; in fact, the devil was "increasingly portrayed as ridiculous," Schnierer contends, for instance, in Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass* or in "the number of Faust plays right up to the present" (202). Regarding the twenty-first century, the critic refers to some British plays, Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) and Martin McDonagh's film script *Bruges* (2008) among them, distinguished by new visions of demons and the hellish "gesture at our helplessness in the face of newer apocalypses." This seems to contradict what Schnierer said about the comic portrayal of the demonic above, but he adds as a conclusion: "[b]etter the devil you know" (208), which suggests a potential (utopian?) alteration of power relations between the indeterminate demonic menace and humankind in our time. As a thought-provoking parallel, the Irish Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* (2006, first performed in London) can be mentioned, which stages characters belonging to the lowest, down-and-out social class. A stranger from outside joins them in a game of cards; having hooves instead of feet, he is the devil incarnate; the game with him draws on the sym-

bolism of legends. The outcome is that the apparently ne'er-do-well characters manage to make him the loser. Pál Göttinger, director of the Hungarian premiere (2008, Hungarian title: *A tengeren*) said: "although the characters do not 'know' what is happening, they somehow feel it, sense it. This is why, [...] they start defending themselves. Clearly, it is only their love for each other that can save them from the Devil".[2]

Two papers ground their investigation in the dystopian view of what happens to language and communication in an age when many feel insecure and anxious about the future. Luciana Tamas's *A Description of This World as if It Were a Beautiful Place: From Avant-Garde Destruction to Dys(u)topias* evokes the disruptive textual experimentations of the avant-garde to arrive at contemporary examples that use fragmented communication, choosing them from the performance projects of the *Forced Entertainment* company. Leila Michelle Vaziri, in her *'I Am the Abyss into Which People Dread to Fall': Encountering Anxiety in Dystopian Drama*, emphasises the crossing of borders such as time, bodily pain, and the expressivity of language in the theatre of anxiety. In Scottish playwright Alistair McDowell's play *X* (2016), she explores "how, in anxiety, time and language are connected and destructed simultaneously" (189). By way of a parallel, Vaziri comments on Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* as well, seeing it as a piece representing the "economic and ethical destruction of society" through events that invade, most of all, individual lives (198).

Finally, there are two papers concerned with just one play each, by prominent authors Richard Bean and Martin Crimp, respectively. In their analyses, the authors manage to bring together and tackle a broad spectrum of the issues discussed in most of the whole collection. Mathias Göhrmann's *The Spectre of Utopia/Dystopia: The Representation of Anthropogenic Global Climate Change as Culture-War Issue in Richard Bean's The Heretic (2011)* focuses on dramatising "eco-anxiety" (166) manifest in the characters' antagonistic views regarding climate change. Bean's protagonist is a female scientist of sharp intellect, Dr. Diane Cassell, who "does not conform to hegemonic thinking patterns" (172) and remains sceptical about the changes much stressed by the rhetoric of a powerful lobby of activists that influences university politics too, with implications of financial interest. Set in the context of university management and the surrounding internal debates, *The Heretic* can be called a campus drama, a rare sub-genre in contemporary theatre, although not exceptional if we think of David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992) with its warlike clash between teacher and student. In *The Heretic*, the university proves to be a highly appropriate context to demonstrate the workings of a culture war, which divides the staff of a department (a mini society) over subscribing to the ideologically driven ideas that climate change is a formidable, immediate threat or challenging their extremities and occasional manipulative coerciveness on scientific grounds and empirical data. In our post-truth era, as Göhrmann words it, "the culture war's neoliberal qualities" are assessed by this drama, in which Diane's antagonists try to silence her while "seeking to exploit scientific research for either neoliberal profit maximisation or an oppressive green orthodoxy" (171). At the same time, Göhrmann notes that this "debate-based" drama does not lack a satirical tone either, which sweeps in the direction of both sides (171, 177). I think this basically language-driven, realistic play has its antecedent in Bernard Shaw's theatre, considering also its closing a return to "romanticised normalcy" (179), a utopian event of reconciliation that may remind us of Shavian plays like *Major Barbara* (1905) where the weighty social issues and antagonisms converge into a similarly fragile

[2] "Interview with Pál Göttinger," in *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: "Right beside the Beyond"*, ed. Lilian CHAMBERS and Eamonn JORDAN (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), 245.

"happy ending" to emphasise that a partial and temporary resolution of conflicts is possible only on the individual level.

'Hiding from the World': Dystopian Subjectivity in Martin Crimp's In the Republic of Happiness posits Ilka Zänger's idea that "Crimp's bleak visions of society doubtlessly resonate with the idea of dystopia" (209), from which her argument departs. This is a shockingly experimental play of three loosely connected parts (a structuring not unique in Crimp's oeuvre): one about the collapse of family, another about individual crisis in the throes of the expanding commodity culture, while the third one leads the reader/audience to the republic of happiness, seemingly a utopian space but proving to be a dystopian scenery of all-powered dominance versus self-loss and dementia. Zänger lends prior attention to the fate of dramatic language when she highlights that the overarching "general deterioration can be best illustrated by the use of language which is no longer the means of conversation on which human connection is built but has turned to an empty vessel of impulsive utterance often sounding artificial and bereft of human decencies," applying the refrain-like slogan of never "going deep" (212-213). Furthermore, Zänger's study joins the widening scholarly examination of Crimp's dramaturgy by stating that here "[t]he crisis of the subject becomes a crisis of conventional drama," entailing "the dissolution of dramatic form"—and that of characterisation, we might add (218).

