

## The Perils of Creating Reality. University Stage of Szeged: *Petőfi Rock*, 1973

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**Abstract:** *Petőfi Rock*, which premiered in 1973, was an emblematic performance of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, placing second in the amateur talent search program entitled *Szóljatok szép szavak – Petőfi Sándorról!* [Let Beautiful Prose Resound – On Sándor Petőfi] and being the commemorative program for March 15th at the Attila József University of Sciences in Szeged. Consequently, it is an important chapter in Hungary's history of youth theatre. The current study reconstructs employing the Philther Method, from the ethical perspective of community theatre and education in theatre, this "nostalgic requiem" for "1848 and Hungarian freedom".

*Petőfi Rock* was an emblematic performance of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, placing second in the amateur talent search program entitled *Szóljatok szép szavak – Petőfi Sándorról!* [Let Beautiful Prose Resound – On Sándor Petőfi], the commemorative program for March 15th at the Attila József University of Sciences in Szeged.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it is not only an emblem of "tolerated" open defiance,<sup>2</sup> but also an important chapter in Hun-

gary's history of youth and student theatre. From the perspective of community theatre and drama in education the current study reconstructs this "nostalgic requiem" for "1848 and Hungarian freedom".<sup>3</sup> As one of the greatest legends of Hungary's "alternative theatre", what educational goals did it implement vis-à-vis the holiday's remembrance? How did this laboratory theatre – conducting experiments in paratheatre à la Grotowski – ensure its aesthetic quality?<sup>4</sup> What process, steeped in arts pedagogy, led to the transformation of Szeged University's youth theatre into an alternative theatre, not to mention the students into actors, all the while dissolving the stage itself? This study seeks to answer these questions employing the Philther Method.

Let us begin with a seemingly innocent linguistic gesture. Theatre history, which primarily deals with productions by ("professional") institutions within the structure of permanent theatres, tends to identify the products of ("amateur" or "independent") groups outside the established structure with the personal name of the given group's leader. Thanks to this, the youth theatre movements at universities in Budapest and Szeged assumed the formal name of "József

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1960's and 1970's, when cultural works were classified as *supported*, *tolerated*, or *banned*, "this theatre of youth irritates officials in both theatre and politics." NÁNYAI István, "Az Orfeo-ügy", last accessed: 01.07.2021, <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/az-orfeo-ugy>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Wolfgang STING, "Devising Theatre", in *Wörterbuch der Theatrepädagogik*, hrsg. Gerd KOCH and Marianne STREISAND, 73–74 (Uckerland: Schibi Verlag, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> "It's common knowledge that what was shown at the Belgrade and Wrocław Festivals signified a true renaissance for the entire Hungarian amateur movement of the sixties and seventies." BÉRCZES László, "Mássház Magyarországon: 1945–1989", *Színház* 29, No. 4. (1996): 44–48, 44.

Ruszt” or “István Paál” theatre, and this portion of the Hungarian theatre’s history became Ruszt-esque or Paál-esque periods. Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that Ruszt, Paál, and Tamás Fodor were institutional leaders, occupying the focus of Kádár-Era Communism’s adult education program.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps for this reason, insufficient attention was paid to the innovations (or flaws) in art pedagogy at Universitas (the amateur company at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest), the University Stage of Szeged, and the Orfeo Group; since historiography focused on the aesthetics of the end products (theatre productions), which exclusively divided creators and the audience. Moreover, within the walls of Attila József University, they not only created theatre, but *applied* it with the aim of audience creation and actual happenings.<sup>6</sup> We may come to know the nature of this evolution, in terms of drama and theatre pedagogy, if we reconstruct the 1973 production of *Petőfi Rock* not as a piece on the repertoire of an “elite institution operating as an [artistic] theatre”,<sup>7</sup> but as a commemorative program. Indeed, we may view István Paál, who did not “become estab-

<sup>5</sup> “Active participation, communal experiences, and contact with the world of art facilitate the further strengthening of ties between culture and audience, culture and the people. This is how new cultural forms are developed and deeply integrated into everyday life.” Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party’s resolution on developmental tasks for public culture (19–20 March 1974).” ÁCS Ferencné, ed., *Szocialista közművelődés. Szöveggyűjtemény* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1980), 95, 99.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthias WARSTATT and Julius HEINICKE et al. hrsg., *Theatre als Intervention. Politiken ästhetischer Praxis* (Berlin: Theatre der Zeit, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> NÁRAY István, “A nem hivatásos színházak két évtizede”, in *Fordulatok*, ed. by Tibor VÁRSZEGI, 447–466 (no location: editor’s publication, no year), 448.

lished”,<sup>8</sup> as a director of student actors in the twenty-first century sense.

