



# THEATRON

Vol. 16. No. 4.  
Winter 2022.

*Hungarian Theatre Historiography After WWII*



# THEATRON

*Hungarian Theatre History (iograph) y  
After WWII*

Journal in Performance Studies

Volume 16. No. 4.

Winter 2022.

Publisher:

Theatron Műhely Alapítvány

H-1041 Budapest

Kiss János utca 4/A.

E-mail: theatronalapitvany@gmail.com

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

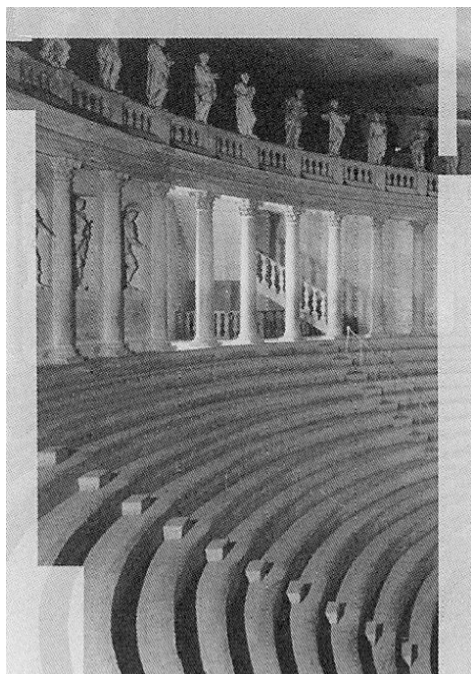
This issue was published with the support of  
Nemzeti Kulturális Alap, Magyar Tudományos  
Akadémia, Miniszterelnökség Nemzetpolitikai  
Államtitkárság, Bethlen Gábor Alapkezelő Zrt.  
and Studium Prospero Alapítvány.



MEGVALÓSULT A MAGYAR KORMÁNY  
TÁMOGATÁSÁVAL



ISSN14189941



# Table of Contents

#	<i>Hungarian Theatre Histor(iograph)y After WWII</i>
3	<b>Changes. The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Hungary</b> MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI
16	<b>The Country of Iron and Steel on Stage. Theatres and Political Propaganda in the Rákosi Era</b> ORSOLYA RING
28	<b>Community and Invisible Work at the Szkéné Collective. Methodological Questions on Researching Amateur Theatres during the 1960s and 1970s</b> KORNÉLIA DERES
43	<b>Parallel Histories and Survival Strategies. The Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre yesterday and today</b> TAMÁS JÁSZAY
54	<b>Samuel Beckett's Drama in Hungarian Theatre History and Criticism before 1990</b> MÁRIA KURDI
70	<b>The Perils of Creating Reality. University Stage of Szeged: <i>Petőfi Rock</i>, 1973</b> GABRIELLA KISS
81	<b>"World Theatre in Szolnok" during the 1970s. Gábor Székely: <i>The Drake's Head</i>, 1973</b> ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN
96	<b>Prohibition, Toleration, Bewilderment. On the Early Reception of Péter Nádas' Play <i>Cleaning</i> (1977)</b> PÉTER P. MÜLLER
107	<b>Poetic Rituality in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre. An Overview</b> ENIKŐ SEPSI
118	<b>The Responsible Hands of Theatre. Minor and Major Forces on the Stage of Metanoia Artopédia</b> VERA KÉRCHY
129	<b>"A rose by any other name". Contemporary Hungarian Shakespeare Adaptations on Stage and in Cyberspace</b> VERONIKA SCHANDL

# *Book reviews*

- 143 **Rulership in Early Modern England: Shakespeare's *King Lear* in Context**  
(Judit Mudriczki: *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear. An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage*)  
NATÁLIA PIKLI
- 150 **How to Deal with Multitudes? (Mary McAvoy and Peter O'Connor, eds.: *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*)**  
ÁDÁM BETHLENFALVY
- 157 **Living Through Extremes in Process Drama**  
(Ádám Bethlenfalvy: *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama*)  
CHRIS COOPER
- 165 **East is East? (Kalina Stefanova and Marvin Carlson, eds.: *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe: 30 Years After the Fall of Iron Curtain*)**  
TAMÁS JÁSZAY
- 170 **Shakespeare Matrix Across the Continent (Nicoleta Cinpoș, Florence March and Paul Prescott, eds.: *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages*)**  
TAMÁS JÁSZAY
- 176 **The Authors in this Issue**

## Changes. The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Hungary

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI

**Abstract:** During the course of the 20th century, there appeared trends and schools that characterised European theatrical practice as a whole, and yet the functioning of the academic discipline would traverse different paths in small-language cultures, especially those that fell under Soviet power, than the rest of the continent did. We associate the emergence of theatre studies as an academic discipline with the emerging concept of performativity, as seen in Erika Fischer-Lichte's impactful paper. "However, the discovery of the performative dates back to the beginning of this century. It resulted, among other things, in the birth of a new academic discipline – theatre studies."<sup>1</sup> From the vantage point of the hundred-year-long history of German theatre studies, this statement is undeniably inspiring, since on the one hand, it allows us to glimpse the shared characteristics of performance culture at the beginning of the century, from Craig through Appia to Stanislavski, and on the other, it lets us note that decades later, the language theory research beginning with Austen derives inspiration from a completely different experiential platform when it comes to the performative character of language (and not that of bodily processes.) However, in small-language cultures we perceive a different academic practice, therefore in this paper we follow the structure of scholarship born of the discovery, experience and naming of per-

formativity, until the solidification of Sovietised academic practices in the 1960s.

In 1908 and 1909, Edward Gordon Craig posed two round-table questions to European theatre-makers on the pages of *The Mask*: what do they mean by realism, and do they need a National Theatre. From Hungary, these questions were answered by Sándor Hevesi, a director working at the National and Thália Theatres, who proceeded to exchange many more letters with Craig. This paper paraphrases the title of Erika Fischer-Lichte's work on German theatre studies to reach towards the realisation that the disciplined academic thinking that could have led to the rise of Hungarian theatre studies was underpinned by the answers to Craig's questions. We must remark that Craig never visited Hungary, never met the man who answered his letters, and he had no contact with Hungarian theatre, unless we count his acquaintance with Lajos Fülep, a Hungarian art historian who was his neighbour for half a decade in Florence. Craig's questions, his insights and his position outside the system of theatrical institutions kickstarted Hungarian discourse about theatre as an independent form of art.

### 1. *The Idea: Realism (Hevesi)*

The European frameworks of theatre studies are more than a century old, their institutional development can be measured through the emergence of university departments. "The first Institute of Theatre Studies was founded in Berlin in 1923 on the initiative of Max Herrmann."<sup>2</sup> German examples demonstrate

---

<sup>1</sup> Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, „From Text to Performance: The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Germany”, *Theatre Research International* 24, No. 2. (1999): 168–178, 168.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300020794>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 168.

that early academic and theoretical difficulties stemmed from the separation of literature and theatre, the question of whether it is possible to create a theatrical performance without a written play was immediately followed by the question, whether it is possible to lecture on theatre at a literature department. When it comes to the major monolingual countries of Europe, the power struggles in academia took place between departments and disciplines, but Hungary was in a different situation. It is a significant aspect of the post-WW1 Hungarian state that while humanities departments struggle to redefine their positions in the academic hierarchy, they are not competing with new disciplines, but with the integration of universities that found themselves beyond Hungary's borders.<sup>3</sup> In this geopolitical situation, the Budapest Academy of Theatre Arts holds an especially powerful position in educational policy, since some of its teachers are star directors known Europe-wide, whose possess a degree proving their academic qualifications – often a doctoral degree in the Humanities. Thus the first for theatre studies wasn't breaking into the realm of literary studies, instead, it had to define its own boundaries.

Sándor Hevesi taught at the Academy of Theatre Arts between 1927 and 1932, and starting in 1929, he created a course in theatre directing, and was the first among Hungarian theatre directors to approach the actor's work and to do so with a systemising philosophical toolset: clearly Hevesi was the one to define theatre in a new theoretical framework. Hevesi co-founded the Hungarian alternative theatre, Thália Company, with György Lukács in 1904, and also created its

<sup>3</sup> Hungarian scholars, departments and even entire universities that found themselves outside the new borders of Hungary, in the wake of WW1 and the Trianon treaty, chose to relocate to „mainland” Hungary where they were re-established and integrated into the pre-existing academic network.

training program, Thália Academy. We believe that the determination to create a philosophical system, and the primary orientation towards German and English-language theory originated with Lukács, but we can also follow it through the decades-long exchange of letters with Craig,<sup>4</sup> seeing how this collection of private, personal and academic examples tracks the developing need to create a separate academic discipline. Hevesi, as the head of the National Theatre, watched with scholarly curiosity and an analytic will, how “theatre increasingly sheds literature, the poet becomes more and more lonely on the stage,”<sup>5</sup> but he believed that the text of the performance only matures into a finalised play in the next generation, in the present all performed texts serve the performance, thus from the perspective of the present, all decisions are made by theatrical practice, so it is actor training and director training that can create academic theatrical thought. This realisation leads far, since Hevesi won an unambiguously cerebral position for the director, and Hungarian theatre still considers this well-prepared, analytic behaviour the professional norm for directors. Sándor Hevesi actively participates in developing the theoretical framework of European theatrical practice, and his importance in depicting the Hungarian theatre studies discipline is undeniable.

In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hevesi built a functional and national theatre based on ideals that explore the concept of realism. Hevesi's taste as a director and analyst conforms to Craig's ideas on theatre, even though all aspects of their lives

<sup>4</sup> Edward Gordon CRAIG és HEVESI Sándor, *Levelezés, 1908–1933*, ed. by SZÉKELY György (Budapest: OSZMI, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> HEVESI Sándor, “Tragédia kell a népnek?”, in *A magyar dramaturgia haladó hagyományai*, ed. by CSILLAG Ilona, HEGEDÜS Géza, 317–323 (Budapest: Művelt Nép, 1953), 318.

and careers diverge.<sup>6</sup> Craig posed the following questions on the pages of *The Mask*:

- “1. Do you consider Realism in acting to be a frank representation of human nature?
2. In your opinion should the Actor be allowed the same liberty in his expressions of the Passions, as is permitted to the Writer or the Painter?
3. Do you think that Realism appeals to the General Public or only to a limited section of Playgoers?”<sup>7</sup>

Hevesi's responses to the 1908 questions signify that amongst the rigidity of formalism and a philistine audience's expectations of reality, realism is the single artistic practice, which can seize art that inevitably tends towards symbolism in its expressions, and again and again lead it back towards representation of life. “Realism always appears when Art has become fossilised into formalism”. Realist art is capable of demonstrating the extraordinariness of man. “This art consists in laying stress on what is special in the human.”<sup>8</sup> The appearance of the topics of formalism, symbolism and life in the orbit of realism thematises theatre theoretical queries in the beginning of the century, and Hevesi's multiple decades as the head of the National Theatre and his years spent as a professor at the Academy of Theatre Arts served as the foundation of the academic discipline in Hungarian language and culture.

“The modern tendency in Art, and what we are all striving at, is to conquer Life through Art.” At the same time, Hevesi understands, and provides a linguistically precise answer to Craig's 2<sup>nd</sup> question. He understands the actor's toolset (his “liberty in his expressions”) to signify expression, and

primarily verbal expression: “In the first place his limitation is through material, that is to say, through speech.” Consequently, when it comes to speech and utterance, liberty is to be found in the words of the playwright (Writer), but the actor is never alone. “The Actor does not stand alone upon the stage. He is a part of the whole and this whole is represented by the Stage Manager.”<sup>9</sup> Reconstructing Hevesi's own works as a director, this excerpt sees the actor's liberty in performative bodily processes, physically expressed events, and this liberty is curtailed by the director.

Hevesi encounters the linguistic phenomenon of untranslatability in his response to the third question, since in Hungarian he must separate the word cluster denoting realism from the one denoting reality, he must speak of *realizmus* (realism) on the one hand, and *való(di)ság* (reality-realness-verisimilitude) on the other. The audience, the playgoer “wants everything to be real... real trees, real walls and so on. These real things are always unreal things in Art, alien and hostile to Art.”<sup>10</sup> Following Hevesi, I will hazard the presupposition that this linguistic phenomenon made the relationship between depictions of reality and realist (later socialist realist) art inherently fragmentary and in need of explanation. The academic discipline of theatre studies is concerned with the event of performativity, and discovers it in the conceptual vocabulary of the current stylistic trend, realism, and in the strategies of depicting reality. Depicting reality is not the exclusive domain of realism, Hevesi intuits this from the etymological specificities of the topical Hungarian vocabulary, and he unwittingly begins the debates on realism that often provide us with an explanation of the word, and not of the phenomenon. His own theatrical routine aimed at translating the classics, mostly Shakespeare and Moliere, as well as con-

<sup>6</sup> CRAIG és HEVESI, *Levelezés...*, 194–201.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mask*, Vol. I. No. 3–4. 1908.1. Quoted in (and published in two languages): CRAIG és HEVESI, *Levelezés...*, 176–177.

<sup>8</sup> CRAIG és HEVESI, *Levelezés...*, 176.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 177.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 177.



temporary Hungarian plays, into something natural, as opposed to something real.

At the beginning of the century, Craig's questions find Hevesi during the first major change in his career. In 1908, at the age of 35 he is still the founder-director of the Thália Company, the first Hungarian alternative theatre, and at the same time, the leading director of the largest private theatre, the Popular Theatre (Volksbühne/Népszínház), and from 1909, once more the director and later the head of the National Theatre. Craig and Hevesi are the same age, they were born only one year apart. Their careers entwined in 1908, when one of Hevesi's letters became the foreword of Craig's second book.<sup>11</sup> But their stories already diverge during the first world war. Their defining experiences in 1914 reshaped their theatrical practices: in 1914, Craig met Appia in Zürich, while Hevesi found himself on the Eastern front. Craig articulates his aesthetics in exhibitions, Hevesi does so in theatrical performances. In 1933, their exchange of letters ceases. Due to political pressure Hevesi is removed from the leadership of the National Theatre, and he dies in 1939, while Craig lives on for 27 more years.

The questions posed on the pages of *The Mask* in 1909 reach a Hungarian director who is acclaimed both in the National Theatre, and in the alternative theatre scene. Hevesi's answers to Craig's inspiring questions make it clear that he considers theatre an academic discipline.

"1. Do you believe a National Theatre, directed by a Committee, is advantageous to the development of our Artists?

2. Has your experience shown you that the greatest talent is to be found in the National Theatres of Europe, or in the Theatres of private enterprise?

3. Do you think greater advantage would accrue to the State if it supported the independent efforts of individual artists of great talent, rather than a collective and less talented body of artists under the control of a Committee?

4. If you had been asked the question thirty years ago, would you have voted in favour of the State supporting Madame Bernhardt, Madame Duse, Tommaso Salvini and Henry Irving, or would you have been in favour of the Nation supporting the National Theatre of France, and the proposed National Theatres in England and Italy?"<sup>12</sup>

The answers acknowledge that theatre is built on strong acting talents, but consider State support indispensable, however instead of leadership by committee, they are content with a managerial form of leadership: "a manager, a man of artistic sense and experience, will suffice".<sup>13</sup> Hevesi considers Heinrich Laube's career and social activism as the head of the Burgtheatre to be his exemplar, as Laube held political function as a member of parliament since 1848, the year of civil revolution in Europe, and at the same time while leading the Viennese theatre, he developed a model that supported theatrical utterance in the speaker's own national language. Here's a rare moment of Hungarian theatre history, which carries on the revolutionary demand for national autonomy, the anti-Habsburg, anti-German ideal of the 1848–1849 revolution, through the harmonic and modern usage of a Viennese, Laubeian framework for popular theatre. Let us not forget that in 1909, Hungary is still part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and Budapest, as the second largest city of the Monarchy, is an open, esteemed, and exciting city without European culture. Speaking of Budapest's position relative to Vienna, in Craig's

<sup>11</sup> Edward Gordon CRAIG, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: William Heinemann, 1911).

<sup>12</sup> [*The Mask*, Vol. II. No. 4–6. 1909–1.] CRAIG és HEVESI, *Levelezés...*, 178–180.

<sup>13</sup> CRAIG és HEVESI, *Levelezés...*, 179.



question the State signified the Monarchy, but in Hevesi's answer it referred to the Hungarian nation, and this linguistic and theoretical difference, born of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Monarchy, can lead to misunderstandings.

These are the foundations of the Hungarian academic discipline of theatre studies: actor training, director training, and training in Hungarian language, since language is one of the substantial elements of identity, since the actor is the substance of theatre, and the creator of the theatrical art is the director. Investigating the particularities of the art of acting and directing, in 1908 Sándor Hevesi writes a book for his students *On The Art of Acting*, and beyond the practical examples, the book recognises that the role of theory is to stimulate, since "the effects of theory lead to the development of practice."<sup>14</sup> His books illuminate two extraordinary perspectives, one of them being that the development of theatre studies as an academic discipline flowed from those working in theatres themselves, not from the humanities department of the greatest Budapest university. The other is that directors occupy a national post where they exercise power, therefore their statements as the head of the National Theatre (later Antal Németh és Tamás Major) strengthen the position of the National Theatre.

## 2. *The network: encyclopaedia authors, definitions – "consuming the real"*<sup>15</sup>

In his introduction to American theatre studies,<sup>16</sup> Marvin Carlson also refers to the insti-

tutionalisation of the academic discipline as a fight, as a battle, since in the North American system of tertiary education, the question of whether performance, cultural or literary studies attract more students, and thus more attention from of the university's proprietor, animates the rivalry of institutions and thus academic disciplines. In Hungary this conflict does not appear on the same scale, while in American interdisciplinary struggles, national identity does not feature as a key element. In America, major universities organise practical courses, and these feature drama and play, in opposition to classical theoretical courses, therefore the struggle for students and for funding between cultural studies and drama and speech departments happens both between and within universities. Finally, Carlson quotes Foucault to admit that eventually this might lead to a disintegration of the academic discipline, yet this is the position that allows him to ask: how can this Janus-faced academic discipline be channelled into a structure that fits the academic framework, if at one moment it prioritises the standards of theoretical humanities, and the next, practical analyses. Carlson focuses on Kuhn's paradigm theory in order to interpret the challenge of interdisciplinarity, and states as a general revelation:

"The much more normal American pattern, however, followed the pragmatic orientation of combining theory and practice, so that the normal American theatre programme would include classes in acting, directing, playwriting, and design as well as historical and theoretical study of theatre, but not, strangely, literary study of the plays themselves, since this would challenge

<sup>14</sup> dr. HEVESI Sándor, *A színjátszás művészete* (Budapest: Stampel. 1908), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Bert O. STATES, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 46.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin CARLSON, "Theatre and Performance at a Time of Shifting Disciplines", *Theatre*

*Research International* 26. No. 2. (2001): 137–144. 138.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883301000141>

the already established domain of English and other literary disciplines.”<sup>17</sup>

This form of disciplinary distance was also typical of the emerging Hungarian scholarly practice.

Carlson’s line of thought has a relevant insight that applies on a European scale: academic inclusion is always elitist, but especially so in places where scholarly institutions are entrusted with building a national store of knowledge. However, theatre is inherently popular, and so „in order to demonstrate its academic respectability”,<sup>18</sup> theatre studies must emulate the framework of literary studies. The formation of the Hungarian academic discipline proceeds much like the American model until World War Two, meaning that a demand for theory appears within the courses of the practical training, and the analysis of dramatic texts is taught alongside speech and acting classes, but the elitist scholarly institutions function as a closed system, and theatre as a performative art form cannot encroach upon their territory. It is a peculiarity of Hungarian theatre studies that since a single (royal, later national) theatre academy has been in operation since 1865, the threads of individual interests within the fraying weave of educational policy are rendered visible. In the absence of institutions, the professionalisation of Hungarian theatre studies proceeds along a different path. This path unambiguously leads towards the re-constituted elite society of the interwar years, towards urban bourgeoisie, (in Budapest and other major Hungarian cities), and this process means that the second crucial event in the story of Hungarian theatre scholarship is still not the foundation of an institution, but a unique moment in publication history: two significant Hungarian encyclopaedias are published on the topic of theatre, at the same time.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 141.

*Lexicon of Acting* is edited by Antal Németh and published in 1930, as one of the most ambitious publications of its decade; it summarises all the knowledge of theatre produced by European thinkers and creatives in its two volumes and 2000 pages. And at the same time, in instalments between 1929 and 1932, editor Aladár Schöpflin puts out the four volumes of his *Lexicon of Hungarian Theatre Arts*, which focuses on the history of Hungarian theatre and playwriting. There is an overlap between the authors who contributed to the two encyclopaedias, but the generational and professional opposition between the chief editors is tangible. Schöpflin is a literary historian, a writer, and he’s more than twice as old as Németh, the 27-year-old theatre scholar and dramaturge. Schöpflin understands and interprets theatre as text, while Németh thinks about it as a director does. The simultaneous publication of these two different encyclopaedias appears like a rivalry between publishing houses, but from an academic-historical perspective, it is important to note the powerful emergence of professional frameworks.

While we must accept that the encyclopaedic genre inevitably simplifies, it seems obvious that it allows a wider readership to access the type of theoretical and historiographical thinking that considers theatre as an autonomous form of art and analyses its aesthetics through the actor. In investigating the academic discipline, it is preferable to focus on Németh’s efforts, with the additional reason that while at the time of the encyclopaedia’s publication, Sándor Hevesi was still the head of the National Theatre, subsequently (following two short-term appointees) Antal Németh, the editor of the encyclopaedia took over his position.<sup>19</sup> Before the

<sup>19</sup> Németh Antal became head of the National Theatre by appointment of the Minister of Culture. In this paper I will not detail the events of 1935, one of the greatest scandals of Hungarian theatrical life, because the tensions between two great creatives, and

publication of the encyclopaedia, Németh's renown in the Hungarian theatrical profession was limited (compared to Hevesi or Schöpflin), although after his provincial directing work, he received a state grant to study Italian, German and French theatre, following the work of Reinhardt and Jessner,<sup>20</sup> and he became well-acquainted with the contemporary European art scene, but he didn't make a long-term commitment either to Hungarian avant-garde theatre, or to major theatre companies. However, in 1928 he participated in the development of the Theatre Art Studio, which aimed to "use state support to create the foundations of a permanent experimental theatre", in order to "develop the theatrical arts."<sup>21</sup> It is clear that the encyclopaedia brought fame not only to Hungarian theatre studies, but also to Antal Németh himself, since this form of research project motivated the still young Antal Németh to develop a systemic view of theatre philosophy, and it gave him direct access to the greats in the theatrical world. He instructs more than fifty article-writers, and beyond the original goal, that is, a popular introduction of actors, he commissions articles on the aesthetic and historical frameworks of theatrical art. In addition to the history of the National Theatre's foundation, the trends of avant-garde theatre also receive great attention, and are assigned to multiple article-writers. In Berlin, right as he is editing the encyclopaedia, Németh writes

---

the results thereof, did not have a significant impact on the development of theatre studies as a discipline.

<sup>20</sup> KÁVÁSI Klára, *Németh Antal a Nemzetiben és száműzetésben* (Budapest: MMA, 2018.), 14. Note 5.

<sup>21</sup> See Jenő ZÓLYOMI's article in *Magyar Színművészeti Lexikon*, ed. by SCHÖPFLIN Aladár (Budapest: Országos Színészegyesület és Nyugdíjintézete, 1929–1931), 307. Cited by: GARA Márk, "A Színpadművészeti Stúdió története", *Theatron* 14, 4. sz. (2020): 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.55502/THE.2020.4.73>

his paper *An Outline of the Aesthetics of Performance*, which may be considered the director's personal entry into academic writing. But in terms of academic disciplines it wasn't clear, either then or now, what sort of academic scene he could have entered, since while Németh's work on the encyclopaedia achieved a great response, brought significant renown, and created a community that could confidently navigate within the frameworks and conceptual vocabulary of the academic discipline, nonetheless without educational institutions, the structure and language of the encyclopaedia remained confused – undisciplined. Németh doesn't belong to an academic workshop, since in the thirties, the universities retain their autonomy, the Minister of Culture (and Education) cannot appoint anyone into the leadership of the Budapest University or the Academy of Theatre Arts. But he can choose the leader of the National Theatre, and so dr. Antal Németh<sup>22</sup> becomes the head of the National Theatre in 1935, by ministerial appointment; according to the narrative of monographers, it was his presentation at the 1934 conference of the Italian Academy of Science, in addition to his editorial work on the encyclopaedia, that drew attention to his abilities.

The 1929 paper is more of a manifesto, an analysis inspired by expressionism that relies primarily on the shared authority of contemporary German writers. Carl Hagemann, Felix Emmel, Adolf Wins, Max Boehn have since fallen out of the scholarly canon, but they were novel in 1929, and directed attention away from the dramatic text, and towards the actor's creative work, the director's labour. The young Németh understands theatre aesthetics as a bodily processed undertaking, which leads to complete transference both for the actor and the audience. Németh believes that in the weeks of preparation, "the cause and effect relationships within the world of the real self become ob-

---

<sup>22</sup> Németh has his degree at University of Pázmány, Budapest, in 1922.



scured, and the actor is clad in the destined causal relations of another self.”<sup>23</sup> Németh writes powerful texts in order to preserve the performances of star actors, he pens an excellent mimeograph of Károly Sugár’s facial expressions in the role of Caliban.<sup>24</sup> In 1929, on the pages of *Színészújság* (Actor’s Newspaper)<sup>25</sup> he describes German director training, the system of the German Theatrewissenschaftliches Institut, which is already training performers for a new kind of theatre in Berlin, Munich, Cologne and Kiel. He himself outlines the operation of a National Theatre College, that teaches twelve parallel courses, where modern Russian ballet and Chinese facial expressions all form part of the curriculum.

Not necessarily in Bert O. States’s sense, but Németh’s drive for theatre is “consuming the real”, since he’s taking the drive for newness that characterised early, 1910s classical avant-garde, and introducing it to the National Theatre in 1935, with the support of the minister and the state. This process is relevant to our exploration of the formation of an academic discipline, since it means that the avant-garde drive, the expressionist linguistic toolset of the new theatre appear in an establishment that moves with a glacial pace along its traditions of performance. Németh’s years as a journalist and critic reveal an active, well-informed, inspirational thinker, who prepares for his career with the discipline of a scholar, but the ambitions of a director, a theatre-maker. He doesn’t interpret theatre from a literary perspective, and

possibly it wasn’t Sándor Hevesi’s teachings, but the revelations of his professors during his studies in Germany that confirmed him in his approach. It is a unique feature of the history of Hungarian academia that Németh could realise his notions as the head of the National Theatre, but he could only enter educational institutions as a guest lecturer, he wasn’t entrusted with a chair or a faculty. But in the National Theatre, he created his director training program, which, among others, started the careers of the greatest Transylvanian directors for generations: József Szabó, Miklós Tompa.

Németh’s academic activity does not stop at the fortification of the social network of Hungarian theatrical historiography: in the last stage of his career, as the head librarian of the National Library, he developed a uniform system of describing performances, he created the foundations of the Theatre Studies Collection with the material relics of the old National Theatre demolished in 1965, and so he strengthened the archival, systemising, historiographic practice of theatre studies as a discipline, and elevated it to the state’s scope of responsibility. The political experience of Németh’s career as the National Theatre’s leader seems impossible to document, but its relevance to academic history is undeniable: in creating the network and in collecting relics, he represented a drive towards systemisation in theatrical memory.

### 3. Sovietisation as an academic framework

To Hungarian theatre historians, it is clear that Hevesi and Németh are doctors and directors at the same time. The nature of their scholarly statements reveals the primacy of action over analysis. While the writings of Hevesi and Németh create the theoretical surface of the profession, due to their own actual position, they greatly distance it from the established institutions of academia. And this is the historical moment when the Soviet machinery of power casually interrupts a functional process that up to that

<sup>23</sup> NÉMETH Antal, „A színjátszás esztétikájának vázlata”, in NÉMETH Antal, *Új színház*, 151–205 (Budapest: Múzsák, 1988), 175.

<sup>24</sup> NÉMETH Antal, “Mimográfia Sugár Károly Calibanjáról”, *Színpad* 2. Nos. 5–6. (1936): 221–226. reprint: NÉMETH Antal, *Új színház*... 50–55.

<sup>25</sup> NÉMETH Antal, “A rendezőnevelés és a színészképzés problémája”, *Színészújság* 3. No. 5. (1929): 12–14. reprint: NÉMETH Antal, *Új színház*... 76–82.

point retained its autonomy, despite the limitations of a small language. We agree with Postlewait's insight that "the preceding century also saw the emergence of theatre libraries and museums, both locally and nationally (though many of them lack adequate funding and some have disappeared)",<sup>26</sup> meaning that one must wait for governmental or private investors before scholarship can gain its own institutions, and in post-WW2 Hungary, this moment arrived with the Soviet takeover. Between 1949 and 1952 four institutions are founded, almost out of nowhere, to shoulder the work of historical collection, theoretical query and history-writing, in the new frameworks of academic policy. In the same year that theatres are nationalised, the Hungarian Union of Theatre and Film Arts is founded as the professional organisation of all those who work in theatres and film studios. The academic department that runs a library and announces a publishing program is organised in 1952, within the Union, again emerging from within the profession, which we can interpret as an established routine, a professional tradition. The financial and ideological support for the grand plans of the Union's academic department is provided by the Ministry of (the People's) Culture. Within one year of the foundation of this academic department, the National Museum of Theatre is created, and Ferenc Hont is appointed as its leader, who calculates that twenty-one institutions pursue concurrent theatre studies research, and so he suggests combining them (less on the principle of rational efficiency, more to adhere to the Soviet practice of authoritarian control.)<sup>27</sup> Thus on the first of January 1957,

<sup>26</sup> Thomas POSTLEWAIT, "Theatre History and Historiography: A Disciplinary Mandate", *Theatre Survey* 45, No. 2. (2004): 181–188, 186. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557404000122>

<sup>27</sup> HONT Ferenc, *Javaslat a színháztörténeti és színháztudományi munkálatok gazdaságosabb megszervezéséről*. OSZMI Archives, Hont-fonds.

the Institute of Theatre and Film Studies is created.

The institution was created in adherence to the Soviet model, and named collection as the goal of theatre studies; the controlled, directed reconstruction of the past, as Max Hermann claimed in Berlin in the 1920ies.<sup>28</sup> The effect of sovietisation on Hungarian theatre studies is brutal in its complexity, because it proffers the Soviet model with no transition, it operates on linguistic and cultural axioms that are foreign to creatives and scholars born in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. We can only turn towards this period with exceptional care, because we can still perceive the exclusive use of Marxist-positivist premises in contemporary scholarly language, it became an automatism, our academic mother tongue. The functioning of Soviet scholarship was imported to Hungary by creatives who emigrated to Berlin, then to Moscow during the interwar Horthy era, and who returned after WW2, prepared for this scholarly task, but their preparation was of the 1920ies, of Alexander Gvozdev in Moscow. We have learned the most about this method from the post-war headmaster of the Academy of Theatre Arts, Ferenc Hont, who was an avant-garde director in the late 1920ies, a student of Gémier and a colleague of Antal Németh.

Hont's entire oeuvre has not yet been subjected to thorough research, and neither has the Soviet phase of the transformation of our academic life, in this paper I will provide a mere sketch: the development of theatre education, the protocol for publishing theatrical texts, the selection of authors to canonise, all this became the responsibility of Hont, who had returned from the Soviet

<sup>28</sup> „Herrmann claimed that as a first step, theatre studies should reconstruct past performances by collecting and evaluating the historic material concerning them and by applying the experiences made in contemporary theatre before proceeding to investigate them.” FISCHER-LICHTE, „From Text ...”, 173.

Union, but spoke Russian badly, and had no current Soviet contacts. From the perspective of academic history, individual impulses fade away, and what remains visible is a strong drive towards synthesis: let there be a Hungarian theatre history, let previous research be systemised, and in addition, Hont began an (improvised) process: let there be an ongoing contemporary archival collection of all Hungarian theatrical events as they occur. This latter decision provides the foundation of theatre studies in Hungary. Hont was a rarity, an unschooled director, an autodidact in the Humanities, who learned the craft alongside avant-garde directors, gained erudition from his friends among the 1920ies Hungarian intelligentsia, assisted Gémier when he played *Ubu Roi* in Paris, invented the Szeged Theatre Festival emulating Reinhardt's Salzburger Festspiele, and used expressionist tools to direct the greatest classic of Hungarian theatrical literature, *The Tragedy of Man*. As a Jewish man, he is drafted into a labour battalion during WW2, and when he's sent to the Eastern front, he successfully deserts to the Soviet side. When he returns from Moscow in 1945, he's not a prisoner of war, he has a mission from the Party: he must restart theatrical and film production in Hungary. The example of Soviet academic policy almost reinforces Hont's professional commitment: the collection he began in 1957 as a documentation of the present serves as the core of the Institute's database even today, and curiously this became the peculiar strength of Hungarian theatre studies. All Hungarian performances after 1945 were officially, compulsorily included in the archive. Hont's work realises the narrative that began with the letters of Hevesi and Craig, which defined theatre as an autonomous performative art; the academic toolset for its adequate documentation was assembled by the network of scholars that was bolstered by years spent editing Németh's encyclopaedia, and the institutions of the academic discipline would not be the universities, but the libraries and the Museum of Theatre.