All in all, the papers in this absolutely resourceful CDE collection present a convincingly detailed picture of multiple layers of the ways in which utopia and dystopia intertwine and reinforce each other's role in the theatrical making of meaning. The authors, ranging from distinguished professors to emerging scholars and PhD candidates, offer in-depth analyses of aspects of the overall subject in several respective dramatic works which represent an important, renewed, and renewing aesthetic trend in contemporary British playwriting. Also, the papers include contextualised references to several other plays and playwrights, inviting fellow scholars and doctoral students to contribute to an ongoing worldwide scholarship by addressing them in theoretical framings complementary to those employed by these authors with so much professional zeal and ambition.

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About a (not so) Small Revolution

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

Peter M. BOENISCH, ed. *The Schaubühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing Realism*. London: Methuen Drama, 2022. 208 p.

How can you write a synthesising work of theatre history about an institution that is still in operation today? This collection of essays, edited by Peter M. Boenisch and written in collaboration with a dozen theatre scholars and theatre practitioners, offers a possible answer to this question by examining the first twenty years of the Schaubühne Berlin's recent history from different perspectives. The book constructs a narrative that—and this is very important!—has not been interrupted, has not ended, and is still *happening*. In addition, some of the performances discussed in the book are still in the repertoire and can be seen in Berlin or around the world, allowing readers to compare them with their own experiences. And most importantly, Thomas Ostermeier, who, at the turn of the millennium, re-founded or at least re-conceptualised the Schaubühne's work from the ground up, is still its director and a leading figure of contemporary German theatre.

This is not the first encounter between German theatre scholar Peter M. Boenisch, who currently teaches and conducts research at the University of Aarhus, and Thomas Ostermeier. His 2016 monograph, co-authored with the director, offers a thorough and distinctive introduction to the director's intellectual workshop.[1] At that time, Ostermeier and his close collaborators reflected on his working methods and aesthetics; now, members of the academic community contribute their perspectives, positioning him in a broader context on the extensive map of contemporary world theatre.[2] This new multi-perspective volume, edited by Boenisch, is particularly notable for its breadth and diversity. And although some of the essays may seem out of place at first reading, by the end of the volume it becomes clear why it was necessary to bring together seemingly less fitting pieces of the mosaic.

The title clearly and decisively defines the focus of the investigation while also elevating Ostermeier to a 'demigod' status by implying that what has happened and is happening on and around the three stages of the Schaubühne in the 21st century is primarily—or even exclusively—his doing. Compiling a two-hundred-page book on a stage director who remains highly active, with contributions from a dozen experts, inherently carries the risk that the analysis will focus only on his successes—essentially canonising his career as a triumph. Without disputing the validity of this perspective, it is still worth noting that this book serves as a monument to Ostermeier and the theatre model he has led so effectively. At the same time, it is important to highlight another crucial point: precisely for this reason, the book's most unexpectedly compelling moments arise when it explores

[1] Peter M. BOENISCH and Thomas OSTERMEIER, *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier* (Routledge, 2016).

[2] Ostermeier is one of the most analysed directors among the active creators of contemporary world theatre. In addition to the volumes already mentioned, see, for example, Gerhard JÖRGER und Thomas OSTERMEIER, *Ostermeier* (Theater der Zeit, 2016); Jitka PELECHOVÁ, *Le théâtre de Thomas Ostermeier* (Centre d'études théâtrales, 2017); Delphine EDY, *Thomas Ostermeier: Explorer l'autre face du réel pour recréer* (Presses du Reel, 2022).

failures and shortcomings—instances where the best intentions did not translate into success.

From the book, Ostermeier emerges as a notably self-reflective and self-critical artist and company director. One of the most compelling chapters is a lengthy interview in which he candidly responds to Clare Finburgh Delijani's questions, including Schaubühne's stance on inclusivity and diversity. Ostermeier acknowledges that while the cornerstone of his theatre-making credo is addressing the struggles of marginalised groups, the Schaubühne as an institution falls short of reflecting the diversity of contemporary German society.[3] He identifies the failure of the 'enforced democracy' introduced within the company after he became director as the greatest failure of his career: actors were interested neither in receiving equal pay nor in being restricted from working outside the Schaubühne. Similar initiatives are not unprecedented in the history of Western theatre (consider Ariane Mnouchkine's commune-like operating principles at the Théâtre du Soleil) nor, as we shall see, in the history of the Schaubühne itself.

The collection of essays, divided into three chapters of almost equal length, explores the phenomena of the **'**Schaubühne' and **'**Ostermeier', as well as their intersections, from multiple perspectives. The history of the institution and the portrait of the director continuously reflect one another throughout this kaleidoscopic volume. The four essays in the first section focus on the institution (*The Schaubühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing an Institution*), while the five essays in the second section examine the director and his work (*Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne: Reinventing 'Directors' Theatre'*). The third section, comprising five additional essays, offers indirect insights into the institution, the director, and his environment through case studies addressing specific subtopics (*The Schaubühne's Experiment Across Forms and Borders: Towards a New Realism*).

