

## Prohibition, Toleration, Bewilderment. On the Early Reception of Péter Nádas' Play *Cleaning* (1977)

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**Abstract:** The scheduled premiere of the first play of Péter Nádas, *Takarítás* (*Cleaning*) was prohibited in the Fall of 1979 in the theatre of Pécs. A year later, after the first realized premiere of the play in the theatre of Győr, the Hungarian daily press was ordered to keep silent about the production. Reviews published later in the weekly and monthly journals demonstrated a total bewilderment about the play. In the following, I give a survey of the reception of the first two publications (in 1978 and 1982, both time in collection) and the first production (in 1980) of the play, *Cleaning*.

### *The reception of the published play*

When István Örkény was asked in an interview published at Christmas in 1977 about who he met most frequently, who were his good friends, the writer closed his answer by saying this: "Novice writers turn to me often. The first play of the young Péter Nádas happens to be on my desk right now."<sup>1</sup> The play in question, Nádas's *Cleaning* was published the next year in the anthology entitled *Fiatalok rivaldája (hat színmű)* (*Stage of the Young [Six Plays]*).<sup>2</sup> Although Nádas had written a

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<sup>1</sup> GÁCH Mariann, „Tizennyolc kérdés Örkény Istvánhoz”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1977. dec. 24., 18–20, 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Fiatalok rivaldája. Hat színmű*, ed by B. TURÁN Róbert (Budapest: Magvető, 1978). Beside *Cleaning* the volume includes the following plays, Géza Bereményi's *Légekőbméter* [*Cibuc Meter of Air*], Gábor Czakó's *Disznójáték* [*Pigplay*], István Jász's *István Kezdet a végeken* [*Beginning at the Ends*], András Simonffy's *A Japán Szalon* [*The Japanese Salon*], and Róbert B. Turán's *Melina*. Two years

dramatic text earlier, that was published only in 1990,<sup>3</sup> therefore literary history and criticism considers *Cleaning* to be the first play of Péter Nádas. After its publication in the 1978 drama anthology, next it was published in a volume of collected works. This was Nádas's drama trilogy published in 1982 under the title *Szintér* (*Stage*).<sup>4</sup> Because *Cleaning* was published both times as part of an anthology, it reinforced the interpretational approach towards the play to analyse *Cleaning* not in itself, but in comparison with the other plays in the same volume. That was primarily the case with Nádas's drama trilogy where the three plays were connected by their genre, their dramaturgy, their system of motives, and their title. In Hungarian all three titles are one word, beginning with the same letter ("t"), the genre of the three plays given by Nádas are Comedy without intermission (*Cleaning*), Tragedy without intermission (*Encounter*), Comedy without intermission (*Funeral*). All three plays have a limited number of characters organized in pairs. In *Funeral* there are two acting characters, Actor and Actress, dressed alike, and they are doubled in human size puppets laying in the two white coffins at the two corners of the proscenium. In *Encounter* there are two acting characters, Maria and Youngman, who

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later another volume was published under the same title, which included more new plays by eight young authors.

<sup>3</sup> NÁDAS Péter, „Protokoll. Elbeszélésnek alávetett tragikomédia”, *Alföld* 41, No. 7 (1990), 6–11. Year of writing: 1966.

<sup>4</sup> NÁDAS Péter, *Szintér* (Budapest: Magvető, 1982). The drama trilogy included in the volume: *Takarítás – 1977 (Cleaning)*, *Találkozás – 1979 (Encounter)*, *Temetés – 1980 (Funeral)*.

evoke two other characters in their stories. Maria tells the story of a man who was her lover (and the Youngman's father), while Youngman, in response, talks about a young girl. The cast includes three musicians as well, but in the text their presence is limited to being mentioned in the list of characters. They have their role in the production. In *Cleaning* there are four characters listed in the *dramatis personae*, composed into pairs, Klára (62), Zsuzsa (32), Jóska (20), and András (20). István Bazsányi, one of the monographers of Nádas empathizes that "the interpreters of *Cleaning* (1977), *Encounter* (1979), and *Funeral* (1980) (Angyalosi Gergely, Balassa [Péter], Duró Győző, Fodor [Géza], Pályi [András], P. Müller Péter, Radnóti Zsuzsa...) perceive very similar network of kinship around the three plays."<sup>5</sup>

The play in itself got into the focus of interpretation when it was first produced. In connection with this the practice of traditional Hungarian theatre criticism is reproduced when the premiere gives opportunity to analyse the text, and in the interpretation or cultural journalism the performance becomes less important or even neglected.