Within the framework provided by Hont's Soviet academic practices, cooperative research projects turned towards the memories of old Hungarian theatre. Hont himself wrote about the art of action, he was interested in folk mime, in popular theatre, which was in ideological harmony with the research aims of the People's Republic, but still redirected research towards performative events. And it was in the Soviet era that a multitude of books were published on one of the particularities of Hungarian national identity, our early folk theatre. Hont started institutionally organised theatre studies research in Hungary, and even contemporary researchers connect to the same structure.

Studying the rise of theatre studies as an academic discipline in Hungary, this is where we must halt, this is the step from where Hungarian theatre studies as an established institution can let its voice be heard – although in the early era, with some Soviet overtones.

The academic and theoretical summation of the Soviet era is the 10-year anniversary conference held in 1962, the papers and debates of which were collected in a special issue of the *Theatrum* journal in 1963. In Hungary, we have developed a certain skill in detaching Soviet speech modes from academic analyses, and so we must remark that this double-speak, this methodological ballast weighs heavily on researchers of the academic history of State Socialist countries. Comprehension is hindered when scholars must express their thanks not only to a sponsor, but also to the Party. In the early years of totalitarian dictatorship, in the early 1950ies, lengthy expressions of thanks were compulsory, first to the great linguist Stalin, and in Hungary also to the great theoretician Révai, the Party's leading ideologue. In the early sixties, the linguistic formulae of compliance become more subtle, but reading them is nonetheless painful. The texts celebrating the first ten years of institutional Hungarian theatre studies still retain a rhetoric that centres class warfare, the history of



anti-fascism, labour and socialism, the ontological position of struggle and vigilance, and this syrupy ideological drivel makes it impossible for a young contemporary researcher to unfold the meaning of the texts with patience and understanding. Since this has not yet come to pass, the institutional history of Hungarian theatre studies skips over these decades, and claims that a pure and free workshop only emerged after the regime change, in 1994, with the foundation of Tamás Bécsy's Theatre Studies Department, safely embedded in university hierarchy and its academic framework. However, thirty years passed in the meantime, and processing them falls to us – let us make an attempt.

Ferenc Hont made it a lifelong project to create institutional theatre studies, his work towards this goal consisted of maintaining the ideal (realism,) the network (the encyclopaedia authors) and the Institute itself. He himself was primarily a director, who saw academia from the vantage point for praxis. The 1962 conference allowed Hungarian academics to speak, after a brief (and friendly) ministerial introduction, since by this point, there was no need for the presence, the controlling and validating authority of Soviet comrades, Hungarian academia was allowed to function without overt supervision. Yet we must not forget that the Institute of Theatre and Film Studies was created as an institution of the Ministry, not the Academy of Sciences, and operates as such to this day; this bars it from ever achieving professional academic autonomy, or joining an academic field of scholarship.

Hont affirmed in his presentation that the precursors of Socialist theatre are workers' theatre and folk theatre, and in this context workers' theatre meant avant-garde. Marxist theatre studies create their own traditions, and this is how Hont elevates his own 1930ies initiatives (contemporary with Hevesi and Antal Németh) to the forefront of the academic discipline. Former members of the Szeged Youths organisation created in the orbit of Szeged University became

"the young scholars and artists who in 1934 founded *Színpad* (Stage),<sup>29</sup> the first theatrical journal with genuinely academic standards, then in 1936 the Hungarian Theatre Studies Group, and 25 years ago [in 1937,] combined with other Communist organisations, the legal theatre project of the [illegal] Communist Party, the Independent Stage."<sup>30</sup>

Hont's narrative evidently legitimates his own standing, but peeling off the Soviet verbiage, it is revealed that Hont interprets theatre as a social activity and process, that he seeks to find the synthesis between daily reviews (*critique de théâtre*) and real analysis (*critique littéraire*), that his concept of ideal theatre hinges on the simultaneous shared effort of the actor and the audience. It is in this spirit that Hont publishes the volume titled *Hungarian Theatre History* in 1962, and this approach to research, disdained by Marxist academia despite its foundations in positivist methodology, proceeds to flood the reader with hundreds of volumes and publications. Some already perceive at this 1962 conference (in Margit Gáspár's remarks during the debate) that while the particularity of this academic discipline lies in the analyses provided by the directors, by the actual theatre-makers, nonetheless directors are absent, research became the purview of data collectors and aesthetes. These are the decades of quiet data collection that pave the way for the resurrection of theatre studies as a discipline once the regime change brings about a political shift, because the data collection wasn't limited to all the data, relics, photos, video and audio recordings and press reviews etc. of all Hungarian performances after 1945, no, the ministerial deci-

<sup>29</sup> LAKATOS Éva, *A magyar színházi folyóiratok bibliográfiája 1778–1948* (Szombathely: Savaria University Press, 2010.) 448.

<sup>30</sup> HONT Ferenc, "A Magyar színháztudomány és az élő színház", *Theatrum* 1, No. 1. (1963) 8–28. 13.

sions of the coalition period (1945–1948) also received their own reprint editions,<sup>31</sup> as did reviews of older Hungarian theatrical events,<sup>32</sup> as did bibliographies and collections, that due to the antiquarian nature of source publications could (and sometimes did) avoid taking a political stance. Hont and the Institute create theatre studies in the quantitative sense, their publications feature the writings of Western Communist authors in addition to the compulsory Soviet literature, and in a few years, they publish volumes that would have taken decades to write. Far from the scholarly structures of universities and academia, they develop their own methodology, and the most severe consequence of this is that Hungarian theatre studies don't become a part of academic research until the Changes, and this intensive, but insular research will demonstrably hinder entry into international academia.

Women play a curious role in this era of theatre studies. Female theatre historians of great renown and great legacy begin their research, Tekla Dömötör shoulders the search for traces of old Hungarian drama, Jolán Pukánszky-Kádár the search for sources on the National Theatre, their books tell the story from its beginning. Rózsa Dancs and Ilona Csillag conducted background research projects, they compiled databases, histories of dramaturgy, and they did not summarize their findings themselves, but contributed to the professionalisation of the craft.

#### 4. Epilogue

Following Schlegel, we believe that small-language cultures are indicators, they let us know which movements, which trends reach their geographical and linguistic borders,

<sup>31</sup> DANCs Rózsa, ed. *A Vallás- és közoktatási minisztérium színházi iratai* (Budapest: OSZMI, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> BÉCSY Tamás, KERÉNYI Ferenc, SZÉKELY György, eds. *Magyar színháztörténet I–III. 1790–1949* (Budapest: OSZMI, Könyvklub, 1990–2005).

and how thoroughly they need to be altered before they can be adopted. This paper follows the rise of Hungarian theatre studies until the 1960ies, and so outlines the geopolitical field of academic currents in Europe, complete with concepts, events and trends, while struggling with the question: what are the benefits of studying the analytical scholarship of small-language cultures? We accept that both the cultural process and the scholarship interpreting it passes through a multitude of translations, both in terms of examples cited, and in terms of analytical and methodological vocabulary, and yet the researcher's motivation is affected by the necessary divergence between local and global expression. Local research projects are discouraged by the fact that global publications have a disproportionate weight in academic metrics, furthermore, local results can only be received or transmitted by a larger cultural scene if they use the dominant language of the larger community. Yet in addition to the preservation of a nuanced national identity, there is a reason to analyse and evaluate events that were seen and recounted only by few, because they point to symptomatic processes. Let us admit that it is rather difficult to find the academic vantage point where, while one is forced by the sheer size and foreignness of the international audience to rely on simplifications and generalisations, and worse, one builds on the statements of academics who are unfamiliar to the audience – one still hopes that one's insights add to the global histories. Since the theatrical culture of small-language nations<sup>33</sup> in some instances reveals a completely different aspect of cultural globalisation than that of major languages, the dynamics of

<sup>33</sup> Meike WAGNER, "Expanding the Canon, Creating Alternative Knowledge, marketing the Filed? Performance Practices in Theatre Studies." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 28, No. 1. (2016): 4–14.

their academia also differ, and that is why I made this attempt to outline the dynamic frameworks of Hungarian theatre studies, for an audience who reads in English, and possesses the theatrical culture of Europe.

### Bibliography

- BÉCSY Tamás, KERÉNYI Ferenc, SZÉKELY György, eds. *Magyar színháztörténet I–III. 1790–1949*. Budapest: OSZMI, Magyar Könyvklub, 1990–2005.
- CARLSON Marvin. "Theatre and Performance at a Time of Shifting Disciplines". *Theatre Research International* 26. No. 2. (2001): 137–144.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883301000141>
- CRAIG, Edward Gordon and HEVESI Sándor. *Levelezés, 1908–1933*. Edited by SZÉKELY György. Budapest: OSZMI, 1991.
- CRAIG, Edward Gordon. *On the Art of the Theatre*. London: William Heinemann, 1911.
- DANCS Rózsa, ed. *A Vallás- és közoktatási minisztérium színházi iratai 1946–1949*. Budapest: OSZMI, 1990.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika. "From Text to Performance: The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Germany", *Theatre Research International*, 24, No. 2. (1999): 168–178.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300020794>
- GARA Márk. "A Színpadművészeti Stúdió története". *Theatron* 14, No. 4. (2020): 73–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.55502/THE.2020.4.73>
- HEVESI Sándor. "Tragédia kell a népnek?". In *A magyar dramaturgia haladó hagyományai*. Edited by CSILLAG Ilona, HEGEDÜS Géza, 317–323. Budapest: Művelt Nép, 1953.
- HEVESI Sándor. *A színháztudomány művészete*. Budapest: Stampel, 1908.
- HONT Ferenc. "A Magyar színháztudomány és az élő színház". *Theatron* 1, No. 1. (1963): 8–28.
- HONT Ferenc. *Javaslat a színháztörténeti és színháztudományi munkálatok gazdaságosabb megszervezéséről*. OSZMI Archives, Hont-fonds.
- KAVASI Klára. *Németh Antal a Nemzetiben és száműzetésben*. Budapest: MMA, 2018.
- LAKATOS Éva. *A magyar színházi folyóiratok bibliográfiája 1778–1948*. Szombathely: Savaria University Press, 2010.
- NEMETH Antal. "A rendezőnevelés és a színészképzés problémája". *Színészság* 3. No. 5. (1929): 12–14.
- NEMETH Antal. "Mimográfia Sugár Károly Calibanjáról". *Színpad* 2. Nos. 5–6. (1936): 221–226.
- NEMETH Antal. "A színháztudomány esztétikájának vázlata". In NEMETH Antal. *Új színház, 151–205*. Budapest: Múzsák, 1988.
- POSTLEWAIT, Thomas. "Theatre History and Historiography: A Disciplinary Mandate", *Theatre Survey* 45, No. 2. (2004): 181–188,  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557404000122>
- STATES, Bert O. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.
- WAGNER, Meike. "Expanding the Canon, Creating Alternative Knowledge, marketing the Filed? Performance Practices in Theatre Studies". *Nordic Theatre Studies* 28, No. 1. (2016): 4–14.



## The Country of Iron and Steel on Stage. Theatres and Political Propaganda in the Rákosi Era

ORSOLYA RING

**Abstract:** In my study, I examine how theatre appeared in the official propaganda journal of the Rákosi-era, whose declared aim was to support the “cultural revolution”. Through an analysis of the linguistic propaganda devices that appeared in the journal, the focus of my writing is to show the ideological relations that defined not only the official theatre, but also the framework of workers’ or factory theatre. The ideologists and political decision-makers of the period made excellent use of the phenomenon that, in a total dictatorship, artistic works always carried a political message and conveyed values. In this way, theatre was used as a tool of propaganda to influence people's thinking, emotions, and behaviour.

### *Introduction*

By the late 1940s, after losing in World War II, Hungary had established a Soviet-style political system as part of the international socialist totalitarian world empire. The country had completely lost its external and internal sovereignty. The one-party totalitarian dictatorship that emerged was linked to the despotic personal power of Mátyás Rákosi. The vast majority of the means of production were nationalised, and private property and private enterprise were minimised. The independence of democratic freedoms and the judiciary were severely restricted. The new system, outlined in the 1949 constitution, was a complete break with historical tradition, essentially a word-for-word copy of the Soviet model. The totalitarian regime abolished all guarantees of human rights and based its rule, to a large extent, on terror. All

economic, social, and political autonomy and pluralism were abolished.<sup>1</sup>

The basic institution of the party-state between 1948 and 1956 was the highly centralised, hierarchical, and militarised Hungarian Worker’s Party (MDP). The entire political structure was organised to carry out the orders of a single central will, with neither those at the party’s various levels nor regular members of society having any meaningful influence on decisions. The cohesive forces of the order were a system of ideology, power structure, coercion, prestige, and privilege. While property relations were thoroughly transformed, radically limiting the private property of individuals, social policy was characterised by paternalism and narrow-minded class politics, its main aim being to transform society as a whole. The state intervened in the lives of individuals at both macro and micro levels, seeking to control every aspect of society, and making absolute obedience and loyalty to the party a value. The MDP mobilised great efforts to entirely transform the social structure, which took a long time, despite its very drastic steps. The ensuing mass social change was almost exclusively politically motivated; it was not of the free will of the people, but because the political changes made it difficult or impossible for them to continue with their previous way of life. One of the aims of this top-down transformation was to dismantle the traditional peasant society, and force the population of the villages into producer coopera-

---

<sup>1</sup> BIHARI Mihály, *Magyar politika: 1944-2004 – politikai és hatalmi viszonyok*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005), 94–102; ROMSICS Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 285–295, 338–346.

tives. Great numbers of people who had previously been peasants were forced to change occupations, most of them becoming unskilled industrial workers, resulting in a loss of social status.<sup>2</sup>

Forced industrialisation led to an increase in the number of urban workers, but becoming one of them in the 1950s did not represent a real social uplift, as workers perceived their working and living conditions as deteriorating.

In 1949, unions were banned and any grassroots organisation of society was stopped. Thus, instead of the self-organisation of the past, authorities took care of leisure activities. In the workplace, brigades were formed following the Soviet model, whose members stayed together outside working hours, not least because this provided another opportunity to convey the party's ideology. One of the common recreational activities of the workers in a factory was to participate in various cultural groups.

Since one of the goals of the system was to create a "socialist type of man", culture was used to impart socialist ideology: science and the arts, such as film and theatre, were seen as necessary in educating the masses. The Ministry of Popular Culture, set up in 1949, was responsible for supervising cultural life at the ministerial level, and its creation was praised on the front page of the Free People newspaper: "The task of the newly established Ministry of Popular Culture will be to make up for our backwardness on the cultural front, to change our whole public thinking, to raise the cultural standards of our people, to fight against hostile ideologies".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> KORNAI János, *A szocialista rendszer. Kritikai politikai gazdaságtan* (Budapest: Kalligram, 1993). Cited in VALUCH Tibor, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> N.N., „Az új kormány”, *Szabad Nép*, 1949. jún. 11., 1.

In March 1950, the Ministry of Culture launched a cultural mass movement magazine called *Művelt Nép* (Educated People), which was a monthly until April 1954 and a weekly from then until October 1956, informing its readers about the events of cultural life.

In my study, I will examine how the working class appeared as an 'active participant in culture' through theatre-related articles published in a journal whose declared aim was to support the 'cultural revolution'. Through an analysis of the linguistic propaganda devices that appeared in the articles, the focus of my writing is on the ideological relations that defined not only the official theatre, but also the framework of the workers' or factory theatre. I will show how propaganda and theatre were linked in the toolbox of the ideological re-education of the working class.

"Our working people, with the help of the Soviet Union, under the leadership of our Party, have won political and economic power, and have begun to build socialism. An important condition for this is the spreading of knowledge and education, the raising of the cultural level of the working people, and the victory of our cultural revolution"<sup>4</sup> wrote Antal Berczeller, head of the Theatre Department of the Ministry of People's Education, in the columns of *Művelt Nép*. The aim of this "cultural revolution" as well as of popular education was to develop a new attitude to culture in society as a whole, for all people to acquire a socialist worldview. In the interests of this re-education, Berczeller wanted to turn all institutional means – science, the arts, cinema, theatre, and publishing – towards the masses.

#### *Frameworks of theatrical life*

After the war, which had done much damage to education and culture, the idea of nation-

<sup>4</sup> BERCELLER Antal, „Színházaink jövő évadja és a közönségszervezés kérdései”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 7. (1950): 20–21, 21.

alising theatres was raised almost immediately. For example, in its action programme adopted in 1945, the Social Democratic Party stated that “just like cinemas and radio, theatres should be taken out of the hands of private capital, once the necessary preconditions have been created.”<sup>5</sup> In 1948, the programme declaration of the Hungarian Workers’ Party (MDP), which was formed by the merger of the Social Democratic and Hungarian Communist Parties, stated that “scientific research and artistic creation must be freed from dependence on capital, and put at the service of the people”.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the parliamentary elections of November 1945, coal mines and electric power stations were taken into state administration, and then large banks and the companies they owned were nationalised. In 1948, the pace of nationalisation accelerated, with state ownership of industrial enterprises employing more than 100 workers and then of schools. In the theatre sector, the old system of district and private theatres continued until 1949. In 1948, the year before theatres were nationalised, there were 27 county theatre districts in the country, and the theatres in the capital.<sup>7</sup> Minister of Finance, István Kossa, presented the case for the nationalisation of theatres in the capital city on 19 July 1949. It was approved by Ernő Gerő, President of the People’s Economic Council on 21 July.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> BALOGH Sándor, IZSÁK Lajos, *Pártok és pártprogramok Magyarországon (1944–1948)* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1977), 214–215.

<sup>6</sup> BALOGH, IZSÁK *Pártok és pártprogramok...*, 339.

<sup>7</sup> Decision No. 101/6/1949. of the People’s Economic Council.

<sup>8</sup> István Kossa’s proposal on the nationalization of the capital’s theatres. MNL OL XIX-A-10-53-1949. Reprinted in DANCs Istvánné, ed., *A Vallás- és Közoktatásügyi Minisztérium színházi iratai 1946–1949*, (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 1990), 194–207.

In August 1949, the People’s Economic Council decided to take the rural theatres under state management, following a proposal by Minister Gyula Ortutay on 20 July 1949. The decision was justified by “political, economic, and personal considerations”, since until then “the programming policy of the rural theatres had been governed by the profit motives of private businessmen”. Their programmes thus predominantly included politically – and often morally – objectionable plays. Another reason given was that rural towns are not able to employ and support a large company on their own throughout the year. They have to cover a larger area, and each company has to be able to play in several towns. That way they won’t be forced to run new shows every 2-3 days without rehearsal, and present many bad plays in bad productions. We need few but good companies that put on good plays with many rehearsals and good performances. Therefore, instead of the previous 25 rural companies, 6 district theatre companies, one miner- and one opera-company were set up. In addition to performances in the capital, these companies were required to give 40 to 50 country performances a month, within a 50-kilometre radius. Nationalisation did not completely abolish travelling theatre but revived it in its own form with the Rolling Opera (1948–1954) and the State Village Theatre, which from 1952 was known as the State Déryné Theatre. These theatres were intended to provide performances for localities outside the reach of state theatres, in community and cultural centres. State ownership stabilised the theatres economically, but also created a completely new operational and artistic structure, which remained fundamentally unchanged throughout the following decades.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> KOROSSY Zsuzsa, „Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében” in GAJDÓ Tamás, ed., *Színház és politika. Színháztörténeti tanulmányok, 1949–1989*. (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 65–69.



The ministerial supervision of theatre life was transferred to the newly established Ministry of Culture and remained in its hands until 1957. The College of the ministry did not primarily take a position on artistic issues, but sought to align the operation of theatres with general cultural policy principles. For example, it determined the profile of the theatres, made decisions on economic and personnel matters, dealt with audience organisation and theatre criticism, and approved the work plan of the ministry's Theatre Department. The Theatre Department coordinated theatre life and was responsible for implementing the College's decisions.

Party leadership at the highest level was exercised by the relevant departments and committees of the MDP. The Agitation and Propaganda Committee played the most important role in the formulation of ideological standards. The intertwining of the party and state structures is illustrated by the person of József Révai, the Minister of National Education, who held several important posts at once, and was the head of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee at the same time as his ministerial post (1949–1953). It was him who personally managed the affairs of artistic life. Révai's aim was to translate the Soviet cultural policy associated with Zhdanov's name – socialist realism – into Hungarian practice.<sup>10</sup> He was responsible for the creation of centralised theatre management, and for ensuring the political and intellectual message and quality of theatre performances. The basis for this was the artistic depiction of the everyday heroism of the people living under socialism, in a simple and comprehensible way for everyone.<sup>11</sup>

After the nationalisation of theatres, political decision-makers intended to use them

to spread their ideology, and thus sought to tighten their control of them, strictly defining the nature, message, number, and target audience of the plays they could produce. The aim was to ensure that the plays preferred by politicians reached as large a proportion of society as possible. After 1949, one of the main objectives of the theatres' programming policy was to present as many new Hungarian plays dealing with contemporary problems as possible. A considerable number of the new shows produced were rather didactic pieces dealing with the transformation of agriculture and industrialisation, presenting a model of reality constructed according to communist ideology. The ideology demanded by the authorities also dictated that the plays should have a positive hero at their centre. The hero is a mythical embodiment of all that the individual cannot become, compensating for the individual's sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

### *The toolbox of propaganda*

The seemingly often absurd propaganda carried out by authoritarian regimes is not only designed to persuade the public, but also to lay down a form of acceptable public discourse that inhibits alternative ways of speaking and accustoms citizens to correct behaviour and communication.

A person who uses propaganda tools is trying to encourage others to accept his claims without questioning and to act as he wants them to. One of their most important tools is therefore suggestion (coercive influence), the process of inducing the public to accept a statement, even if there is no logical basis for doing so. The idea of suggestion is to use simple and known registers, to be clearly understood and to make positive statements, preferably in response to people's known desires, so that the reader does

<sup>10</sup> Andrej Alekszandrovics ZSDANOV, *A művészet és filozófia kérdéseiről* (Budapest: Szikra Könyvkiadó, 1949).

<sup>11</sup> KOROSSY, „Színházirányítás...”, 66; BOLVÁRI-TAKÁCS Gábor, *A művészetpolitika mechanizmusai* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2020), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques ELLUL, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 248.

not even think that there is another, possibly more positive, side to the issues. A more subtle form of suggestion uses innuendo, indirect statements.<sup>13</sup>

Propaganda texts often use terms such as “justice”, “law and order”, or “peace” to create favourable attitudes in the reader and thus prepare a good background for the message they want to convey, but they may also use words like “radical” or “war” to encourage readers to reject a cause or idea that they consider contrary to their own interests.

Other main features of propaganda are simplicity, the selection of information, the frequent repetition of the content to be conveyed, and the use of metaphors to facilitate the transmission of information and mobilise the masses, if possible by inducing them to act without thinking. In political communication, especially in dictatorships, the choice of metaphor is important: themes complete with metaphors help keep the issues the power considers important on top of the agenda. The most common metaphors used in propaganda texts are related to the words “body”, “life”, “death”, and “war”.<sup>14</sup>

In totalitarian regimes, propaganda is of paramount importance, because the more violence is inflicted upon society, the greater the need for ideological justification. To this end, political propaganda uses all the means at its disposal.<sup>15</sup> One of the aims of propaganda is to arouse suspicion and doubt about the (supposed) enemy, since its story is based on the idea of “us versus them”. The

inclusive “us”, defined in opposition to the hated “them” is a powerful cohesive force.<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand, the language of propaganda is simple and ordinary, easily understood by the members of the addressed group while using words with vague meanings that “evoke powerful and indefinite images, and it is this very vagueness that envelops them that increases their mysterious power.”<sup>17</sup> Political propaganda also often operates with complex, multi-meaning expressions whose meaning can only be determined in a specific context, or uses symbols whose meaning creates a sense of belonging to a community.<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of totalitarianism, observes that “the real aim of totalitarian propaganda is not to persuade but to organise [...] The masses are not persuaded by these facts, not even by invented facts, but only by the consistency of the system of which they are a part.”<sup>19</sup>

Next, I will examine the propaganda tools that can be identified in the theatre-related reports, i.e. the ways in which the Rákosi-era used theatre as a medium to spread its ideology. To do this, I used the system developed by the American Propaganda Analysis Institute in 1937, used to study propaganda ever since. This grouped propaganda tools as follows:

- Name-Calling: Giving an idea a bad label to reject it without examining the evidence.

<sup>13</sup> PÉTER Mihály, *A leplező nyelv. Álcázás és ámitás a nyelv használatában* (Budapest, Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2012), 108–113; Klaus KRIPPENDORF, *A tartalomelemzés módszertanának alapjai*, (Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 1995), 17–18; KÖVECSES Zoltán: *A metafora* (Budapest: Tipotex Kiadó, 2005), 19–29.

<sup>14</sup> JOBST Ágnes, „A HARC metafora szerepe az ’50-es évek politikai köznyelvében”, *Magyar Nyelvőr* 133, No. 4. (2009): 233–446.

<sup>15</sup> ELLUL, *Propaganda...*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Gustav LE BON, *A tömegek lélektana*, trans. by DR. BALLA Antal, (Franklin Társulat, Budapest, 1920). Cited in PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Edward SAPIR, „Beszéd és személyiség”, in SAPIR, *Az ember és a nyelv* (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1971), 141. Cited in PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah ARENDT, *A totalitarizmus gyökerei* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1992), 273, 268.

- Glittering Generality: Vague term that evokes positive emotions (“freedom”, “security”, “well-being”)
- Transfer: Transmitting the authority of positive symbols.
- Testimonial: Consists of having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program, product, or person is good or bad.
- Plain Folks: Putting the claim in the mouths of ordinary people, associating it with them (“of the people,” “plain folks.”)
- Card Stacking: Involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person, or product.
- Bandwagon: Everybody thinks a certain way, if you don't, you are left out, you don't belong to the community (“everybody—at least all of us—is doing it!”)
- Either-or: turning the debate into a bipolar one.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Writing on theatre in the propaganda press*

The theatre-related writings of *Művelt Nép* can be divided into two broad categories for the purpose of analysis. The first group includes the articles that attempted to evaluate the programming policy of the official theatres, while the second group includes those that dealt with theatres for workers or theatres in factories.

The articles in the first group cover two major themes, one being the question of audience organisation and the other the propagation and promotion of the production of plays with the appropriate ideological content by theatres. The task of organising theatre audiences was primarily the responsibility

of mass organisations, mainly because workers living predominantly in the suburbs did not necessarily go to the theatres in the city centre to buy tickets. The actions devised to solve this problem, such as taking tickets to the factories, were not only supposed to help but also to exert pressure, requiring workers to buy tickets.

Audience organisation served two propaganda purposes: on the one hand, it helped to drive workers to the theatre and spend their leisure time in a controlled way, and on the other hand, newspaper reports about audience organisation supported ideological goals, i.e. the party state gives workers the opportunity to be cultured, it gives them a cultural outlet, it gives them opportunities that were not available to them before. In the auditorium, through ideological and didactic plays, the workers in the auditorium would be then given a precise idea of how they should behave in everyday life, and what the norms were. The majority of the plays presented were extremely simplistic so that the message could be understood by all spectators without giving it much thought.

However, in many cases, the organisers themselves – called cultural workers to bring them closer to the audience by making them a part of the “we” of workers – did not know the plays to which they were supposed to draw the attention of others. As a result, organising audiences often meant little more than delivering tickets to the factories. The press of the time still portrayed audience organisation as a success story, citing the fact that the number of theatre-goers was on the rise throughout the period (compared to 3,435,579 in 1951, 5,531,638 in 1955, 44.7% of which were sold through the publicity agencies).<sup>21</sup>

In the writings, “good” cultural workers are said to be skilled and reliable on which performances to attend. In listing the fail-

<sup>20</sup> Victoria O’ DONNEL, Garth S. JOWETT, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1992), 237.

<sup>21</sup> TARÓDI-NAGY Béla, ed., *Magyar színházi adatok 1. Színpad és közönség* (Budapest: Színháztudományi Intézet, 1962), 53.

ures, we find panels: if audience management fails, it is partly the result of the theatres' poor programming policies: "The inappropriate programming policies of our theatres, which are out of touch with public opinion, also cause many difficulties. Even the best factory public relations manager cannot persuade his most enthusiastic theatre-loving workmate to see three Hungarian plays on the same theme at the same time."<sup>22</sup> It was also described as partly the fault of the press, which writes about plays at the wrong time (i.e. too late) and with inappropriate content:

"There is little information in advance and, apart from the usual reviews, the performance of an actor or a new young artist is rarely remembered. Many working publicists have experienced the damaging, almost irreparable effect of criticism that is not benignly critical but demoralising, not only on the author but also on the audience!"<sup>23</sup>

### *Professional acting*

The columns of *Művelt Nép* mostly reported on the travelling performances of professional theatres, and much less on a single performance in a permanent theatre. Behind this, one can easily see the intention of showing actors meeting ordinary workers directly, to bring the theatre closer to them. Most of the plays known to us are either by Soviet or "people's democratic authors", or new Hungarian dramas, the most common being miners' plays. The descriptions of the performances paint an idealistic picture for the reader: the actors go off to the country for a performance, sing merrily, and return home even more joyful because of the satisfaction they feel at the work they have done. The audience is, of course, always very en-

thusiastic, with many more people showing up than expected, all clapping loudly, welcoming the actors with love, often inviting them into their homes or treating them to homemade food and drink, as if they were family. Almost all the media report that there are plenty of bright-eyed children in the audience, alongside the workers.<sup>24</sup>

All these images served to create a sense of community in the reader. They brought the artists closer to ordinary working people so that the messages of the pieces were not conveyed by a distant "other" but by "someone like us". The articles used a number of well-established propaganda tools at the same time, and references to ordinary people are accordingly frequent: "The performance has already started, the 'Closed' sign hangs above the box office. A farmhand with a serious moustache and boots is still busily shaking the window of the glass case."<sup>25</sup>

The descriptions of audience reactions, which read like a children's theatre performance where the public even shouts into the performance, are crucial. Again, the point was to make the message simply accessible and approachable, both to the audience and to potential readers. It suggested that one does not need to be educated to go to the theatre, because it is about ordinary life, and it also told prospective theatre-goers when to rejoice and when to shed a tear at the performance. Because, to use a popular propaganda device: "I can make no exceptions, but the whole company will help the miners' fight, the coal battle, with all its heart and soul."<sup>26</sup>

The expectation of the authorities was that the spectators would see on the stage an artificially created world, which the party had deemed ideal. After all, socialist-realist

<sup>22</sup> PONGRÁCZ Zsuzsa, „Jegyeladás vagy közönségszervezés?”, *Művelt Nép* 6, No. 22. (1955): 3.

<sup>23</sup> PONGRÁCZ, „Jegyeladás...”, 3.

<sup>24</sup> ZOLNAY Miklós, „A »Csillagtárna« Királdon”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 2. (1951): 27–28, 27.

<sup>25</sup> FÖLDÉNYI Ervin, „Az üzemi és városi kultúrverseny bemutatói Győrött”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 5. (1951): 13–14, 13.

<sup>26</sup> ZOLNAY, „A »Csillagtárna«...”, 27–28.



theatre, following in the footsteps of Gorky, had to follow the same principles as Soviet theatre: to present works that dealt with issues that were understandable and important to the workers; that were set in the same places as the workers' everyday lives; that represented reality; and, last but not least, that expressed the goals of the party. The message of the plays was to be simple: you have to notice your mistakes, exercise self-criticism, correct yourself, and struggle to achieve the best possible results in the working world.<sup>27</sup>

One of the major problems of the period was the lack of plays with appropriate content. That is why the press gave a prominent role to the presentation of ones adapted to the expectations, which were usually didactic performances inspired by the life of the producers' cooperatives, mining or factories, written by Hungarian, Soviet, or "people's democratic authors". Two plays by the Romanian author Michail Davidoglu, *Miners* and *Iron and Steel* fit into this series. The first premiered on 13 April 1950 at the Hungarian Theatre, directed by Zoltán Várkonyi, and the second on 15 April 1952 at the Szeged National Theatre, directed by Albert Szilágyi. The importance of these two premieres is well illustrated by the fact that, in addition to the professional press, they were also reported in the official daily newspaper of the MDP, *Szabad Nép*. The reviews of *Miners* essentially include all the propaganda tools: we can read about the victorious struggle of Stakhanovist workers against reaction, the successful unmasking of the enemy, the development of the character of the socialist

man, the difficulties of the miners' life, which they then overcome through heroic work. The play was considered so important that the first act of the three-act play was published in the *Művelt Nép* as a stand-alone piece, especially for workers' theatre groups, and it was reported that several such companies did successfully perform it.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Art groups – company/workers' theatre*

Two-thirds of the theatrical writings in *Művelt Nép* dealt with the issue of factory or workers' theatre, which it described as the most popular art form of the mass cultural movement (with thousands of occasional or permanent theatre groups) and as such playing an important role in the political and cultural education of the working masses.<sup>29</sup>

The dictatorial political authorities were quick to recognise the potential of workers' theatre, which had its roots in the 19th century. Workers' art groups provided controlled leisure time, and the content of the performances offered an excellent opportunity to convey the ideology of the party. In this way, propaganda texts were made gleefully accessible to the workers, making up for any shortcomings in their reading skills or their lack of familiarity with ideological messages. As worker-actors, they were able to internalise information more easily than if they had read or listened to it.