The central keyword of the volume—also emphasised in the subtitle—is realism and its flexible, continuously evolving forms across time and space. For this reason, the volume does not define a single, fixed concept of realism. Instead, the authors approach the term through their own frameworks, at times even developing distinct typologies. A striking example of this is provided by Marvin Carlson, who organises the terms 'socialist realism,' 'capitalist realism,' and 'Ostermeier realism' in chronological order, examining the history of the Schaubühne in parallel with Ostermeier's directing career.[4] The volume's editor, Peter M. Boenisch, further refines the final phase identified in Carlson's essay by distinguishing different forms of 'Ostermeier realism' along both chronological and thematic lines.[5] According to Boenisch, after the early 'in-yer-face realism' practised on the studio stage of the Deutsches Theatre's Barracke and later in the early years of the Schaubühne's administration (*Shopping and Fucking, Human Circle, Woyzeck*), the early 2000s ushered in Ostermeier's era of 'neo(n)realism', which focused on middle-class experiences—exemplified by his Ibsen adaptations and American family dramas. According to Boenisch, the era of 'reflective realism' began with *Hamlet*, a production that exposed the cracks in the staged fictional world, allowing the audience to glimpse contemporary reality—a world in crisis.

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[3] "'Audiences Know Their Cause will be Treated': Making Political Theatre at the Schaubühne: Thomas Ostermeier in Conversation with Clare Finburgh Delijani," in *The Schabühne Berlin under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing Realism*, ed. Peter M. Boenisch (Methuen Drama, 2022), 48–49.

[4] Marvin Carlson, "Socialist Realism, Capitalist Realism, Ostermeier Realism," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 53–65.

[5] Peter M. Boenisch, "Confronting the Present: Thomas Ostermeier's Post-Conceptual Regietheater," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 105–119.

The foundation of the entire undertaking lies in the short, well-structured mission statement, written in 1999 by the four individuals who took over the theatre—Thomas Ostermeier, Jens Hillje, Sasha Waltz, and Jochen Sandig—who collectively assumed the responsibilities of artistic direction. This mission statement has now been published in full for the first time in English, translated by Peter M. Boenisch. Calling for a 'new realism' throughout, the manifesto states: "Realism is not the simple depiction of the world as it looks. It is the view onto the world through an attitude that demands for change, born from pain and injury, which become the reason for making art in order to take revenge on the world for its blindness and stupidity. It attempts to comprehend and to express these realities, and to refigure them."[6] The manifesto concludes with a vision of long-time and new audience members sitting peacefully together as they watch contemporary dramas unfold on stage. The authors of the text assert that, should this vision be realised, 'a small revolution'[7] could take place—not just in Berlin, but beyond. The volume as a whole serves as a rich reflection on this mission statement: nearly two decades after Ostermeier's Schaubühne debut, it is an opportune moment for both a summary and (self)evaluation. The 2020 date of the book's editing and production also marks another significant anniversary: Peter Stein assumed leadership of the Schaubühne in 1970, exactly thirty years before Ostermeier. During Stein's fifteen-year tenure, German *Regietheater* was born, shaped by the influential directors who worked there. The first section of the book, which focuses on institutional history, presents a fragmented yet panoramic theatre history rather than a strictly detailed and chronological account. The preface already highlights the theatre's founding fathers from 1962, about whom Erika Fischer-Lichte, employing a diachronic approach, offers a more detailed historical commemoration by interpreting the present in light of the past.[8] In 1962, theatre students from Freie Universität founded a new theatre, Berliner Schaubühne, where Klaus Michael Grüber, Peter Stein, Peter Zadek, and others soon began their work. Stein assumed leadership in 1970, introducing *Mitbestimmung* (joint decision-making with all theatre employees) and *Vollversammlung* (a monthly general assembly), making the Schaubühne Germany's first democratic theatre. It is instructive to see that thirty years later, Ostermeier's determined attempts to implement similar democratic principles were met with resistance from the company—underscoring the stark differences between Berlin in the 1970s and the 2000s. Just as Stein's vision of opening up to international collaboration was ultimately realised, Ostermeier transformed the Schaubühne into a truly international ensemble through frequent touring. The significance of this evolution must be understood in the broader context of globalisation and festivalisation.

Ramona Mosse's insightful study conceptualises the Schaubühne as a building, an institution, and a socio-cultural experiment, framing it as a phenomenon that oscillates between the local and the global.[9] She draws a parallel between Berlin's rapid internationalisation in the early 2000s and the Schaubühne's emergence as a global company, while also emphasising the key concept of 'out-of-place'—a notion that ensures the

[6] Thomas OSTERMEIER, Jens HILLJE, Sasha WALTZ and Jochen SANDIG, "The First Season: The Mission (1999)," in *The Schaubühne Berlin…*, 4.

[7] Ibid. 6.