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

In this case, the production’s context is not solely determined by premieres from Hungary’s official permanent theatres over the 1972–1973 and 1973–1974 seasons.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it is shaped in part by the political nature of play selection in Szeged,<sup>10</sup> and in part by the accustomed commemorative theatrical programs of the 70s<sup>11</sup> – that is, “supported, tol-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 447.

<sup>9</sup> In the spirit of so-called double-speak, Gábor Székely created tradition in Szolnok in 1970, as did Gábor Zsámbéki in Kaposvár in 1975. Also, Tamás Ascher and János Szikora began their directorial careers. These directors were contemporaries of István Paál. Still, Gogol’s *A revizor* [The Government Inspector] directed by Tovstonogov was a hit with audiences at the National Theatre (11 March 1973). Ottó Ádám’s *Othello* at Madách Theatre (28 September 1973) became the drama of the Iago Generation. At Vígszínház [Comedy Theatre], Déry’s *Képzelt riport egy amerikai popfesztiválról* [An Imaginary Report on an American Rock Festival] (2 March 1973) established a musical theatre tradition that was sensitive and critical of society. Finally, in Pesti Theatre, the premiere of two contemporary Hungarian dramas by István Örkény and István Eörsi represented alternative thinking (*Holtak hallgatása* [Silence of the Dead], 2 March 1973; and *Széchenyi és az árnyak* [Széchenyi and the Phantoms], 19 October 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Ionesco, *Orrszarvú* [Rhinoceros], Act Three (part of the “Sizzling Literature” series’ *Wide World* evening in 1963); Mrožek, *Piotr Ohey mártíromsága* [The Martyrdom of Piotr Ohey] (1966); Ionesco, *A király halódik* [Exit the King] (27 November 1967); and Tibor Déry, *Óriáscsecsemő* [The Giant Baby] (22 March 1970).

<sup>11</sup> NÁRAY, “Petőfi Rock...”

erated, and banned” stagings of the national mythos vis-à-vis Hungarian revolution and the fight for freedom – oftentimes at the site of many students’ examinations. In fact, in Baracska, they had concluded a Petőfi Year. Moreover, the Kommunisták Ifjúsági Szövetsége [Communist Youth Alliance] delegated the *Szóljatok szép szavak – Petőfi Sándorról!* contest to the University Stage of Szeged. The group took both the title of the commission and its conditions (which guaranteed radio and television coverage) quite seriously.<sup>12</sup> The students, the same age as active participants in the revolution 125 years earlier, questioned the image of Petőfi that they themselves held.

The imperative search for one’s self-image was made apparent in the production’s initial sequence through a self-proclaiming gesture. László Vági’s guitar strumming drew people to Szeged’s Auditorium Maximum venue, where each actor held a back-and-white photo of Sándor Petőfi with the Hungarian tricolor in the corner. In 1973, this daguerreotype, taken by Gábor Egressy, qualified as a relative novelty for those versed in the philological study of Petőfi. Also, due to its washed-out nature, it indicated the everyday nature of this emblematic banner of the Petőfi cult. Then and there, the photograph’s colorful decoration referred to a visual symbol of the revolution and fight for

<sup>12</sup> “[...] The Institute of People’s Culture announced the contest in the spring of 1972 with the assistance of the National Awareness Committee of the Patriotic People’s Front, Hungarian Radio’s Youth Division, the Council of Bács-Kiskun County, and other state and social organizations. [...] It appeared from regional premieres that the groups drew from Petőfi’s entire oeuvre when creating their programs – richly presenting the history of the time, as well as modern youth’s relationship to Petőfi’s lifework and mentality.” BICSKEI Gábor, “Szóljatok szép szavak – Petőfi Sándorról”, *Honismeret* 2, Nos. 1–2. (1973): 107–108.