<sup>27</sup> Makszim GORKIJ, „A szovjet írók I. Összszövetségi Kongresszusa”, in *Irodalmi tanulmányok*, 388–429 (Budapest: Szikra Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1950). Cited in LEPOSA Balázs, „Martinászkok polgári köntösben. A magyar termelési dráma Mándi Éva *Hétköznapiak hősei* című műve alapján”, *Theatron* 14, No. 3. (2020): 71–77, 71.

<http://doi.org/10.55502/the.2020.3.71>

<sup>28</sup> N.N., „Román drámát mutat be a Magyar Színház”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 8., 6; MOLNÁR Miklós, „Bányászok. Mihail Davidoglu színművének bemutatója a Magyar Színházban”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 18, 6; N.N., „Beszélgetés Mihail Davidogluval, a »Bányászok« írójával”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 16., 4; VÁRKONYI Zoltán, „Vas és acél. A Szegedi Nemzeti Színház bemutatója”, *Szabad Nép*, 1952. jún. 12., 6.

<sup>29</sup> ESZTERÁG Albert, „Az egyfelvonásos. A legnépszerűbb drámai műfaj problémái”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 8.

"I have studied this character carefully," says the young man seriously, 'Pável is a loud-mouthed, pretentious man who does his work superficially and lives only for his own pleasure. He is detached from the workers, he directs from above, and when he is forced to admit that the mine is lagging behind, he looks for the fault not in himself but in others... I must admit that the fourth act is the most difficult for me because I want to show honestly and authentically what a useful worker the community will make of this pretentious character.'"<sup>30</sup>

Cultural competitions were regularly organised for students of workers' theatres, not only significant for giving them an opportunity to present their plays to a wider audience, but also to receive detailed ideological evaluations in the press. Such was the propaganda importance attached to these cultural competitions that one can read reports of them in almost every issue of *Művelt Nép*. Readers of the paper could learn that the workers in all of the country's major factories, and even in the most remote and smallest mining villages were undergoing a huge development of character through the study of the characters they were playing, which contributed to better work performance. Thus, the most diligent factory actors almost certainly became the best workers: "The real juxtaposition of production and culture is a guest performance, which inspires all of them, the workers of the village and the theatre, to work even harder and achieve even greater results".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> NAGY Piroska, „Úgy kell nekünk a művészet, mint lenn a bányában a fény”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 1. (1950): 15–16, 16.

<sup>31</sup> LÁSZLÓ Anikó, „A Pécsi Nemzeti Színház vendégjátékai”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 31.

### *One-act plays*

While in official theatres there were opportunities for classical plays that had passed through the filter of censorship to be presented under a "new guise", in factory theatres it was preferred that groups performed one-act plays or even scenes from everyday life. The necessary one-act plays were regularly put out to tender, and financial incentives were offered to both playwrights and workers themselves. *Művelt Nép* also relayed what a good one-act play was like.

"A play achieves its effect, however, if its author draws his message from life and his characters are living figures [...] Characters also develop in one-act plays, but there is not as much time to portray this development as in plays that take up the whole evening. It is therefore necessary to present a stage in the development of the characters in which it is possible to refer to their past and to indicate the direction of their development. It is, therefore, necessary for the author of a one-act play to create, in a short space of time, a situation on the stage which, despite the conclusion of the play's plot, clearly determines the further development of the hero's character [...] A one-act play, like other literary works, must depict our people's struggle for peace, for the building of socialism, and show the difficulties and triumphs of this struggle. However, it can only do this if it draws its themes from life, and thus responds to the problems that the spectators of the plays face in their daily work and private lives."<sup>32</sup>

The point, then, is to portray the development of character, embedded in simple everyday situations through which the worker-actor and the spectator can easily internalise

<sup>32</sup> ESZTERÁG, „Az egyfelvonásos...", 8.

the ideology of the party. And to further emphasise the importance of workers' theatre, the text could not fail to mention the struggle for wages and for the construction of socialism, which, according to the propaganda, should be the fundamental task of all workers.

### *The legitimising role of professional artists*

Professional and working-class theatre, however, was not and could not be separated. Workers could thus meet actors not only in stone theatres or in country performances, but also in the context of factory theatre.

The theatres were not only given the task of organising country performances, but also patronising factory theatre groups. "Many of them travelled down to the villages, including Beremend, Pécsbányatelep, and Vasas. György Váradi, the director of the theatre, rehearsed daily with the actors of the Pécs Industrial Training School. All the patronised groups from the factories made it to the county and city shows. This successful work went hand in hand with the search for new, popular talent."<sup>33</sup>

Behind the news reports on the relationship between professional artists and factory theatre, we can also discover a kind of legitimisation, for what better way to show the value of the work of a theatre group than to have the real, great artists take an interest in it, take time not only to watch the performances but also to work with the actors-turned-workers. In the columns of the *Művelt Nép* we can read several times about the rise of poor working-class youths in this way, which is almost like a folk tale.

"József Szalai was brought to my attention by the director of the National Theatre. 'We asked him if he would like to enrol at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. He has not yet given an answer.' I am talking to József Szalai, the mod-

est, smiling nineteen-year-old miner's son, in the park of the culture house, under the blossoming trees. 'I was the youngest of his six children' he says. 'At the age of nine, I was already earning my bread...'"<sup>34</sup>

But the role of the actors was not only to legitimise factory theatre or the new Hungarian dramas. In the columns of the *Művelt Nép* it is not uncommon to combine the description of a major state project, such as the construction of Stalin's City, with a description of a visit to the National Theatre, thus proclaiming that the party was not only building a new city and providing jobs for the workers, but also bringing the most popular artists of the premier theatre to perform there.<sup>35</sup>

### *Summary*

The propaganda literature of the period was characterised by the predominant use of words expressing positive emotions ("peace", "freedom", "development", "love", "care"), which inherently conveyed conviction and did not require justification, but also by the constant expressions of force through various military terms ("fight", "combat", "mobilise", "front", "enemy") being recurring elements of the texts. Another characteristic was the bipolarisation of the argument (creating a sense of "we" vis-à-vis the enemy), and the consistent association of what the discourse of power perceived as a negative phenomenon with a specific negative term. In this system, the role of art was to support the need for political change and to convey optimism and progress. The texts are predominantly calls to action ("worker competition", "struggle for peace"), which is reflected in the frequent use of imperative verbs,

<sup>34</sup> RÁKOS Sándor, „Kultúrmunkások”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 12.

<sup>35</sup> CSANÁDI Imre, „Új város születik, új ember formálódik”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 6–7.

<sup>33</sup> LÁSZLÓ, „A Pécsi Nemzeti...”, 31.

while the frequent use of superlative adjectives indicates self-confidence, which helps to underline the importance of the political message and the unquestionability of the expectations conveyed by the system.

Among the various propaganda devices, the use of “glittering generalisations” was common, using highly valued concepts and beliefs to induce a general and unjustified acceptance of the phenomena associated with them, thus manipulating the reader’s engagement with the content of the text. In addition, the obfuscation of evidence, or erroneous conclusions based on incomplete evidence, justifies certain data and cases, while ignoring contradictory data. The texts also frequently used “either/or” structures where the negatives of the former bourgeois world were contrasted with the positive realities of the present. Another popular device was phrasing propaganda texts as the thoughts of ordinary workers. The texts were defined by templates and stereotypes that encouraged the recipients to act without thinking.

The propaganda language of the Rákosi-era was extremely militant, as Ágnes Jobst pointed out in her analysis, one of the central metaphors being “struggle”, which was transferred in the texts in a very creative way to any ordinary theme.<sup>36</sup> The ideologues and political decision-makers of the period made excellent use of the phenomenon that, in a total dictatorship, artistic works always carry a political message and convey values. In this way, the theatre was used as a tool of propaganda to influence people’s thinking, emotions, and behaviour.

### Bibliography

- ARENDT, Hannah. *A totalitarizmus gyökerei*. Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1992.
- BIHARI Mihály. *Magyar politika: 1944-2004 – Politikai és hatalmi viszonyok*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005.

- BALOGH Sándor, IZSÁK Lajos. *Pártok és part-programok Magyarországon (1944–1948)*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1977.
- BERCELLER Antal. „Színházaink jövő évadja és a közönségszervezés kérdései”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 7. (1950): 20–21.
- CSANÁDI Imre. „Új város születik, új ember formálódik”. *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 6–7.
- DANCS Istvánné, ed. *A Vallás- és Köznevelési Minisztérium színházi iratai 1946–1949*. Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 1990.
- ELLUL, Jacques. *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.
- ESZTERÁG Albert. „Az egyfelvonásos. A legnépszerűbb drámai műfaj problémái”. *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 8.
- FÖLDÉNYI Ervin. „Az üzemi és városi kultúrverseny bemutatói Győrött”. *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 5. (1951): 13–14.
- GORKIJ, Makszim. „A szovjet írók I. Összszövetségi Kongresszusa”. In *Irodalmi tanulmányok*, 388–429. Budapest: Szikra Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1950.
- JOBST Ágnes. „A HARC metafora szerepe az '50-es évek politikai köznyelvében”, *Magyar Nyelvőr* 133, No. 4. (2009): 233–446.
- KORNAI János. *A szocialista rendszer. Kritikai politikai gazdaságtan*. Budapest: Kalligram, 1993.
- KOROSSY Zsuzsa. „Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében” In *Színház és politika. Színháztörténeti tanulmányok, 1949–1989*. Edited by GAJDÓ Tamás. Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007.
- KÖVECSES Zoltán. *A metafora*. Budapest: Tipotex Kiadó, 2005.
- KRIPPENDORF, Klaus. *A tartalomelemzés módszertanának alapjai*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1995.
- LÁSZLÓ Anikó. „A Pécsi Nemzeti Színház vendégjátékai”. *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 31.
- LE BON, Gustav. *A tömegek lélektana*. Translated by DR. BALLA Antal. Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1920.

<sup>36</sup> JOBST, „Harc...”, 444.



- LEPOSA Balázs. „Martinászok polgári köntösben. A magyar termelési dráma Mándi Éva *Hétköznapiak hősei* című műve alapján”. *Theatron* 14, No. 3. (2020): 71–77.  
<http://doi.org/10.55502/the.2020.3.71>
- NAGY Piroska. „Úgy kell nekünk a művészet, mint lenn a bányában a fény”. *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 1. (1950): 16.
- MOLNÁR Miklós, „Bányászok. Mihail Davidoglu színművének bemutatója a Magyar Színházban”. *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 18., 6.
- N.N. „Az új kormány”. *Szabad Nép*, 1949. jún. 11., 1.
- N.N. „Román drámát mutat be a Magyar Színház”. *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 8., 6.
- N.N. „Beszélgetés Mihail Davidogluval, a »Bányászok« írójával”. *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 16., 4.
- O’ DONNEL, Victoria, JOWETT Garth S. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Los Angeles: Sage, 1992.
- PETER Mihály. *A leplező nyelv. Álcázás és ámítás a nyelv használatában*. Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2012.
- PONGRACZ Zsuzsa. „Jegyeladás vagy közönségszervezés?” *Művelt Nép* 6, No. 22. (1955): 3.
- RAKOS Sándor. „Kultúrmunkások”. *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 12.
- SAPIR, Edward. „Beszéd és személyiség”. In SAPIR, Edward. *Az ember és a nyelv*. 115–131. Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1971.
- ROMSICS Ignác. *Magyarország története a XX. században*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001.
- TARÓDI-NAGY Béla, ed. *Magyar színházi adatok 1. Színpad és közönség*. Budapest, Színháztudományi Intézet, 1962.
- VALUCH Tibor. *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001.
- VÁRKONYI Zoltán. „Vas és acél. A Szegedi Nemzeti Színház bemutatója”. *Szabad Nép*, 1952. jún. 12., 6.
- ZOLNAY Miklós. „A »Csillagtárna« Királdon”. *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 2. (1951): 27–28.
- ZSDANOV, Andrej Alekszandrovics. *A művészet és filozófia kérdéseiről*. Budapest: Szikra Könyvkiadó, 1949.

## Community and Invisible Work at the Szkéné Collective: Methodological Questions on Researching Amateur Theatres during the 1960s and 1970s

KORNÉLIA DERES

**Abstract:** The essay aims at highlighting the methodological challenges of researching amateur theatres under Hungarian state socialism, including the accessibility of documents in official archives, leading and sometimes misleading narratives of historiography, and the emerging role of oral history interviews and personal collections. Focusing on the history of the university theatre at Budapest University of Technology, namely, the Szkéné Collective, the case study investigates the dynamics of invisible work, collective creation, and the role of female participants between 1962 and 1973. In order to acknowledge the role of community in amateur theatre practices, it is essential to readdress the hierarchical understanding of a collective, and search for the usually hidden stories of shared creativity and labour.

### *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My research is part of the project *Missing (Theatre) Histories*, supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office [Hiányzó (színház)történetek, NKFI 137873]. Besides members of the research group, I would especially like to thank Sára Ungvári, my student assistant, whose work contributed to the present essay. I am also grateful for the help of Gabriella Unger from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, and Beáta Huber, Tamás Halász and Mariann Sipócz from the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. Finally, I am more than grateful to Éva Raffinger and Péter Hidas, who generously allowed me to use their personal collections for the research, as well as to Ilona

The recent decades show a growth in international publications on the methodological challenges of archiving and researching event-based art.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, several research projects aimed at examining the histories of performance and theatre in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Despite the productivity of the field,

Vercseg, who provided great help in contacting many members of the theatre collective.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: Rebecca SCHNEIDER, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011); Amelia JONES, Adrian HEATHFIELD, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012); Heike ROMS, "Archiving legacies: Who cares for performance remains?", in *Performing Archives / Archives of Performance*, ed. by Gundhild BORGGREEN and Rune GADE, 35–52. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press/University of Copenhagen, 2013); Heike ROMS, "Mind the Gaps: Evidencing Performance and Performing Evidence in Performance Art History", in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, ed. by Claire COCHRANE and Joanna ROBINSON, 163–181 (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Barbara BÜSCHER, Franz Anton CRAMER, eds., *Fluid Access: Archiving Performance-Based Arts* (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2017); Paul CLARKE, Simon JONES, Nick KAYE, Johanna LINSLEY, eds., *Artists in the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: Katalin CSEH-VARGA, Ádám CZIRÁK, eds., *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere. Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); Tamás SCHEIBNER, Kathleen CIOFFI,

Hungarian art and theatre historiography still lacks a comprehensive overview of marginalized and non-official theatre practices under state socialist times, including questions on the dynamics of the first and second public spheres, the role of amateur theatre practices in socialist societies and their international networks, as well as methodological questions of handling various types of documents and other materials. Moreover, detecting the histories of Hungarian amateur theatres cannot be neglected if one would like to understand how the amateur movement interconnected with important experimental aesthetics and agents of nonconformist practices in the second public sphere. Thus, researching how amateur theatres were organized and controlled in the 1960s and 1970s can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of art and theatre practices in the Kádár regime, including the relation of theatre and pedagogy, cultural education and art, processes of surveillance and resistance, negotiation and networking, state approval and ban. In addition, it can also offer a more complex contextualization for re-

---

„Archiving the Literature and Theatre of Dissent: Beyond the Canon”, in *The Handbook of Courage: Cultural Opposition and its Heritage in Eastern Europe*, ed. by APOR Balázs, APOR Péter and HORVÁTH Sándor, 307–328 (Budapest: Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2018); KÜRTI Emese, *Glissando és húrtepés: Kortárs zene és neoavantgárd művészet az underground magánterekben, 1958–1970* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2018); Juliana FÜRST, Josie MCLELLAN, eds., *Dropping out of Socialism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017); Agata JAKUBOWSKA, Magdalena RADOMSKA, eds., *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Katalin CSEH-VARGA, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: The Art of the Second Public Sphere* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2022).

searching theatre practices of the first public sphere, as well as for examining well-known experimental theatre collectives of the era, such as the Kassák House Studio and Apartment Theatre at Dohány Street, Orfeo Studio, or Kovács István Studio.

In the present essay, I will look at a specific type of amateur theatres of the 1960–70s, namely, the practices of university theatres. In the given era, there were a few highly influential university theatre collectives that were embedded in student communities from Faculties of Humanities or Social Sciences, such as the Universitas Collective at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University or the University Theatre at Szeged. However, my case study, focusing on the Szkéné Collective, which was situated within one of the most prestigious universities of technical sciences in Hungary, the Budapest University of Technology, presents a slightly different story. Further methodological challenges arise from the fact that Szkéné as an important institution of contemporary Hungarian independent theatre sphere is active to the present day, yet without a permanent collective. Therefore, first and foremost, it is inevitable to clarify the structural changes of the collective and the theatre space over the past six decades.

In 1961/62 the Budapest University of Technology initiated a student theatre, called the BME Literary Stage [BME Irodalmi Színpad] under the leadership of István Keleti, a prominent figure of amateur and youth theatre, later staff member of the Institute for People's Cultural Education. The BME Literary Stage practically meant a more or less permanent collective with university students and external members who were either secondary school students or had civil jobs.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 the collective was renamed

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022; Interview with László BÖSZÖRMÉNYI, 1 September 2022; Interview with Katalin TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022; Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022.

Szkéné Collective [Szkéné Együttes],<sup>5</sup> and in 1970 a permanent theatre space was built for the group on the second floor in building “K” of the Budapest University of Technology, which also got the name Szkéné Theatre [Szkéné Színház]. For almost five years, the Szkéné Collective remained the only permanent collective at Szkéné Theatre, and Keleti wanted to keep that structure.<sup>6</sup> However, after Keleti left the collective in 1973 and Alfréd Wiegmann became the next leader of the group (until 1985), Szkéné started to change from a theatre with one permanent collective into a theatre institution housing more collectives, such as the renown BME Pantomime Theatre led by Pál Regős from 1975,<sup>7</sup> as well as various national and international theatre, dance, and pantomime festivals, including International Pantomime Week in 1978, and later International Meeting of Physical Theatres between 1979 and 1992.<sup>8</sup> Szkéné Theatre currently operates as a production house which invites various independent theatre groups and artists, offering space for rehearsals as well as productions. (FIG. 1.)

Most parts of the contemporary history of Szkéné Theatre are documented in official archives, such as the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute and the university's own archive, and at the official website of the institution.<sup>9</sup> The theatre celebrated its fiftieth

anniversary in 2020 with a series of interviews with former and current artists of the theatre, including some former actors of the Szkéné Collective.<sup>10</sup> However, we still know very little about the collective's work between 1962 and 1973, as there is almost nothing to be found in the above-mentioned archives regarding this early era, and most probably as a consequence, these years have not been researched comprehensively. The amateur status of the collective can be seen as a reason behind the extremely low number of archived documents, as official theatre archives did not collect the materials of amateur groups in the 1960–70s as a principle. Amateurism as a uniformed interpretative frame influenced external as well as internal interpretation of the group's work, resulting in an exclusion from theatre canons. Therefore, it is also important to clarify that amateur theatre in Hungary during this period mainly referred to the different structural conditions under which certain collectives operated, as opposed to state-approved and state-funded theatres, and the term did not necessarily refer to the quality of productions and performances. Moreover, experimental aesthetics rather characterized the works of amateur or alternative theatre groups. Theatre critic István Nánay suggested in one of his essays written in 1983 that while “amateur acting” [amatőr színjátszás] mainly referred to school and university collectives with the aim of public education and non-professional but valuable entertainment, whereas “amateur theatres” [amatőr színház] were associated with more professional goals with high-quality productions.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there are many examples when university collectives created aesthetically progressive, nonconformist, innovative productions. Thus,

<sup>5</sup> KOVÁCS Zoltán, TARNÓI Gizella, VÁRADI Zsuzsa, eds., *A színház csak ürügy: Keleti István utolsó ajándéka* (Budapest: Irodalom Kft. – Journal Art Alapítvány, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See in KOVÁCS, TARNÓI, VÁRADI, eds., *A színház csak ürügy...*

<sup>7</sup> A very rich material on the BME Pantomime Theatre can be found at the Dance Archive of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute as part of Pál Regős' personal collection.

<sup>8</sup> REGÖS Pál, REGÖS János, eds., *Szkéné Színház 1968–2008: Színház ég és föld között* (Budapest: Szkéné Színház, 2008), 23–62.

<sup>9</sup> Website of Szkéné Theatre:

<https://www.szkene.hu/hu/szkene/tortenet.html>

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.szkene.hu/hu/szkene/5oszkenev.html>

<sup>11</sup> NÁRAY István, „Amatőr színházak tündöklése és bukása”, *Színháztudományi Szemle* 19, No. 1. (1986):179–251.



the terms “amateur”, “alternative”, and “experimental” were practically parts of the same scale.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, the story of the Szkéné Collective poses several relevant methodological questions for (theatre) historiography of the Kádár regime, including the accessibility of documents, leading and sometimes misleading narratives of historiography, and the emerging role of oral histories. On the one hand, we can see that edited volumes on Szkéné Theatre either strengthened a narrative that solely gravitates towards the pedagogical influence and importance of István Keleti,<sup>13</sup> or barely touched the timeslot of the early 1970s in the history of the theatre.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, after conducting several oral history interviews with former participants of the Szkéné Collective – including Katalin Andai, Ilona Vercseg, László Böszörményi, Katalin Takács, and Éva Raffinger – it became clear that collective work and the power of community were major factors not only in the 1960s and 1970s, but even nowadays, when many of the members, now in their seventies, are still in an active and friendly relationship, supporting and meeting each other.<sup>15</sup>

In the following, therefore, my aim is to examine the dynamics of invisible and collective work, community creation, and the role of female participants and their work in the Szkéné Collective between 1962 and 1973. The hypothesis is that in order to acknowledge the role of community in amateur theatre practices, it is essential to readdress the hierarchical understanding of a leader/director and the group members, and to offer a nar-

rative that is built on the usually hidden stories of collective creation, shared creativity and labour. Firstly, I will offer a short overview of theatre cultures and public spheres under the Kádár regime. Secondly, I will describe the challenges of researching the Szkéné Collective as an amateur theatre group, including the accessibility and characteristics of various archival sites and materials. Finally, I will offer an overview of narratives regarding the collective’s work, focusing on the performativity of historical evidence making, and possible means of integrating (hi)stories of community and collective creation. (FIG. 2.)

### *Theatre cultures and public spheres in the 1960s and 1970s*

During the Kádár regime (1956–1988)<sup>16</sup> Hungarian theatre culture was influenced and formed by the nationalization of theatre institutions, which started in 1949. As a result, the operation of theatres was characterized by closely controlled programmes, staff, and productions: “The cultural politics of the Kádár regime, after the Rákosi era, were built on the principle of high-quality culture for the crowds, and while strongly supporting this vision, they also disproportionately con-

<sup>12</sup> Kornélia DERES, Zoltán IMRE, Veronika DARIDA, Gabriella SCHULLER, *Missing [Theatre] Histories*, project description, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *A színház csak ürügy...; Gábor BÓTA, ed., Arcok a Szkénéből* (Budapest: OSZMI, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> REGÖS, REGÖS, eds., *Szkéné Színház 1968–2008...*

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022.

<sup>16</sup> The Kádár regime is referring to the era between 1956 and 1988, when Hungary’s leader was János Kádár, General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. The start of the regime followed the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (which was later officially referred to as counter-revolution), and therefore its first years were characterised by retributions, executions, and imprisonment. However, in 1963, under the slogan of “who is not against us, is with us”, Kádár pardoned many of those formerly imprisoned. The United Nations also ended its debate over the country, which was followed by a consolidation of the regime with increased trading and other collaborations with Western countries.

trolled the field.”<sup>17</sup> State control was carried out through partly political, partly administrative ways, and the main aim was to create a specific cultural content called socialist realist, as opposed to cosmopolitan anti-realist art.<sup>18</sup> Theatres as public displays in Hungary meant important media for propagating the social changes proposed by the Soviet culture and party ideologies.<sup>19</sup> From 1960 the Agitation and Propaganda Committee of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist People’s Party was the official body which supervised the structure of theatre programmes and, if necessary, made changes to the season plans.<sup>20</sup> In 1963, the Committee announced that the socialist content of theatres should be strengthened and a change in the methods of theatre management is needed.<sup>21</sup> The socialist content of theatres would include the acting method loosely based on Stanislavski’s theories as well as an integration of Soviet playwrights into the dramatic canons.<sup>22</sup>

State control for theatres was provided through several national, municipal, and local institutions, which included the Executive Committees of Budapest and each County

Councils, the Department of Cultural Management, the Agitation and Propaganda Committee, the Ministry of Culture, and the Theatre Arts Association.<sup>23</sup> The amateur sphere was under the control of the Institute for People’s Cultural Education, which operated under the Ministry of Culture. In 1965, under the leadership of Imre Kiss, the institute created the Department of Art, Education and Research, which organized and managed the amateur sphere, meaning “non-professional, but state-recognized artists”.<sup>24</sup> Apart from theatre collectives and literary stages, this area included film, photography, various forms of dance, and later puppet theatre, popular music, and youth theatre, however, church and classical music were considered forbidden categories.<sup>25</sup> In 1971 the Department was divided into the Department of Visual Arts and the Department of Performing Arts. The latter supervised amateur theatres, youth and children theatre, puppet theatre, folk and contemporary dance, and they organized national festivals for amateur collectives in order to create a network of the initiatives. The above-mentioned István Keleti, leader of the BME Literary Stage and later Szkéné Collective, was working at the Department of Performing Arts from the 1960s, and also authored a methodological volume on the operation and working methods of literary stages and amateur theatre groups.<sup>26</sup> Parallel to this,

<sup>17</sup> IMRE Zoltán, RING Orsolya, „A Kádár-kori színházirányítás a dokumentumok tükrében: 1970–1982”, in *Szigorúan titkos: Dokumentumok a Kádár-kori színházirányítás történetéhez, 1972–1980*, ed. by Z. IMRE and O. RING (Budapest: PIM–OSZMI, 2018), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Svetlana LUKANITSCHWA, „Against the Stream”, in *Popular Music Theatre under Socialism*, ed. by Wolfgang JANSEN (Münster: Waxmann, 2020), 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>20</sup> RING Orsolya, „A színházak pártirányítása a Kádár-korszakban: színházi témák az MSZMP KB Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottságának ülésein”, *Levéltári Közlemények* 79, Nos. 1–2 (2008): 197–214.

<sup>21</sup> IMRE, RING, „A Kádár-kori színházirányítás...”, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 11–12; LUKANITSCHWA, „Against the Stream”, 19.

<sup>23</sup> HELTAI Gyöngyi, „Színházművészeti Szövetség”, *OSZMI Színháztörténeti Fórum*, 2018, last accessed 22.10.2022.

<http://resolver.szhaztortenet.hu/study/STD18381>

<sup>24</sup> Zoltán IMRE, Balázs KALMÁR, „Institute for People’s Cultural Education”, *Hiányzó (színház)-történetek*, last accessed 24.10.2022,

<https://hiaszt.hu/institute-for-peoples-cultural-education/>

<sup>25</sup> IMRE, KALMÁR, „Institute for...”

<sup>26</sup> KELETI István, *A színjáték művészete I. Tankönyv a színjátszócsoporthoz és irodalmi színpadok szakmai vezetőinek oktatásához* (Buda-

from 1957 the concept of the “3 T-s” in cultural politics (associated with György Aczél, the head of cultural management) categorized publicly shown and discussed artworks and art practices into three groups: to ban [tilt], to tolerate [tűr], and to support [támogat]. This framework, however, was not based on strict rules or laws, but rather on subjective opinions, and therefore, it initiated a negotiable network of special bargains based on individual political outreach and personal contacts.<sup>27</sup>

Controlled and supported theatres were parts of the so called first public domain “held together by an ideological project, the creation of a socialist consciousness”.<sup>28</sup> The second public sphere included those actors, who, either willingly or unwillingly, for a long or a short time, were excluded from the first controlled sphere. The relation of the first and second public spheres was complementary, and not exclusive. As performance and art historian Katalin Cseh-Varga pointed out “the second public sphere required the first public sphere for its own existence. (...) Those who did not completely accept the first public sphere had the option of an escape route into the second public sphere, and vice versa: the second public sphere could not have existed without the observing eye of an ordered public sphere. The interplay of these two zones was inherent in the very dynamics of the public sphere under state socialism

(...)”.<sup>29</sup> The second public sphere offered more opportunities for autonomous communication and art practices, however, their venues and medial contexts had to be constantly re-created and re-formed, thanks to state bans, secret services, and police operation. Therefore, the second public sphere can be imagined as a fluid, continuously re-formed network of individuals, often artists without professional educational background, obtaining non-artistic civilian jobs.<sup>30</sup> The venues of theatres operating in the second public sphere ranged from youth clubs and universities to culture houses and private homes. Alternative media platforms and strategies, such as samizdat publication or travelling private performances, defined the communication networks of this sphere.<sup>31</sup> In addition, due to the consolidation of Kádár’s regime, during the 1960s some sort of cultural opening began in Hungary, which provided amateur and alternative theatres the opportunity to perform previously banned works and to experiment with theatrical forms.<sup>32</sup>

Within this context, university theatres experienced a relative freedom in the socialist society, partly because of the more relaxed rules enabling the collectives to visit various national and international festivals, and partly because of the less harsh censorship regarding their programmes, as opposed to those of established professional theatres. The operation and programmes of university

---

pest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1966); DÉVÉNYI Róbert, KELETI István, *A színházi művészete II. Tankönyv a színházi csoportok és irodalmi színpadok szakmai vezetőinek oktatásához* (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> IMRE, RING, „A Kádár-kori színházirányítás...”, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Katalin CSEH-VARGA, Ádám CZIRÁK, „Introduction”, in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere*, eds. K. CSEH-VARGA, Á. CZIRÁK (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

---

<sup>29</sup> CSEH-VARGA, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism...*

<sup>30</sup> CSEH-VARGA, CZIRÁK, „Introduction”, 7–8.

<sup>31</sup> Kathrin FAHLENBRACH, Erling SIVERTSEN and Rolf WERENSKJOLD, eds., *Media and Revolt: Strategies and Performances from the 1960s to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Gabriella SCHULLER, „Kovács István Studio and Stances of Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde Theatre during the 1970s”, *Institute of the Present*, 2018, last accessed 01.04.2022. <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/08/kovacs-istvan-studio/>

theatres was usually supervised by the university councils and the university's committees of Youth Communist League. The emergence of university collectives in the 1960s was fuelled by the success of the University Stage at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University [Egyetemi Színpad], which was established in 1957 with the intention of creating a shared cultural place for university students, where they could interact, become self-active, and create various artistic events.<sup>33</sup> In the 1960s the University Stage functioned as a place of transition between state-approved and experimental artistic practices of the era by integrating actors from both sides, even those who had been officially silenced before. Moreover, it also became a place of international networking, and the Stage's permanent group, the Universitas Collective was among the few that could travel to festivals not only in the Eastern Bloc, but also in Western Europe, including locations like Zagreb, Wrocław, Birmingham, Parma, Nancy, Vienna, and Paris.<sup>34</sup> Parallel to the Universitas's work another important workshop started in Szeged at the Faculty of Humanities of József Attila University, which became an internationally recognized theatre for the 1970s. These leading collectives, together with a growing network of amateur groups, which was fostered by a series of national amateur festivals organized by the Institute for People's Cultural Education, created an atmosphere in the 1960s and 1970s, which favoured the creation and establishment of university collectives in Hungary. (FIG. 3.)