[8] Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, "Between Philosophical and Sociological Theatre: The Political Regietheater of Peter Stein and Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne Berlin," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 7–21.

[9] Ramona MOSSE, "The Schaubühne's Civic Mission in the Age of Globalization: An Imaginary Island that Probes Society," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 22–38.

institution's continuous transformation. This idea is reinforced by initiatives such as the annual international festival FIND and the *Pearson's Preview* blog on the Schaubühne website. The metaphors used in the study to describe the Schaubühne building, originally constructed as a cinema in the 1920s and converted into a theatre in 1981, are particularly evocative: a 'small, habitable island', a UFO on earth, and, since Ostermeier's landmark Ibsen production *The Enemy of the People*, a 'civic space', a site for testing democratic processes. This train of thought is further developed in the important interview with Ostermeier, referenced earlier. In addition to offering a precise and insightful historical overview, the interview serves as a valuable window into the director's personal artistic manifesto. Ostermeier's commitment to democracy and audience participation remains a central priority, as does his rejection of the traditional divide between low and high culture—a perspective he traces directly back to English Renaissance theatre: "For me, theatre is the art of entertainment, and all my senses need to be stimulated."[10]

The interview serves as a transition into the second part of the book, which focuses on Ostermeier as a director. The previously mentioned study by Marvin Carlson examines the presence and evolution of the realist tradition within Ostermeier's oeuvre. The trajectory of his career from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s is unconventional, and the author also reflects on why Ostermeier achieved significant success with classical drama. The key to this success, in Carlson's view, lies in the consistent use of a contemporary perspective, which he analyses primarily—but not exclusively—through Ostermeier's Ibsen adaptations. Shakespeare's works, which have been notably marginalised in the mentioned studies, take centre stage in the next two essays. Jitka Goriaux Pelechová compiles a director's guidebook, examining six of Ostermeier's Shakespearean productions—*A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, Othello, Measure for Measure, Richard III,* and *Twelfth Night*—to establish a typology and, presumably due to space constraints, an analytical framework that is not fully elaborated.[11] She identifies the contemporary perspective in these productions through elements such as scenography, a concept she defines in her study as directorial 'fabrication', storytelling, epic narrative, and exposed theatricality—all of which extend Ostermeier's Shakespearean stagings beyond conventional realism into symbolic expression and pure theatricality. This framework is immediately challenged by Elisa Leroy's compelling study of *Hamlet*. She examines the Schaubühne's legendary production, which has been running since 2008 and continues to sell out, analysing it across multiple temporal and spatial contexts.[12] The validity of this diachronic reading is reinforced by Ostermeier himself, who, in a 2019 interview, described *Hamlet* as a 'breathing organism'. Reading the essay, it becomes evident that, despite the production's rigorously structured framework, there remains ample room for improvisation—a freedom that Lars Eidinger, Ostermeier's iconic Hamlet, fully exploits. Over the years, the once well-defined boundary between the character of Hamlet and the German actor Lars Eidinger has become increasingly blurred.

The following short essay introduces a sudden shift in perspective: Igor de Almeida Silva contemplates what German theatre, particularly the Schaubühne, looks like from

[10] Finburgh Delijani, "'Audiences Know…," 49.

[11] Jitka Goriaux Pelechová, "Thomas Ostermeier's Shakespeare Productions: The Mise en Action of Canonical Plays," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 66–80.

[12] Elisa Leroy, "Hamlet Out of Joint: Variations on a Theme in Thomas Ostermeier's Production, 2008–20," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*…, 81–94.

Brazil.[13] His reflections are prompted by the guest performance of *The Enemy of the People* in São Paulo in 2013, which unexpectedly took on new significance due to a major protest occurring at the time. Once again, the focus is on the ruptures within the classical dramatic text: despite the fact that the Brazilian press largely engaged with the Ibsen production through a lens of 'silent resonance', the author interprets the performance in direct relation to the political realities of contemporary Brazilian theatre and dance. In the final essay, Peter M. Boenisch, the editor of the volume, synthesises and defines Ostermeier's directorial credo within a typology of realism. Central to this discussion is the concept of political theatre, a recurring theme throughout the volume. Boenisch highlights critical reflection, the emphasis on recognition rather than identification, and the notion of the stage as a laboratory—all key aspects of Ostermeier's approach.