freedom that occurred in 1956. Thus, these young potential members of the intellectual class were questioning one of the taboos of the Kádár regime while staging the communal memory of 1848, independent of the official ideology regarding “everyday revolutionaries” building a peaceful communist society.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Dramatic text, dramaturgy*

“The Hungarian people have dubbed this day the ‘Day of Petőfi’, because he set this day in the firmament, so that under this canopy he could fight to the end the nation’s extended battle against the enemies of freedom!”<sup>14</sup> The script of *Petőfi Rock* begins and ends with this Mór Jókai quote, and it is the only sentence delivered by the company’s leader István Paál, who also conducted the action onstage with his drumming. Nonetheless, this thesis, from one of the most important documents to the Petőfi mythos, was not rendered pathetic in 1973. Its modality (the sheer power of its meaning) and its theme (the moral obligation to remember) became both significant and challenging. Moreover, the dramaturgy and choice of text demonstrate how difficult it is to make an ideologically manipulated celebration personal.

The entries in Petőfi’s journal from March 15, 1848, established an unbroken dialogue between accounts and remarks made by law enforcement bodies, the regional council, and the palatines in 1848, as well as the undisclosed texts underlying official celebrations in 1973. This is not mentioning the three poems (*Dicsőséges nagyurak, Nemzeti dal, A szabadsághoz* [Illustrious Lords, National Song, To Liberty]) which Mór Jókai dubbed “psalms of patriotism and freedom”.

<sup>13</sup> See GYÖRGY Péter, *Kádár köpönyege* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2005), 7–87.

<sup>14</sup> JÓKAI Mór, *Petőfi Sándor élete és költeményei*, last accessed: 29.07.2020, <http://mek.niif.hu/00700/00793/html/jokai19.htm#ref1>.

At first glance, this documentary-style dramaturgy does not differ much from the curated literary programs of the time. What is more, it concentrated on the historical events of “those splendid days”, in the tradition of the most conservative commemorative shows.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the corpus consisted, in one sense, of texts that defined the holiday’s message not in terms of the poor’s uprising against the rich, but the possible means of opposing a prevailing authority and the ethical dilemma surrounding those means. That is, they did not perform what was *known*, but what a community, then and there, was seeking – the value of the Revolution of 1848. In another sense, it juxtaposed texts of stylistically, rhetorically, and aesthetically completely different quality. First of all, this allowed room for theatrical abstraction. Secondly, it provided an intellectual counterpoint to an emotional iden-

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<sup>15</sup> “The national and social holiday is an ever-returning occasion to make the event ceremonial and increase its effect – i.e., public interest. The performance’s consciously assumed educational function gives rise to the so-called *ceremonial program* based on the directorial and dramaturgical principals of *literary programs*, which have a number of variations in which literature and music highlight the function, mainly as tools to evoke an emotional effect. [...] At the same time, it is the conscious educational intent – the folk art stance that adopts the motto “Everything is my concern” in order to bolster society’s feeling of responsibility – which shapes our modern-day *document oratory* genre, one possibility of formal presentation. Citing *documents* and *reports*, which exposes fact in order to provoke thought, encapsulates more than any other format the value and purpose of all amateur performance – namely, fulfilling a social function by openly assuming this role.” DEBRECENI Tibor – RENCZ Antal, *A pódiumi színjátéktípusok dramaturgiája* (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1971), 26.

tification devoid of reflection. Thirdly, *Petőfi Rock* did not treat the stage like a pulpit; thus, it was under no obligation to reproduce the pathetic atmosphere of a commemorative program. Not once did they draw from the requisite components of official commemorations – namely, “Revolutionary Spring” in 1972 and “Revolutionary Youth Days” in 1973. Instead, they problematized the Petőfi mythos, interpreting the tone of the texts (whether introspective, sublime, or ridiculous) as stage metaphors. The modes of conduct on display (be it mass resistance, bootlicking, or public declaration which amounted to sacrifice) were embodied by kinetic energy, while the strength of the community was demonstrated in group chants accompanied by drum and guitar.