*Collective and invisible work  
at the Szkéné Collective*

Art and performance historian Heike Roms pointed out in her influential essay *Mind the Gaps: Evidencing Performance and Performing Evidence in Performance Art History* that "evidence is not a thing but an event that is situated and mediated, and which relies on the co-creative presence of others".<sup>35</sup> Writing a history of the Szkéné Collective, therefore, would also demand methodological consciousness regarding already existing narratives and pieces of evidence in archives and collections. Although there are a few books mentioned above that tried to capture some parts of the collective's history, their narration usually remained in a hierarchical disposition including István Keleti as an educator, leader and director and the rest of the group as young participants. As for the archival sites, the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute has very little materials on the first phase of the collective (two reviews, but no photos or playbills), however, the Budapest University of Technology's own archive has some relevant materials on the structural operation of the collective in this period, including the fact that some members of the Cultural Committee of the university's Youth Communist League, including second director and actor Tamás Varga and actor Ilona Vercseg, were active participants in the Szkéné Collective. In addition, the university's newspaper, the *Engineer of the Future* [A Jövő Mérnöke] also gave frequent reports on the collective's work and published interviews with some members. Some materials can be found in the Historical Archives of Hungarian State Security, which mentioned the leaders of the collective, usually in an affirmative context.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> NÁRAY István, *Profán szentély: színpad a kápolnában* (Budapest: Alexandra Kiadó, 2007), 20–24.

<sup>34</sup> Records of University Stage 1965–1969, Hungarian National Theatre History and Museum, Manuscript Collection

<sup>35</sup> Heike ROMS, "Mind the Gaps...", 166.

<sup>36</sup> Dossier „Végső Géza” M-27043. Furthermore, Tamás Varga's name was mentioned in the renowned state security dossier entitled „Horgászok”, which gathered reports



As a result of the relatively low number of materials in official archives regarding the group's work between 1962 and 1973, detecting oral histories and personal archives proved to be essential in the research. Between June and November of 2022, I and Sára Ungvári conducted oral history interviews with former members Katalin Andai, Ilona Vercseg, László Böszörményi, Katalin Takács, and Éva Raffinger.<sup>37</sup> Methodological challenges of drawing on living memory and testimonies arise from the collective work of evidence making, or, as Roms put it: "the constitution of evidence in such contexts is often the effect of complex interpersonal negotiations, even collaborations, which challenges the assumption that research is able to be detached objectively from either researcher or 'researched'".<sup>38</sup> Accepting the fluid nature of interpersonal negotiations, there is a consequent need to return to certain events, topics, or practices during the interviews, in order to either challenge (mis)leading narratives, or to specify personal experiences. In addition to the interviews,<sup>39</sup> materials in personal collections of former members Éva Raffinger and Péter Hidas also made a huge contribution to the research, including photos of rehearsals, summer camps and productions, playbills, promptbooks, and mails. These materials can promote an understanding of a clear change in the collective's work: BME Literary

---

against the team of Apartment Theatre at Dohány Street, who eventually emigrated in 1976. In one of the reports, Varga spoke about his negative opinion on the group's work, as well as their 1973 premiere in Wrocław. ÁBTL-O-16268/2, 92-94.

<sup>37</sup> In November and December 2022 further interviews are to be conducted with Péter Hidas, Ilona Harsay, Alfréd Wiegmann, and László Pap.

<sup>38</sup> ROMS, "Mind the Gaps...", 166.

<sup>39</sup> The video interviews will be published on the project website of *Missing (Theatre) Histories*. URL: <https://hiaszt.hu/szkene-szinhaz/>

Stage between 1962 and 1967 focused on producing events of poetry recitation with various thematic nodes, but from 1967 there was a conscious turn towards dramatic pieces, eventually leading to the oratorical aesthetics of the Szkéné Collective, which also characterized the opening of the theatre space in 1970. (FIG. 4.)

Examining leading narratives of the Szkéné Collective's history, it is conspicuous that not only former members' recollections strengthened the hierarchical status of István Keleti within the group, but also various reviews and essays written about the collective. For instance, theatre critic István Nánay, who is one of the very few experts that consistently followed the amateur and alternative theatre spheres from the 1960s, positioned Keleti in the middle of the Szkéné's work in his 1986 comprehensive study on amateur theatres: "Before 1969 and for a while after it as well, István Keleti led the Szkéné Stage at the University of Technology. (...) Apart from literary events and Sándor Weöres's oratory titled *Theomachia*, one of Keleti's most matured piece was created at Szkéné (...)"<sup>40</sup> As a result, cultural memory often equalized the Szkéné Collective with Keleti's pedagogical and directorial practices. Even personal interviews with former members confirmed that there was no real democratic decision making in the group: Keleti was an authority figure both on the structural and the aesthetic level.<sup>41</sup> However, the interviews also challenged the image of Keleti as the only source of creative energy in the group.<sup>42</sup> In the following, I will

---

<sup>40</sup> NÁNAY, „Amatőr színházak tündöklése...” [English translation by me – K.D.]

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG, 30 July 2022; Interview with Katalin TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022; Interview with László Böszörményi, 1 September 2022; Interview with Katalin

provide some cases that can highlight the dynamics of invisible labour both within and around the collective.

One of the most well-known and well-documented productions by the collective was *Theomachia*, which celebrated the opening of the theatre space on 21 March 1970. The production was based on the dramatic piece by Hungarian writer Sándor Weöres, inspired by ancient Greek tragedies. The characters of the play were divided into two categories: five gods (Okeanos, Gaia, Rhea, Typhon, and Zeus) and two choirs (one male, one female). The textual material fitted Keleti's cultural ideas, which centred around the Greek and Roman mythology and humanistic education. On the visual and physical level, the production tried to grasp the conflict of the gods, who were reciting the text standing still on pillars, while the choir presented a dynamic physical language in the foreground. As former member, Katalin Takács, recalled, while the gods were speaking their parts, they were lit by a sharper light on the face and upper body, during which the choir was in the dark and communicating only through moans and murmurs.<sup>43</sup> When members of the choir spoke their parts, often reciting the text collectively together, they were lit by a soft warm colour.<sup>44</sup> The production was not only reviewed by the university's paper, but professional theatre critics wrote about it in well-recognised theatre journals as well. (FIG. 5.)

All critics praised the physical language of the choir, highlighting it as the most innovative part of the production. In a 1970 essay on amateur theatre, theatre critic Péter Molnár Gál confronted the different styles of the main characters and choir members in *Theomachia*, underlining the importance of the latter:

---

TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022; Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Katalin TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

"The choir operated through the principles of Grotowski's theatre. The beauty of movements provided by the collective, an undecorated type of theatre which only wanted to shine in the beauty of the human body, powerful changes, and the actors' style which was not based on identification but commentary: all of these provided a new experience, as well as dense and powerful effects. While the main roles were swimming in an emotional bulk of romantic amateurism, the dynamic, organized nature of the choir, their gymnastic actions, and focused, almost religious trance, and their increasing acting style from the quietest, whispering murmur to the loudest scream, promised the creation of a new theatre."<sup>45</sup>

The overpraised aesthetics of the choir was usually evaluated as the result of Keleti's directorial work, as another theatre critic, István Nánay, recalled: "The main strength of Keleti was his analytical and editorial skills. In *Theomachia* he understood that the text would die if a dozen young people had just recited it in different tones. Because of this, he formed groups and spatial shapes from human bodies, which interpreted the text. This was highly rare at that time."<sup>46</sup> (FIG. 6.)

In contrast with this narrative, the university's newspaper gave a report on the summer camp at Balatonlelle in 1969, which preceded the premiere of *Theomachia*, and noted that it was Tamás Varga and Katalin Andai who were responsible for the movement

---

<sup>45</sup> MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, „Sebzett kiáltás”, *Színház* 3, No. 9. (1970): 28–31, 29.

<sup>46</sup> JÁSZAY Tamás, „Egy színház átváltozásai: beszélgetés Nánay Istvánnal az ötvenéves Szkénéről”, *Revizoronline*, last accessed 18.10.2022  
<https://revizoronline.com/hu/cikk/8588/besz-elgetes-nanay-istvannal-az-otveneves-szkenerol>

of the choir.<sup>47</sup> Andai confirmed this information during the personal interview and noted that in 1969 she, as a fresh student at the Theatre and Film Academy, gave physical trainings for the collective, and also designed the choreography for *Theomachia* together with Tamás Varga.<sup>48</sup> However, as she also recalled, after the premiere only Tamás Varga's name appeared in reviews as the choreographer.<sup>49</sup> The cooperation was turned out to be even larger, as in another interview Éva Raffinger, who played the leader of the choir in the production, pointed out that she also contributed to the choreography, which seems no surprise, given the fact that Raffinger was trained to be a ballet dancer in her childhood. As these traces show, the most innovative part of *Theomachia*, namely, the choir's unique choreography and physical language was the result of a cooperation, including (at least) three members, none of which was the director, Keleti himself. Out of the three co-operators, only one was given credit in the official reviews: Tamás Varga, who was said to be the other authority figure besides Keleti, and also the leader of the Cultural Committee at the university. The two other female members' vital contribution to the creative innovation of movements was seemingly forgotten for a long time, and has not been credited in essays or reviews.

Apart from invisible creative labour, there was a considerable amount of invisible operational work as well in the history of the Szkéné Collective, which was left out of theatre histories. An eminent example was Judit Zigány, who was not an actor in the group, but said to be a mother figure for them, and although sometimes she fulfilled the tasks of a director's assistant, she was remembered as the one responsible for catering during the summer camps in Balatonlelle and else-

where.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, she also played a major role in organizing a trip to France in 1973, where the group presented two productions. And there was artist Ilona Harsay as well, who designed and fabricated the scenery and costumes of *Theomachia*, among others, and was also among the many forgotten creative figures of the group.<sup>51</sup> Besides, relatives of the members also contributed to the operation of the collective, creating another layer of non-recognized operational and even creative work, which historically can be interpreted within the underrated and invisible sphere of craftsmanship.<sup>52</sup> For instance, mothers of László Böszörményi and Éva Raffinger did needlework for many costumes and props, and the latter even filled in for a role at one performance when the actor was missing.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, as some members recalled, a number of established theatres in Budapest, including the Operetta Theatre, offered used items, such as costumes, props, reflectors, for the opening of the theatre.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022; Interview with László Böszörményi, 1 September 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022; Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022; Interview with Katalin TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022; Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022.

<sup>52</sup> See the critical work by Aoife Monks on theatre costumes and virtuosity. Aoife MONKS, „Costume At The National Theatre: A Curator's Talk”, *Studies in Costume and Performance* 5, No. 1. (2020): 101–111; Aoife MONKS, „Curating Costume: Reflection”, in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*, ed. by Sofia PANTOUVAKI and Peter MCNEIL (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 63–66.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with László BÖSZÖRMÉNYI, 1 September 2022; Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with László BÖSZÖRMÉNYI, 1 September 2022; Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022.

<sup>47</sup> BÍRÓ T., CSANÁDY J., „Szkénések a Balaton partján”, *A Jövő Mérnöke* 16, No. 22. (1969): 7.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Last but not least, all members of the collective contributed through physical work to the building of Szkéné Theatre, as they painted and hammered the walls, carried construction waste and pieces of the new set, which was captured by some photos. (FIG. 7.)

Collective work was thus an outcome of efforts and labour done by members of the collective, and also by civilians, including friends and relatives, as well as professionals, including colleagues working in theatres of the first public sphere. As Susan Bennett outlined almost twenty years ago, in order to acknowledge female contribution to theatre practices, it is not enough to supplement already existing histories, but a change of perspective and a different composition is needed.<sup>55</sup> When writing the history of Hungarian amateur theatres, therefore, it is inevitable to (re)integrate female agents and give voice to their experiences. Besides exploring leading narratives of official reviews and cultural memory, other written documents, playbills, promptbooks, and photos in personal collections as well as oral histories and personal stories that have been explored by the current research can all help in writing the history of BME Literary Stage and the Szkéné Collective as a history of creative cooperation, allowing to highlight the labour of female participants as well as craftswomen, making their invisible work visible, recognized, and a vital part of (Hungarian) theatre history.

### Bibliography

BENNETT, Susan. „Decomposing History (Why Are There So Few Women in Theatre History?)”. In *Theorizing Practice. Redefining Theatre History*. Edited by W. B. WORTHEN,

<sup>55</sup> Susan BENNETT, „Decomposing History (Why Are There So Few Women in Theatre History?)”, In *Theorizing Practice. Redefining Theatre History*, ed. by W. B. WORTHEN, Peter HOLLAND (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71–87.

- Peter HOLLAND. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 71–87.
- BÍRÓ T., CSANÁDY J. „Szkénések a Balaton partján”. *A Jövő Mérnöke* 16, No. 22. (1969): 7.
- BÓTA Gábor, ed. *Arcok a Szkénéből*. Budapest: OSZMI, 1998.
- CSEH-VARGA, Katalin. *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: The Art of the Second Public Sphere*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2022.
- CSEH-VARGA, Katalin, CZIRÁK, Ádám, eds. *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315193106>
- DÉVÉNYI, Róbert, KELETI, István. *A színház művészete II. Tankönyv a színházcsoportok és irodalmi színpadok szakmai vezetőinek oktatásához*. Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, n.d.
- Dossier „Horgászok” ÁBTL-O-16268/2.
- Dossier „Végső Géza” ÁBTL-M-27043.
- FAHLENBRACH, Kathrin, SIVERTSEN, Erling, WERENSKJOLD, Rolf. eds. *Media and Revolt: Strategies and Performances from the 1960s to the Present*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780857459992>
- HELTAI Gyöngyi. „Színházművészeti Szövetség”, *OSZMI Színháztörténeti Fórum*, 2018, <http://resolver.szhaztortenet.hu/study/STD18381>
- IMRE Zoltán, KALMÁR Balázs. „Institute for People’s Cultural Education”. *Hiányzó (színház)történetek*, <https://hiaszt.hu/institute-for-peoples-cultural-education/>
- IMRE Zoltán, RING Orsolya, eds. *Szigorúan titkos: Dokumentumok a Kádár-kori színházirányítás történetéhez, 1972–1980*. Budapest: PIM–OSZMI, 2018.
- Interview with Éva RAFFINGER, 17 September 2022. Made by Kornélia DERES and Sára UNGVÁRI.
- Interview with Ilona VERCSEG 30 July 2022. Made by Kornélia DERES and Sára UNGVÁRI.
- Interview with Katalin ANDAI, 30 June 2022. Made by Kornélia DERES and Sára UNGVÁRI.

- Interview with Katalin TAKÁCS, 10 September 2022. Made by Kornélia DERES and Sára UNGVÁRI.
- Interview with László BÖSZÖRMÉNYI, 1 September 2022. Made by Kornélia DERES and Sára UNGVÁRI.
- JÁSZAY Tamás. „Egy színház átváltozásai: beszélgetés Nánay Istvánnal az ötvenéves Szkénéről”. *Revizoronline*, <https://revizoronline.com/hu/cikk/8588/beszelgetes-nanay-istvannal-az-otveneves-szkenerol>
- KELETI István. *A színjáték művészete I. Tankönyv a színjátszócsoporthoz és irodalmi színpadok szakmai vezetőinek oktatásához*. Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1966.
- KOVÁCS Zoltán, TARNÓI Gizella, VÁRADI Zsuzsa, eds. *A színház csak ürügy: Keleti István utolsó ajándéka*. Budapest: Irodalom Kft. – Journal Art Alapítvány, 1996.
- LUKANITSCHewa, Svetlana. „Against the Stream”. In *Popular Music Theatre under Socialism*. Edited by Wolfgang JANSEN. Münster: Waxmann, 2020. 11–21.
- MOLNÁR GÁL Péter. „Sebzett kiáltás”. *Színház* 3, No. 9. (1970): 28–31.
- MONKS, Aoife. „Costume At The National Theatre: A Curator’s Talk”, *Studies in Costume and Performance* 5, No. 1. (2020): 101–111. [https://doi.org/10.1386/scp\\_00016\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00016_1)
- MONKS, Aoife. „Curating Costume: Reflection”. In *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*. Edited by Sofia PANTOUVAKI, Peter MCNEIL, 63–66 (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350098831.ch-006>
- NÁRAY István. „Amatőr színházak tündöklése és bukása”. *Színháztudományi Szemle* 19, No. 1. (1986): 179–251.
- NÁRAY István. *Profán szentély: színpad a kápolnában*. Budapest: Alexandra Kiadó, 2007.
- Records of University Stage 1965–1969, Hungarian National Theatre History and Museum, Manuscript Collection.
- REGŐS Pál, REGŐS János, eds. *Szkéné Színház 1968–2008: Színház ég és föld között*. Budapest: Szkéné Színház, 2008.
- RING Orsolya. „A színházak pártirányítása a Kádár-korszakban: színházi témák az MSZMP KB Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottságának ülésein”, *Levéltári Közlemények* 79, Nos. 1–2. (2008): 197–214.
- ROMS, Heike. “Mind the Gaps: Evidencing Performance and Performing Evidence in Performance Art History”. In *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*. Edited by Claire COCHRANE, Joanna ROBINSON, 163–181. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137457288\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137457288_9)
- SCHULLER Gabriella. “Kovács István Studio and Stances of Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde Theatre during the 1970s”. *Institute of the Present*, 2018, <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/08/kovacs-istvan-studio/>





**FIG. 1.** Members of the collective that helped to build the Szkéné Theatre.  
Photo from Éva Raffinger's personal collection.



**FIG. 2.** Collective of BME Literary Stage in 1965.  
Photo from Éva Raffinger's personal collection.





FIG. 3. Morning gymnastics at the summer camp in Balatonlelle.  
Photo from Péter Hidas' personal collection.



FIG. 4. Scene from *Theomachia*.  
Photo from Éva Raffinger's personal collection.



FIG. 5. Playbill of *Theomachia*, 1970.  
Photo from Péter Hidas' personal collection.





FIG. 6. Choreography of the Choir. Rehearsals of *Theomachia*.  
Photo from Éva Raffinger's personal collection.

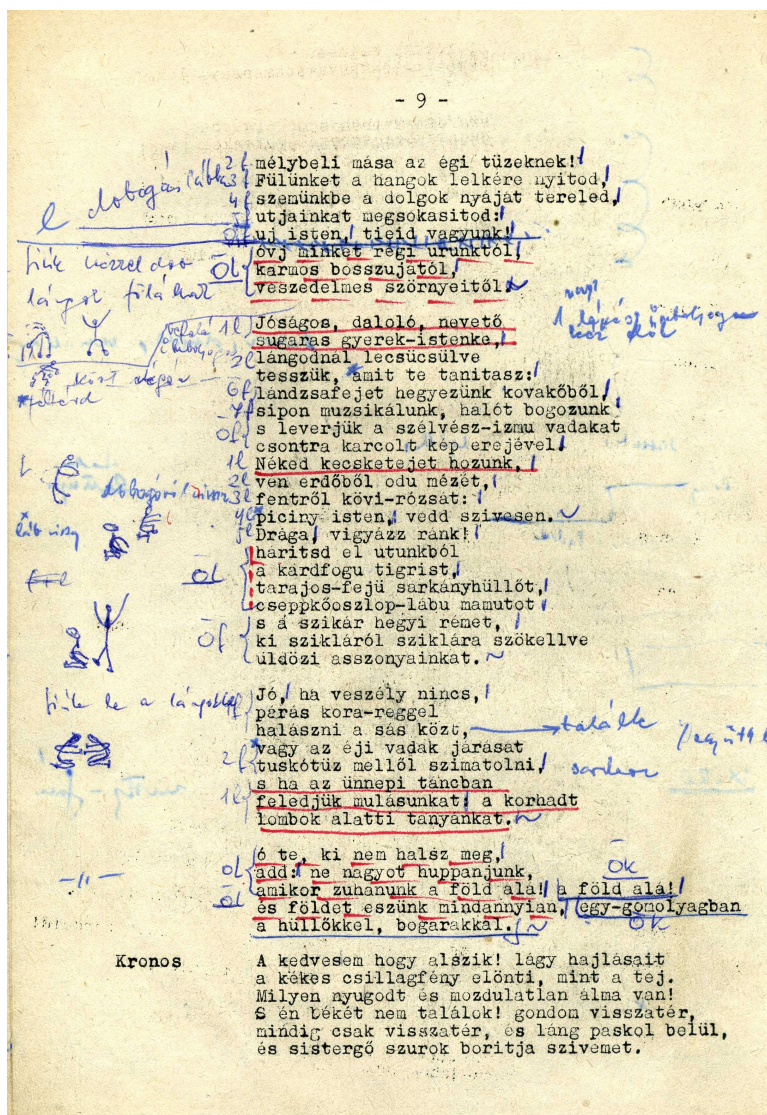


FIG. 7. Promptbook of *Theomachia* with notes on the choreography.  
Material from Éva Raffinger's personal collection.

## Parallel Histories and Survival Strategies. The Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre yesterday and today

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

**Abstract:** Receptive venues in Hungary are the „stepchildren” of the theatre structure established in 1949, which has remained essentially unchanged since then. These spaces of the independent performing arts scene could be the breeding ground of artistic innovation, progression, and experimentation, if properly subsidized by the state. This has clearly not taken place over the last few decades: neither the ever-changing funding and legislative environment, nor the public and theatre professionals’ perception of the status of the receptive venues support an improvement in the situation. This study examines and compares the theatrical profiles of two emblematic performing arts centres on the Buda side of the Hungarian capital: the Szkéné Theatre on the second floor of the Budapest University of Technology and the MU Theatre, which grew out of the former Lágymányosi Community Centre.

In the present study, I explore the history of two institutions of the Hungarian performing arts structure, which have been of crucial importance for decades, but in many ways still operate on the periphery. Shaping their histories into parallel narratives is not the result of an arbitrary choice: this has come to surface during my research on the past of the two theatres. There is no space here to go into detail about the history of the development and functioning of the theatre structure in Hungary today. Therefore, I will simply point out that after World War II, in 1949, theatres in Hungary became state-owned and maintained, which had decisive consequences to whom, what, and how the Hun-

garian theatres performed in the following decades.<sup>1</sup>

After nationalisation, the foundations of the renewed Hungarian theatre structure were organised on the basis of central instructions. The structure’s most valuable elements were the stone theatres with permanent buildings, companies and repertoire – and for many, they still are.<sup>2</sup> However, especially from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, more and more initiatives emerged on the periphery, which were in sharp opposition to state socialism, not only ideologically and aesthetically, but also, for example, in their choice of venue, the treatment of the audience and, more fundamentally, in thinking about theatre as a form of communication.<sup>3</sup>

These groups, with very different ways of thinking, using radically different aesthetics or modes of operation, have been circum-

---

<sup>1</sup> For the post-WWII theatre structure and cultural governance in Hungary, see RING Orsolya, „Húzd meg, ereszd meg: Színházirányítás, színházi struktúra 1949–1989”, *Színház* 55, No. 10. (2022): 2–6; JÁKFALVI Magdolna, KÉKESI KUN Árpád, KISS Gabriella, RING Orsolya, eds., *Újjáépítés és államosítás: Tanulmánykötet a kultúra államosításának kezdeti éveiről* (Budapest: Arktisz – TMA, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For a wider context see István SZABÓ, „The System Went – The Theatres Remained”, in *Theatre After the Change: And What Was There Before the After?*, ed. by Mária MAYER-SZILÁGYI, 55–63 (Budapest: Creativ Média, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> On the changes and the key actors involved, see BÉRCZES László, „Másszínház Magyarországon (1945–1989)”, Part I. *Színház* 29, No. 3. (1996): 42–48; Part II. *Színház* 29, No. 4. (1996): 44–48; Part III. *Színház* 29, No. 5. (1996): 43–48.

scribed and identified by many terms in the past decades. Without recapitulating the long-standing terminological debate, which has never been settled, I would like to point out that in this essay I use the terms independent, alternative, reform, amateur, and underground as synonyms.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the term 'independent', which is widely used today, is practically a euphemism: independents are the most dependent elements of the whole system, as they are financially highly vulnerable to the Ministry of Culture, i.e. the government in power. In contrast to the stone theatres, the 'independents' in Hungary do not receive any normative subsidy from the state: they have to prove their right to exist every year, through a rather complicated application procedure.<sup>5</sup>

The 'ancestors' of today's independent theatre groups in Hungary can be traced back to the 1960s, to a few universities in the capital and outside of it, and to other ama-

teur theatre workshops.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, the innovative artists of the independent performing arts movement found a new base in some of the capital's community centres.<sup>7</sup> While the university playhouses were primarily, but not exclusively, aimed at university students, the community centres were intended to provide the local communities, living in the neighbourhood, with a variety of cultural programmes, but of course within a limited framework. Both types of venues also provided a kind of refuge for artists who thought differently from the mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

Of the three slogans of socialist cultural governance until the 1989–90 change of regime – 'promote, tolerate, ban' (in Hungarian „the 3Ts”: *támogat, tűr, tilt*) – the category of 'tolerate' was the trickle-down one for venues not originally or not necessarily built as theatres, and for the mainly young audiences who were attending there. This meant that the artists and groups working in these venues could operate undisturbedly within certain, unwritten boundaries: the given university or the community centre as an institution formed a kind of protective shell around

<sup>4</sup> For a recent clarification on the concepts see RIHAY-KOVÁCS Zita, „Alternatív-e a független színház?”, in *THEALTER30(+1) színháztudományi konferencia: Szeged, 2021. július 29–30.*, ed. by JÁSZAY Tamás, 79–87. (Szeged: SZTE BTK Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, MASZK Egyesület, 2022), last accessed: 2022.08.30., [http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter\\_all\\_final\\_3aug2022.pdf](http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter_all_final_3aug2022.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. TARISKA Andrea, „A függetlenek finanszírozásának története Magyarországon a nyolcvanas évektől napjainkig”, in *Alternatívok – Az első száz év*, 73–79 (Budapest: no publishing house, 2011); Tamás JÁSZAY, „Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre”, *Critical Stages*, last accessed: 2022.08.30., <https://www.criticalstages.org/8/finita-la-commedia-the-debilitation-of-hungarian-independent-theatre-hungary/>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 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*, GAJDÓ Tamás szerk., 307–346, (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 307–312.

<sup>7</sup> PATONAY Anita, „Kulturális közösségi terek az államosítás után”, in JÁKFALVI, KÉKESI KUN, KISS, RING eds., *Újjáépítés és...*, 118–136. presents an exciting case study of the early performing arts efforts of community centres.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief introduction to the history of Hungarian independents beginning in the 1970s, see András FORGÁCH, „The Fringe-Benefits of the Fringe”, in *A Shabby Paradise: Contemporary Hungarian Theatre 2004*, ed. Péter FÁBRI 35–41. (Budapest: Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute, 2004).



the innovative artistic work. And, of course, the works shown here also acted as a safety valve in the hard or soft days of dictatorship: the fact that the system ‘tolerated’ often radical, innovative, and experimental work in these venues could create a fragile illusion of freedom in viewers and participants. The present text deals with two receptive venues that have slowly and persistently, yet virtually invisibly, become dominant sites in the Hungarian theatre structure over the past decades. Invisibly and unnoticed: the real weight and significance of the events that have taken place here, often seem to be beyond the awareness of those directly involved.

In 2019 and 2021, thanks to two independent proposals, I started to study in depth the history of the two longest continuously operating Hungarian receptive venues, the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, with a focus on the role they have played in the functioning of independent theatre groups in Hungary in the past decades.

I examined the history of the Szkéné Theatre, which began in 1970, through a series of fifty interviews with the artists who played a key role in the life of the institution. The interviews, first published on the theatre’s website in 2020 and 2021, with a historical focus, and intention to cover the changes in the social and cultural milieu of the past fifty years, were published in 2022 in a separate volume, with an introductory study.<sup>9</sup> Around the 1989–90 change of regime in Hungary, the MU Theatre was born, an all-arts venue that, as we shall see, to some extent followed and reimaged the model set up by Szkéné. In my research I was focusing specifically on the theatre productions and the artists and groups that performed there.<sup>10</sup> The

book, which is not for commercial sale and is representative of MU’s activities in dance, visual arts, music, and community theatre, was published in the autumn of 2022. In the process of gathering documents and preparing the material, it became clear that the history of the two important performing arts venues on the Buda side of the Hungarian capital intersected at several points. In the following, I report on these possible intersections.

First of all, we should talk about the form of operation, if only because the receptive venue is a special form of theatre within the Hungarian theatre structure, which is obviously starting from a disadvantage. There is an emphatic expression in the Hungarian language: a ‘veterinary horse’ is the name given to phenomena whose operation can be closely examined to reveal and analyse the many hidden and open deficiencies and illnesses of the whole system. The image might be a vivid description of the current situation of receptive venues in Hungary as a form of operation. Receptive venue, by definition, offers a wide variety of independent individual artists and artistic groups regular opportunities to show their work, and is ideally a breeding ground of innovation and progression.<sup>11</sup> As such, it should play a prominent role in the state-subsidized performing arts scene in Hungary, both in terms of its importance and the subsidy it receives.

Máté Gáspár, former managing director of the Krétakör Theatre, wrote in 2012 in the context of the early history of Trafó, House of Contemporary Arts, a receptive venue founded in 1998, that has since grown to international significance: “When in a socio-cultural context a massive set of meanings is almost automatically formed about a con-

<sup>9</sup> JÁSZAY Tamás, *Színház a másodikon: Ötvenen a Szkéné 50 évéről* (Budapest: Szkéné Színház, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> JÁSZAY Tamás, „Itt van a ház, vagyunk lakói: Színházi csoportok a MU Színházban a kezdetektől 2021-ig”, in *MU*, szerk. BÁNÓCZY

VARGA Andrea, 166–245 (Budapest: MU Színház, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> On receptive venues in general see JOÓB Sándor, „Modernkori vándorszínészet? A magyarországi befogadó színházakról”, in *Ellenfény* 2, 4. sz. (1997): 22–23.

cept, the marketing and acceptance of any initiative that differs from it is a risky but certainly time-consuming undertaking.”<sup>12</sup>

Receptive venue is the *difference* itself to the common notion of theatre. From the point of view of the maintainer, e. g. the state, the very existence of receptive venues is an anomaly, as they are hybrid entities. Practically, receptive venues combine certain characteristics of a stone theatre existence, with a permanent building and infrastructure, which is in every sense rather bound, but also the elements of a reformed, amateur, alternative, independent medium, traditionally viewed with suspicion and/or incomprehension by the authorities.

The sustainable and predictable functioning of receptive venues would be in the common interest of the whole theatre structure regarding innovation and progression. Instead, we find that even venues with their own ethos and well-defined profile, such as the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, are constantly struggling to survive, and in the meantime, they no longer have the energy and/or will to communicate their own role, which would be crucial for the whole sector.

Outward communication is crucial for connecting with one's audience, and there is really no recipe. The hybrid form is one of the reasons why, despite decades of continuous operation, both the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre have remained, in a sense, invisible to the wider community of theatre-goers in Budapest. Invisibility, hiding in the shadows of the greats, can of course be an advantage, but it is also a circumstance that makes moving forward, developing, or changing scale impossible. Although these venues were a relatively well-defined community and crucial for the socialisation of theatre for the artists and teams who performed there, the real breakthrough towards the audience never really materialised.

Existing on the periphery is an equally comfortable way of being for both institutions, adding immediately that – not least because of the rapid changes in the legal-financial environment over the last decade – the once parallel paths now seem to be drifting farther and farther apart in the two cases under study. Since the 2010s, both institutions have been consciously building their brands, but while the Szkéné Theatre has admittedly been primarily seeking to develop a sustainable business model, the MU Theatre has, for some years, been interested in a new form of theatre. Unique in Hungary for the theatre professionals and audiences alike, it seeks to establish a community theatre profile as the basis of its operations, which does not have much tradition here.

It is important to emphasize that since its opening in 1970, for a quite long period of time, the Szkéné Theatre was the only high-quality receptive venue in Budapest (in fact, in the whole country), which, thanks to the dancer, choreographer, and pantomime artist Pál Regős and his son, the playwright, actor, director and all-round theatre person János Regős, developed a well-defined, noteworthy international performing arts line ahead of all others. The emergence of the MU Theatre around the change of regime was preceded by the birth of the Petőfi Hall, which fertilised the Hungarian contemporary dance scene, and then by the Merlin, a theatre that was a 'regime changer', like the MU Theatre, born in 1991. Still, we had to wait until 1998 for the opening of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts, and until 2001 for the National Dance Theatre. Like the Szkéné Theatre, the MU Theatre has had a long period in its history when it should have been one of the few venues of its kind to get attention.

What could be the reasons that allowed the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre to stay outside the system? My hypothesis is that the circumstances of the start-up already implied neglect as a possible long-term consequence. The Szkéné Theatre opened on

<sup>12</sup> GÁSPÁR Máté, „A Trafó mint színház”, *Színház* 45, 3. sz. (2012): 26–29, 26.

the second floor of the Budapest University of Technology on 21 March 1970, providing a rehearsal and performance space for the amateur theatre company of the same name, which had been operating there for almost a decade and was managed by the director and exceptional educator István Keleti. And not only for them: at the time, it was compulsory to run art groups at the university, and many of them found a home here. The studio space of the Szkéné Theatre, designed by László Vidolovics, an architecture student (!) who studied here, and partly built literally by the artists who performed there, welcomed the groups with an infrastructure and modern theatre architecture that was unique in the country at the time. Although the theatre has been renovated several times, certain technical limitations have become clear over time, which have both hindered and inspired the artists who have worked there. The recent renovation of the theatre in 2011 is a landmark moment in the history of the Szkéné Theatre. Despite being crowded and chaotic, the bohemian space, which had long been a cosy home for many, now offers audiences a clearer auditorium and artists much more comfortable conditions than before. There were and will be no revolving stages, no complicated stage technology, and the sets are still transported through the corridors of the University of Technology, but after many decades, the view of the Danube is finally back; the spectacularly renewed venue bears traces of the old memories.