In fact, the four case studies in the final section of the book could serve as an introduction to a forthcoming edited volume. These analyses offer a glimpse into the wide-ranging and diverse work that has taken place at the Schaubühne over the past twenty years. The reader may feel a sense of relief as Ostermeier finally ventures beyond his own stagings at the Schaubühne. In other words, the book acknowledges that the theatre's creative landscape extends beyond Ostermeier's productions. Of particular significance is Jens Hillje's essay. A founding member of Ostermeier's initial team, Hillje became a key dramaturg during the first ten years of the Schaubühne's transformation.[14] He reframes the Brechtian connection already emphasised by Fischer-Lichte, defining the spectators as 'citizens of our society'. In his view, the active collaboration between invited directors and the theatre's established audience has led to the development of 'a theatre of real societal relevance'. This transformation has been shaped by key figures such as Sasha Waltz, who was involved from the beginning, as well as Constanza Macras, Falk Richter, and Luk Perceval—not to mention the playwrights associated with the institution. Following this, Hillje's study examines the methods of Richter, Perceval, and Ostermeier. In the next study, Benjamin Fowler introduces another compelling dialogue between directors: Ostermeier and Katie Mitchell.[15] Their parallel approaches highlight both differences and similarities in their directing methods—for example, in their respective productions of *Wunschkonzert*, as well as in Ostermeier's legendary *Hamlet* and Mitchell's *Ophelias Zimmer*, which engages in a creative dialogue with it. Fowler's sensitive analysis also addresses a critical issue within Ostermeier's theatre: are women truly given an equal position within the institution? Additionally, his study presents a challenge for future theatre historians, arguing that the history of a theatre should not be seen as a mere succession of independently staged performances but rather as an ongoing and evolving dialogue. Marina Ceppi then provides a thematic perspective by analysing FIND, the Schaubühne's annual international theatre festival, which takes place every spring. She examines it through the lens of the 'rage' of South American theatre,[16] particularly from Mexico and Chile, drawing connections with an earlier study of Ostermeier's visit to Brazil. Finally,

[13] Igor de ALMEIDA SILVA, "Sensing the North: Thomas Ostermeier and the Schaubühne in Brazil," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 95–104.

[14] Jens HILLJE, "The Schaubühne's Experiment Across Forms and Borders: Towards a New Realism," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 123–140.

[15] Benjamin FOWLER, "Re-scripting Realism: Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 141–158.

[16] Marina CEPPI, "Encountering the Rage from the South: Latin American Theatre at the Schaubühne's FIND Festival," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 159–172.

Sabine Huschka explores the status of contemporary dance at the Schaubühne.[17] She focuses on figures such as Waltz, Macras, and Anouk van Dijk, noting that while dance was once a vital component of the theatre's revival, it has since been gradually overshadowed by theatre.

The volume is elegantly framed by a wide-ranging essay by Hans-Thies Lehmann, a leading figure in German theatre theory.[18] One of the key elements of the 1999 mission statement was the creation of a dialogue between theatre and dance, a vision that gradually faded into the background following Waltz's departure. In this essay, Lehmann interweaves personal impressions, critical observations, and theoretical considerations within the context of Falk Richter and Anouk van Dijk's collaborative production, *TRUST***,** which premiered in 2009. It is worth quoting the final sentences of the opening paragraph of his essay: "These spaces indicate: this is about discourse. Theatre here is part of a wider, general social field of reflection, to which it seeks to contribute with its own means: physicality, poetry, visuality, musicality."[19] These lines extend beyond a single production; they encapsulate the essence of the Schaubühne, as it continues to be revitalised under the direction of Thomas Ostermeier.

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[17] Sabine HUSCHKA, "Performing Bodies as a Scenic Playground of Social Realities: Choreographic Theatre at the Schaubühne Berlin," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 173–190.

[18] Hans-Thies LEHMANN, "REST/less EXHAUSTION, SEMI-CALM: Some Notes on Falk Richter's and Anouk van Dijk's Trust," in *The Schaubühne Berlin*..., 191–201.

[19] Ibid. 191.

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Present Rewritten for the Future

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

Milo RAU. *Theatre is Democracy in Small. Art, Society, Resistance*. Berchem: EPO, 2022. 191 p.

If we claim that the Swiss-born Milo Rau is one of, if not the most, influential creators in Western theatre in the 2020s, we are barely scratching the surface. Since 2024, Rau has been the artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, Central Europe's high-budget performing arts festival, reshaping and transforming the event under the global slogan *Free Republic of Vienna*. He pursues this mission with such conviction and determination that it raises questions even among his most devoted supporters—not to mention the local politicians of the extreme right. As a firm believer and practitioner of the principle of 'permanent revolution'[1], Rau is rethinking institutional frameworks from the ground up, testing the patience and adaptability of the festival's patrons, participating artists, and ultimately, the ticket-buying audience. (His activities in this regard can also be read as a commentary on the failed strategies employed in handling the impact of Covid on the performing arts. As Rau has repeatedly emphasised, it is sheer hypocrisy and self-deception to pretend that everything can return to 'normal' after the pandemic subsided.)

I believe the most fascinating aspect of Rau's grand experiment is precisely this: how one can steer a long-established, safely operating "corporation" off its well-trodden path—or at the very least, nudge it in a different direction. A factory that exists independently of the artistic director and where the person appointed to lead is, at best, just another cog in the vast machinery. Recognising this seemingly simple truth requires a high degree of self-discipline and self-reflection on the part of the "CEO". As Rau himself notes in the volume under review: "...an institution you happen to become artistic director of, for a finite amount of time, is a machine that has already functioned for a long time and that will continue to function after you are gone."[2]

Will Milo Rau produce a similarly reflective summary at the end of his tenure as director of the Wiener Festwochen, akin to *Theatre is Democracy in Small*, published in 2022? Between 2018 and 2023, Rau served as the artistic director of NTGent, the city theatre of Ghent, Belgium, and the internal logic of this volume is primarily shaped by the theoretical considerations and practical events of that period. The book offers insights not only into the creative processes behind certain productions but also into the thinkers and artists—writers, philosophers, and theatre-makers—whose work and ideas Rau considers worth following. Additionally, it sheds light on what the city theatre of the future could be (or could have been) in light of the practical experiences surrounding the implementation of the highly influential *Ghent Manifesto*, issued by Rau and his collaborators in 2018. As for the rhetorical question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, the answer is, in all likelihood, yes—if only because Milo Rau is one of the few theatre-makers who diligently and systematically document their own work.