After *Cleaning* was published in the above mentioned volumes, the majority of the interpreters and critics expressed that the play was puzzling and confusing. One way to handle this experience was declaring that the play in its written form cannot be interpreted – this is just a canvas or a score – and it becomes a real work of art only in the theatre production. If it was the case, there would not be Shakespeare philology, interpretation of Molière plays, and so on. Regarding this issue I agree with László Szörényi who, in his review of the *Szintér* (*Stage*) volume represented the following position: "This time I try to make the best of the interpretation of only the text itself in the belief that dramas have their complete value without being

<sup>5</sup> BAZSÁNYI Sándor, *Nádas Péter. A Bibliától a Világló részletekig 1962–2017* (Budapest: Jelenkor, 2018), 132.

produced".<sup>6</sup> But the opposite idea appeared emphatically as well, when *Cleaning* was first published. Writing about the 1978 drama anthology, Tamás Tarján represented the following in his review: "It is impossible to judge the 'musically organized' text of Nádas, but it is vastly interesting, and this is the only experimental play; its value will be determined by the production, probably favourably".<sup>7</sup>

Tamás Koltai represented a similar view after the first premiere in Győr, in 1980, already in the knowledge of the production, when referring to the challenge of the interpretation of the text of the play. He wrote "*Cleaning* [...] includes in its text almost as 'closed in a bottle' the performance itself, as if theatre encoded into the lines should only be 'freed'. Probably this is why the play resisted concrete interpretation."<sup>8</sup> The same point of view was represented by Tamás Mészáros, who declared at the beginning of his essay on Nádas's play and Mihály Kornis's drama entitled *Halleluja* (*Hallelujah*), already in the knowledge of their first productions, that one should "disregard the literary value of the plays (for the very reason that these being dramas, this point of view cannot be applied separately on them)".<sup>9</sup>

The challenge radiating from the plays and the non-satisfactory feature of the then available concepts and interpretational techniques prompted several critics to express the different dramatic terms being unusable, and the attempts of interpretation being im-

<sup>6</sup> SZÖRÉNYI László, „Nádas Péter: Szintér”, *Mozgó Világ* 9, No. 10. (1983): 92–93, 92.

<sup>7</sup> TARJÁN Tamás, „Gondolatok egy dramagyűtemény kapcsán”, *Kritika* 8, No. 5. (1979): 8–9, 8.

<sup>8</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, „Vita a Takarításról”, *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981): 33–34, 33.

<sup>9</sup> MÉSZÁROS Tamás, „A hősnek hűlt helye”, in VINKÓ József, ed., *Hiánydramaturgia (Fiatal magyar drámaírók)*, 144–158 (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1982), 144. Originally published in *Életünk* 20, No. 1. (1982): 66–75.

possible or a fiasco. Péter Nagy Sz. wrote that, “the metaphysical absurd of Nádás can become totally inconceivable in an effort of more traditional aesthetic comprehension looking for a rational, round narrative”.<sup>10</sup> Even a decade after *Cleaning* was first published (but connected to the volume of drama trilogy, *Stage*) Mrs. László Mész stressed on the basis of this attitude, that the world of the Nádás plays “warns us to avoid the regular ways of drama interpretation, and to give up the desire that these plays can be ranged into some familiar group.”<sup>11</sup> She is the one who underlined the separation of Nádás’s plays from the tradition of drama history when she declared that these works “are not connected to any modern time dramatic-theatrical system of conventions. These are not naturalist, not symbolist, not surrealist plays, but he does not write absurd plays either.”<sup>12</sup>

One extreme in the reception of Nádás’s play is the declaration of the impossibility or uselessness of interpretation. As in the summary of the discussion of the premier of *Cleaning* in Győr, it was mentioned that “at one extreme pole occurred the issue of indecipherability”.<sup>13</sup> According to this position, in this play Nádás “made the impossibility of explanation the essence of dramaturgy”.<sup>14</sup> The failure in the interpretation did not mean giving up the judgmental, evaluating attitude. It was not uncommon that judgements appeared without worthwhile analysis of the

play. For instance, the critic of the newspaper *Kisalföld* declared that the work of Nádás “is strongly objectionable from the point of view of its content”.<sup>15</sup> A reviewer of the volume *Stage* regretted, three years after the first premiere of *Cleaning*, although referring to the published trilogy, that because of the lack of stage Nádás could only do half of the work.<sup>16</sup>