The history of the present MU Theatre dates back to the 1980s. The Lágymányosi Community House (Lágymányosi Községi Ház, LKH) of Kőrösy József Street, was a particularly vibrant venue at that time, even compared to other community centres of the 11<sup>th</sup> district.<sup>13</sup> It became the base and

concert venue for numerous bands and their regular audiences, and the place was also a high-quality venue for the manifestations of the leading figures of alternative music, visual arts, and literature, as well as for classical cultural education events. After the occasional theatre programmes at the LKH, theatre (and contemporary dance) began to be more and more prominent only around the change of regime, initially in joint organisation with the Szkéné Theatre (!), then as part of the LKH programme, and from 1991 onwards, under the distinctive MU project name. In the MU Theatre, both the main hall and the later opened upstairs studio are almost 'anti-theatre' spaces, serving the audience with minimal technical conditions and demanding a lot of compromise from the creators.

In 1992, János Regőcs, director of the Szkéné Theatre for almost a decade and a half, wrote about Hungarian alternative theatres, and although he did not name the MU Theatre specifically, his words are easy to understand for the present and the near future of the freshly opened institution:

„...several new venues have opened or been strengthened in the past year, festivals and meetings have been organised for so-called alternative theatres and productions. And, contrary to all rumours, there are audiences... A new audience is emerging, one that is not very keen on the so-called ordinary theatre, preferring to go where they can see something unique and new, even if it is perhaps not very professional... people have a renewed desire for intimacy and immediacy, the mere spirit of the place, to visit a small theatre where the director greets them in the foyer, where they feel that the director is sitting among them at each performance, where they see a real creative collective on stage, and where

<sup>13</sup> Cf. FARKAS Zsolt, SZAKMÁRY Dalma, „Kultúra és közművelődés Újbudán – a XI. kerületi közösségi házak története”, in *A közművelődés házai Budapesten 9.*, ed. by. SLÉZIA Gabriella, 67–116 (Budapest: Budapesti Művelődési Központ, 2014), 72–74.

they have the desire and the opportunity to stay for a chat, a beer, or a coffee after the performance... there is no better 'advertiser' than tonight's audience. If the word gets out that something is good, then there is bound to be a big series, which, in the case of such productions, of course does not mean hundreds of performances, but it certainly brings with it artistic and professional improvement and change, since the process of development does not usually end with the presentation."<sup>14</sup>

As I have indicated, the Szkéné Theatre and the MU Theatre, which are less than a kilometre apart as the crow flies, were not only theoretically but also very practically linked – a fact worth emphasising if only because it was not typical yesterday, nor is it today, for artistic institutions to see each other as partners rather than competitors. Livia Fuchs, renowned dance historian and dance critic, says in a 2017 conversation about the 1990s:

„Obviously, there was some competition between the MU, the Szkéné, and the Petőfi Hall, but they were able to work very well together... It's surprising to recall a series of performances that could be seen in all three venues: the host venues did not work against each other, the incredibly rich lineup at the time eventually spread nicely between them."<sup>15</sup>

The archives of the MU Theatre are kept by the National Museum and Institute of Theatre History. It is from there that we know

<sup>14</sup> REGŐS János, „Tendenciák a magyar alternatív színházak munkáiban”, in *Fordulatok: Hungarian Theatres 1992*, szerk. VÁRSZEGI Tibor, 467–471 (Budapest: editor's publication, 1992), 470.

<sup>15</sup> HALÁSZ Tamás, „Talpon maradni – MU25: Kerekasztal-beszélgetés”, in *Parallel* 35. sz. (2017): 16–33, 19.

that around the opening of the MU the institution published programmes jointly with the Szkéné Theatre: the programmes of the two theatres were coordinated and complemented each other. In addition, we know of a number of artists who, after “outgrowing” the Szkéné Theatre, i.e. either began to think of larger-scale projects or simply ran out of audience, in several cases tried their luck at the initiative of János Regős and found a home within the walls of the MU Theatre. Not officially, but in a practical sense, the MU Theatre has become a kind of after-school of the Szkéné Theatre. Here is a list of some groups and artists who started their career at the Szkéné, then turned to the MU: György Árvai and the Természetes Vészek Kollektíva (Collective of Natural Art Disaster), Gerzson Péter Kovács and TranzDanz, who experiment with contemporary folk dance, Gábor Goda and Artus, who work on the border between dance, theatre, and visual arts, Csaba Méhes, who presents humorous (mostly) one-man shows. More recently, the presence of the newly dissolved k2 Theatre at the MU Theatre, was inspired by similar motifs: the company with its political performances was reflecting on our present, bringing young artists together. In the past fifteen years, a similar dynamic can be identified between Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts and the MU Theatre.

Witnesses from the 1980s and 1990s, the heyday of the Szkéné Theatre, speak of an excited, eager hunger, an overwhelming curiosity for each other's work. It may seem like an exaggeration, but the impression to today's observer is that it was almost compulsory to be involved in as many and as varied projects as possible. The history of the Szkéné Theatre could be written in terms of these connections, but here I mention only one extreme example.

The most popular member of the independent theatre community in Hungary today, internationally acclaimed Béla Pintér, started his career in the 1980s as a teenager in, what was then called, the Tanulmány

Színház (Study Theatre). This group grew into the Arvisura Company, which was the emblematic independent theatre of the period: the director, István Somogyi, leader of the group, experimented in a direction that was quite unusual in the realist-based theatre of Hungary. He created complex theatre that was strongly visual and musical, and that primarily focused on the senses. At that time Béla Pintér worked for seven years at Artus, with the direction of Gábor Goda, where he developed his movement culture, body awareness, and acting presence. Pintér also appeared in the performances of several small independent groups at the Szkéné Theatre, which existed for shorter or longer periods of time: he was present at most of the performances of the Utolsó Vonal Színházi Érdektömörülés (Last Line Theatre Workshop), which practiced self-reflective meta-theatre. Pintér also performed in groups such as the Dream Team, the Picaro and the Hattyú Gárda (Swan Guard). Until 1998 Pintér also appeared as an actor in early productions of the later internationally renowned Krétakör Színház (Chalk Circle Theatre), founded by Árpád Schilling in 1995. In 1998, Pintér created his first premiere. The title of it, *Népi rablét* (*Common Bondage*), is the anagram of his own name, and the show is a grotesque, bloody-ridiculous performance that founded „the” Béla Pintér and Company. In many ways, Béla Pintér is an exception in contemporary Hungarian theatre history, and the list of actors and directors who passed from one company to another at the Szkéné Theatre is, in any case, a long one.

There is no such intense “coexistence” in the MU Theatre. According to the recollections, everyone did their own thing, and although they were by no means excluded from working together, their circles seemed to intersect at fewer points. There are just a few exceptions to the rule: György Árvai, who was present when the foundations of the MU were being laid, was involved in the projects of several other artists from a wide range of performing arts (e.g. Ágens, Edit Szűcs, Ani-

kó Zsalakovics, Krisztián Gergye, László Hudi and others). Further exceptions include the Pont Műhely (Point Workshop), born out of the Pont Színház (Pont Theatre), the old and new AIOWA, which originated in Vojvodina, Serbia, and the close ties that existed between them and the András Urbán Company in Subotica. In more recent history, the co-operation of small, mobile companies from rural Hungary, conceived in the amateur, student theatre and theatre education milieu, is also worth mentioning as an exception, e.g. the cooperation between FAQ, a theatre company originally based in Győr, KB35 Inárcs near Budapest, and the Rév Theatre in Győr, as well as the aforementioned k2 Theatre and the Soltis Lajos Theatre in Celldömölk. The last two mentioned, according to the company managers, were not so much motivated by the MU Theatre: most of the teams knew each other from amateur and other theatre festivals, and the MU Theatre merely provided a venue to present the results of their joint work in the capital.

Although neither the Szkéné Theatre nor the MU Theatre has been able to leap over its own shadow, both were important factors in a certain time and community. In both cases, the catalyst for these processes is linked to the theatre’s director, who had long been an emblematic figure in the life of the institution.

The real heyday of the Szkéné Theatre began in 1979, when János Regős took over the reins at the theatre, where he remained until his departure in 2010. Those three decades were not consistent, neither in terms of programming, nor in the quality of the groups that performed there, nor in terms of their strength, intensity, or their importance in theatre history. Yet, what Regős created there and then, with little money, was a unique institution at national, and, most probably, at regional level too.

The list is not exhaustive, but it says a lot about the era that the world-famous dance choreographer Josef Nadj, or Tamás Ascher and János Szikora, who are primarily known



today as stone theatre directors, worked or performed there at practically the same time. The same can be said about folk dancer Zoltán Zsuráfszky, contemporary dancer Yvette Bozsik, and her collaborator György Árvai, and other emblematic figures of anti-realist theatre, such as András Jeles, Erzsébet Gaál, or Katalin Lábán. Of course, we cannot forget about the resident company of the era, the Arvisura, led by István Somogyi, which was able to become the first independent theatre group in Hungary that was able to operate a permanent company and an ever-expanding repertoire for a long period of time; thanks to the financial support from the George Soros Foundation. The virtual family tree of the Szkéné Theatre has also grown: the Arvisura was the starting point of the careers of Béla Pintér, Árpád Schilling, and Ádám Horgas, who soon also had successful productions as directors. The model of the Arvisura as a resident company was repeated by Béla Pintér at the Szkéné Theatre in the 2000s, which meant that the name of the receptive venue was synonymous with Pintér for many people for a long time. Pintér's departure from the Szkéné was a slow and not painless process, but from the 2022/23 season onwards the director-playwright had only one production left in the venue's repertoire. Pintér decided to do this in order to ensure that his production of *A sütemények királynője* (*The Queen of Cookies*, 2004), a tragedy dealing with the story of an abusive family in communist Hungary in the 1980s, would remain an intimate, close-to-conscious experience for the audience.

János Regős presented an exceptionally rich and varied programme at the Szkéné Theatre. It was under his direction that the Szkéné became a "place", and its connection to the international performing arts network through festivals and workshops would act as a low-budget model and a rudimentary forerunner of Trafó – House of Contemporary Arts. It is now almost unbelievable that for more than two decades, the International

Meeting of Movement Theatre (IMMT) festivals featured groups and artists such as Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, Japanese Shushaku and Dormu Dance Theatre, Kazuo Ohno, Polish Gardzienice and Russian Derovo. Thanks to János Regős's extensive international network, the Szkéné Theatre also hosted performers outside the festival circuit, such as Min Tanaka from Japan, Oleg Zhukovsky from Russia, Divadlo na Provázku from the Czech Republic, La Mama Theatre, the Living Theatre and the Bread & Puppet Theatre from the United States. The Western artists' trips to the exotic lands behind the Iron Curtain for a fraction of their usual fees were probably also undertaken for the sake of adventure, but in the process, they had a profound influence on a whole generation of Hungarian artists. The summer workshop series of the International Dance-Movement Center (IDMC), which joined the IMMT in 1985, testifies to János Regős's pedagogical sense and future-oriented thinking: there anyone could get acquainted with dance and movement genres that were little known or unknown in Hungary at the time, such as jazz dance, musical dance, butoh, afro dance, flamenco, samba, tai-chi, etc. János Regős turned the Szkéné Theatre into an all-arts, crossover venue in the 1980s, a period when the term had not yet become trendy or banal. While Regős was a quality programmer, his selection was clearly not elitist, let alone revenue and audience maximizing, and he always left time and space for failure and trial and error.

This last point is analogous to the credo of the open-minded and liberal Tibor Leszták, former director of the MU Theatre, who led the not-so-smooth process of transforming the community centre into a receptive venue, creating, maintaining, and running another new "place". As a programmer, organiser, artistic secretary, artistic director, and director with a small but enthusiastic team, Leszták, with a strong affinity for alternative and contemporary arts, took the project forward until his early death in 2008. As he

wrote in a 1994 summary of the MU, the institution “is an inclusive theatre that does not want to see the increasing number of talented groups and ensembles of cultural value lost, as in the case of the Atlantis culture, and therefore wishes to give them the opportunity and a home to present themselves, and to continue to operate.”<sup>16</sup>

The decade of the MU’s launch was marked by the departure of György Árvai and the Collective of Natural Art Disaster from the Szkéné Theatre. Gábor Goda and the Artus were performing at both venues for a while. The group Andaxínház, which evolved from the Artus, and Csaba Méhes, who also worked with Gábor Goda for a long time, became long-time residents of the MU Theatre. The Pont Theatre, organised around Tibor Várszegi, and later the Pont Workshop, under the artistic direction of László Keszég, were also linked to the institution for decades. The legendary eccentric of Hungarian theatre history, the Szentkirályi Színházi Műhely (Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop) with Lili Monori and Miklós B. Székely, was an important team there in the 2000s, as was the ensemble of Viktor Bodó, the Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság (Sputnik Shipping Company). The Sputnik was invited to the MU by Tibor Leszták, but it only achieved significant results after his death. The company quickly became a major player in the Hungarian independent scene, won numerous international awards, but was dissolved a few years later.

In 2008, Tibor Leszták died and was replaced by Balázs Erős, who had considerable experience in managing several independent companies, such as the Krétakör Theatre or the Maladype, and initiated a decisive change of direction. Erős said goodbye to the companies that had long defined themselves as resident companies of the MU Theatre, and instead gave opportunities to young,

small, and mobile, often rural companies. The most important event of the past decade was the 2013 move of one of the oldest theatre education companies in Hungary, the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) moving to the MU Theatre. The inclusion of the Káva is a clear sign that the theatre education and community theatre line had become an absolute priority at the institution, and the theatre has recently been pursuing this path with renewed vigour. To mention just two notable undertakings: the OPEN International Community and Participatory Theatre Festival educates Hungarian audiences to understand and embrace this still unusual form through Hungarian and foreign performances, workshops, and round-table discussions. A particularly exciting and nationally unique undertaking in recent years has been the presentation of community theatre performances by the MU Theatre’s senior age groups. It is also a fine example of cooperation within the institution: the exceptional performances are directed by András Sereglei, actor, drama teacher, and one of the founding members of the Káva Cultural Workshop.

In 2010, after thirty-one years of directing, János Regős had to leave the Szkéné Theatre in a swift manner. His place was taken by Ádám Németh, an economist with many ties to the Budapest University of Technology and its firms. The managerial approach came at the right time: the changed legislative and financial environment created the opportunity for a complete re-profiling of the Szkéné. With the diminishing role of Béla Pintér, who had long been a resident artist at the Szkéné Theatre, and his departure in the early 2010s, new groups were given the opportunity to build their own returning audiences. Among the groups that were presenting new shows year by year, with permanent or virtual companies, we find important creators of the Hungarian independent performing arts scene, such as the Forte Company, which started out as a dance and physical theatre company led by Csaba Horváth,

<sup>16</sup> „MU Színház”, in *Félúton*, szerk. VÁRSZEGI Tibor (Budapest: Új Színházért Alapítvány, 1994), 28.

who redefined the language of movement on stage, the Nézőművészeti Kft., which is a company of two popular stage and film actors, Péter Scherer and Zoltán Mucsi, or the Vádli Alkalmi Színházi Társulás (Calves Occasional Theatre Company), led by actor-director Rémusz Szikszai, who represents expressive theatre and political message in almost all his performances. In addition to these, the Szkéné Theatre also hosts important chamber productions from rural Hungary and from Hungarian speaking regions beyond the borders, as well as occasional young groups, often assembled for a single project. The Szkéné also looks after the next generation of directors, regularly giving opportunities to influential young directors such as Máté Hegymegi and Jakab Tarnóczy.

The Szkéné Theatre existed as a foreign body, almost hidden, within the building of a non-artistic university, while the MU Theatre, community centre that had survived socialism and was in a precarious position and role after the change of regime, was transformed into a receptive venue. The reason why their history has been so varied, with detours and dead ends, is that they have maintained their marginal status within the Hungarian theatre structure from the very beginning. Some people, of course, are not happy about the changes, but I agree with the words of István Nánay, the doyen of Hungarian critics, whose statement about the Szkéné Theatre can be applied to the MU Theatre as well: "The history of the institution nicely describes the changes that have taken place in our society, in art, and in theatre over the last half century, and for this reason it cannot be condemned for being like this today, rather than like that."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> „Nánay István: Egy színház átváltozásai”, in JÁSZAY, *Színház a második...*, 75–80, 80.

## Bibliography

- BÉRCZES László. „Mácsszínház Magyarországon (1945-1989)”, Part I. *Színház* 29, No. 3. (1996): 42–48; Part II. *Színház* 29, No. 4. (1996): 44–48; Part III. *Színház* 29, No. 5. (1996): 43–48.
- FARKAS Zsolt, SZAKMÁRY Dalma. „Kultúra és közművelődés Újbudán – a XI. kerületi közösségi házak története”. In *A közművelődés házai Budapesten 9*. Edited by SLÉZIA Gabriella, 67–116. Budapest: Budapesti Művelődési Központ, 2014.
- FORGÁCH András. „The Fringe-Benefits of the Fringe”. In *A Shabby Paradise: Contemporary Hungarian Theatre 2004*. Edited by Péter FÁBRI, 35–41. Budapest: Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute, 2004.
- 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*. Edited by GAJDÓ Tamás, 307–346. Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007.
- GÁSPÁR Máté. „A Trafó mint színház”. *Színház* 45, No. 3. (2012): 26–29.
- HALÁSZ Tamás. „Talpon maradni – MU25: Kerekasztal-beszélgetés”. *Parallel* No. 35. (2017): 16–33, 19.
- TAMÁS JÁSZAY. „Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre”, *Critical Stages*, last accessed: 2022.08.30., <https://www.criticalstages.org/8/finita-la-commedia-the-debilitation-of-hungarian-independent-theatre-hungary/>
- JÁSZAY Tamás. „Itt van a ház, vagyunk lakói: Színházi csoportok a MU Színházban a kezdetektől 2021-ig”. In *MU*. Edited by BÁNÓCZY VARGA Andrea, 166–245. Budapest: MU Színház, 2022.
- JÁSZAY Tamás. *Színház a másodikon: Ötvenen a Szkéné 50. évéről*. Budapest: Szkéné Színház, 2022.

- JOÓB Sándor. „Modernkori vándorszínészet? A magyarországi befogadó színházakról”. In *Ellenfény* 2, No. 4. (1997): 22–23.
- PATONAY Anita. „Kulturális közösségi terek az államosítás után”. In *Újjáépítés és államosítás: Tanulmánykötet a kultúra államosításának kezdeti éveiről*. Edited by JÁKFALVI Magdolna, KÉKESI KUN Árpád, KISS Gabriella, RING Orsolya, 118–136. Budapest: Arktisz – TMA, 2020.
- REGŐS János. „Tendenciák a magyar alternatív színházak munkáiban”. In *Fordulatok: Hungarian Theatres 1992*, edited by VÁRSZEGI Tibor, 467–471. Budapest: editor's publication, 1992.
- RIHAY-KOVÁCS Zita. „Alternatív-e a független színház?”. In *THEALTER30(+1) színháztudományi konferencia: Szeged, 2021. július 29-30*. Edited by JÁSZAY Tamás, 79–87. Szeged: SZTE BTK Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, MASZK Egyesület, 2022, last accessed: 2022.08.30., [http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter\\_all\\_final\\_3aug2022.pdf](http://www.complit.u-szeged.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/thealter_all_final_3aug2022.pdf)
- RING Orsolya. „Húzd meg, ereszd meg: Színházirányítás, színházi struktúra 1949–1989”. *Színház* 55, No. 10. (2022): 2–6.
- SZABÓ István. „The System Went – The Theatres Remained”. In *Theatre After the Change: And What Was There Before the After?* Edited by Mária MAYER-SZILÁGYI, 55–63. Budapest: Creativ Média, 2011.
- TARISKA Andrea. „A függetlenek finanszírozásának története Magyarországon a nyolcvanas évektől napjainkig”. In *Alternatívok – Az első száz év*, 73–79. Budapest: no publishing house, 2011.
- VÁRSZEGI Tibor, ed. *Félúton*. Budapest: Új Színházért Alapítvány, 1994.

## Samuel Beckett's Drama in Hungarian Theatre History and Criticism before 1990

MÁRIA KURDI

**Abstract:** The international and intercultural aspects of Samuel Beckett's theatre have been widely recognised by an increasing number of scholarly works in the last few decades. This article offers a study of the pre-1990 reception of Beckett's drama and theatre in Hungarian criticism and literary and theatre histories. Its focus is on critical and theoretical investigations of three of Beckett's masterpieces for the stage, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), and *Happy Days* (1961), provided by Hungarian authors in Hungary or in Hungarian-language forums of the neighbouring countries. While mentioning all the premieres of the three masterpieces in Hungary during the given period, the article surveys and compares only those ideas across the various theatre reviews, which contribute to the Hungarian critical reception of Beckett and the selected works. To place the addressed pre-1990 Hungarian studies and reviews in the broader field, the article is framed by references to some relevant writings of international Beckett scholars.

"The 'what' and 'where' behind the story of Beckett's international reception are under scrutiny in the essays collected in this volume", Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman, editors of *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett* (2011) write in their "Introduction". More specifically, they add that the book "testifies to trends and patterns within a network of critical and cultural exchange, yet also to the realization that there exist many 'Becketts', read through specific cultural, historical and political situations".<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian Beckett

is not discussed in the volume separately. The chapter "Samuel Beckett and Poland" by Marek Kędzierski introduces the politically and culturally restrictive milieu the Soviet bloc countries faced before 1990, with a quotation from the Hungarian-born Marxist philosopher György Lukács, a persistent advocate of realism, which testifies his rather negative attitude to Beckett. Nevertheless, *Waiting for Godot* had its Polish premiere as early as 1957.<sup>2</sup> Further in the book, Octavian Saiu's chapter "Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain" briefly calls attention to certain aspects of the writer's reception in Hungary beside that in other Eastern European countries. Saiu claims that during the socialist era, censorship was less severe in Hungary than in Bulgaria and Romania, "which may account for a larger number of productions and translations of Beckett's works". Regarding the pre-1990 period, he reminds the reader that both in print and on stage *Waiting for Godot* arrived in Hungary by 1965. The premiere took place in the Thália Studio Theatre, Budapest, originally a small rehearsal room, which choice was "not a sign of disrespect", Saiu adds, "but a strategy employed by the directors, Károly Kazimir and Péter Léner to make the socialist authorities accept the project". Saiu also mentions the debate between various Hungarian critics about the play in the same year, stating that "the range of opinions expressed was as broad as Beckett generated anywhere: from wholehearted admiration to sheer revulsion". As

---

*Reception of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark NIXON and Matthew FELDMAN (London: Continuum, 2009), E-book edition.

<sup>2</sup> Marek KĘDZIERSKI, "Samuel Beckett and Poland", in NIXON and FELDMAN, E-book edition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark NIXON and Matthew FELDMAN, "Introduction: 'Getting Known' – Samuel Beckett's International Reception", in *The International*



for the pre-1990 premiere of other Beckett plays in Hungary, Saiu refers to almost all of them.<sup>3</sup>

The Hungarian *Godot*-debate is briefly commented on by dramaturge István Pinczés in his unpublished doctoral dissertation (2009), which explores issues of dramaturgy regarding the production of the play. So far it is Anita Rákóczy who has most thoroughly studied how the Hungarian Beckett came into being. She has devoted scholarly articles to the Hungarian staging of *Godot* and *Endgame*, as well as made interviews with relevant theatre makers, which were included and published in essay collections she authored or co-edited. In this study of the early, pre-1990 reception of Beckett's theatre in Hungarian criticism and literary and theatre histories I am going to draw on some findings of Rákóczy. While her main focus is on productions and their directors' innovations, I am primarily concerned with critical, historical and theoretical reflections on three of Beckett's masterpieces, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), and *Happy Days* (1961), provided by Hungarian authors in Hungary, or in the Hungarian-language forums of the neighbouring countries. Accordingly, this article considers only reviews written about theatre productions which contributed to the Hungarian critical reception of Beckett and the three selected works. In my argument I will also refer to and quote from Noémi Herczog's nuanced study of the relations between Hungarian theatre criticism and the practice of political denunciation over the years 1957–1989, called the Kádár-era after János Kádár, leader of the one-party socialist system ruling the country during that long period. Besides, I also make ample use of the two bibliographies availa-

<sup>3</sup> Octavian SAIU, "Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe", in NIXON and FELDMAN, E-book edition.

ble of Hungarian writings on and responses to Beckett's work.<sup>4</sup>

Using Emil Kolozsvári Grandpierre's translation from the French original, the Hungarian *Godot* was first published in August 1965 by a major journal specializing in world literature called *Nagyvilág* (Great World). A preface to the text written by Gábor Mihályi dwells on the fame *Godot* had already earned world-wide and the controversies it generated in many international scholarly communities due to the devastating picture it conveys of the human existence in decline. However, the play is important even for people in socialist Hungary, the author says, because "it is the unacceptability of this picture that might encourage us to say no to negativism and set optimism against it".<sup>5</sup> The three main points Mihályi makes about the unquestionably growing reputation of the writer, the controversial nature of the play, and the reasons why it can be important for the Hungarian audience have their echoes in the ensuing, quite heated *Godot*-debate.

The debate about the play and its premiere in Thália,<sup>6</sup> was hosted also by *Nagyvilág*; it involved some leading critics' voices about the merits and the shortcomings of Beckett's work, as well as about the ways in which it

<sup>4</sup> CSÁMPAI Zoltán, *Samuel Beckett bibliográfia*, <http://beckett.uw.hu/sbbibl.htm/>, 2005.

KURDI Mária, P. MÜLLER Péter "Samuel Beckett in Hungary: A Centennial Bibliography", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 14, No. 1. (2008): 133–158.

<sup>5</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „A *Godot* elé”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 8. (1965): 1171–1172. The translation of the quotation from Hungarian into English is my work (MK) and applies to all cases where another translator's name is not given.

<sup>6</sup> About the political circumstances and the extreme challenges of the premiere see Anita RÁKÓCZY, "It All Started with *Godot* in 1965': Dialogue with Péter LÉNER", in Anita RÁKÓCZY, *Samuel Beckett's Endgame and Hungarian Opening Gambits* (Budapest – Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 119–125.

can or should be interpreted for Hungarian audiences. First among the contributors, Géza Hegedűs's article dismisses the play as worthless because it does not say anything new, it is tasteless, and cannot even provoke laughter. Moreover, by the portrayal of hopelessness it morally justifies idle behaviour, the critic says, which looked, no doubt, intolerable through the lens of the socialist ideology and its demand that the whole society work industriously for a better future. To sum up his rigidly disparaging and berating opinion of *Godot* and its author, Hegedűs quotes a well-known phrase from one of Hans Christian Andersen's tales: "the king is naked!"<sup>7</sup> The other contributors to the debate did not share Hegedűs's degrading attitude and rejection, yet their views proved contradictory in various ways: they identified values and merits in *Godot* while also distanced the work from themselves and the audience as a capitalist product, which demonstrates the bourgeois societies' problems of alienation and hopelessness. Given that the mid-1960s were still a time when the cultural and literary life of Hungary was dominated by Marxist ideology, which required that artists disseminate an optimistic belief in easily attainable social change and improvement, the situation could hardly have been otherwise. At the same time, the contradictions in the critics' position reflected also the spirit of the literati's ongoing debates about socialist realism, for some still a viable criterion of rules of representation while an outdated mode for others, as well as about the many faces and phases of realism itself.<sup>8</sup>

In the debate, György Szabó's article emphasizes that the play encourages a multiplicity of meanings through devices by which it can avoid remaining a bundle of dry ab-

stractions. Moreover, Szabó argues, the play carries a revolutionary effect in that it portrays profound disillusionment and both mocks and rejects bourgeois ideas in the way the Dadaist artists did decades earlier. Not forgetting to add something in the negative, Szabó says that the dark view of the world Beckett transmits through his art needs to be challenged by our belief in progress and the potential for change.<sup>9</sup> In his contribution, Béla Mátrai-Betegh opposes Hegedűs by saying that the play does have the capacity of making the audience laugh at Vladimir and Estragon's antics, who, although capitalism moulded them uniform and deprived them of individuality, still show differences in their character. Also, Mátrai-Betegh maintains that Lucky's monologue conveys the madly desperate outburst of an oppressed man, by which the text is approaching some painful but beautiful lyricism. In this critic's eyes, *Godot* is not a pessimistic drama because it shows how people are not able to live and, thus, inspires the audience to embrace useful activities.<sup>10</sup> Uniquely among the contributors, Aurél Varannay separates the work and its author, setting them in opposition. He says that here "waiting is the expression of the life instinct, that of hope against hopelessness", and the play's vision of life is tragic like Hamlet's, whereas its grotesque, wry humour exposes hypocrisy. Having praised the drama, Varannay implies criticism of Beckett's choice to portray a kind of existence which is limited, painful, and humiliating to such an extent that he would rather wait for *Godot* – probably for a play

<sup>7</sup> HEGEDŰS GÉZA, „*Godot*-t újraolvasva”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1715–1719.

<sup>8</sup> About these debates see a contemporary American article by Ann DEMAIRE, "The Great Debate on Socialist Realism", *The Modern Language Journal*, 50, No. 5. (1966): 263–268.

<sup>9</sup> SZABÓ György, „Egy másik nézőpontról”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1719–1723, 1720, 1723.

<sup>10</sup> MÁTRAJ-BETEGH Béla, „A néző szemével a *Godot*-ról”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1867–1869.

which fulfils all his social, aesthetic, as well as moral expectations.<sup>11</sup>

Writing an afterword to the debate, László Kéry provides a brief summary of the contrasting points in the others' discussion of Beckett and *Godot* before his own ruminations. Indeed, his assessment also oscillates between appraisal and fault-finding, and regards Beckett as an author of anti-drama. Moreover, he introduces a tendency of comparing the socialist and politically committed Brecht with the absurdist Beckett at the expense of the latter, who does not aim to bring about individual and social change by means of the theatre. To an extent, the comic games of the protagonists have some alienating function, but they are not able to dissolve the pessimistic determinism which pervades the play, Kéry argues, and this is why it is a mistake to look for catharsis in *Godot*. Nevertheless, the play's effect lies in its multi-layered nature, therefore, as a significant work of recent bourgeois literature it is worth studying among other western cultural phenomena, since its aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual value cannot be denied, Kéry admits. Perhaps unknowingly, at the end Kéry sums up the general paradox of putting the obligatory Marxist view of literature into practice: "This is not the only work in the bourgeois literature of the past half-century, which poses the following anxious question: how can a work of art, problematic or even unacceptable because of its philosophy, become significant and considered valuable?"<sup>12</sup> For Kéry, a professor of English literature, the principle work of a similar hue must have been Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was made available for the public in a new Hungarian translation only in 1974.

<sup>11</sup> VARANNAY Aurél, „*Godot* mellett, Beckett ellen.” *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1869–1870.

<sup>12</sup> KÉRY László, „A mozdulatlanság drámája – Utószó a *Godot*-vitához”, *Nagyvilág* 11, No. 7. (1966): 261–264.

Concurrently with the *Godot*-debate, the politically influential literary historian, Pál Pándi's article in the communist party's daily paper *Népszabadság* (Freedom of the People) hailed the translation, publication, and staging of *Godot*, because, he claimed, one had to know and understand the play before forming an opinion of its qualities. Thus, differently from Hegedűs's scanty reasoning, Pándi departs from a seemingly valid standpoint, yet arrives at an even more severe, heavily ideologized conclusion than the other critic: he rejects the play on the grounds that it is nihilistic, characterized by “grotesque scepticism”. As such, for Pándi, *Godot* negates humanism, it is not modern but decadent, moreover, its philosophy of despair and passivity is incongruous with the vitality of the dramatic genre.<sup>13</sup> László Varga approaches *Godot* from the angle of modernism, deploying Antonin Artaud's theories which undoubtedly influenced the language of the absurd theatre. Beckett intended, Varga says, “to loosen dependence on the text and utilize the whole space of the stage as well as the potential of the human, the actors' body”. The dramaturgical talent of the playwright lies in his capacity to depict even the most hopeless situations with grotesque humour, while his sympathy for his down-and-out characters evokes the lyrical tone, Varga says. After this unconditional appraisal it sounds all the more surprising that he switches to the ideological terrain, stressing that the picture Beckett provides of human life is distorted because of showing it contradictory and not suggesting, in any way, that contradictions can be overcome by purposeful activity, which sounds much like the Marxist programme of building socialism.<sup>14</sup>

At the opposite end of the scale articles were written free from ideological consider-

<sup>13</sup> PÁNDI Pál, „Megismerés vagy elfogadás? – *Godot*-ra várva. Színmű, a Thália Színház előadása”, *Népszabadság*, 1965. nov. 27., 8.