It cannot be emphasised enough that Rau's productions do not exist solely on stage

[1] Florian MALZACHER, *„'My Leadership Model is Permanent Revolution': Milo Rau"*, Spike Art Magazine, https://spikeartmagazine.com/articles/interview-leadership-model-permanent-revolution-milo-rau, accessed: 10 February 2025.

[2] Milo RAU, *Theatre is Democracy in Small: Art, Society, Resistance* (EPO: 2022), 166.

but also extend beyond and around it—one need only consider his documentary films capturing rehearsal processes, the *Golden Books* series co-published by NTGent, numerous other publications, and the countless round-table discussions, symposiums, live-streamed and archived conversations, and lectures featuring him and his collaborators. On one level, *Theatre is Democracy in Small* encapsulates everything Rau stands for and has accomplished as the artistic director of NTGent. On another, it serves as a practical guide for those who believe that the ultimate essence and purpose of theatre is not merely to produce an endless series of new premieres but to change the world.

Although Milo Rau is credited as the sole author on the book's cover—clearly identifying and emphasising the brand that his name has become in recent years—the voices of his NTGent collaborators are also present throughout its pages. This decision carries several implications. Firstly, it is unsurprising that the questions and remarks from his colleagues largely align with Rau's own perspective, even as individual distinctions emerge. Secondly, the book, comprising texts originally created for different purposes and audiences, contains a significant amount of repetition and parallel ideas. This is not a criticism but a fact—one that further underscores the importance of the educational aspect of Rau's work, which constitutes a substantial part of his artistic practice.

A significant portion of the texts compiled in the volume consists of *speeches* delivered on special occasions—such as a theatre season opening or a ceremony awarding an honorary doctorate degree—presented to an audience that presumably supports the speaker and agrees with their statements. By their very nature, these texts lack the possibility of direct feedback and can be read more as declarations made for a particular occasion. However, the backbone of the book, as well as its longest chapter, is fortunately structured around an intellectually invigorating four-part *dialogue* between critic and dramaturg Marijn Lems and Milo Rau, organised around key thematic focal points.

Dialogue itself is one of the fundamental concepts shaping Milo Rau's artistic thinking. Before delving into the summaries of individual chapters, here is a brief list of the most frequently recurring terms in the book: *real*, *reality*, *representation*, *distance*, *violence*, *tragedy*, *process*, *resistance*, *change*, *institution*, *community*. While the conceptual network woven around these terms may seem overly broad, it is important to emphasise that neither Rau nor his collaborators attempt to offer ready-made formulas in the book. Instead, they synthesise experiences accumulated over varying timeframes and articulate their hopes and aspirations. As a result, *Theatre is Democracy in Small* becomes both an empirically grounded account of lived experiences and a forum for sharing best practices. At the same time, it is also a utopian handbook—one that some will read with longing, while others may approach it with scepticism and disbelief.

The book, divided into four chapters, begins with a concise foreword by Lily Maeve Climenhaga, who studied Milo Rau's work as part of her doctoral research. She successfully accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of summarising, within just a few pages, the future-orientated thinking that characterises Rau's theatre—one that deliberately brackets the here-and-now nature of theatrical performance. Already in this introduction, she touches on the concept of *global realism*,[3] introduced by Rau, which situates local inequalities and injustices within the framework of a global supply chain. Climenhaga highlights that Rau does not believe in storytelling for its own sake, nor in the idea that theatre audiences will take to the streets to protest power structures after a show. Instead, he maintains

[3] Milo RAU, *Globaler Realismus. Goldenes Buch I* (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018).

that the potential inherent in theatre can be made real, and that this, in turn, can genuinely generate change. The possibility of failure is inherently embedded in such an undertaking, yet this should not be cause for despair; rather, it should be taken as a serious invitation to *listen, learn, and try*.

The first section of the book comprises *The Art of Resistance*, a speech Milo Rau delivered at the 2018 Hannah Arendt Tage. Rau did his homework: as he repeatedly emphasises, while his starting point was Arendt's seminal *The Banality of Evil*, he immersed himself deeply in the philosopher's entire body of work. Already here, we can observe a rhetorical technique that Rau frequently employs—he enjoys and excels at beginning with concrete examples before drawing broader conclusions. In this case, the starting point is his experience with *Hate Radio* (2011/12), a production examining the Rwandan genocide. While we cannot stop the evil that engulfs the world around us, we must attempt to interpret its presence, Rau argues. The first step in meaningful resistance is to look at contemporary reality as if we were viewing the present from the perspective of the future. If we do this, we immediately feel the urgent need for intervention. Moreover, this perspective enables "the development of a prospective, utopian imagination with respect to the alternative possibilities for action."[4]