In my view, the most sensitive, clear, and rational descriptive-interpretative analysis of Nádás’s drama trilogy including *Cleaning* was given by Győző Duró, exploring the complex network of references, the ritual basis, relevant motives, and autobiographical connections of the plays. He closed his analysis with the following:

“The trilogy of Nádás is a unique achievement in his generation. He has no other fellow writers who could present three plays composed with such high-quality forms, with such significant and serious messages. This fact confers him as the most outstanding representative of the young Hungarian dramatic literature.”<sup>17</sup>

In the play, *Cleaning*, Nádás uses the motives and characters of his 1967 short story *Klára asszony háza* (*The House of Aunt Clara*). In the play, there are three plus one characters, of whom the plus one is András, who can be seen on a huge photograph on the wall till the very last moments. He comes to life (steps out of the picture) as *deus ex machine* in the closing scene of the play, and finishes the play with the only sentence told in prose. The genre of the play is identified by Nádás as a comedy without intermission. In the

<sup>10</sup> NAGY SZ. Péter, „Háttérben Sodoma. Bere-ményi Géza: *Trilógia*; Nádás Péter: *Színtér*”, *Új Írás* 23, No. 9. (1983): 117–120, 119.

<sup>11</sup> MÉSZ Lászlóné, „Színterek. Nádás Péter drámái”, in MÉSZ Lászlóné, *Színterek* (Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó, 1988. Reprinted: Budapest, Korona Kiadó, 1995), 437–454, 440. The author borrows the title for her volume of drama interpretation from Nádás’ drama volume.

<sup>12</sup> MÉSZ, „Színterek...”, 440.

<sup>13</sup> KOLTAI, „Vita...”, 33.

<sup>14</sup> MÉSZÁROS, „A hősnek...”, 149.

<sup>15</sup> P[ETŐCZ] M[iklós], „A stúdió első bemutatkozása. *Takarítás*”, *Kisalföld*, 1980. dec. 6., 5.

<sup>16</sup> NAGY SZ., „Háttérben...”, 120.

<sup>17</sup> DURÓ Győző, „Nádás Péter”, in VINKÓ József, ed., *Hiánydramaturgia (Fiatal magyar drámaírók)* 42–65 (Budapest, Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1982), 65.

opening instruction he explains that the play follows the model of opera, and among the three characters “Klára speaks in *mezzo-soprano*, Zsuzsi in *contralto*, and Jóska in *tenor*.”<sup>18</sup> A dominant motive in *Cleaning*, like in the other two plays of the trilogy, is the fading of the boundaries of the self of the characters. One major means of this is putting to the fore the mutual dependence in the relationships through which interdependence and conformity to the other plays a stronger role in creating the character than the individual features of the personae.

Among the three characters moving on the stage, Klára (62) is in a dependent relationship with András (20) who appears at the beginning on a photograph, and at the end steps out of it and enters the stage. Living out this emotional fixation leads Klára to identify Jóska (20) the young boy hired from the neighbourhood with her onetime love, András. The boy is easy to shape, he is infantile. As a consequence of Klára’s manipulation, Jóska can be considered as an ironic, grotesque reincarnation of the once lived revolutionary, András. One of the functions of Zsuzsa (32), servant and house manager, is to be a means for Klára, and help the lady to relive her love from three decades ago, not in the direct sense, but as a spectator of the duet of Zsuzsa and Jóska. The other role of Zsuzsa is to force Klára to face and break up with her past by the cleaning of the house. One cannot find a protagonist among this quartet where the characters reflect and counterpoint each other. The characters are the complementary to and repetitions of one another. The phenomenon of being projected onto each other is demonstrated in the recurrence of the same actions. The dramaturgical construction of the play suggests as if Klára and András were the “original” (one-time) characters who are doubled in the per-

sons of Zsuzsa and Jóska, into whom the two “youngsters” transform.