### *Staging*

With a series of kinetic statue groups formed out of 14 human bodies, the direction mounted the revolution – conjuring the interplay of authoritarian use of power, public action, and autonomous formation of thought, which is indispensable for an uprising. Yet, the viewers’ attention was not drawn to what was said, since the spectacle did not illustrate, not even accidentally, what they heard. “The players’ ceaseless motion, the constant spatial hurly-burly, the sight of flying (and expertly caught) actors, as well as the human pyramid and monstrous phalanx of handholding people, akin to the spectacle of a gymnast troupe”<sup>16</sup> never once depicted what the text referenced (direct sources without exception). The relationship between action and diction, speech and image, tone and presence were in constant flux, while the youths in blue jeans – continuously altering their spatial locations and positions (reclining, sitting, kneeling, standing) and ceaselessly making contact (whether leaning, falling, lifting one another up high, or flying) –

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<sup>16</sup> NÁNAY István, “Partizánattitűd”, *Színház* 36, No. 8. (2003): 2–5, 3.

became animated notes on some streamlined piece of sheet music. The score for this “Day of Petőfi” appeared with perfect precision, beginning with *La Marseillaise*, its melody intoned by a disorderly crowd of people, and ending with the lines of Petőfi’s *Szabadsághoz*, sung in an anthem-like key. The dramaturgical ‘endpoint’, however, was actually an ‘origin’ from two theatrical standpoints – firstly, because, as they knelt in a circle holding hands, each member of the company stared down a complete stranger in the audience, committed to maintaining eye contact over the nine stanzas until the conclusion of the revolutionary vision;<sup>17</sup> and secondly, because the performance had no actual conclusion. The players, who had invited audience members to join them during *Nemzeti dal* and then led them back to their seats, held up the Petőfi photos again and repeated a cross-section of the performance until the majority of those present as viewers, already used to audience participation, decided whether to stay with the performers or leave the space. This “Day of Petőfi” in 1973 is remembered by that generation, now known to the world as *boomers*, as an act of risk-taking, manifested in that participation.

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<sup>17</sup> It is no accident that one of the best known stories from the legend surrounding this production is also related to this gesture: “There was a *Petőfi Rock* that we presented in the policemen’s club. There sat two detectives, who had questioned me earlier. When we sang the poem ‘To Liberty’, we knelt and held each other’s hands, and I accidentally ended up face-to-face with the two detectives. In any case, you picked out someone and sang to the person, ‘And if every single one of us falls, we will rise from the grave come midnight, so our victorious enemies will have to fight again with our haunting souls.’ It was satisfying for me, because the policemen lowered their eyes and did not dare look at me.” Dózsa Erzsébet, cited in BÉRCZES László, *A végnek végéig. Paál István* (Budapest: Cégér, 1995), 44.

### *Stage design and sound*

The production’s spectacle was built upon the stylized choreography of practices geared towards the psychophysical training of actors and the refinement of their spatial awareness, which made up a regular part of the rehearsal process.<sup>18</sup> Formations made up of torsos, hands, and extremities, resulting from the act of filling the space, functioned as societal gestures à la Brecht. With exact precision, they demonstrated where the delivered theme in question (or the referenced historical event) lay within the coordinate system, one axis being individual values and communal will, and the other being the poles of servitude and liberty. The ‘throne’ of Louis Phillippe I (then reigning King of France) was formed out of grotesque gestures – not to mention the barrier broken through by the hero during the folk game “King, give us a Soldier” (akin to “Red Rover”), only for a sea of fists to be raised on high once “the revolution reaches Vienna”. Curling up, straightening up, staggering to one’s feet from a reclining position, and dropping back down all articulated, as a series of decisions; the process whereby the rhetoric of revolution leads to action.