The second chapter, dated 2021, is Milo Rau's speech delivered upon receiving an honorary doctorate degree from Ghent University, dedicated to the circumstances of artistic creation. This emphasis is crucial in Rau's case, as many of his projects are not "just" theatre productions. One might even say that his real work often begins precisely where and when theatre traditionally ends. Speaking about *The New Gospel*, a retelling of Christ's Passion set in the context of African migrants and the Italian agrarian mafia, Rau asserts that the work is "not only a film, an exhibition, a live passion spectacle, and a political campaign, but… it also supported (and remains to support) the first plantation in Italy managed by migrants themselves."[5] Everything that predictably—or unexpectedly—follows from such undertakings, from labour organisation and logistics to the very definition of the *event* itself, understandably catches both general audiences and professional observers off guard, not to mention even the participants themselves.

As he reiterates throughout the book, Rau consciously moves beyond the bourgeois concept of art—that is, the idea that theatre is a form of high art produced by a select few for another privileged group. In his view, these culturally homogenous production structures are "purified of social struggles."[6] He also assigns a radically different role to critics—both those writing about his work and art criticism in general—than what has long been customary: "I dream of an adventurous, creative, solidarity-based critique that can withstand contradictions. A critique that takes time to delve into a case without identifying with it. A critique that understands the 'work of art' as an alibi to reflect on the contexts it is dealing with and thus perhaps finds better, more correct, more precise ways of describing (and maybe even transforming) reality."[7]

As previously mentioned, nearly half of the book is devoted to an extensive four-chapter interview conducted in 2022 in Ghent between Marijn Lems and Milo Rau. Their wide-ranging discussions revolve around four major themes: (1) violence and its stage representation, (2) art as a form of resistance and a potential path to revolution, (3) an exploration of the term *micro-ecologies*, and (4) the contours of the future city theatre. Even with its inevitable gaps and contradictions, the conceptual framework that defines Rau's aesthetics remains coherent throughout.

Without attempting to be exhaustive, here are some of the interview's key pillars. Rau

[4] RAU, *Theatre is…*, 33.
[5] Ibid., 63.
[6] Ibid., 68.
[7] Ibid., 70.

once again stresses the importance of process and the construction of *mini-communities*—which he coordinates but does not control—along with the agency afforded to participants. He acknowledges that treating performers as partners and sharing directorial responsibility is a time- and energy-intensive endeavour but insists that introducing collective responsibility more than compensates for the extra effort. (The interviewer takes the discussion in an interesting direction by probing the financial aspects of these principles—a particularly timely issue in an era of declining public subsidies for the arts worldwide.)

A significant part of Milo Rau's work directly challenges the Eurocentric concept of theatre and all its inherited assumptions—one need only think of his productions created in Rwanda, Iraq, Brazil, etc. Perhaps the most crucial realisation Rau has drawn from these experiences is that artistic groups or individual creators working outside the institutional framework of (Western) European art—as well as activists and ordinary citizens—can ask honest, direct, and original questions about canonical works. These questions, in turn, cast a new light on familiar works. One striking example: during *The New Gospel* project, filmed in and around Matera, southern Italy, the activist playing Judas told Rau that he would not hang himself, as his predecessors had done in every previous movie about the life of Jesus. The reasoning? "They only want to tell a story or make art if it furthers their cause"[8]—and suicide, he argued, cannot be the conclusion of an activist's life.

For Rau, the process is more important than the performance, and this refers not only to the process of creating a production but also to everything that happens after the premiere and what follows from it. As he puts it: "I don't want to make an artwork without also redesigning the whole process from the ground up, so it has an impact beyond the artwork itself."[9] Content thus takes precedence over form, which in turn calls into question the traditional Western theatre model of the *master-disciple*, *guru-fan* relationship. Inclusion, diversity, and democracy become the keys to an ideal institution—though Rau himself, for now, only dares to speak of it as a cautious utopia when he says: "to find—I don't know if it's possible—a way to retain the intimacy and democratic potential that you get when you work with a small group, for a whole institution that employs over a hundred people."[10]

In the book's final section, other voices alongside Rau's are given space. For NTGent's season announcement on 30 May 2022, artists and collaborators working in various positions within the institution were tasked with providing a brief commentary on each word in the phrase "*The City Theatre of the Future.*" Rau begins with "*The*", describing the institution as an agora where diverse voices and stories can be heard. Chokri Ben Chikha—actor, dancer, performer, and playwright—sees the "*city*" as a barometer. Miet Warlop, a visual artist, speaks of a "*theatre*" that is curated, not only programmed. Theatre-maker, curator, and researcher Lara Staal, reflecting on "*of*", considers ownership: who does the theatre belong to, and how does it become a diverse and pluralistic space? Director, writer, producer, and sound artist Jesse Vandamme, discussing "*the*", insists that there is no singular theatre, only fragmented, chaotic stories that are given the chance to intersect. Brazilian writer and performer Luanda Casella sees the "*future*" as something closer than we might think. And the theatre they have collectively envisioned? It is, in reality, an expression of the complex realities of the present.