<sup>14</sup> VARGA László, „Beckett és a korszerűség”, *Kritika* 4, No. 5. (1966): 33–38., 34, 35, 38.

ations, for instance Mihályi's in *Híd* (Bridge), a journal based in Novi Sad, then Yugoslavia (1966), which focuses on the dramaturgical innovations and stylistic values of Beckett's theatre. Beckett, Ionesco, and other authors of the absurd declared conventional forms of dramatic writing unsuitable to render the complexities and contradictions of their age, Mihályi claims. According to him, Beckett's "tragicomedies", by means of grotesque humour and parody, unmask old myths which had become empty and meaningless by that time. Also, Mihályi reinterprets the often-cited negativism in *Godot*, positing that Beckett's art represents the negation of negation, a new myth, the myth of the never arriving Godot, which creates a lyrical tone of sympathy and compassion, revealing the playwright's profound humanism. Identifying *Godot*'s links with the traditions of world theatre, the author finds it similar to the greatest tragedies in which the fate of the protagonists is pre-determined.<sup>15</sup> Mihályi's article lacks any ideological baggage, probably because it was published in Yugoslavia, a country formally socialist but not dependent on the political supremacy of Moscow after 1948, so it did not come under the kind of censorship that were operating in the Soviet Union's satellite countries like Hungary.<sup>16</sup> Another thought-provoking inquiry into *Godot* is in a book chapter by Vilmos Zolnay. Scrutinizing the comic mode in the play, he quotes from the initial scene, where the famous utterance "nothing to be done" refers to both Estragon's struggle to take off his shoes and Vladimir's philosophy of life, the gap between them creating tension but also its comic release, because bringing the high and the low together is an age-old device employed by comedies. Opposites with a

similar effect characterize *Godot* at several points, Zolnay continues, for instance, in the scene where the protagonists discuss hanging themselves which would give them an erection, thus fusing death with the possible conception of a new life.<sup>17</sup>

Among the critical reviews of *Godot*'s Hungarian premiere an oscillation between serving the official demand for an ideologically restrictive approach and a freer evaluation can also be seen. Ernő Taxner re-addresses the Brecht-Beckett comparison, stressing that Beckett gave up trying to convince his audience of social truths, and represents isolated situations and passive states. However, for Taxner, like for Kéry before him, there seems to be a touch of the Brechtian in Beckett, because the comic behaviour of the tramps in *Godot* actually cautions the audience not to identify with them. At the same time Taxner comes up with the quite combative political interpretation that Beckett's play transmits western thinkers' ideas about life as an aimless waiting not only in their world but everywhere, therefore we, in the socialist countries, should be alert to the danger this belief might entail when employed by political practice.<sup>18</sup> Tamás Ungvári, author of another review of the first Hungarian *Godot* on stage, expresses a more lenient opinion: the production helped the audience understand that the play is worthy of attention as it is about "something different". Its symbolism allows for a number of interpretations, and in Thália the alienating mode of playing it suggested that it depicts types of people whose chances are limited by capitalism, Ungvári contends.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Beckett *Godot*-ja és az elidegenedés mitológiája”, *Híd* 4, No. 10. (1966): 505–510., 505, 506, 507, 508.

<sup>16</sup> In this context it is worth mentioning that the first *Godot* premiere behind the Iron Curtain took place in Belgrade, as early as in 1955.

<sup>17</sup> ZOLNAY Vilmos, *Az írói mesterség: A mű és elemei* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1971), 212, 214.

<sup>18</sup> TAXNER Ernő, „Színházi levél Budapestről”, *Jelenkor* 9, No. 2. (1966): 141–145., 142–143.

<sup>19</sup> UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Egy színházi kísérlet – Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1965. nov. 17., 4.

After Beckett had received the Nobel Prize in 1969, it appeared to be high time to demonstrate the Hungarian interest in his work more ambitiously. Importantly, the cultural climate in the country was becoming more favourable to the realization of such plans. Since the end of the 1960s, György Aczél had been the nominated Secretary of the Central Committee for Cultural Affairs. Culture was state managed, historian László Kontler writes, and the official strategy was the division of the cultural sphere into “prohibited, permitted, and promoted” (tiltott, tűrt és támogatott in Hungarian) products. In fact, “there was a category of tolerated works of art and intellectual achievements, which were deemed neither likely to have a subversive effect, nor to be particularly conducive to the attainment of the professed social and political goals of the regime”.<sup>20</sup> Beckett’s works seemed to fall into this category, resembling the Hungarian reception of his also Irish-born predecessor, Oscar Wilde, whose dramatic oeuvre was rehabilitated in this period.<sup>21</sup>

The volume of Beckett’s collected plays in Hungarian translation saw the light in 1970. With a nod to *Endgame*, the title of Miklós Almási’s substantial afterword, “Tragédiák a szemétkosárban” (Tragedies in Ashbins), calls attention to two aspects of the oeuvre, which are discussed in the afterword itself. On the one hand the emptying out of the tragic mode and a grotesque dramatization of physically and/or psychologically incarcerated and helpless characters on the other, which renders any showing of samaritan humanism toward them ineffectual and outdated. Like most previous authors, Almási

offers both critique and appreciation. He stresses that the writer has continued portraying the experience of shock and loss during World War II and its aftermath, which made him a poet of humans without an alternative. Looking at the masterful use of stylistic devices closely, Almási observes that the black humour rampant in the playwright’s work is a means to discredit a character when s/he would begin to soar to tragic heights. Nevertheless, the critic reminds the reader of other kinds of representation in the contemporary theatre, hallmarked by Peter Weiss, Arthur Miller and the late Ionesco, who stage people as active agents, capable of resistance and change, in contrast with Beckett’s hopeless figures.<sup>22</sup>

A couple of reviews about the collection of Beckett’s dramatic output employ new perspectives to sum up this unique achievement. Márton Mesterházi considers his works a source of enhancing the reader’s or spectator’s self-knowledge. The more we are willing to recognize our own mistakes in those of Vladimir and Estragon, the stronger the cathartic effect of the play can be on us, Mesterházi claims.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Bálint Rozsnyai affirms that the situations in *Godot* look more and more familiar to the reader or spectator who recognizes in them his/her own experiences, resulting in a cathartic effect. Rozsnyai’s subtle observations contribute new details to the Hungarian Beckett reception, by discussing certain issues across the dramatic oeuvre. In most of them the characters are confronting and wrestling with the past, feeling constrained to repeat the same narratives over and over again, according to this review. The image of the sea

<sup>20</sup> László KONTLER, *Millenium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary* (Budapest: Atlantis Kiadó, 1999), 445.

<sup>21</sup> Mária KURDI, “An Ideal Situation? The Importance of Oscar Wilde’s Dramatic Work in Hungary”, in *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, ed. Stephano EVANGELISTA, 245–255 (London: Continuum, 2010), 251.

<sup>22</sup> ALMÁSI Miklós, „Tragédiák a szemétkosárban: a drámaíró Beckett” Utószó, in Samuel BECKETT, *Drámák*, trans. by István BART et al. (Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 1970), 353–383., 359, 360, 361, 365, 377, 383.

<sup>23</sup> MESTERHÁZI Márton, „Beckett drámaköte-téről”, *Nagyvilág* 16, No. 5. (1971): 745–750., 746.



is also present in many of the plays, Rozsnyai notes, but it does not connote the power of purification. In his conclusion Rozsnyai draws a parallel with Jonathan Swift on the grounds that both writers see humankind as hopeless and futureless, yet Beckett's work is able to rouse more sympathy in the audience.<sup>24</sup>

In 1970, the history of English literature in the twentieth century came out with Mihályi's chapter on Beckett. The plays, *Godot* primarily, capture a kind of feeling about life which is very characteristic of the modern era, Mihályi says, and does not make a difference between western and socialist countries. He also emphasizes the formal perfection of *Godot* and the precise construction of the complementary pairs of characters. However, Mihályi's idea that the endless waiting in *Godot* resembles that of the sisters for going to Moscow in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, holds truth only in broader terms: both belong to modern tragicomedies.<sup>25</sup> A few years later a literary scholar, Pál Réz re-considered the Beckett-Chekhov parallel more convincingly in the aesthetic field, saying that Beckett possesses an exceptional lyrical talent akin to Chekhov's, which enables him to name the unnameable.<sup>26</sup> In his own work of theatre history, Mihályi adds some new ideas to those above. Beckett, for him, reduces man to his final essence, the instinctive wish to survive, while the characters represent basic human behaviour patterns, reminiscent of figures in medieval moralities and mysteries, yet they offer an oppositional parable which ridicules religious beliefs. Mihályi discards the earlier practice of regarding *Godot* as an anti-drama defying all generic rules; he thinks its construction follows as strict for-

mal expectations as classical French drama does. In *Endgame*, Mihályi discovers the parody of Noah's story in the Bible, whose second son was called Ham. Like Noah, Hamm in Beckett's play has a shelter for his family, but, unlike the Biblical character, he destroys all creatures around himself. In addition to its Biblical ring, Mihályi claims that Hamm's name can also be associated with the phrase a "ham actor", meaning a bad performer in English. With regard to Winnie's monologue in *Happy Days*, the critic raises but does not pursue the philosophical issue that it is having a listener which gives her speech meaning<sup>27</sup>—a Listener was to be put on stage in the later play, *Not I* (1972).

The assessments of Beckett's work in other literary and theatre histories or reference books published in the 1970s and 1980s offer a varied picture. *Az angol irodalom története* (The History of English Literature, 1972), authored by three academics, devote a few pages to Beckett's fiction and drama. The writers aim to be objective and also evaluative; *Godot* for them symbolizes the ultimate precariousness of human life. More generally, they conclude that "the Beckettian hero faces nothingness", and the pessimism pervading the works is counterbalanced by a sense of consolation that the heroes are at least capable of such a daring confrontation.<sup>28</sup> In 1971, *Színházi kalauz* (Theatre Guide) came out with an entry on Beckett from the pen of Judit Szántó. For her, Beckett's exceptional talent is manifested in representing the adramatic and passive condition of waiting by using new dramaturgical devices, with which he creates a grotesque and tragic tension. Even his most hor-

<sup>24</sup> ROZSNYAI Bálint, „Beckett: Drámák”, *Kritika* 9, No. 10. (1971): 55–57., 56, 57.

<sup>25</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Az angol irodalom a huszadik században*, ed. by BÁTI László, KRISTÓ-NAGY István, 77–100 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1970), 93, 98, 99.

<sup>26</sup> RÉZ Pál, *Kulcsok és kérdőjelek* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1973), 303.

<sup>27</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „A patthelyzet drámái”, in MIHÁLYI Gábor, *Végjáték: A nyugat-európai és amerikai dráma 25 éve, 1945–1970*, 291–308 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 294, 295, 299–301, 303.

<sup>28</sup> SZENCZI Miklós, SZOBOTKA Tibor and KATONA Anna, *Az angol irodalom története* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1972), 665, 667.

rifying visions, Szántó adds, were evoked by a deep sympathy with the sufferings of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

Two other historical works published mainly for the general public, demonstrate some discrepancy. *Világirodalmi kisenciklopédia* (Short Encyclopedia of World Literature) contains a sound introduction of Beckett by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák in a few paragraphs. According to this, the protagonists of *Godot* live in a thoroughly alienated world, reminiscent of the threatened human existence under Nazi occupation, and *Endgame* is set on the verge of nihil, inviting to be interpreted as a parody of *King Lear*. In both plays, the author claims, language is used artistically and creatively. More generally, he attributes a "heroic pessimism" to the Beckettian literary world,<sup>30</sup> connecting to Mihályi's idea about the new myth of a Godot who never comes (as suggested in his article in *Híd*, 1966), which can be interpreted as the acceptance of losing all illusions. Surprisingly, a decade later the voluminous *A színház világtörténete* (World History of the Theatre, 1986) presented hardly more material on Beckett, treating his work in the subchapter dedicated to the absurd and mid-century political theatre in France. The author, Géza Staud, restricts his portrait of Beckett to acknowledging that he became the primary representative of the absurd theatre. There seems to lurk some irony in Staud's conclusion that by the time the writer received the Nobel Prize for *Godot* (1969), the absurd had been surpassed by other trends in the theatre world.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> SZÁNTÓ Judit, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Színházi kalauz* ed. by VAJDA György Mihály, 898–901 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 899.

<sup>30</sup> SZEGEDY-MASZÁK Mihály, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Világirodalmi kisenciklopédia*, ed. by KÖPECZI Béla and PÓK Lajos, 112–114 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1976), 113, 114.

<sup>31</sup> STAUD Géza, „Az abszurdok és a politikai színház”, in *A színház világtörténete*, ed. by

The second Hungarian production of *Godot* was undertaken by the Studio of Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár in 1975, under Tamás Ascher's direction. Reviewer Anna Belia says of the venture that they offered a laudably humanistic reading of the play, allowing members of the audience to recognize familiar attitudes and patterns in the tramps instead of viewing them from a distance.<sup>32</sup> András Pályi's article is concerned only with actor Andor Lukáts, who impersonated Lucky, and played that role using the whole of his body and a rich arsenal of gestic language. *Godot* may be called the drama of motionlessness by some, but this performance, Pályi concludes, moves the audience profoundly by Lucky's terrifying monologue.<sup>33</sup> Another article by Pályi, written in 1988 on the occasion of the revival of the Kaposvár *Godot*, quotes Mircea Eliade to substantiate his idea that one can see the cosmic and cyclical in the drama. The cathartic experience generated by the production, Pályi suggests, lies in turning the audience toward their deeply buried selves.<sup>34</sup> With the drama, Mihályi's review contends, Beckett asks whether humans can exist without hope and believing in something, to which the play provides the reply that they cannot, and *Godot* is a single, huge metaphor of the need to maintain hope against hopelessness. Notably, Mihályi stresses that by 1975, the date of the Kaposvár production, nobody questioned the artistic values of *Godot*, and there

HONT Ferenc, 276–280 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1986), 278, 279.

<sup>32</sup> BELIA Anna, „Beckett a kaposvári studio-ban”, *Színház* 9, No. 5. (1976): 16–18., 17.

<sup>33</sup> PÁLYI András, „Egy ember kibújik a bőréből – Lukáts Andor Luckyja”, *Színház* 21, No. 5. (1976): 19–20.

<sup>34</sup> PÁLYI András, „Beckett visszanéz – A *Godot-ra* várva (ismét) Kaposvárott”, *Színház* 21, No. 8. (1988): 17–18.

were no more debates and doubts about its optimism or pessimism either.<sup>35</sup>

In 1983 one more pre-1990 revival of the play took place, this time in Madách Kamaraszínház, Budapest, where the director was István Bódi. According to the theatre review of Zsuzsa Vass, this new production failed to capture the Beckettian ethos, and did not manage to present the ambiguities of *Godot* manifest between the desperate situation of the protagonists and their grotesque games. Beckett's perspective is dual, as Vass, along with other commentators, sees it: on the one hand philosophical, concerning how man can exist and survive in a world which renders existence almost impossible and, on the other hand, the expression of sympathy with the characters' plight through the lyrical mode.<sup>36</sup> Tamás Koltai is even more critical of this production, saying that it fails to transmit the innovations of the playwright, which initiated a third phase of dramaturgical changes after Brecht and Artaud in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup>

The second play by Beckett to have its Hungarian premiere was *Happy Days* (1961), performed by the National Theatre of Szeged in the Aula of the University of Szeged in 1970. Perhaps because it was not an event in the main theatre, it passed almost unacknowledged. Lajos Kiss, a university lecturer welcomed the idea of presenting the play, which the average spectator might not have received well, before an audience of students and professors. This sounds like an elitist view, yet Kiss wonders why the play harvested so much applause despite the fact that its philosophy is not new and it undermines the dramatic genre as the protagonist, engulfed in meaningless actions, talks only to her-

self.<sup>38</sup> Another review expresses satisfaction that any fears of the audience that Beckett's drama is too difficult and might just baffle them were dissolved by watching the production. This author, Ö. L. claims that the designation "absurd" for Beckett's work does not apply because the non-realistic setting and dramaturgy symbolize a familiar experience of reality. Winnie's miserable optimism, he adds, carries a belief in humanism, suggesting that her protest and hope to change her predicament form the deeper meaning of the play.<sup>39</sup>

Next *Happy Days* was mounted by the Studio Stage of Madách Theatre, Budapest, again not on a main stage, under the direction of László Vámos in 1971. As Noémi Herczog contends, if *Godot* in 1965 did not do so, this performance provoked some scandal following the publication of the first review by Péter Molnár Gál in the communist party's paper, *Népszabadság*.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it is a declarative yet strangely ambivalent review, stating that Beckett should be saved from being staged by such a theatre company which misinterprets and tries to tame his work by failing to recognize its existentialist spirit. By "taming" Molnár Gál meant that the production presented Winnie and her monologue with undue humanism, even sentimentalizing her figure to win the sympathy of the audience, instead of sticking to Beckett's instructions. Although Molnár Gál packs his venom carefully, it seems obvious that he rejects the playwright because his work cannot be accommodated to the socialist culture built on a different world

<sup>35</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „*Godot-ra várva* Kaposvárrott”, *Nagyvilág* 21, No. 8. (1976): 1238–1240., 1238.

<sup>36</sup> VASS Zsuzsa, „*Godot-ra várva*”, *Színház* 17, No. 3. (1984): 22–24., 23.

<sup>37</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, „Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*”, *Kritika* 13, No. 1. (1984): 35–36.

<sup>38</sup> Kiss Lajos, „Meditáció Beckett szegedi bemutatóján”, *Kortárs* 14, No. 6. (1970): 1004–1005.

<sup>39</sup> Ö. L., „Beckett-est az egyetemen”, *Délmagyarország*, 1970. febr. 24., 5.

<sup>40</sup> HERCZOG Noémi, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika a Kádár-korban* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2022), 364.

view.<sup>41</sup> Some other critics reacted to Molnár Gál's review almost immediately, sensing the presence of implied denunciation between the lines. Tamás Ungvári explicitly states that a critic should not behave as a policeman. Basically, he admires the interpretative work of both the director and the actress, Klári Tolnay, who played Winnie, and also celebrates the placing of a transparent curtain between the audience and the small stage.<sup>42</sup> On her part, Vera Létay, conveying a retort to Molnár Gál, deems it quite acceptable that Tolnay's performance is emotional and lyrical rather than revealing the latent grotesque tone, but does present Winnie's down-to-earth (no pun intended) banalities with a pinch of irony. While transmitted as comic, in this production Winnie's figure has retained some respectability as a human being who does not give up hope even in the deathliest situation, Létay says.<sup>43</sup> Imre Demeter confirms that the Hungarian theatre world is strong and mature enough not to refrain from staging Beckett's world-famous drama, be it existentialist in its philosophy and shockingly unorthodox in its dramaturgy.<sup>44</sup>

As Herczog highlights, Molnár Gál did not hesitate to refuse the critique of the other reviewers,<sup>45</sup> which is implied in their writings, even though they do not refer to him by name. Molnár Gál kept insisting on his politically motivated conviction that Beckett shows the wrong path of utter hopelessness for his audience. This reads much like Pál Pándi's rejection of *Godot* in 1965, nota

bene, published also in the communist party paper *Népszabadság*. The title of Molnár Gál's new article, "Beckett és akiknek kell" (Beckett and Those Who Need Him), openly derides the positive Hungarian responses to the playwright, and negates the possibility to interpret his work in more ways than one, conforming to the rigorous party politics, which he was serving as a secret agent.<sup>46</sup> Herczog calls attention to a summary of the polemics about this production of *Happy Days* written by Anna Földes to introduce an interview conducted with Klári Tolnay, the impersonator of Winnie.<sup>47</sup> The interview makes it clear that the actress interpreted the figure as an ageing person who, even though her living space and mobility become more and more restricted, still finds something to hold onto and does not give in to utter despair.<sup>48</sup>

The 1980s saw two more revivals of *Happy Days*. First, in 1982, the Kaposvár theatre ventured it, directed by Tamás Ascher, with Judit Pogány in the main role. Among the reviewers Mihályi finds that the excellence of Pogány's Winnie was proven by the audience feeling that her self-deceptions and illusory happiness reflected their own attempts to ignore the most troubling and menacing issues of life's inevitable realities, while the grotesque and tragic features of Winnie's fate were also highlighted. For Mihályi, the irony and satirical overtone in the drama connects Beckett to his great Anglo-Irish predecessor, Jonathan Swift, who mocked the human species by first dwarfing its representatives then making them too big.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> MOLNÁR G. Péter, „Ó, miért épp ezek a szép napok? Beckett drámája a Madách Stúdiójában”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 8., 7.

<sup>42</sup> UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1971. jan. 10., 11.

<sup>43</sup> LÉTAY Vera, „Mindennek ellenére”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 1971. jan. 16., 12.

<sup>44</sup> DEMETER Imre, „Ó, azok a szép napok! Beckett-dráma a Madách Stúdióban”. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1971. jan. 16., 10–11.

<sup>45</sup> HERCZOG, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika...*, 365.

<sup>46</sup> MOLNÁR G. Péter, „Beckett és akiknek kell”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 27., 7.

<sup>47</sup> HERCZOG, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika...*, 365–366.

<sup>48</sup> FÖLDES Anna, „Winnie-t vállalva. Beszélgetés Tolnay Klárral”, *Színház* 4, No. 4. (1971): 29–33., 30–31.

<sup>49</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Titokzatos sugárzóképeség. Pogány Judit Winnie-jéről”, *Színház* 16, No. 12. (1983): 33–35.

Tamás Koltai sums up the Kaposvár *Happy Days* as the best ever Hungarian Beckett production, including the 1975 *Godot* in the same theatre. Pogány, Koltai claims, plays Winnie's character as Beckett imagined her: a woman who resists the pressure of her desperate situation by fulfilling a programme of day-to-day banalities.<sup>50</sup> Next, *Happy Days* premiered in Kecskemét by Katona József Színház in 1984, directed by Tamás Banovich. In this case the reviews were less enthusiastic. Tamás Bécsy expresses dissatisfaction with the use of too much irony (or attempt to ironize certain details), which neutralizes the suffering and the loneliness characterising Winnie's situation.<sup>51</sup> Mihályi observes that the outstanding actress, Mari Törőcsik played Winnie brilliantly yet interpreted the role in a rather one-sided way: she presented a woman saddened by the problem of ageing without the grotesque overtone in the Beckettian text.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Katalin Róna calls attention to the shortcoming that Winnie's situation does not appear to be as unbearable and shocking in the Kecskemét production as Beckett conceived it.<sup>53</sup> However, the review of Judit Máriássy offers a very moving assessment in favour of Törőcsik's acting Winnie with all the body parts she was still able to control, thus realizing the subtle nuances the text conveys, most importantly Winnie's struggle to retain sanity and the ability to speak and remember in the second act.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, „»Emlékezés által való kínzás.« Színházi esték Kaposváron”, *Jelenkor* 26, Nos. 7–8. (1983): 689–96., 693–94.

<sup>51</sup> BÉCSY Tamás, „Beckett: Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Kritika* 13, No. 9. (1984): 32–33.

<sup>52</sup> MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Reményvesztve – tragikus. Törőcsik Mari Winnie-jéről”, *Színház* 17, No. 4. (1984): 25–26.

<sup>53</sup> RÓNA Katalin, „Bemutató Kecskeméten. Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1984. febr. 18., 12–13.

<sup>54</sup> MÁRIÁSSY Judit, „Vinnie, az óriás”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 1984. ápr. 6., 12.

*Endgame* came to the Hungarian theatre world at a slower pace. Its pre-1990 journey is documented by Anita Rákóczy, who reports that the “Hungarian stage premiere was preceded by a nearly-forgotten 1974 TV recording ... directed under studio conditions by the young, upcoming theatre artist, Gábor Zsámbéki”.<sup>55</sup> The first staging of *Endgame* took place in the Chamber Theatre of Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1979, directed by István Paál. The reviews the production inspired praised it, yet also paid considerable attention to the artistry of the text. Júlia Szekrényesy argues that in the play Beckett relegates two of our favourite illusions, the belief in individual abilities and the “Faustian man” to ashbins, showing them defunct. Their irrationality and ineffectuality, Szekrényesy continues, have been known to humans, but kept in secret under the mask of advertising the infinite possibilities of life and self-realization in the consumer society, while Beckett's drama debunks the cult of ego aggrandizement through its faceless and ruined characters. Her idea that Hamm's dreadful narrative functions as a parody of bad modern novels centring on inflated egos carries another evidence that the text of *Endgame* re-hashes bits of other literary material in thoroughly twisted and ironical ways. Szekrényesy praises the language of the play as expressive and vibrant, which enabled the Szolnok production to evoke polarized emotions.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, for Koltai the metaphorical and the banal intertwine in the drama with tragicomic and grotesque effects, achieved in Szolnok without fail.<sup>57</sup> Among the inter-

<sup>55</sup> RÁKÓCZY, Anita, “Samuel Beckett's *Fin de Partie* in Hungary: A Brief Reception History”, in *Samuel Beckett as World Literature*, ed. by Thirthanker CHAKRABORTY, Juan Luis TORIBIO VAZQUEZ, 125–135 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1916), 125.

<sup>56</sup> SZEKRÉNYESY Júlia, „Zárkombinációk?” *Színház* 12, No. 12. (1979): 24–26.

<sup>57</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, „A játszma vége”, *Népszabadság*, 1979. okt. 27., 7.



textual elements, István Váncsa finds a reference in the play to Nietzsche's prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which contains the sentence: "The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest".<sup>58</sup> It cannot be accidental, Váncsa remarks, that halfway through the drama Clov finds a flea in his trousers and tries to get rid of it by using a bottle of insecticide, but the result is uncertain.<sup>59</sup> In support of Váncsa's idea is the fact that Clov is unable to walk properly, he rather hops about like Nietzsche's "last man".

Parallel with the productions and reviews, the number of critical works and scholarly studies on Beckett's dramatic oeuvre, written from diverse perspectives and leaving ideological scruples behind, was steadily growing. Despite the atheist stance of the leading communist party and its government, the Catholic monthly called *Vigília* held its position even in the pre-1990 years. Being not radical, it fell into the tolerated category, and was allowed publicity. In this journal, authored by Sándor Szabadi, an interpretation of Beckett's major plays focuses on their lack of the transcendental level and representation of human despair in a world without God. Szabadi begins by referring to Kirillov's nihilist philosophy in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1871), according to which man's destroying God entails the change of both the Earth and people. Beckett depicts such a transformation: in his work the decline of culture and the physical as well as spiritual degeneration of man can be seen, Szabadi claims. He discusses the kinship of the two writers in terms of their relentless search for truth and exploration of the depths of human suffering and pain, refer-

ring also to how the comic and tragic intertwine in their works as in a Godless world suffering looks grotesquely comic, even absurd. Indeed, Nell's much quoted half sentence in *Endgame* about unhappiness looking funny supports this view. The mimed family praying in the same play becomes a travesty of Christian traditions when Hamm interrupts it by cursing God who does not even exist, to which Clov's answer "Not yet" expresses a "frightening possibility" for Szabadi.<sup>60</sup> Here Szabadi seems to imply that Clov might wait for divine interference, which has "not yet" arrived; it is unknowable, therefore fills him with fear beside some slight hope.

The lack of the transcendental level and the viability of an allegorical interpretation also feature in Tamás Bécsy's 1974 monograph, although with the difference that his investigation is grounded in drama poetics, inspired by theories of structuralism, somewhat belatedly but markedly present in Hungarian scholarship at that time. Bécsy distinguishes three types of the dramatic genre: conflict-driven, central-pointed, and two-level models, of which the last one characterizes medieval and certain 20<sup>th</sup> century plays with the plot being set at the border of two worlds: the mundane and the transcendental. Bécsy's analysis of the figures in *Godot* and *Endgame* treats them as abstractions, similar to those in medieval works, but he stresses that they are not grounded in a firm belief system such as Christianity. "What we see on the [modern] stage can only vaguely remind us of certain everyday actions or conversations. They only evoke the image of those, only refer to them [...] mundane life is shown as meaningless and insignificant" Bécsy underlines, because the transcendental level proves vacant: the

<sup>58</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter KAUFMANN (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1978), 17.

<sup>59</sup> VÁNCSA István „A kép kimerevedik”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1979. okt. 6., 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> SZABADI Sándor, „Ember és történelem Beckett drámáiban”, *Vigília* 37, No. 2. (1972): 99–103., 99, 102–103.

mysterious Godot never appears.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Bécsy's view about the role of waiting chimes with Mihályi's who also states that although humans face a bleak world, they cannot live without clinging to some kind of hope.

The exploration of how language is employed and functions in the three major Beckett plays is in the centre of some other scholarly writings. In as early as 1965, Ungvári published an article about the theatre of the absurd, understood in a broad sense, with references to several playwrights and plays, including Beckett's *Godot* on a few pages. The impossibility of expression in the drama (and in other absurd plays) can be approached, Ungvári suggests, by applying crucial tenets of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). The critic quotes ideas from *Tractatus* to trace parallels in *Godot*, for instance the proposition that all assertions are equal, which is characteristic of the Beckettian protagonists' utterances: they do not express the personality of either Didi or Gogo, therefore they are interchangeable. There is no meaning and value in this world, only outside of it, Ungvári paraphrases Wittgenstein, which might explain why Beckett's protagonists are waiting for Godot to give meaning to their life.<sup>62</sup>

In 1974 and 1983, two articles saw the light about speech and communication in Beckett's drama, their respective lines of thought reminiscent of, although probably not inspired by, Wittgenstein's theories of language games in his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The *Routledge Guidebook* to this seminal work notes: "Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a *language game* in order to bring into prominence the fact that language functions

within the active, practical lives of speakers; its use is inextricably bound up with the non-linguistic behaviour which constitutes its natural environment".<sup>63</sup> Erzsébet Juhász's article examines the characters' speech in *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. In these the "non-linguistic behaviour" of the characters is waiting; they represent pure existence. Juhász compares the representation of speech in the three texts respectively, stating that it consists in language games merely to prove that the characters are alive and try to make their existence bearable, so the dialogues conform to certain rules. From this, it follows that Juhász rejects Mihályi's opinion about the characters of *Godot* being patterned as complementary: for her Vladimir and Estragon cannot be distinguished from each other and have no personalities, which was also noted by Ungvári's above quoted early study. As to the other major plays, Juhász argues that Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* are not able to play verbal games, their dialogue is mere clowning with parts of their speech becoming monological, while in *Happy Days* Winnie's talking to herself is an often self-addressing monologue, which cannot be found in the previous two plays.<sup>64</sup> This contention is arguable as the seeds of self-addressing appear in both of the other works too.

The other article, by Eszter Kiss, presents similar points to Juhász's, and also takes some of the latter's ideas further, although it explores the plays from another angle, that of communication theory. Kiss contends that in *Godot*, as an absurd play, dramatic action is replaced by quasi acts and the characters' speech functions only as a semblance of

<sup>61</sup> BÉCSY Tamás, *A dráma-modellek és a mai dráma* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974), 360–363, 381–382.

<sup>62</sup> UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Abszurd dráma – drámai abszurdum”, *Helikon* 11, No. 2. (1965): 76–90., 79.

<sup>63</sup> Marie MCGINN, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.

<sup>64</sup> JUHÁSZ Erzsébet, „Másodlagos jelentés és létélmény: Beckett *Godot-ra várva*, *A játékma vége* és *Ó, azok a szép napok* című drámái”, *új symposion* 109 (1974): 1280–1290., 1280, 1282–1283, 1285–1286, 1288–1289.

communication, which follows suit with Bécsy's and Juhász's views. It is not a drama of action, Kiss says, but a series of opportunities for action the characters make use of in their imitative communication which isolates itself from the world by being self-reflexive and patterned according to rules, like games do. Like Bécsy, Kiss also thinks that Vladimir's song about the never finishing story of a dog in the middle of *Godot* models the open structure of the eternal line of repetitive acts in the whole drama. About *Endgame*, Kiss expresses an opinion different from Juhász's: she says that here the conversations also form a series of games which do not provide information; both Hamm and Clov are conscious of this, yet they need the games in order not to have to face reality. The Beckettian dramatic communication is, thus, absurd as its use is to veil reality with meaningless words, Kiss says, and concludes that Beckett stages the unsayable, nothingness itself.<sup>65</sup>

As this essay purported to demonstrate, at the beginning the reception of Beckett and his three major works for the stage depended on the ideological milieu and the cultural politics of the socialist government of Hungary to a considerable extent. Changes toward more openness and leniency with western cultural products, Beckett's oeuvre among them, were taking place from the late 1960s. Beckett's Nobel Prize in 1969 and the easing of political influence in the cultural sphere made it possible that from total or partial rejection and oscillation or ambiguity in forming critical attitudes, a development to comparatively ideology-free explorations of the unique and experimental dramaturgy as well as intertextual richness in the writer's oeuvre started to take place. During the period of two and a half decades targeted in this essay, scholar and critic Gábor Mihályi

(1923–2021) can be credited with a prominent role in the progress of Hungarian critical reactions toward a greater variety of nuanced observations and fruitful inquiries, likely to build on and enter into dialogue with each other and/or generating some kind of polemics. The notion that Beckett's plays present hope alongside decline as components of the human predicament has become almost unanimous. Looking at the 1970s and 1980s in his study on English-speaking Beckett criticism, David Pattie distinguishes two strands: one of "the humanists" who think that "his writing represents a heroically sustained and determined attempt to uncover [...] the naked, uncomfortable truth of human existence in an indifferent universe" and the other of those who "have drawn attention to the curiously self-generating nature of Beckett's texts" and conclude that "Beckett's work demonstrates that all human communication is subject to *aporia*".<sup>66</sup> The present article has found that in the Hungarian reference literature of the period traces of both these strands, although not so separately, can be detected in Beckett's evaluation. Besides contributing, in their own way, to the results of the ever-widening international research into Beckett's theatre, the mentioned scholars and critics with their observations and analyses have established the foundations of the "Hungarian Beckett" by the time of the writer's death in December 1989, and by the major political change in Hungary in early 1990.