*The first scheduled and announced premiere of Cleaning in the National Theatre of Pécs*

The first premier of *Cleaning* was scheduled in the National Theatre of Pécs in the 1979-80 season. The play was included in the program of the season both in the program booklet and on the posters advertising the theatre’s program in the streets of Pécs.

The director of *Cleaning* would have been János Szikora, whose first directing in Pécs was in the 1977–1978 season on 21 March 1978 in the Chamber Theatre of the National Theatre. It was Tibor Déry’s *Az óriáscsecsemő* (*The Giant Infant*), an avant-garde play from 1926, which was the first professional production of the play. At the time of the premiere Szikora was a student of theatre directing at the Theatre and Film Academy in Budapest. The premiere was a significant success, both among theatre professionals and the audience. Szikora’s exam production as theatre director took place in Pécs as well, in the next season, this time on the main stage of the National Theatre. This was an adaptation of Franz Kafka’s novel, *The Trial*, made by Szikora and dramaturg Géza Morcsányi. This production had a very positive welcome by theatre professionals as well. Due to these artistic achievements, the theatre signed on Szikora as director for the next season. First in the season he prepared to put on stage Péter Nádas’s *Cleaning* as the very first premiere of the play. This would have been his first work as a graduated director in the Chamber Theatre, where this production would have started the season. The program plan of the season became public during the summer. (FIG. 1.)

Talking about this period of time to journalist and theatre critic Erzsébet Bogácsi, Szikora said that it was not easy to put the play on the program of the theatre, and the play “could become part of the program plan after long fights between the leaders of the

<sup>18</sup> NÁDAS Péter, „*Takarítás*” [Cleaning], in NÁDAS Péter, *Színtér* [Stage], 5–87 (Budapest: Magvető, 1982), 9. Italics in the original.

theatre and the higher administration".<sup>19</sup> During the summer, plans for the set design were made, and by the beginning of the season the scenery was almost completely ready, which was shown to the director when he arrived to the season opening meeting of the company. But before the meeting, the managing director of the theatre had called Szikora into his office where Szikora was told that "the permission of the premiere has been withdrawn".<sup>20</sup> The journalist who reported about the season opening meeting of the company in the local daily paper, *Dunántúli Napló* logically did not mention the play of Nádas, but from her article it seems that the managing director had not adjusted his words to the new situation.

"Róbert Nógrádi [the managing director – PMP] talked about the fifteen plays to be produced, that the planned program was put together from plays that offer several good roles and give opportunity to actors' development and progression. The team of young directors formed in the theatre last year is a guarantee for the diversity of the season, and the combined appearance of various styles" – can be read in the report.<sup>21</sup>

In the cited interview of Bogácsi, Szikora, the director laments that one reason for the prohibition of the play could have been the drastic price increase of goods announced on 23 July 1979. The Agitation and Propaganda Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party's Central Committee held a meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. The decision, among others, was made there that for the sake of reducing the hostile public mood due to the

rising prices plays that the politicians considered troubling, had to be removed from the planned programs of theatres. "*Cleaning* was considered a play like this", said Szikora. The other reason was a retaliation of the power against Péter Nádas, which came directly from György Aczél, who was in charge and control of the Hungarian cultural life at the time. The appearance of Nádas's name "was enough [...] to try to get rid of him".<sup>22</sup> At the end of the season Szikora quit the National Theatre of Pécs, and signed a contract with the theatre of Győr for the 1980–1981 season. He spent one season there.

*The first premiere of Cleaning  
in the National Theatre of Győr*

Director János Szikora told to Erzsébet Bogácsi in the interview that when signing his contract with the theatre in Győr he lay down the condition to put Péter Nádas' *Cleaning* on stage. The permitted premiere in Győr

"was realized under very strong political control. Already before starting the rehearsals, I had to report in details to the first secretary of the party committee of the county about what I wanted exactly, what the production would look like, he inspected the set design, and visited the rehearsals. According to him, after a general rehearsal what could be basis for judgement, he reported to György Aczél by phone, and after all, he took the political responsibility of what was going to happen in the studio of the theatre in Győr", can be read in the interview.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> BOGÁCSI Erzsébet, *Rivalda-zárlat* (Budapest: Dóvin, 1991), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>21</sup> GALLOS Orsolya, „Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban”, *Dunántúli Napló*, 1979. aug., 27., 2.