The progress of Reform-Era thought was manifest as an act of assuming responsibility that transpired during the *Nemzeti dal* se-

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<sup>18</sup> “According to the weekly work schedule, the group held rehearsals every day. Two of those days were devoted to dramaturgy of movement, improvisation, and spatial formations achievable through motion. On the following four days, they practiced parts; and on the seventh day, there was the general rehearsal. Ultimately, this repeating ‘cycle of creation’ led to a flexible, dynamic production and a truly great success.” DEMCSÁK Katalin, “A Paál István vezette Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad” in *Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák*, ed. by IMRE Zoltán, 242–264 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008), 256.

quence, which called upon viewers to participate actively. The stylized choreography of a trust game heightened the momentary sensation of freedom, while explicating its death-defying beauty. The flight of bodies – placed at the mercy of gravity and the players' concentration, seemingly tossed and caught with ease – accomplished this realistically, without pathos, interpreting the cited historical facts as risks that were taken – namely, the authorities ending censorship at the people's demand, the inaction of the army, and the release of political prisoners on March 15, 1848. Thus, a human pyramid raising aloft a female figure with her fingers forming a "V" became a monument to society's acceptance of responsibility. Moreover, at the conclusion of the performance, the 'supporting pillars' of this statue, along with Petőfi, regarded freedom as "the only true deity".

László Vági's progressive rock, which amplified and broadcast the energy level of the actors' performance, made the feeling of liberation audible while rendering the dramaturgy of the revolutionary events practically palpable. The composer with his guitar and the director with drum in hand conducted not only the singing, but the rhythm of the stage business. An example of this is the *Dicsőséges nagyurak* sequence, the basic gesture of which was the recognition that taking action in a time of revolution is not only a noble and lofty cause, but a deed that demands human lives.<sup>19</sup> The company from Szeged staged Sándor Petőfi's poem as a rhythmically complex, energising game with one thing at stake. Together with the guitar and the drum, the players, roused by János Ács' beating, were hitting the ground or their thighs, scanning the spoken verse, as they

<sup>19</sup> Stefan AUST, *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1985). See Carol FINK, Paul GASSERT, and Detlef JUNKER eds., 1968: *The World Transformed* (Cambridge: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1998).

gathered the strength to turn away from the closed circle and look upon the audience. The energy level did not decrease but assumed the weight of a rebellious threat. Nonetheless, following the stanzas inciting the public to revenge and lynch, it was not the chorus, but the voice of János Ács that signaled peace – the opportunity of an about-face and forgiveness. By that time, a fierce clash had emerged between the poetry-reciting human voice and the escalating strength of the drumming. The players, who beat the rhythm on the floor while initially reclining, then kneeling, and eventually staring into the viewers' eyes, first delivered the concluding line "The Lord God have mercy on you all!" shouting along to the music, but the second time was without accompaniment.

Another sequence that displayed the tedious nature of the training in Szeged problematized the lines that glorified a hero's death in "Petőfi's Journal". At first, they expressed *en masse* in outraged chanting how a community possesses the right to assert and represent itself. Then suddenly, in a different tone "You must act, and as soon as tomorrow, lest the next day be too late." 'looped in' with lyrical sadness. This mournful recitative for the future fallen was broken by László Vági's outburst, "And if they are shot down? God be with them! Who could wish a more beautiful death?" – which, in this context, did not sound at all like heroism, as much as resignation and despair. Thus, *Petőfi Rock* became an oratorio capable of reflecting on a victorious revolution and a failed freedom fight, composing the documents along the lines of individual and personal questioning (in no way in line with political directives), realistically depicting the trajectory of faith and resolution necessary to bring about such momentous events.

#### *Acting*

Thus, the wish to be free was articulated as a common desire and manifest through a se-

ries of mass actions, not solely through easily-imitated indicators of 'activation' and 'involvement' such as podium speeches, increased proximity, contact, etc. In relation to the acting work, then, perhaps it is more productive to stress the eye contact during *Szabadsághoz*. At any rate, the performance's conclusion also drew attention to the training, which focused on self-exposure and personal commitment.