Finally, the title. *Theatre is Democracy in Small*—in a post-#MeToo theatrical landscape, at a time when the necessity of non-hierarchical working structures is being recognised—functions as both a provocative state-

[8] Ibid., 105.
[9] Ibid., 131.
[10] Ibid., 156.

ment and a simple, everyday truth. The writings of Milo Rau and his collaborators stand as a series of firm declarations, urging the arrival of a day when neither in theatre nor in the world surrounding it will anyone question the truth content of these five words.

The Authors in this Issue

MÓNIKA GODA is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She completed her PhD in 2020 at the Doctoral School of Philosophy, her thesis explored experimental tendencies in contemporary puppet art. Her current research examines the potential of puppet-assisted play therapy in early childhood education, with a particular focus on its application for children living with cerebral palsy.

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI is a professor of theatre history at the University of Pécs. She is the co-founder of the *Theatron* (Journal in Performance Studies) and the *Philther*-hub (http://www.theatron.hu/ph). In the last decade, her research has focused on the State Socialist practice of Hungarian theatre after World War II, on the sovietised reception history of the performances, and on the transformation of the Viennese operetta into a nationalised one.

TAMÁS JÁSZAY is a theatre critic, editor, university lecturer and curator. Since 2003 he has published more than 1300 articles in more than 20 magazines all around the world. Since 2008 he has been the co-editor of the critical portal *Revizor* (www.revizoronline.com) and since 2021 he has been working as the editor-in-chief. In 2013 he defended his PhD thesis on the history of the Krétakör Theatre. In the past decade he started to work as a curator, e.g. THEALTER Festival (Szeged, since 2014), dunaPart3 (Budapest, 2015, 2017, 2019). Between 2009 and 2013 he was teaching theatre history and theatre theory to future actors at Kaposvár University. Since February 2015 he's been teaching at Szeged University, since 2019 as an Associate Professor.

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN is an Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. He was chairman of the Committee of Theatre and Film Studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for twelve years and has been editor of *Theatron* since 1998. His research work and publications focus on 20th century and contemporary trends of director's theatre as well as the past and present of music theatre (mostly staging operas). He is the author and editor of sixteen books and more than ninety essays on various aspects of the performing arts. His most recent publications include the English-language monograph, *Ambiguous Topicality. A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre* (L'Harmattan, 2021).

GABRIELLA KISS is a theatre historian, translator, drama teacher, and Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. She has been editor of *Theatron* since 1998. Her most recent publications include the monograph, *A tettre kész néző* [How To Do Things as Spectator] (L'Harmattan, 2024), and she currently focuses on the relationship between contemporary theatre and theatre in education.

MÁRIA KURDI is professor emerita in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Pécs. Her research activities focus on modern and contemporary English-speaking drama and theatre, with a special attention to Ireland. She has authored seven books, edited or co-edited several essay collections and published over a hundred articles in these fields both in Hungary and abroad.

TAMÁS OLÁH obtained his bachelor's degree in 2013 at the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. In 2015 he graduated from the master's program in theatre studies at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Budapest. He received an MA in Hungarian language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad in 2016. He defended his PhD thesis at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest in 2022. He does research work in postdramatic, political and community theatre. He studies the forms of Hungarian-language minority theatre in Vojvodina. As a dramaturg and director, he participated in several independent and permanent theatre productions in Serbia, Romania and Hungary. He lives in Kanjiža in Vojvodina.

LÁSZLÓ PETERDI NAGY (1937), theatre historian. After graduating from the University of Szeged, he lectured on 19th-century Russian literature and theatre at the University of Pécs. In 1967 he became a doctoral student at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow, where he defended his thesis on Chekhov and world theatre in 1971. His analyses of Russian literature and art were published in the journals *Nagyvilág*, *Új Írás*, *Élet és Irodalom.* After returning home, he was deputy head of the theatre department at the Ministry of Culture, literary advisor at the National Theatre and senior research fellow at the Hungarian Theatre Institute. Between 1979 and 1984 he headed the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Warsaw and continuously published essays in *Nagyvilág*, *Kritika* and *Színház*. After his retirement, he published three monographs (*Chekhov's Theatre*, *Meyerhold's Workshop* and *The Russian Comedy*), as well as a collection of essays (*The Velvet Revolution of the Theatre*). He is currently working on his DSc dissertation.

MIKLÓS PÉTI is an associate professor of English literature at Károli Gáspár University, Budapest.

VERONIKA SCHANDL is an associate professor at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. She researches Shakespeare in performance and theatre history, specialising in Socialist, politicised productions of Shakespeare in Eastern-Europe. She has widely published on the Hungarian theatrical reception of Shakespeare, in journals, edited volumes, companions and encyclopaedias. Currently she is writing a monograph on Hungarian actor-director, Tamás Major's Shakespeare directions, and is researching contemporary Shakespeare burlesques and theatrical nostalgia.

BÁLINT SZELE holds a position of Associate Professor at the University of Pannonia and is interested in literary translation, English literature, Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays, and intercultural studies. He has published twelve interviews with Hungarian Shakespeare translators.

ZSÓFIA EMMA SZILÁGYI is a theatre historian and a first-year doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs. Her doctoral research focuses on contemporary stage adaptations.