<sup>22</sup> BOGÁCSI, *Rivalda-zárlat*, 37. In those years, György Aczél was not only a member of the Political Committee of the HSWP, but he was an MP representing the 1<sup>st</sup> electoral district of Baranya county, which basically meant Pécs.

<sup>23</sup> BOGÁCSI, *Rivalda-zárlat*, 40.



Péter Nádas kept a diary about the rehearsal process from the 30<sup>th</sup> of August to the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1980. The premiere of the play took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November. (FIG. 2.) Part of the diary written after the 29<sup>th</sup> of October was later published under the title *Egy próbanapló utolsó lapjai* (*Last pages of a rehearsal diary*) in Nádas's volume *Nézőtér* (*Auditorium*) which includes his theatre writings, essays, and reviews.<sup>24</sup> Partly from the diary of Nádas, and partly from the cited interview with Szikora it is known that the rehearsal process led to a crisis. The director said this about the situation a decade later:

“Everybody expected a political scandal, but it became something else, an ethical scandal. In the last period of the rehearsal process, I was dragged into a serious conflict with Mária Kovács, who then gave back the role. We remained there without a protagonist. We could have two choices. Either we cancel the premiere or recast the role. We chose the latter, and invited Éva Olsavszky for the role.”<sup>25</sup>

The cast of the very first premiere of *Cleaning* in Győr was the following: Éva Olsavszky (Klára), Mária Bajcsay (Zsuzsa), János Bán (Jóska), László Angster (András), László Rajk (set design), Hajnal Tordai (costumes), Géza Morcsányi (dramaturg), István Mózes (assistant director), and János Szikora (director).

The theatrical and literary reception of the premiere of Nádas's *Cleaning* was rather different from the usual practice of the critical response. In this case the critical response did not follow the sequence from the first cultural journalism to the later scholarly interpretation, but the silence of the daily pa-

<sup>24</sup> NÁDAS Péter, *Nézőtér* (Budapest: Magvető, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> BOGÁCSI, *Rivalda-zárlat*, 40. Mária Kovács would have played the role of Klára, the owner of the house where the action takes place.

pers was counterpointed by the promise of an immediate professional canonization. Péter Balassa wrote in connection with the premiere in Győr that “an absurd silence has occurred [...] around the play and its production, which was in itself nothing but a sneaky, total hysteria, in a silent form, because of the lack of opportunity to speak.”<sup>26</sup> While Géza Fodor stressed that

“the premiere of *Cleaning* was not followed by a normal critical response. Except for *Színház* [Theatre] and *Mozgó Világ* [Moving World] we could not read about it in any papers. The reception of the work has become immediately, and therefore abnormally, professional. The first approach had to pathologically overcompensate and run quite ahead, to almost the final emplacement, and not so much to fight healthily.”<sup>27</sup>

This double reaction, silence and over explanation were the two sides of the same phenomenon. The confusion was not generated directly by the work to be analysed and evaluated, but by the environment of politics, power, and the theatre profession.

In their writings both Balassa and Fodor refer to the silence in the daily papers that followed the premiere being natural. This phenomenon was mentioned, probably ironically, by Tibor Balogh at the end of his review, published in the monthly Catholic peri-

<sup>26</sup> BALASSA Péter, „Opera és komédia. Nádas Péter *Takarítása*”, *Mozgó Világ* 7, No. 6. (1981): 105–112, 105. In the table of contents of the volume of the periodical, the essay is called a “theatre review”. In the footnote linked to the title of the essay there is the following: The text of the discussion starter of the colloquium held in the Association of Theatre Artists (2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> FODOR Géza, „Szín – tér nélkül. Nádas Péter drámái”, *Jelenkor* 26, Nos. 7–8. (1983): 723–728, 723.

odical, *Vigilia*, that it presented a challenge for him to travel to Győr to see the production. "Maybe the distance discourages several critics, this is why there is this deep silence around the premiere."<sup>28</sup> It was recalled by Erzsébet Bogácsi in her interview with János Szikora that "the papers were advised against writing about the production. I, who had written about all of your works, could not do it this time in the *Magyar Nemzet*."<sup>29</sup>