In 1972, István Paál saw the last production by the ascetic labours of "Laboratory Theatre", which was collectively created out of a three-year rehearsal process. *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* addressed the question, "What would happen if Christ were to return today?"<sup>20</sup> The performance is connected to the attempted blasphemous, yet devoted play on the Gospels in order to draw closer to contemporary times. "It is the laws of poetry, not prose, which hold sway here: distant associations, overlapping metaphors, tableaux, actions and meanings continually fading into each other. Once again the imagery is all in actors. It is embodied in gesture and mime, movement and intonation, groupings and place-changes, inward reactions and counter-reactions. Meanings are multiplied and telescoped; an actor's face will express one thing, the motion of his hand another, the response of his partner something else again."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the production István Paál saw at the International Youth Theatre Festival meant more to him than a fascinating stage vision on account of its use of abstract signs. It inspired his knowledge of a special working process.

<sup>20</sup> See Konstany PUZYNA, *The Return of Christ* (Krakow – Warszawa: Instytut Książki, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Konstany PUZYNA, "A Myth Vivisected: Grotowski's *Apocalypsis*" in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. by Richard SCHECHNER and Lisa WOLFORD, 88–105 (London – New York: Routledge, 2014), 88–90.

"Grotowski's company prepared [...] with hard work every day, spending three to four hours daily. [...] This work was not tinkering or fiddling with a character – like we ultimately do – but the training itself. This occupied the core of the work and continued when they were not rehearsing for a performance. [...] With a working method of this sort that has a dual purpose (not just the creation of a performance), we are not speaking of an externally constructed form which the actors must arrive at with greater or lesser success. In his company, throughout the process, the actors produce from themselves an as-yet-unknown final result. [...] They do not play roles, they present themselves. That is, the actors have a sense of identity that disregards the distinction between the individual and the character, thus 'merging' with the role."<sup>22</sup>

As a director, he was excited by a manner of guiding actors independent of societal role-playing, thereby making the existence of a community of individuals possible. As the leader of a group, he was interested in an acting method that would define the craft as a life-long, process-oriented workshop. As a viewer, he was captivated by a performance (if its use of symbols managed to exceed superficial experience) able to convey processes, one that fills „a hunger for the invisible, a hunger for a reality deeper than the fullest form of everyday life — or [...] a hunger for the missing things of life, a hunger, in fact, for buffers against reality”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, for István Paál, creative reception of the Grotowski experience meant the development of an acting style aimed at shocking the audience, and it would be a precondition for the performers. It was imperative that the

<sup>22</sup> BÉRCZES, *A végnek...*, 77–79.

<sup>23</sup> Peter BROOK, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 51–52.

production make use of the psychological layers of Mankind lurking beneath the masks we wear in life. Moreover, the protracted eye contact at the end of *Petőfi Rock* made it clear that the work undertaken at University Stage experimented with the effect on spectators when actors applied the guise of their roles to break free of the masks forced upon us through socialization. When first translated into Hungarian, such experiments were mere theoretical reflection. Later, Grotowski's theoretical works were disseminated and analyzed.<sup>24</sup> Evident signs of it were manifested in the self-exploration and self-analysis needed to generate group catharsis. Hence, in *Petőfi Rock*, a dynamic and complex series of images, built upon energising trust games and improvisations on status, presented liberty's "glorious dream that lasts from dawn till dusk".

#### *Impact and posterity*

This practically unknown training had three effects on staging in terms of the nation's professional theatre training. First, those participating as "college student celebrants" in the 'amateur' *Petőfi Rock* came to realise that, at the Auditorium Maximum of Attila József University of Sciences, they had been part of an aesthetic experience incomparably more exciting than anything seen at the National Theatre of Szeged.<sup>25</sup> Second, in a manner both clear and valid to this day, the

<sup>24</sup> *Színésztréning Grotowski, Bablet, Marijnen szövegei felhasználásával belső használatra* [Actor Training Through Texts by Grotowski, Bablet, and Marijnen for Internal Use], ed. by István PAÁL (manuscript).