### Bibliography

ALMÁSI Miklós. „Tragédiák a szemétkosárban: a drámaíró Beckett” Utószó. In Samuel BECKETT, *Drámák*. Translated by István BART et al., 353–383. Budapest: Európa, 1970.

<sup>65</sup> KISS Eszter, „Kommunikáció a drámában: Samuel Beckett drámáinak kommunikációelméleti megközelítése”, *Színháztudományi Szemle* 10 (1983): 7–54., 13–15, 27–30, 33, 41, 47.

<sup>66</sup> David PATTIE, "Beckett and Bibliography", in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. by Lois OPPENHEIM, 226–246 (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004), 227–228.

- BELIA Anna. „Beckett a kaposvári stúdióban”. *Színház* 9, No. 5. (1976): 16–18.
- BÉCSY Tamás. *A drámamodellek és a mai dráma*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974.
- BÉCSY Tamás. „Beckett: Ó, azok a szép napok”. *Kritika* 13, No. 9. (1984): 32–33.
- CSÁMPAI Zoltán. *Samuel Beckett bibliográfia*. <http://beckett.uw.hu/sbbibl.htm/>, 2005.
- DEMAITRE, Ann. “The Great Debate on Socialist Realism”. *The Modern Language Journal* 50, No. 5. (1966): 263–268.
- DEMETER Imre. “Ó, azok a szép napok! Beckett-dráma a Madách Stúdióban”. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1971. jan. 16., 10–11.
- FÖLDES Anna. „Winnie-t vállalva. Beszélgetés Tolnay Klárral”. *Színház* 4, No. 5. (1971): 29–33.
- HEGEDŰS Géza. „Godot-t újraolvasva”. *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1715–1719.
- HERCZOG Noémi. *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika a Kádár-korban*. Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2022.
- JUHÁSZ Erzsébet. „Másodlagos jelentés és lét-élmény: Beckett *Godot-ra várva*, *A játszma vége* és *Ó, azok a szép napok* című drámái”. *uj symposion* 109. (1974): 1280–1290.
- KĘDZIERSKI, Marek: “Samuel Beckett and Poland”. In Nixon and Feldman. E-book edition.
- KÉRY László. „A mozdulatlanság drámája – Utószó a *Godot-vitához*”. *Nagyvilág* 11, No. 7. (1966): 261–264.
- KISS Eszter. „Kommunikáció a drámában: Samuel Beckett drámáinak kommunikáció-elméleti megközelítése”. *Színháztudományi Szemle* 10 (1983): 7–54.
- KISS Lajos. „Meditáció Beckett szegedi bemutatóján”. *Kortárs* 14, No. 6. (1970): 1004–1005.
- KOLTAI Tamás. „A játszma vége.” *Népszabadság*, 1979. okt. 27., 7.
- KOLTAI Tamás. „»Emlékezés által való kínzás«. Színházi esték Kaposváron”. *Jelenkor* 26, Nos. 7–8. (1983): 689–696.
- KOLTAI Tamás. „Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*”. *Kritika* 13, No. 1. (1984): 35–36.
- KONTLER László. *Millenium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary*. Budapest: Atlantisz Kiadó, 1999.
- KURDI, Mária. “An Ideal Situation? The Importance of Oscar Wilde’s Dramatic Work in Hungary”. In *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*. Edited by Stephano EVANGELISTA, 245–255. London: Continuum, 2010.
- KURDI, Mária, P. MÜLLER, Péter. “Samuel Beckett in Hungary: A Centennial Bibliography”. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 14, No. 1. (2008): 133–158.
- LÉTAY Vera. „Mindennek ellenére”. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1971. jan. 16., 12.
- MÁRIÁSSY Judit. „Vinnie, az óriás”. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1984. ápr. 6., 12.
- MÁTRAI-BETEGH Béla. „A néző szemével a Godot-ról”. *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1867–1869.
- MCGINN, Marie. *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- MESTERHÁZI Márton. „Beckett drámaköte-téről”. *Nagyvilág* 16, No. 5. (1971): 745–750.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. „A *Godot* elé”. *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 8. (1965): 1171–1172.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. „Beckett *Godot*-ja és az elidegenedés mitológiája”. *Híd* 4, No. 10. (1966): 505–510.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. *Végjáték: A nyugat-európai és amerikai dráma 25 éve, 1945–1970*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1971.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. „Samuel Beckett”. In *Az angol irodalom a huszadik században*. Edited by BÁTI László, KRISTÓ-NAGY István, 77–100. Budapest: Gondolat, 1970.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. „*Godot-ra várva* Kaposvárrott”. *Nagyvilág* 21, No. 8. (1976): 1238–1240.
- MIHÁLYI Gábor. „Titokzatos sugárzóképeség: Pogány Judit Winnie-jéről”. *Színház* 16, No. 12. (1983): 33–35.
- MIHÁLYI, Gábor. „Reményvesztve – tragikusan. Törőcsik Mari Winnie-jéről.” *Színház* 17, No. 4. (1984): 25–26.
- MOLNÁR G. Péter. „Ó, miért épp ezek a szép napok? Beckett drámája a Madách Stúdiójában”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 8., 7.
- MOLNÁR G. Péter. „Beckett és akiknek kell”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 24., 7.



- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York, London: Penguin Books, 1978.
- NIXON, Mark, and Matthew FELDMAN, eds. *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*. London: Continuum, 2009. E-book edition.
- Ö. L. „Beckett-est az egyetemen”. *Délmagyarország*, 1970. febr. 24., 5.
- PATTIE, David. “Beckett and Bibliography”. In *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*. Edited by Lois OPPENHEIM, 226–246. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- PÁLYI András. „Egy ember kibújik a bőréből – Lukáts Andor Luckyja”. *Színház* 21, No. 5. (1976): 19–20.
- PÁLYI András. „Beckett visszanéz – A *Godot-ra várva* (ismét) Kaposvárott”. *Színház* 21, No. 8. (1988): 14–18.
- PÁNDI Pál. „Megismerés vagy elfogadás? – *Godot-ra várva*. Színmű, a Thália Színház előadása”. *Népszabadság*, 1965. nov. 27., 8.
- RÁKÓCZY, Anita. “Samuel Beckett’s *Fin de Partie* in Hungary: A Brief Reception History”. In *Samuel Beckett as World Literature*, edited by Thirthanker CHAKRABORTY, Juan Luis TORIBIO VAZQUEZ, 125–137. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1916.
- RÁKÓCZY, Anita. *Samuel Beckett’s Endgame and Hungarian Opening Gambits*. Budapest – Paris: L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2021.
- RÉZ Pál. *Kulcsok és kérdőjelek*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1973.
- RÓNA, Katalin. „Bemutató Kecskeméten. Ó, azok a szép napok!” *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1984. febr. 18. 12–13.
- ROZSNYAI Bálint. „Beckett: Drámák”. *Kritika* 9, No. 10. (1971): 708–710.
- SAIU, Octavian. “Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe”. In NIXON and FELDMAN eds. E-book edition.
- STAUD Géza. „Az abszurdok és a politikai színház”. In *A színház világtörténete*. Edited by HONT Ferenc, 276–280. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1986.
- SZABADI Sándor. „Ember és történelem Beckett drámáiban”. *Vigília* 37, No. 2. (1972): 99–103.
- SZABÓ György. „Egy másik nézőpontról”. *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1719–1723.
- SZÁNTÓ Judit. „Samuel Beckett”. In *Színházi kalauz*. Edited by VAJDA György Mihály, 898–901. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1971.
- SZEGEDY-MASZÁK Mihály. “Samuel Beckett”. In *Világirodalmi kisenciklopédia*. Edited by KÖPECZI Béla and PÓK Lajos, 112–114. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1976.
- SZEKRÉNYESY Júlia. „Zárkombinációk?” *Színház* 12, No. 12. (1979): 24–26.
- SZENCZI Miklós, SZOBOTKA Tibor and KATONA Anna. *Az angol irodalom története*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1972.
- UNGVÁRI Tamás. „Abszurd dráma – drámai abszurdum”. *Helikon* 11, No. 1. (1965): 76–90.
- UNGVÁRI Tamás. “Egy színházi kísérlet – Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*.” *Magyar Nemzet*, 1965. nov. 17., 4.
- VARANNAY Aurél. „*Godot* mellett, Beckett ellen”. *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1869–1870.
- VASS Zsuzsa. „*Godot-ra várva*”. *Színház* 17, No. 3. (1984): 22–24.
- VÁNCSA István. „A kép kimerevedik”. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1979. okt. 6., 4–5.
- VARGA László. „Beckett és a korszerűség”. *Kritika* 4, No. 5. (1966): 33–38.
- ZOLNAY Vilmos. *Az írói mesterség. A mű és elemei*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1971.

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

GABRIELLA KISS

**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

---

<sup>1</sup> The study was published with the support of Oktatási Hivatal (OH-KUT/48/2021), Nemzeti Kutatási, Fejlesztési és Innovációs Hivatal (K-131764) and the Research Group of Theatre Pedagogy at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (KRE 185/2022). Special thanks to Patrick Mullaney and Eszter Csatár for the translation.

<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." NÁRAY István, "Az Orfeo-ügy", last accessed: 01.07.2021, <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/az-orfeo-ugy>.

---

<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, "Másszínház 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 Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség [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

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 (*Dicsőseges nagyurak, Nemzeti dal, A szabadsághoz* [Illustrious Lords, National Song, To Liberty]) which Mór Jókai dubbed “psalms of patriotism and freedom”.

<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.

<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-

---

<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 színjáérték típusok 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) –

---

<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.

---

<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 Philippe 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-

---

<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

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-

<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).

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 Konstanty PUZYNA, *The Return of Christ* (Krakow – Warsaw: Instytut Książki, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Konstanty 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/98/03/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

---

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 KESERŐ, 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 Keserő, József Krékit, 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.

### *Bibliography*

- ÁCS Ferencné, ed. *Szocialista közművelődés. Szöveggyűjtemény*. Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1980.
- AUST, Stefan. *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1985.
- BÉRCZES László. *A végnek végéig. Paál István*. Budapest: Cégér, 1995.
- BICSKEI Gábor. “Szóljatok szép szavak – Petőfi Sándorról”. *Honismeret* 2, Nos. 1–2. (1973): 107–108.

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

- BROOK, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- DEBRECENI Tibor – RENCZ Antal. *A pódiumi színháztípusok dramaturgiája*. Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1971.
- DEBRECZENI Tibor. *Egy amatőr emlékezése 1966–1978*. Budapest: Országos Közművelődési Központ Módszertani Intézete, 1989.
- DEMCSÁK Katalin. "A Paál István vezette Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad". In *Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák*. Edited by IMRE Zoltán, 242–264. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008.
- FINK Carol, GASSERT, Paul and Detlef JUNKER, eds. 1968: *The World Transformed*. Cambridge: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- GYÖRGY Péter. *Kádár köpönyege*. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2005.
- JÓKAI Mór, *Petőfi Sándor élete és költeményei*, last accessed: 29.07.2020, <http://mek.niif.hu/00700/00793/html/jokai19.htm#ref1>.
- KOLTAI Tamás. „A színházi fordulat éve”, last accessed: 20.07.2020, <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/beszelo/98/03/koltai.htm>.
- NÁNAY István. "A nem hivatásos színházak két évtizede". In *Fordulatok*. Edited by Tibor VÁRSZEGI, 447–466. No location: editor's publication, no year.
- NÁNAY István. "Az Orfeo-ügy", last accessed: 01.07.2021, <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/az-orfeo-ugy>.
- NÁNAY István. "Színház és diákszínháztársaság – vázlatos történeti visszatekintés". In *Dráma – pedagógia – színház – nevelés. Szöveggyűjtemény középhaladóknak*. Edited by ECK Júlia, KAPOSÍ József and TRENCSENYI László, 217–222. Budapest: OFI, 2016.
- NÁNAY István. "Partizánattitűd". *Színház* 36, No. 8. (2003): 2–5.
- PAÁL István, ed. *Színésztreníng Grotowski, Bablet, Marijnen szövegei felhasználásával belső használatra* [Actor Training Through Texts by Grotowski, Bablet, and Marijnen for Internal Use]. Manuscript.
- Konstanty PUZYNA. *The Return of Christ*. Krakow-Warsawa: Instytut Książki 2014.
- Konstanty PUZYNA, "A Myth Vivisected: Grotowski's Apocalypse". In *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, edited by Richard SCHECHNER and Lisa WOLFORD, 88–105. London – New York: Routledge, 2014.
- STING, Wolfgang, "Devising Theatre". In *Wörterbuch der Theatrepädagogik*, herausgegeben von Gerd KOCH and Marianne STREISAND, 73–74. Uckerland: Schibi Verlag, 2003.
- WARSTATT Matthias, HEINICKE Julius et al. hrsg. *Theatre als Intervention. Politiken ästhetischer Praxis*. Berlin: Theatre der Zeit, 2015.



## “World Theatre in Szolnok” during the 1970s. Gábor Székely: *The Drake’s Head*, 1973

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN

**Abstract:** Gábor Székely’s stagings of Örkény, Chekhov, Molière and Shakespeare in Szolnok during the 1970s overshadow his *mise-en-scène* of *Gácsérfej* (*The Drake’s Head*), whose significance is almost made imperceptible by the unfamiliarity of the play (and its author), and the complete absence of its stage history in Hungary. However, the 1973 performance of George Ciprian’s play illustrates the far-reaching boldness of the effort that “we want to create world theatre here in Szolnok”, which could be the motto of the Székely Era in this small Hungarian town. The essay outlines how *The Drake’s Head* developed into the essence of this ambition, and how free from orthodoxy Székely handled “committed political theatre”, even against the expectations of the authorities.

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

My essay focuses on a single theatre production, which serves as an imprint of an entire era. *The Drake’s Head* was performed no more than 23 times in a small Hungarian town of about 66,000 inhabitants in 1973, so its run spanned only six weeks. But why do we study phenomena that are subjected to time so much that they have palpable presence for a very short period and then merely sporadic traces lead to them? The answer is given by “Impact and Posterity”, the last but all the more important aspect of Philther,<sup>1</sup> my method of performance analysis. A produc-

tion can initiate or influence processes that go far beyond its own sphere, and directly or indirectly contribute to tendencies and eras of historical importance. Gábor Székely’s stagings of Örkény, Chekhov, Molière and Shakespeare in Szolnok during the 1970s overshadow his *mise-en-scène* of *The Drake’s Head*, whose significance is almost made imperceptible by the unfamiliarity of the play (and its author), and also the complete absence of its stage history in Hungary. However, the 1973 performance of George Ciprian’s play illustrates the far-reaching boldness of the effort that “we want to create world theatre here in Szolnok”,<sup>2</sup> which could be the motto of the Székely Era<sup>3</sup> on the bank of the river Tisza. This ambitious statement did not only mean that the world premiere of István Örkény’s *Catsplay* in Szolnok in January 1971 launched the only world success of Hungarian theatre for the following 40 years, but it also meant that all productions were made

---

<sup>2</sup> N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, *D. URH*. 5 October 1973, 8:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Gábor Székely (born in 1944) was the manager and chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok between April 1972 and April 1978. He was a recent graduate when he directed for the first time in this theatre still led by Gábor Berényi: it was *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller in 1968. Afterwards he was working as a director there until he was appointed chief director in 1971, then manager in 1972. He left Szolnok in 1978, and headed directly to the management of the National Theatre. At the time of the premiere of *The Drake’s Head*, he was already referred to as one of the best directors in the country.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Árpád KÉKESI KUN, “Introduction: Philther as a Historiographic Model”, in *Ambiguous Topicality. The Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 9–19 (Budapest: Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L’Harmattan Publishing, 2021).

with a sense of standards far above the average in the provinces, he tried to follow current trends in (world) theatre, and aimed at joining international theatre life, though the chances of this were rather small. My essay outlines how *The Drake's Head* became the essence of this ambition and how free from orthodoxy Székely handled "committed political theatre" (his own expression),<sup>4</sup> even against the expectations of the authorities.

A year and a half before the premiere of *The Drake's Head*, Károly Vass, the manager of the Szigligeti Theatre stated that it was impossible "to create a unique image of a rural theatre".<sup>5</sup> Among the obstacles he listed (1) outdated forms of organisation, (2) the inadequacy of educating actors, particularly the lack of musical actors, and (3) the conflict between the tasks of rural theatres concerning popular education and the artistic goals set by themselves. In addition, he pointed out (4) the race against time due to the obligations imposed on theatres by economics and cultural policy. His conclusion was that "with the current number of staff our obligations can only be fulfilled with extreme efforts and at the cost of artistic compromises".<sup>6</sup> Nearly a month after the interview with Vass, Gábor Székely became the director of the theatre in Szolnok. The fact that by the autumn of 1973 the Szigligeti Theatre had turned into one of the most prominent institutions in the whole country with a highly individual image obviously indicated that Székely did not agree to any "artistic compromises", although the obstacles mentioned by Vass had not disappeared.

<sup>4</sup> BÁTKI Mihály, "Tájékozódás a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban", *Élet és Irodalom* 17, No. 20. (1973): 7.

<sup>5</sup> AMBRUS Tibor, "A szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban. Rádióinterjú", *Petőfi Radio*, 4 March 1972, 9:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 3.

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

Not only theatre people but also critics assessed that the season preceding *The Drake's Head* was "the best season of recent years".<sup>7</sup> The number of reports, full of superlatives, on the Szigligeti Theatre in national newspapers had significantly increased. Székely's staging of *The Versailles Impromptu* and *George Dandin* as a double bill was broadcast on television in June 1973, two members of the company received the prestigious Jászai Award, and the theatre received the Ministry's Excellence award. (As a result of thinking of theatre as a performance workshop and undertaking experimentation, the towns began to excel at that time so that in terms of theatre they would soon surpass the capital.) All this was not solely due to the merits of Székely, but undoubtedly occurred under his management, although he relied on Gábor Berényi's important achievements, who was manager of the Szigligeti Theatre between 1959–1971. With great effort, Berényi had reduced the number of premieres in a season to ten, and Székely did not change their number and composition at first.<sup>8</sup> In his interviews Berényi had also repeatedly referred to boldness and the need to take risks (for example with the Hungarian premiere of Brecht's version of Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1968). The ten productions of the season before *The Drake's Head* were played 320 times, of which 120 performances were held on tour in neighboring towns and villages. In the season of *The Drake's Head*, 8,000 season tickets were sold, more than in the theatre of Szeged, even though the population of the other town on the banks of the Tisza was twice as large as that of Szolnok. Székely realistically stated that "the results of the last

<sup>7</sup> N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió" (Roundtable discussion), *Petőfi Radio*, 27 September 1973, 12:43. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 6.

<sup>8</sup> "Two operettas, three musical comedies, two serious dramas and three lighter ones." S.B., "Évadzárás a Szigligeti Színházban", *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. júl. 4., 1.

ten or fifteen years are starting to show up”.<sup>9</sup> However, in spite of the indicators so important to cultural policy, he claimed that “we will assume the slogan »theatre for Szolnok«, only if it does not mean cheapness, but, on the contrary, a high level of demands”.<sup>10</sup>

Székely’s company comprised 25 full-time and 4 part-time actors, eighty percent of whom were under the age of 35 (and the oldest member was 54 years old), so it was referred to as the smallest and youngest company in the country. Since most season tickets were sold to high schools, so the auditorium was mainly filled with youngsters, and (according to the director’s decision) the production was about young adults, *The Drake’s Head* was born in the synchrony of youth: Székely staged a performance for young people with young people, about young people. Its precursor was the *mise-en-scène* of *The Seagull* in December 1971, which originated (according to Székely) as much from themselves as from Chekhov: “from our loudness, youth and occasional obstinance, but certainly from the cruel consistency of the pursuit of good and beauty, which we demand of others as well”.<sup>11</sup> Restlessness felt in the theatre and described with the synonym of searching was mentioned with a positive overtone in a roundtable discussion during the rehearsals of *The Drake’s Head*. It was said to be built on when arranging the repertoire and tried to be transferred to the spectators so that they would “be more” by and with it.<sup>12</sup> *The Drake’s Head* grew into the embodiment of this experience of restlessness and a forerunner of Székely’s staging of *The Three Sisters*, which expressed it in an extreme form a year later. That is how he created “a theatre of public life” that did not serve the Kádár Regime ideologically, as the question of “why should we »rot« like this”

was examined in almost all of his *mise-en-scènes*.<sup>13</sup>

In this respect, Székely’s approach to tragedies and comedies does not show any difference, as illustrated by the 1972 production of István Csurka’s “pathetic comedy” *The Braggart (Szájhős)* in Szolnok. This highlighted the “struggling rebellion”<sup>14</sup> of the protagonist and the helplessness of his wife much more than the world premiere of the play in Budapest six years earlier. Moreover, “struggling rebellion” took on a spectacular form in Székely’s every *mise-en-scène*, not merely as a recurring pattern of individual fate, but also as an insurmountable state of social existence. The production of Csurka’s play also showed that “from the point of view of striving for perfection on stage, *the political interpretation and the artistic elaboration of the play can hardly be separated*”.<sup>15</sup> If we do not separate aesthetics and ideology, and also take into account the political attitude inherent in Székely’s *mise-en-scènes*, we will come to a different conclusion than those recalling only the director’s participation in the foregrounded events of state socialism. From Székely’s speech at the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) in 1975, where he took part as a representative of theatre managers, the newspaper of the party made a dull headline that echoed official ideology: “We want theatre committed in its worldview”.<sup>16</sup> However, none of Székely’s *mise-en-scènes* conformed to the expectations of the party-state like this, neither at the level of utterances, nor latently.

<sup>13</sup> VALKÓ Mihály, “A Három nővér a Szigligeti Színházban”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1974. okt. 20., 5.

<sup>14</sup> PÁLYI András, “Egy igényes színház”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1972. máj. 25., 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (Italics in the original.)

<sup>16</sup> N.N., “Székely Gábor a szolnoki színház igazgatója: Világnézetileg elkötelezett színházat akarunk”, *Népszabadság*, 1975. márc. 20., 5.

<sup>9</sup> BÁTÍ, “Tájékoztató...”, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See N.N., “Szolnoki stúdió”, 2.

Székely's idea of "political theatre" or "theatre committed in its worldview" is explained by his plain speech given "at home" at the beginning of his first full season as a theatre manager: "The entertaining and artistic functions of theatre cannot be isolated. We prefer high-quality performances that also meet the spectators' needs of entertainment. [...] We took a risk [when arranging the repertoire], but the opportunity for original experiments is worth it."<sup>17</sup> It is fairly conspicuous that "political theatre" occurs with "risk" and "experiment" in Székely's speech, which highlights that the new manager did not want to play safe or spread propaganda from the stage, but to invite the audience to an individual and collective examination. He wanted to invite the members of his company too, who mentioned "teamwork" in their interviews and made it clear that "we are searching for a thought in our rehearsals".<sup>18</sup> All these suggest an ideal of theatre that avoids offering ready answers and asks those "daily moral questions" that people ask themselves, even "around the Central Tisza Region". After all, "we are trying to create a society here that is economically more successful than morally".<sup>19</sup> *The Braggart* questioned its protagonist as he entered the world of corruption and cynicism without any power to change. It confronted the audience with such serious problems as mediocrity, pettiness, and degradation, pervading society as a whole. *The Drake's Head* focused on young people not finding their place, while *Makra*, premiered five months later, on a worker who did not find his place, and the 1974 *Three Sisters* dealt with family members not finding their place since the milieu rather than the individual seemed to be shiftless and lackadaisical. Thus, Székely's theatre expressed "thoughts emerging in sync with

rapidly changing time"<sup>20</sup> and made highly contemporary art not as a mouthpiece of socialist ideology, but as the living conscience of a society that was problematic in its human-ethical foundations. Institutionally, this theatre tried to function in a way that today we call democratic, although it could not be made obvious at that time, but the members of the company referred to the fact that "there are not despotic relationships among people here".<sup>21</sup> And these people knew that "there are many ways to get to truth and we try to find the best".<sup>22</sup>

It would be narrow-minded to consider *The Drake's Head*, i.e. a play from a neighboring "people's democracy", written by a Romanian author, to belong to that part of the repertoire that was determined by the theatre's duties of cultural policy. During Székely's management, none of the productions of the Szigligeti Theatre satisfied the official expectations of the annual presentation of a drama from the Eastern Bloc through a play of dubious aesthetic quality. *The Drake's Head* was translated into Hungarian by Pál Réz and came out in the volume of *Modern román drámák* (Modern Romanian Dramas) in 1967. Its publication was presumably due to the fact that the April 1966 Bucharest premiere (actually the second "world premiere" of the play first staged in 1940) drew attention to it. Romanian theatre had been swept by the fervor of "retheatricalization" for a decade, and *The Drake's Head* was staged by David Esrig, a distinguished representative of this movement, with Radu Beligan, manager of Teatrul de Comedie in one of the main roles. This production, gaining far-reaching reputation due to its participation at the Venice Drama Festival in 1967, launched the play's prestigious Romanian stage history.<sup>23</sup> The production of *The Drake's*

<sup>17</sup> B.A., "Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Szigligeti Színházban", *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1972. aug. 25., 5.

<sup>18</sup> N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió", 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>20</sup> N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió", 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *Cimec.ro* indicates seven premieres in Romania until 2004 but neglects the Hungarian-

*Head* in Szolnok entered into a dialogue with Esrig's *mise-en-scène*, but this was not observed by critics, who merely satisfied with claiming that “many of the pieces of Romanian dramatic literature are still unknown in Hungary. [...] Therefore, the staging of Ciprian's satirical comedy praises the enterprise and lucky choice of the Szigligeti Theatre”.<sup>24</sup> As for cultural policy, the premiere won brownie points, but the production clearly showed that Székely did not only want to achieve that. This is reinforced by the fact that the Hungarian premiere of *The Drake's Head* was scheduled to be the opening production of the season, with which the theatre could make a guest performance at the Budapest Art Weeks. In front of a mostly professional audience, it achieved huge success there and was celebrated as another masterpiece of one of the best theatre companies. However, Székely stated that “we are not after success but cling to our aims”.<sup>25</sup> And it was this attitude that provided the Szigligeti Theatre with unparalleled artistic greatness for a few years.

#### *Dramatic text, dramaturgy*

Despite its publication six years earlier, George Ciprian's comedy and the author himself were as unknown in Hungary in 1973 as they are today. Although the Víg Theatre in Budapest planned to show the play in the 1971/72 season, the premiere did not take place. Thus, before *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok, the Romanian author with Greek ancestors had only one play staged in Hungary: *The Man and His Old Crock* (*Omul cu mârtoaga*), performed as *The Fifth Pharaoh* in Eger in 1962. Ciprian, a well-known actor turned to literary author, created *The Drake's Head* (*Capul de rățoi*) in 1938, which had its

language production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe in the 1976/77 season.

<sup>24</sup> CSERJE Zsuzsa, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, *Színház* 7, No. 2. (1974): 33–36, 33.

<sup>25</sup> N.N., “Szolnoki stúdió”, 9.

world premiere in Bucharest two years later. The grotesque vision and absurd elements of the play were certainly the main attractions for the creative team in Szolnok: *The Drake's Head* may have seemed an appropriate choice after the nationally acclaimed premieres of *The Toth Family* (1969) and *Catsplay* (1971), and before *The Key-Seekers* (1975), all plays by István Örkény, a renowned representative of “the Hungarian absurd”.

Ciprian does not have a firm place in the canon of literary history but his name often appears next to notable agents of the literary avant-garde, such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Urmuz, “the Romanian Jarry”, who committed suicide at the age of forty and left only a few dozens of manuscript pages behind, but whose life and prose inspired *The Drake's Head*.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, most reviewers felt Ciprian's oeuvre fitting into a line from Caragiale to Ionesco and Marin Sorescu, being an integral part of a continuity. Ciprian was also frequently appreciated as a predecessor of the theatre of the absurd, but critics were eager to state that his pieces could not be considered fully parts of this “movement”. Hard-line critics, who wanted to separate the author from the theatre of the absurd for ideological reasons, described him as dissenting from dramas “leading us to the regions of violence and despair”, and preferring “affirmative” lyrical comedy instead.<sup>27</sup> Others pointed out the “Ciprian paradox”, i.e. reaching exaltation through the grotesque, sensing the author's implacable attitude in the “final triumph of reason”, that is, in the belief that “man can improve and strive

<sup>26</sup> Beside Urmuz, Ciriviș was a pen name of Dimitrie Dim. Ionescu-Buzeu, and one of the protagonists of *The Drake's Head* is also called Ciriviș.

<sup>27</sup> See Ileana Popovici's essay (without a title) in the programme of the production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe. n.p.



towards perfection”.<sup>28</sup> George Banu noticed with a keen eye that the absurd becomes liberating in Ciprian’s plays, so his dramatic oeuvre is basically “a theatre of regaining a *raison d’être*”.<sup>29</sup>

Alternating Chekhov with Örkény and completing them with Ciprian, while making one-dimensional sensibility impossible in his *mise-en-scènes*, Gábor Székely used the uniqueness of *The Drake’s Head* to create “absurdist theatre” in a special way among the rather sporadic productions of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, etc., whose pieces had already been tolerated but far from supported in Hungary. While Székely was attracted to “problem plays”, the most striking example of which was *Timon of Athens* (1976), the dramaturgical problems of Ciprian’s comedy were overcome by him. The play was slightly reshaped into “contemporary slang poetry born of very timely worries and anxieties” to build on “absurdly amusing and deeply disheartening situations”.<sup>30</sup> Székely eliminated the references to the political milieu of the late 1930s and made social criticism, which unfolded under completely different conditions in 1940, carry out in Hungary of the 1970s. When a critic referred to “the struggle against spiritual indolence and stupid prejudices”, which “the drake’s head alliance” resisted,<sup>31</sup> he pointed out a phenomenon that could not be linked to a specific social system or period. It was also extensively felt by intellectuals in the quarter-century-old socialist regime in the early 1970s, so Székely was able to adapt the play relatively easily to the present.

<sup>28</sup> N.N., “G. Ciprian”, in *Aspects du théâtre roumain contemporain* (Bucarest: Arta Grafica, 1969), 68–69.

<sup>29</sup> George BANU, “Az emlékidéző drámaíró embersége”, in *The Drake’s Head*, the programme of the production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe. n.p.

<sup>30</sup> N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 2.

<sup>31</sup> CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 33.

Ciprian’s three-act comedy features nearly forty characters, only seven of whom stand out. The director’s work on the text mainly involved shortening the lengthy piece into two acts so that “the joy and collisions of the play could come to life on stage”<sup>32</sup> in addition to, and partly instead of, the dialogues of Pál Réz’s “richly nuanced translation, full of ideas and humor”.<sup>33</sup> However, the two-and-a-half-hour production did not fill the textual “blanks” with scenic or performative elements, so it did not become postdramatic. It was only condensed and accelerated in order to get freshness and dynamism without being retarded by situations repeated because of the variation technique of the play. The effectiveness of the dramaturgical work is shown by the fact that the critics who did not discuss Ciprian’s comedy separately and came across the play only through the production, almost spoke of a masterpiece. In contrast to the 1984 radio version of *The Drake’s Head*, directed by Árpád Jutocsa Hegyi, the reviewer of which noticed “complicated disarray” and revealed his confusion about the structure of the play.<sup>34</sup>

Since no dramaturg is named on the playbill, it was certainly due to the director that the production in Szolnok “agitated much more upsettingly for meaningful human life”<sup>35</sup> than Ciprian’s drama. Székely used the play as a double-edged weapon and did not stress its potential “partisanship”. He recognized the possibility of “doublespeak” in the play, which arises from the plot unfolding on two planes. On the real plane, the so-called Drake’s Head society is being formed, which

<sup>32</sup> BARTA András, “Gácsérfej. George Ciprian szatírája a szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1973. nov. 3., 4.