Beside the silence of the daily papers, except the one local paper of Győr, *Kisalföld*, which published a review of the premiere, some weekly papers (*Élet és Irodalom*,<sup>30</sup> *Film Színház Muzsika*<sup>31</sup>) published short reviews in the length of the regular daily papers' reviews. The worthwhile reception appeared in the monthly periodicals, *Színház*, *Mozgó Világ*, *Vigilia*, and *Híd*. There were not very many of them, and part of them were not written spontaneously, as they were connected to the professional debate initiated and organized by the Critics Branch of the Association of Theatre Artists. That was the event where Péter Balassa's discussion starter, Tamás Bécsy's paper, and András Pályi's interpretation were delivered. The first of these was published in *Mozgó Világ*, while the other two were published in *Színház*. A further essay, which was not connected to the debate but gave a more detailed analysis of the play, published in a monthly periodical, can be related to these papers. This was Tamás Mészáros's previously mentioned paper published in *Életünk*, in which he wrote

<sup>28</sup> BALOGH Tibor, „Nádas Péter drámája Győrött”, *Vigilia* 46, No. 3. (1981): 213–214, 214. The distance between Budapest and Győr is 120 kilometres (75 miles).

<sup>29</sup> BOGÁCSI, *Rivalda-zárlat*, 41. *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation] has been a daily newspaper.

<sup>30</sup> SZEKRÉNYESSY Júlia, „Dalolva szép a takarítás”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 1980. dec. 13., 13.

<sup>31</sup> APÁTI Miklós, „Ezt láttuk – a színházban. Takarítás”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1981. febr. 14., 6–7.

not only about *Cleaning* (and Mihály Kornis's *Hallelujah*), but the theatre productions as well.

Tamás Koltai wrote an introduction to the two published papers (by Bécsy and Pályi) of the professional debate in the Forum section of the monthly magazine, *Színház*. In this introduction Koltai mentions that, beside the presentation of the three papers at the debate, not only the members of the Critics Branch were present, but also "János Szikora, the director of the production, from the cast Éva Olsavszky and János Bán, and writers, film directors, dramaturgs, composers, and some university students".<sup>32</sup> Included in the topics of the discussion, the participants expressed their opinion about the relationship of the three characters, and the content of their connection. The other topic was the directorial concept of cleaning as a stage activity. The director made his remarks to this topic as well, saying, in the summary of Koltai, that this was his third encounter with *Cleaning*, the first of which he directed as a radio play,<sup>33</sup> and then he referred to his ceased work with the play in Pécs.

The two major contributors to the debate, Péter Balassa and Tamás Bécsy, in their argumentation presented the feature of the interpretation of a work of art, which had been described by Endre Bojtár as a contrary process to the description – interpretation – evaluation sequence. Bojtár proved that the hidden nature of this sequence is just the opposite, that is, "the evaluation of the work of art received does not appear at the end of the process, somewhat at its peak, but it appears at the beginning, and our experience goes 'downwards' toward the interpretation

<sup>32</sup> KOLTAI, „Vita...”, 33.

<sup>33</sup> I have not found any information about the radio play, not even in the very detailed and accurate bibliography of Nádas. Cf. BARANYAI György, PÉCSI Gabriella, *Nádas Péter bibliográfia 1961–1994* (Pécs – Zalaegerszeg: Jelenkor Kiadó – Deák Ferenc Megyei Könyvtár, 1994).

and the description."<sup>34</sup> Balassa declared at the beginning of his paper that the trilogy of Nádas "means a *turning point* in the scarce history of Hungarian drama", and later he stressed, about the premier in Győr, that in his view "this was one of the most significant Hungarian theatrical events of the past decades."<sup>35</sup> Bécsy also started with a value judgement, similarly less directly, when he began his remarks, saying:

"The play of Péter Nádas entitled *Cleaning* has not primarily grown from the Hungarian literary tradition. Our dramatic literature, as well as our prose fiction, basically avoided to depict and to represent the subconscious. Western plays that objectify subconscious contents, most importantly the works of Jean Genet, including his *The Maids*, or from the Eastern European tradition Polish plays of the century, from Witkiewicz to Mrozek, could be considered as this work's antecedents. But in those, aspects that connect this admittedly existing part of the human being's inner world with its social determination, are stronger."<sup>36</sup>

Péter Balassa related to the play in an apologetic way, not only this case, but also when he wrote about the other two plays of the trilogy. This admmissive approach was demonstrated in the fact that he declared in advance his glorifying judgement of the play. One can see the same attitude in the case that the two other Nádas plays of the trilogy were first published together with the accompanying essays of Balassa. That is, as Géza Fodor put it, "the determined interpre-

<sup>34</sup> BOJTÁR Endre, „Az irodalmi mű értéke és értékelése”, in BOJTÁR Endre, *Egy kelet-européer az irodalomelméletben*, 9–55 (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1983), 16.