<sup>25</sup> Thus, the amateur scene became part of the professional debate stirred up one year previously by the guest performance in Budapest of *Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Peter Brook. Cf. KOLTAI Tamás, „A színházi fordulat éve”, last accessed: 20.07.2020, <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/beszelo/g8/o3/koltai.htm>.

professionalism of its realisation demonstrated what artistic opportunities lay in the still nascent genres of 70s student acting: oratorios with a (mental and emotional) associative structure and action-packed formal presentations.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it revealed that the University Stage of Szeged's company "worked with professional demands within an amateur framework [...] with ambitions of theatre-making, plenty of painstaking rehearsals, and constant awareness of the company, the stage, and the audience".<sup>27</sup> At this point, we must pose the question to István Paál, the theatre historian then regarded as a director of student actors: "What sequence of personal and professional decisions compel one to create, though the power of charismatic leadership, a community theatre out of a group of laymen while conforming to the guidelines of the professional theatre establishment?"

<sup>26</sup> "Firstly, the (mental) association-structured oratorio is one possibility for *plot* within the oratorical theatrical genre. It can be an independent work (e.g., a literary oratorio) or an assembled, arranged program. Secondly, the category indicates that this theatrical genre has no dramatic plot. Instead, it has a lyrical dramatic structure with intellectual and emotional elements built upon one another. It is also associative, because it is built upon the conflict (contrast and development) of certain thoughts or feelings. This suits the associative capabilities of awareness, the dialectic of thought, and fluctuation of emotion. By virtue of this, it is mental-emotional, which we may also call *lyrically structured*. [...] For an *eventful formal presentation*, the presentation itself comes about through the dramaturgy of events: performed documents or reports, short story adaptations, etc." DEBRECZENI – RENCZ, *A pódiumi...*, 175–176/31.

<sup>27</sup> DEBRECZENI Tibor, *Egy amatőr emlékezése 1966–1978* (Budapest: Országos Közművelődési Központ Módszertani Intézete, 1989), 112.

In this respect, an interview into the life-work of László Bérczes and one document from the application for the Nancy Festival of 1971 are indispensable sources. Moreover, the István Paál text, precisely parsed in Katalin Demcsák's study, substantiates the narrative identity that emerges on the left-hand pages of the volume entitled *A végnek végéig* [To the End of the End] by László Bérczes. "Beyond a description of the group's formation and hierarchy – director, tripartite leadership, long-timers, and newcomers – the text comprises every element of staging a production. [This is supported by the fact that István Paál,] in the midst of a creative writer's block between 1968 and 1970, exchanged the mantle of author for that of director. He felt 'theatre must be approached from the standpoint of a director.' Thus, from then on, direction and the director's dramaturgical work made up one starting point for the realization of productions."<sup>28</sup> In harmony with this, the participants' words on the right-hand pages delineate a community whose members define themselves through an internal hierarchy. What is structured occupies an oppositional framework: incorporated versus fringe, vocation versus hobby, sacrifice versus compromise, fidelity versus betrayal, and, arguably, agency versus powerlessness. What held them together was "the belief in belonging to a community"<sup>29</sup> and the professional demands of a charismatic maestro.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the purpose

<sup>28</sup> DEMCSÁK, "A Paál István vezette...", 255–256.

<sup>29</sup> Erzsébet DÓZSA, cited in BÉRCZES, *A végnek...*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> "Thus, the University Stage of Szeged created a sect-like group in an odd social atmosphere where István guided their thinking and sensations like a shaman. The company members' self-sacrifice worked as the cohesive power. István could manipulate this power with the bearing of a shaman or hierophant. I argued a lot with him, but you could not use rational principles when talk-

was not the performance, but the desire to measure up.<sup>31</sup> For that reason, the fundamental training underlying *Petőfi Rock's* rehearsal process can still be instructive in 2022:

"I asked all of them to concentrate on summoning up some terrible, oppressive, and unresolved burden from their lives. We sat in a circle, each one going into the center, knowing that all this would transpire before witnesses. Lying there on the floor, they had to release all this misery and dread, about which perhaps they had never spoken. It was public vivisection. Unimaginable things happened. To this day, I cannot conceive how they had so much trust in me and faith in the project. Some had sobbing fits; some succumbed to a motionless, catatonic state; some

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ing with him. He always steered the conversation to the metaphysical plane." János ÁCS, cited in BÉRCZES, *A végnek...*, 60.