<sup>35</sup> BALASSA, „Opera...”, 105.

<sup>36</sup> BÉCSY TAMÁS, „Az ellentmondások előadása”, *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981):34-40, 34.

tation *preceded* the work itself."<sup>37</sup> Tamás Bécsy in his interpretation, as a matter of fact, declared a series of objections against the play. For instance: "each character has contradictory features in oneself; these are so contradictory that are unimaginable to coexist in a real human being, considered as a personality."<sup>38</sup> In his final judgement Bécsy rated the play as incomplete, inaccurate, and the directing as contradictory. It is instructive to look back at this opinion from a distance of more than four decades, and see that Bécsy based his opinion and argument on the concept and methodology of structuralism, taking the psychological drama as a model to approach Nádas's poststructuralist piece of work.

András Pályi identified his paper as a portrait of actors, but he wrote about the whole production. He emphasized that with his drama

"Nádas suggested a new, for us, unusual language of the stage. What is more unusual is that this proposition was understood from the written play and realized by János Szikora, when he put the *Cleaning* on stage. What is even more unusual is that his actors understand this new way of theatrical expression. A writer giving a *par excellence* theatrical suggestion to the theatre about his play (regarding the way of acting) is a rarity, and it is just as rare that the theatre understands this proposition, accepts it, and realizes it."<sup>39</sup>

According to the summary of Tamás Koltai, the debate was polemical. It ended up in contradictions, when the director cut the Gordian knot by saying he was interested in completely different issues in connection with

<sup>37</sup> FODOR, „Szín – tér nélkül...”, 723.

<sup>38</sup> BÉCSY, „Az ellentmondások...”, 35.

<sup>39</sup> PÁLYI András, „Egy érzéki színház. Szélgjegyzetek Bajcsay Mária játékához”, *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981): 41–43, 41.



the directing. "By directing *Cleaning*, he was probing how far one can go 'to evoke the devil', how far one can go in making the actors live the tormenting relationships of the dramatic characters, without damaging the actors' personality."<sup>40</sup>

The debate of the production in the National Theatre of Győr took place in February 1981, the articles and essays mentioned and cited above were published in March and June in the same year. By the end of the season the director, János Szikora, left the theatre, and Nádas's play was removed from the repertoire. *Cleaning* was put on stage next in 1987, in the Teatro Trianon in Rome, Italy, and in the theatre of Eger in Hungary. The current paper, however, does not allow for further elaboration of this topic.

### Conclusion

A significant feature of the autocratic regimes can be noticed in this early reception of Péter Nádas' *Cleaning*. Such a political power penetrates the whole society, including all of its spheres, and presents itself as qualified and competent everywhere. Based on this attitude this type of power judges and handles the aesthetic and artistic issues as a question of political power. A proper example for this was one of the reasons to prohibit the play from being produced, namely, the authorities believed that forbidding the premiere of *Cleaning* would calm the people's dissatisfaction because of the drastic raise of prices. The basis of the prohibition was not aesthetical but political.

Such an over-expansion could be seen in the rehearsal process in the theatre of Győr, where the local party secretary followed the rehearsals and continuously reported about it to the leading politician in charge of culture, who used his position to control, rule, and manipulate the country's cultural sphere.

<sup>40</sup> KOLTAI, „Vita...”, 34.

The theatre profession could not withdraw itself from this predominance of the political power in all segments of society. Theatre was penetrated by the omnipresent political power. The professional standpoints bear the rule of games, forced on them by the political regime. Those who made remarks about a theatrical issue, in this case Nádas's play and its production, took the stand of pros and cons, but the opinions presented as professional views were basically responses to the political expectations and will, either for or against them.