<sup>31</sup> "I was a company member from 1971 to 1975. [...] István was really a tyrant. But he was also a mage. Those of us who stayed, accepted him that way, and falsehood arose out of this. During the first course of exercises, people often did not present themselves, but what István wanted to see. We really wanted to satisfy him. Never in my life have I been anguished, pessimistic, or oppressed, but I strove to be in those four years to meet expectations. I never felt like an artist or a creator, but I was very diligent. I could do so, because István was captivating." Katalin KOHLER, cited in BÉRCZES, *A végnek...*, 71. See "The main problem in the theatre, as in every area of life, is our inexpressibly great desire for approval. This kills imagination and initiative. Young people come up, are drawn into the theatre's workings, and face an internal and external compulsion to stand at attention, and they set about fulfilling tasks. This begins the process that gobbles up talent." Tamás JORDÁN, cited in VÁRSZEGI, *Fordulatok...*, 41/467.

screamed and swore; [...] and some said they could not do it. It was a dangerous, stab-in-the-dark trial on my part. Later, I did not really make use of it. [...] The exercise itself – which was a sort of trial by fire – was not verbal in nature. Barely a word was heard from anyone. Everyone found the most suitable means of expression for showing their own pain.”

How many ways can we interpret this story? First, it perfectly establishes how István Paál understood and mastered Grotowski in a self-taught manner. It bears repeating that Paál had Grotowski’s theatrical texts translated for the first time, and worked through them, amid debates, with a group of theatre-makers. Second, it indicates how acting techniques meant to spur audience participation cannot be directed; instead, he considered their abilities and skills in which the actors could and had to be trained – in their own interests, too. Moreover, at the very same time, it is an alarming example of the performers’ defenselessness and vulnerability, which is the ethical, legal, and professional obligation of the director (even one of student actors) to consider and consciously avoid. Also a testimony to their unwavering persistence is that, in 1970, university students aged 19–23 were called upon to practice every day for six weeks from 8pm to 2am in just the preparation (!) phase of the production.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, we may state that *Petőfi Rock*, the last student performance at the University Stage of Szeged, was István Paál’s first professional training course.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> DEMCSÁK, „A Paál István vezette...”, 256.

<sup>33</sup> “I said to Árpád [Árkosi], ‘There are 10–15 adults here. Either you work with them on a volunteer basis without emotional pressure, or you should go – and you want to go, anyway!’ The awful thing is neither István nor Árpád could decide if they really wanted to go.” Imre KESERŰ, cited in BÉRCZES, *A végnek...*, 73.

This verifies István Nánay’s historiographical thesis, according to which “there is hardly any other nation in Europe whose theatre history is so tied to student performances as ours is.”<sup>34</sup>

#### *Details of the production*

*Title:* Petőfi Rock: Nostalgic Requiem for 1848 and Hungarian Freedom. *Date of Premiere:* 14 and 15 March 1973. *Venue:* The Sándor Petőfi Community Center of Kiskőrös (finals for the “Let Beautiful Prose Resound – On Sándor Petőfi” contest) and the Auditorium Maximum of the Attila József University of Sciences in Szeged. *Director:* István Paál. *Authors:* Sándor Petőfi and reports made by contemporary informants. *Composer:* László Vági. *Dramaturg:* István Paál and members of the University Stage of Szeged Company. *Actors:* János Ács, Erzsébet Dózsa, Imre Keserű, József Krékits, István Paál, Anikó Pallagi, Béla Papes, László Papp, Mária Pusztai, Tibor Solténszky, Mária Szendi, Edina Szirtes, as well as members of the University Stage of Szeged taking part in the performance and the viewers present.

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<sup>34</sup> NÁRAY István, “Színház és diákszínjátszás – vázlatos történeti visszatekintés”, in *Dráma – pedagógia – színház – nevelés. Szöveggyűjtemény középhaladóknak*, ed. by ECK Júlia, KAPOSÍ József and TRENCSENYI László, 217–222 (Budapest: OFI, 2016), 217.

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