The following quote is from the poem *A sentence on tyranny* by Gyula Illyés, describing the political presence penetrating the whole society:<sup>41</sup>

“Into the very clothes you wear –  
It penetrates you to the marrow;  
You detach your sense from it, only to find  
No other thought will come to your mind.”

Although the poem was written in 1950 (first published in the days of the 1956 revolution), it is quite astonishing to realize that in the “soft dictatorship” of the Kádár era, the same reflexes of power characterised the operation of politics in the case of *Cleaning* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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<sup>41</sup> ILLYÉS Gyula, „Egy mondat a zsarnokságról”, [„A sentence on tyranny”, trans. by Vernon WATKINS], last accessed 2022.09.01, [https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/illy%C3%A9s\\_Gyula-1902/Egy\\_mondat\\_a\\_zsarnoks%C3%A1gr%C3%B3l/en/1757-A\\_sentence\\_on\\_tyranny](https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/illy%C3%A9s_Gyula-1902/Egy_mondat_a_zsarnoks%C3%A1gr%C3%B3l/en/1757-A_sentence_on_tyranny)

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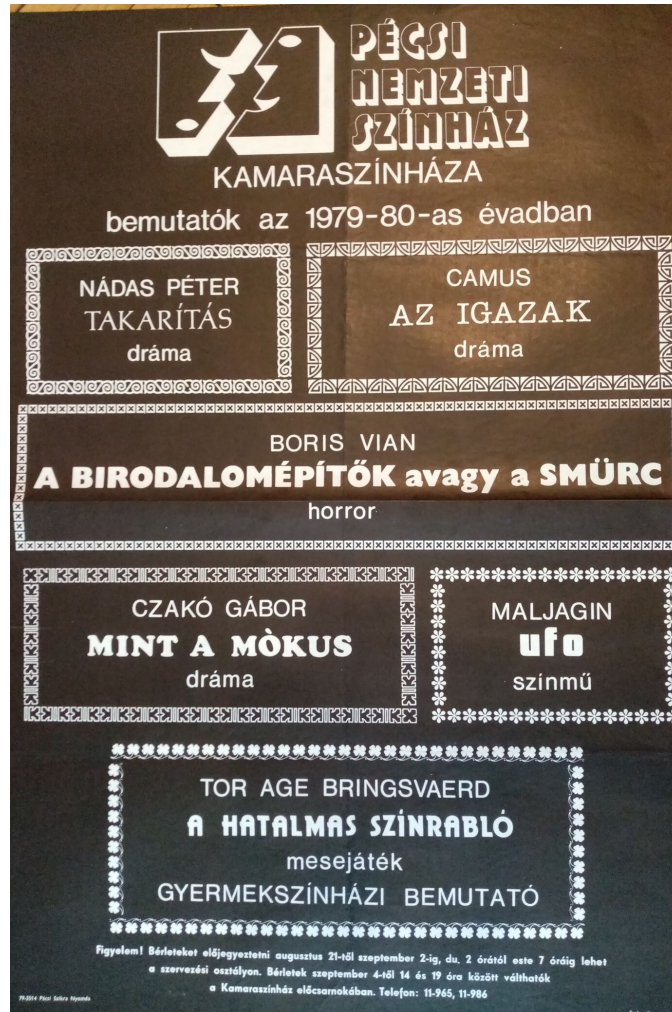


Fig. 1. Poster with the premieres of the 1979–80 season in the Chamber Theatre of the National Theatre of Pécs

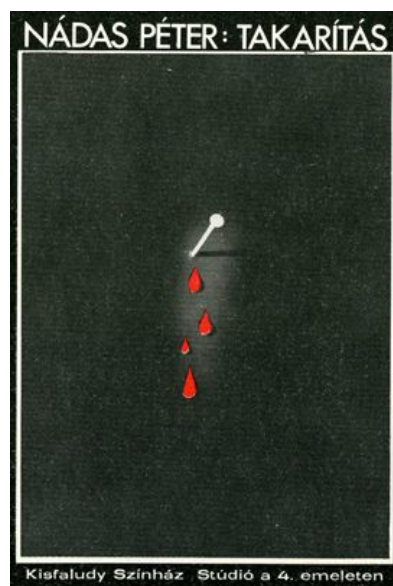


Fig. 2. Poster of the production of *Cleaning* at the National Theatre of Győr (1980)