<sup>33</sup> MOLNÁR G. Péter, “Gácsérfej. A szolnoki Szigligeti Színház bemutatója”, *Népszabadság*, 1973. nov. 3., 7.

<sup>34</sup> B. FAZEKAS László, “Rádió: Gácsérfej”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 28, No. 48. (1984): 21.

<sup>35</sup> N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 2.

“aims to scandalize »men of importance« by disdaining the routine of bourgeois society in order to raise the imagination of people and a *peaceful revolution* in their conscience. After committing some innocent jokes, the four founding members of the »The Drake’s Head« buy a tree on which to establish the headquarters of their alliance. However, Mr. Dacian, an important statesman and a victim of their jokes, takes punitive actions to punish them in a swift and exemplary manner. But Dacian’s first action fails, so the arrogant pride of his personality becomes apparent even more ridiculously and foolishly. The newspapers comment at length on the war of the »men of importance« against these four knights of youthful unrest, spiritual nobility and the pursuit of purity. Dacian feels his prestige threatened and his authority mocked. One night, with the help of his accomplices, he knocks down the tree from which so many fantastic initiations and so much dangerous eccentricity have emerged. The four heroes of fantasy decide to take revenge, and the manner of their revenge resembles them and determines them: they force Mr. Dacian to cut off his imposing beard, a sign of his false dignity and dubious venerability, and they manage to return him to the human course in the end.”<sup>36</sup>

However, the plot has another plane, on which “we can see a duel between intelligence and spiritual darkness, [...] between protesting spirit and that stagnation which is characteristic of retrograde regimes.”<sup>37</sup> Thanks to this symbolic plane, the production in Szolnok had turned into a virtuoso example of “floating”, and presented “a peaceful revo-

lution” that was restrained by critics as “a rash fight”<sup>38</sup> or “a rebellion before ideological maturity”.<sup>39</sup> Since the play is about spreading provocations against bourgeois society that pushes individual freedom between narrow (and already internalized, so almost invisible) boundaries and does not resist fascism, the production could be interpreted as an allegory of the rise of socialism.<sup>40</sup> However, the *mise-en-scène* evoked the present instead of the 1930s, so the spectators could associate the events just as much with the struggling but eventually triumphal resistance to the regime prevailing in the 1970s. After all, in Szolnok, in 1973, the rebellious young people of Hungarian socialism, which had already entered adulthood, wanted to preserve the “daring freedom of their soul and spirit”.<sup>41</sup>

The production did not make it obvious who “a degenerate”<sup>42</sup> was (the petty bourgeois or the communist), whose thinking Ciriviş, Macferlan, Bălăläu and Pentagon wanted to liberate. Or who the “representatives of moral and social conformity”<sup>43</sup> were, whom the four friends played tricks on (those who had submitted to fascism or those who had given in to communism). In this way, the *mise-en-scène* allowed interpretation, even quite subversive, depending on the attitude of the spectator, since the rebellious young people appeared differently from the official

<sup>38</sup> MOLNÁR G., “Gácsérfej...”, 7.

<sup>39</sup> CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Some critics even suggested this interpretation, discussing the “underground efforts” of The Drake’s Head alliance to destroy “the petty-bourgeois supporters of society” (cf. BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.). The audience could associate this with the opposition movement, which had a prominent position in the socialist view of history.

<sup>41</sup> N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 1.

<sup>42</sup> BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.

<sup>43</sup> VALKÓ Mihály, “Gácsérfej – mai hangszerelésben. Magyarországon először a Szigligeti Színházban”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. okt. 16., 5.

<sup>36</sup> N.N., “La tête de Canard”, in *Aspects du théâtre...*, 69–70. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 69.

youth policy in it. The reviews were trying to diminish the political vigor of the production and disarm its power, but *their* “doublespeak” also helped to assess the significance of “a rebellion so symbolic in its extremities”.<sup>44</sup>

### Staging

The production gripped the audience energetically, as the *The Drake's Head* “string quartet” attacked the sclerotic model of life represented by those around them with explosive force and glee. The “four cool Robin Goodfellows” had an extraordinary appeal, but they could also be feared. They made the spectators smile, but sometimes made them shake their heads. They were raging “through the first act in a delightful way, without a blunder, without stopping for a single moment”.<sup>45</sup> Their thought-provoking jokes had nothing to do with the controlled humor of the Kádár regime, represented by *Ludas Matyi*, a well-known humorous magazine. Moreover, elements of circus and show business were featured in the production fairly spectacularly. A year after the guest performance of Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Budapest, *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok demonstrated its direct effect. At the height of the Hungarian Beat movement, the production capitalized on the popularity of the Illés Ensemble and similar beat bands.

This is also related to the fact that the age of the four protagonists had been halved.<sup>46</sup> Instead of middle-aged people rejecting a decent bourgeois way of life, restless young men came into focus, all dissatisfied with the

world of their fathers – with the world that had once begun to be built by those already over the age of 40 in the 1970s. In addition, by the time of *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok, the proportion of the Hungarian population under the age of 30 reached 50 percent, and the country had already had a Youth Act for two years, created as a reaction to certain events of 1968 (student protests, the Prague Spring, etc.). However, the production in Szolnok did not confirm what the Hungarian Youth Act (4/1971) declared with threatening rigor. Namely, that “in the People's Republic of Hungary the fundamental interests and goals of the state, the society and the youth, which is part of the society, are the same. The youth, together with the adult generation, builds socialism, fights for social progress. [...] The society expects the youth to be a worthy heir to the revolutionary traditions of the Hungarian people, an unselfish participant in the construction of socialist society, in the realization of communism.”<sup>47</sup>

The lads who replaced the grown-ups in *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok had swept away the cliché of rejecting the bourgeois way of life. By means of the anti-conformist revolt of young people, Székely tried to bring the play closer to the audience and especially to youths. He showed “a positive gang” (*galéri* in Hungarian),<sup>48</sup> and the adjective is particularly important in this case. The noun served as a criminological category at the time, but György Spiró's phrase suggests that the *mise-en-scène* did not intend to extract a cheap

<sup>44</sup> BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.

<sup>45</sup> SPIRÓ György, “Pozitív galéri”, *Élet és Irodalom* 17, No. 44. (1973): 12.

<sup>46</sup> “The heroes of the production of the Szigligeti Theatre became twentysomething. The original characters of the play are gentlemen in their 40s, who try to break out of the treadmill by reviving their former student jokes. This is their last attempt and opportunity.” Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by KÁTAI Gábor, *Gondolatok az ifjúságpolitikáról és eszközeiről – Magyarországon és Európában* (Budapest: Belvedere Meridionale, 2006), 38. According to Káta, “this act clearly defines the roles, tasks and methods in all possible places that concern young people. It makes the state unavoidable and tries to keep young people »within striking distance«, thus making them incapable of confrontation as individuals and their organizations.” Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> SPIRÓ, “Pozitív galéri”, 12.

moral lesson from the play, and to pillory young people who disobeyed socialist morality. It did not echo the official attitude of the party-state towards certain youth groups (or *galeris*), subjected to constant (and irritating) supervision by the police between the 1960s and 1980s. However, it was not just the world of harmless street or nightclub troubles that gave a context to *The Drake's Head* “*galeri*”, but also the hardly tolerated and mostly forbidden actions of alternative performance groups, i.e. Kassák House Studio and Péter Halász's apartment theatre, the summer activities in the chapel of Balatonboglár (where Halász and his friends spent a week in 1973), the “Orfeo scandal”, Tamás Fodor's commune in Pilisborosjenő, and István Paál's *mise-en-scènes* at the Szeged University Stage, where the legendary *Petőfi-rock* created a furor in 1973. *The Drake's Head* was fueled by the spirit of 1968 (and all these efforts to keep it alive), which could not permeate official theatre culture, but the production “absorbed” all the energy of these restless, young people, who seemed wild and deviant and wanted something else.<sup>49</sup> Although Székely placed the four friends of the play in a good light, some reviewers described them as “extremely individualistic” and “Ur-hippies” whose illusions must col-

<sup>49</sup> It is also noteworthy that during the celebration of the national holiday on 15 March 1973, when numerous demonstrations were held against the regime all over the country, the police “acted against the protesters more harshly than ever before. This was embarrassing even for the intelligentsia of the Kádár regime. According to László Gyurkó's memo to György Aczél [the »controller« of cultural life – Á.K.K.], »for a few hours, the center of Budapest looked as if some serious rebellion had to be crushed«”. Krisztián UNGVÁRY, “Március 15. a Kádár-korszakban: tüntetések és megtorlások”, *hvg.hu*, last accessed 14.06.2022, <https://hvg.hu/itthon/20060311marc15>.

lapse.<sup>50</sup> Others explained more precisely that “the director presents a group of counter-hippies, an elite team whose members dazzle with physical and mental feats as actors”.<sup>51</sup>

This helps us comprehend how “political theatre” is meant in Gábor Székely's speeches and interviews at the time. He made it clear that “we want to say something about our situation right now, in which we meet our most pressing problems directly”.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, he did not turn the Szigligeti into a propaganda theatre, but a workshop that coincided with alternative theatre movements in the realm of officiality, where the protagonists of *The Drake's Head* questioned “what they felt *fundamentally wrong*” as opposed to those who “dare not change, even though they know that *the present way of life is untenable*”.<sup>53</sup> Dramaturgical alterations aimed at contemporaneity and immediacy,<sup>54</sup> not only by bolstering the second act, mentioned earlier, but also by inserting

<sup>50</sup> CSIK István, “A Gácsérfej – Szolnokon”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 17, No. 43. (1973): 10.

<sup>51</sup> KOLTAI Tamás, “Színház vagy teátrum? Külföldi drámák az elmúlt évadban”, *Nagyvilág* 19, No. 8. (1974): 1250–1255, 1253.

<sup>52</sup> CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>54</sup> Immediacy characterized Székely's *mise-en-scène* in contrast to the 1966 Bucharest production of the play, whose director attached a third plane to those of real and symbolic events through the melodies played by an old lady, accompanying the production on the piano in the orchestra pit. This plane of commentary became particularly important at the end, when Dacian's huge beard had been cut off, and everyone was dancing Charleston, but countless bearded men began to flood the stage. See Traian ŞELMARU, “Capul de răţoi în optica de azi”, *Teatrul* 11, No. 6 (1966): 34–37. Székely used as effective directorial methods as David Esrig, but he broke down the distance implied by the third plane in the Romanian production.

passages that “highlighted a few ideas”<sup>55</sup> and by transferring the events into the present. This suggests that the company did not handle the play as a parable about resisting fascism, but about resisting the social structure and ideological background of the current regime in Hungary. No wonder that fascism was specified in none of the reviews, although the strength of resistance had been curtailed in several ways. The target of the actions of The Drake’s Head group was identified either with “petty-bourgeois prejudices and premises”,<sup>56</sup> or with the dominant way of life in contemporary bourgeois democracies,<sup>57</sup> or (rather vaguely) with the apparatus that threatened the Ego.<sup>58</sup>

However, Székely made the crowd an equal agent with the four friends, and identified it with the present audience. In doing so, he avoided the closure of representation, made the presence of performance a leading factor, and cast the current audience in a virtual role, which was carried out as a kind of Brechtian technique. At the beginning of the performance, a red sign was flashing on the open stage: “Silence! The performance is about to begin.” This sign is usually meant for those working behind the scenes, but this time it was meant for the audience to indicate that something was being performed. As a result of the opening of *Illusionstheatre*, the spectators became participants in the play. A reviewer also noticed that “the satire primarily aims at us”, since the opponent of the four friends is not only the bearded Dacian, but all those who let the beards of some people grow long.<sup>59</sup> This was revealed by one of the key scenes of the performance, when the bearded man was confronted with the audience. Although the critic of the local

daily felt “purification, the intention of cleansing” in this moment, as part of an “optimistic performance”,<sup>60</sup> others perceived resignation, which became an essential feature of Székely’s *mise-en-scènes*. This resignation was rooted in the fact that the four friends’ frequent squatting (the parody of salutation) had turned into a symbol of mocking, as more and more people started to greet each other this way. The government failed and the police stood up for the young men, who were lingering on an apple tree, just watching and assisting in the whole upheaval. Thus, the production showed rather maliciously how the best of intentions could unwillingly transform, and how something revolutionary could be institutionalized and made ineffective. In 1970, two years after the launching of the New Economic Mechanism, Endre Marton’s *Chapters on Lenin* in the National Theatre sought to return to the pure ideal of revolution full of hope.<sup>61</sup> In 1973, Gábor Székely’s *The Drake’s Head* resignedly suggested that no return was possible. With the attitude of so-called “reform intellectuals” and in the name of “progressive leftism”,<sup>62</sup> the production was arguing over rigidity a year after the 1972 constitutional amendment, government reshuffle and anti-reform measures.<sup>63</sup> In fact, it passed “severe

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> See Árpád KÉKESI KUN, “From Idol Destruction to Idolatry. Endre Marton: *Chapters on Lenin*, 1970”, in *Ambiguous Topicality...*, 121–133.

<sup>62</sup> Székely’s phrase, in CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. “The opponents of the reforms included the managers of loss-making industrial enterprises and trusts unable to meet the challenges of market competition. [They] found supporters in Moscow, where Khrushchev was overthrown in 1964 and Leonid Brezhnev’s neo-Stalinist and conservative line overcame and strengthened. During his visit to Moscow in February 1972, Kádár was given a severe reprimand. His hosts, including Brezhnev him-

<sup>55</sup> CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

<sup>56</sup> VALKÓ, “Gácsérfej...”, 5.

<sup>57</sup> LUKÁCSY András, “Gácsérfej. Román szatíra bemutatója Szolnokon”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1973. okt. 26., 6.

<sup>58</sup> CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 36.

<sup>59</sup> VALKÓ, “Gácsérfej...”, 5.



judgment over a repressive regime threatening with the terror of mental uniformity”.<sup>64</sup>

### Acting

*The Drake's Head* was celebrated by critics as a successful attempt to merge realistic character building and physical acting. Although the play offers major roles for only a few actors, the production involved most of the company in Szolnok, two-thirds of them in small roles or as extras. At the same time, “team play” was a real challenge and Gábor Székely, who made the Szigligeti Theatre “a center of educating actors and directors”,<sup>65</sup> saw the essence of the actor's work in it. Therefore, only the names of the actors were listed on the playbill, although not in alphabetical order, but in the order of the importance of their (undisclosed) roles. In his company Székely felt the willingness for ensemble acting, “without which modern theatre is unthinkable”, and thought that they had been able to achieve it first in the production of Molière's plays (*The Versailles Impromptu* and *George Dandin*) some months earlier, and at this time in *The Drake's Head*.<sup>66</sup>

self, rebuked him that petty-bourgeois attitude was prevailing in Hungary, the agriculture had returned to small-scale capitalism, social justice was not taken care of, and people were not watchful enough in general. This is why the anti-reform forces could make Kádár and his followers adopt a number of measures between 1972 and 1974 that were economically unfounded or irrational and acted against the process started in 1968.” ROMSICS Ignác, “A Kádár-korszak”, in *Magyarország története a XX. században*, 269–380 (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2010), 310.

<sup>64</sup> LUKÁCSY, “Gácsérfej”, 6.

<sup>65</sup> GYENES András, “Képernyőn a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház”, *Képes Újság* 14, No. 22. (1973): 11.

<sup>66</sup> TAKÁCS István, “»Az ifi edző«”, *Magyar Ifjúság*, 1973. szept. 28., Kulturális melléklet, 40.

This leitmotiv of the last century's theatre aesthetics was also picked up by the critics, and Székely's *mise-en-scène* was praised as “a brilliant example of modern ensemble acting”.<sup>67</sup>

The reviewers also appreciated the extraordinary energy that emanated from the actors who played *The Drake's Head* four, because their every move “expressed explosive power and cheerfulness”.<sup>68</sup> While Székely's *mise-en-scènes* were usually characterized by the subtleties of psychological realism, *The Drake's Head* was an exception, because he did not feel them adequate with the situations of the play.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, he proposed more raucous humor and stylized forms of expression that required “extremely grueling rehearsals and the concentrated use of the actors' entire physique and nervous system”.<sup>70</sup> The result of this unusual strain in the rural theatres of the time was unanimously admired. The set also required the four protagonists to traverse the vertically divided sections of the stage with “a panther's skills”, and their striking physicality contributed substantially to the surprising dynamics and sometimes hilarious rhythm of the performance. However, this did not make the figures exaggerated, since the actors also took care to individualize their roles, with significant differences in the case of the four main characters.

### Stage design and sound

The immediacy of acting was enhanced by the performance space, combining the influ-

<sup>67</sup> N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 2.

<sup>68</sup> SPIRÓ, “Pozitív galeri”, 12.

<sup>69</sup> He said that “the playwright's time management dictates the style of the play. If a man comes on stage and leaves after a few minutes, losing his name, this situation is so absurd, so grotesque, that you don't have to put something across by psychological motivations in it”. CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 35.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

ence of Brecht, Mejerhold, and Brook, the costumes that suggested the here and now of the events, and the sound effects, highlighting these events. The production featured a unit set and an open stage, dominated by a low but wide rectangular platform, a kind of small stage on the main stage, with a half curtain behind it (à la Brecht). Above this, a smaller platform of a few square meters was stretched out with a cord rope, at a height of about two meters. This higher platform could be approached on two ladders, just like the upper level of the set in Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* designed by Sally Jacobs. (A ladder had connected the two levels of the stage in Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scène* of Molière's plays too.) The floodlights that framed the stage from both sides and from behind also became important components of the visual world created by László Székely, and helped to prevent creating illusions. In addition, a few bentwood chairs, a big painter's ladder, a couple of garbage cans, and (as another allusion to Brook's *Dream*) trapezes in the air were used as props. This "variety stage painted with little red and a lot of gray and white"<sup>71</sup> modestly evoked the extravagant constructions on Mejerhold's stage in the 1920s to become a springboard for excessive movement, while the four youngsters transformed its rigor and starkness into a "friendly, nice grove" at times.<sup>72</sup>

Among the most influential theatre people of the last century, Stanislavsky is mentioned the most frequently in relation to Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scènes*. However, in terms of performance space, Székely was the most Brechtian director in Hungary in the 1970s, due to László Székely's stage design, characterized by an airy, sometimes two-story stage, furniture and equipment that barely evoked concrete places, elements that stressed the performed nature of the ongoing play, and curtains that divided the stage and could be moved easily. Moreover, the

cooperation of Gábor Székely and László Székely bear similarities to the productions of the Romanian movement of "retheatricalization". Gábor Székely's statements in his interviews echo those of Liviu Ciulei in his famous article "Theatricalization of the Stage Picture". "Theatricalization is necessary not for its own sake, not for an artificially aroused interest, and not for the sake of deviating from reality at all costs, but for the sake of conveying reality through the peculiar images of the art of the stage."<sup>73</sup> In case of *The Drake's Head*, this indirect and stylized expression was served by the bare stage elements in geometric shapes, e.g. the apple tree, that is, the smaller platform high above the larger one, chosen by the four lads as their residence. Similarly to Esrig's Bucharest production in 1966, where the apple tree was replaced by an orb that dominated the upper part of the stage and could be traversed, it functioned as a metaphor. (Even the grid structure of the orb in the Bucharest production turned up as the net of the hammock above the higher platform in Szolnok.)

The photos of Esrig's staging show actors in costumes reflecting the clothing style of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast, Mária Fekete dressed the actors in clothes that clearly corresponded to contemporary attire in Szolnok. The costumes underlined the current nature of the events and brought the reality of Hungarian streets to the stage via cool jackets, jeans, T-shirts, sweaters, ties, and short skirts. Only one anachronistic accessory was added to these costumes: the four young men wearing bowler hats. Although the bowler hat is included in Ciprian's stage directions and featured in the Romanian production as well, it turned up as a mostly ironic element in Szolnok, due to the pervasive contemporaneity of the production there. The audience could associate the bowler hat with Beckett's vagabonds rather than the time of the play's birth.

<sup>71</sup> BARTA, "Gácsérfe", 4.

<sup>72</sup> SPIRÓ, "Pozitív galéri", 12.

<sup>73</sup> LIVIU CIULEI, "Teatralizarea picturii de teatru", *Teatrul* 1, No. 2. (1956): 52–56, 55.

The acoustic dimension of the performance was determined by diction, but “Zoltán Simon’s powerful musical and sound effects played an important role”, even if they were only mentioned by a single critic.<sup>74</sup>

### *Impact and posterity*

Although historiography has hardly dealt with the production so far, the process of which it became an initiator (certainly not alone) has a prominent place in the memory of Hungarian theatre.<sup>75</sup> Its critical reception was unanimously positive, and it was widely accepted that *The Drake’s Head* was an “incomparably fresh performance whose spiritual intensity goes far beyond its own significance”.<sup>76</sup> A reviewer even considered it worthy to be broadcast on television “to the great public of the country”,<sup>77</sup> but, unlike with several other productions staged in Szolnok, this did not happen. However, it was performed at the Budapest Operetta Theatre on 20 October, during the Budapest Art Weeks, and Székely received the certificate of the Cultural Department of the Town Council for the successful event. Two more performances were held outside Szolnok: on the afternoon and evening of November 15, *The Drake’s Head* was performed in Kecskemét, as part of the guest performance exchange program with the local theatre. Since it was not taken on tour to neighboring towns and villages, 12 more evening and 8 afternoon performances were held, all in Szolnok. One and a half month after its premiere, *The Drake’s Head* was replaced by *The Midnight Rider* (a new Hungarian musical), followed by the new productions of *The*

*Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky, and *The Chocolate Soldier* by Oscar Straus, until the end of 1973.

Despite all the acknowledgements, these 23 performances, the six-week run and the play itself have not inspired other directors, so the 1973 production in Szolnok became the one and only staging of *The Drake’s Head* in Hungary. Nevertheless, the short-lived production became an essential part of the artistic turn started in the theatres of Kaposvár and Kecskemét, besides that of Szolnok, in the first half of the 1970s. This turn culminated in the internationally renowned productions of the Katona József Theatre under the direction of Gábor Székely a decade later and extends well into the present through the work of prominent art theatres (e.g. the Radnóti and the Örkény) and smaller theatre workshops mostly based in Budapest. Moreover, *The Drake’s Head*, related to the theatre of the absurd, belongs to the celebrated series of Székely’s stagings of Örkény and Mrožek in the 1970s, ranging from *The Toth Family* (1969) to *The Emigrants* (1979). And despite all its humor, in terms of the resignation pointed out in connection with the *mise-en-scène*, *The Drake’s Head* contained the germ of bitterness that permeated Székely’s works for two decades from *Timon of Athens* (1976) through *The Misanthrope* (1988) to *Don Juan* (1995) and *Ivanov* (1996), two of his last *mise-en-scènes* in Hungary.

A portrait of the director in 1973 summarized Gábor Székely’s approach to literary theatre with the following characteristics: “an extremely careful analysis of plays focusing on their content from today’s point of view; a precisely developed style corresponding the dramas put on stage; and an excellent, imaginative but strict way of handling actors”.<sup>78</sup> These made the *mise-en-scène* of Ciprian’s comedy outstanding too, so that *The Drake’s Head* would become the epitome of a trend initiated by Tamás Ascher, Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki among

<sup>74</sup> MOLNÁR G., “Gácsérfej”, 7.

<sup>75</sup> See NÁRAY István, “A szolnoki évek”, in *A második életmű. Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*, ed. by Magdolna JÁKFALVI, István NÁRAY, Balázs SIPOS, 239–282 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó – Arktisz Kiadó, 2016).

<sup>76</sup> KOLTAI, “Színház vagy teátrum?”, 1253.

<sup>77</sup> BARTA, “Gácsérfej”, 4.

<sup>78</sup> TAKÁCS, „»Az ifi edző«, 40.

others, which got into the mainstream by the late 1980s. But it all started with small "Drake's Head companies", full of ambitions of making world theatre, commencing a modest rebellion against a mass of "false forms".<sup>79</sup>

#### *Details of the production*

*Title:* The Drake's Head (Gácsérfej). *Date of Premiere:* October 12, 1973. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* Gábor Székely. *Author:* George Ciprian. *Translator:* Pál Réz. *Composer:* Simon Zoltán. *Set designer:* László Székely. *Costume designer:* Mária Fekete. *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Gyula Szombathy, Gyula Piróth, Zoltán Papp, Péter Simon, József Iványi, László Huszár, Olga Koós, Endre Peczkay, Béla Benyovszky, András Berta, Péter Czibulás, Frigyes Hollósi, László Halász, István Kürtös, Attila Balogh Bodor, Jenő Czakó, Antal Gáspár, Ildikó Szeli, Mátyás Usztics, István Lengyel, Annamária Szilvássy, Endre Tatár.

#### *Bibliography*

- AMBRUS Tibor. "A szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban. Rádióinterjú". *Petőfi Radio*, 4 March 1972, 9:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest.
- B.A. "Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Szigligeti Színházban". *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1972. aug. 25., 5.
- BANU, George. "Az emlékidéző drámaíró embersége". In *The Drake's Head*, the programme of the production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe. n.p.
- BARTA András. "Gácsérfej. George Ciprian szatírája a szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban". *Magyar Nemzet*, 1973. nov. 3., 4.
- BÁTKI Mihály. "Tájékozódás a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban", *Élet és Irodalom* 17, No. 20. (1973): 7.

- B. FAZEKAS László. "Rádió: Gácsérfej". *Film Színház Muzsika* 28, No. 48. (1984): 21.
- CIULEI, Liviu. "Teatralizarea picturii de teatru". *Teatrul* 1, No. 2. (1956): 52–56.
- CSERJE Zsuzsa. "A szolnoki Gácsérfej". *Színház* 7, No. 2. (1974): 33–36, 33.
- CSIK István. "A Gácsérfej – Szolnokon". *Film Színház Muzsika* 17, No. 43. (1973): 10.
- GYENES András. "Képernyőn a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház". *Képes Újság* 14, No. 22. (1973): 11.
- KÁTAI Gábor. *Gondolatok az ifjúságpolitikáról és eszközeiről – Magyarországon és Európában*. Budapest: Belvedere Meridionale, 2006.
- KÉKESI KUN Árpád. *Ambiguous Topicality. The Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*. Budapest: Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2021.
- KOLTAI Tamás. "Színház vagy teátrum? Külföldi drámák az elmúlt évadban". *Nagyvilág* 19, No. 8. (1974): 1250–1255.
- LUKÁCSY András. "Gácsérfej. Román szatíra bemutatója Szolnokon". *Magyar Hírlap*, 1973. okt. 26., 6.
- MOLNÁR G. Péter. "Gácsérfej. A szolnoki Szigligeti Színház bemutatója". *Népszabadság*, 1973. nov. 3., 7.
- NÁNAY István. "A szolnoki évek". In *A második életmű. Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*. Edited by Magdolna JÁKFALVI, István NÁNAY, Balázs SIPOS, 239–282. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó – Arktisz Kiadó, 2016.
- N.N. "G. Ciprian". In *Aspects du théâtre roumain contemporain* 68–69. Bucarest: Arta Grafica, 1969.
- N.N. "La tête de Canard". In *Aspects du théâtre roumain contemporain* 69–70. Bucarest: Arta Grafica, 1969.
- N.N. "Szolnoki stúdió" (Roundtable discussion). *Petőfi Radio*, 27 September 1973, 12:43. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest.
- N.N. "Láttuk, hallottuk". *D. URH*. 5 October 1973, 8:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest.

<sup>79</sup> Székely's phrase, in CSERJE, "A szolnoki Gácsérfej", 34.

- N.N. "Székely Gábor a szolnoki színház igazgatója: Világnézetileg elkötelezett színházat akarunk". *Népszabadság*, 1975. márc. 20., 5.
- PÁLYI András. "Egy igényes színház". *Magyar Hírlap*, 1972. máj. 25., 6.
- ROMSICS Ignác. "A Kádár-korszak". In *Magyarország története a XX. században*, 269–380. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2010.
- S.B. "Évadzárás a Szigligeti Színházban". *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. júl. 4., 1.
- ŞELMARU, Traian. "Capul de răţoi în optica de azi". *Teatrul* 11, No. 6 (1966): 34–37.
- SPIRÓ György. "Pozitív galeri". *Élet és irodalom* 17, No. 44. (1973): 12.
- TAKÁCS István. "»Az ifi edző«". *Magyar Ifjúság*, 1973. szept. 28., Kulturális melléklet, 40.
- UNGVÁRY Krisztián. "Március 15. a Kádár-korszakban: tüntetések és megtorlások". *hvg.hu*, <https://hvg.hu/itthon/20060311marc15>.
- VALKÓ Mihály. "Gácsérfej – mai hangszerelésben. Magyarországon először a Szigligeti Színházban". *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. okt. 16., 5.
- VALKÓ Mihály. "A Három nővér a Szigligeti Színházban". *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1974. okt. 20., 5.



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

PÉTER P. MÜLLER

**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

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 *Színház* (*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

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, *Színház* (Budapest: Magvető, 1982). The drama trilogy included in the volume: *Takarítás* – 1977 (*Cleaning*), *Találkozás* – 1979 (*Encounter*), *Temetés* – 1980 (*Funeral*).

<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 *Léghőbméter* [*Cibic 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

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 *Színház* (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

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: Színház”, *Mozgó Világ* 9, No. 10. (1983): 92–93, 92.

<sup>7</sup> TARJÁN Tamás, „Gondolatok egy dramagyűjtemény 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.

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

possible or a fiasco. Péter Nagy Sz. wrote that, "the metaphysical absurd of Nádas 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 Nádas 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 Nádas'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 Nádas'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 Nádas "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 Nádas "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 Nádas could only do half of the work.<sup>16</sup>

In my view, the most sensitive, clear, and rational descriptive-interpretative analysis of Nádas'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 Nádas 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*, Nádas 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 Nádas as a comedy without intermission. In the

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

<sup>11</sup> MÉSZ Lászlóné, „Színterek. Nádas 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 Nádas' 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, „Nádas 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: Dovin, 1991), 36.

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

<sup>21</sup> GÁLLOS Orsolya, „Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban”, *Dunántúl 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 lead to a crisis. The director said this about the situation a decade later:

"Everybody expected a political scandal, but it become 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-

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>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.

<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 admissive 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-

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>34</sup> BOJTÁR Endre, „Az irodalmi mű értéke és értékelése”, in BOJTÁR Endre, *Egy kelet-európeér 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.

<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.

### Bibliography

- APÁTI Miklós. „Ezt láttuk – a színházban. *Takarítás*”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1981. febr. 14., 6–7.
- BALASSA Péter. „Opera és komédia. Nádas Péter *Takarítása*”. *Mozgó Világ* 7, No. 6. (1981): 105–112.

<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)

- BALOGH Tibor. „Nádas Péter drámája Győrött”. *Vigilia* 46, No. 3. (1981): 213–214.
- BARANYAI György, PÉCSI Gabriella. *Nádas Péter bibliográfia 1961–1994*. Pécs – Zalaegerszeg: Jelenkor Kiadó – Deák Ferenc Megyei Könyvtár, 1994.
- BAZSÁNYI Sándor. *Nádas Péter. A Bibliától a Világoló részletekig 1962–2017*. Budapest: Jelenkor, 2018.
- BÉCSY TAMÁS. „Az ellentmondások előadása”. *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981): 34–40.
- BOGÁCSI Erzsébet. *Rivalda-zárlat*. Budapest: Dovin, 1991.
- BOJTÁR Endre. „Az irodalmi mű értéke és értékelése.” In BOJTÁR Endre, *Egy kelet-európai az irodalomelméletben*, 9–55. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1983.
- DURÓ Győző. „Nádas Péter”. In *Hiánydramaturgia (Fiatal magyar drámaírók)*. Edited by VINKÓ József, 42–65. Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1982.
- Fiatalok rivaldája. Hat színmű*. Edited by B. TURÁN Róbert. Budapest: Magvető, 1978.
- FODOR Géza. „Szín – tér nélkül. Nádas Péter drámái”. *Jelenkor* 26. Nos. 7–8. (1983): 723–728.
- GÁCH Mariann. „Tizenhét kérdés Örkény Istvánhoz”. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1977. dec. 24., 18–20.
- GÁLLOS Orsolya. „Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban”. *Dunántúl Napló*, 1979. aug. 27., 2.
- ILLYÉS Gyula, „Egy mondat a zsarnokságról” [„A sentence on tyranny”. Translated by Vernon WATKINS]. [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)
- KOLTAI Tamás. „Vita a Takarításról”. *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981): 33–34.
- MÉSZÁROS Tamás. „A hősnek hűlt helye”. *Hiánydramaturgia (Fiatal magyar drámaírók)*. Edited by VINKÓ József, 144–158. Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1982. Originally published in *Életünk* 20, No. 1. (1982): 66–75.
- MÉSZ Lászlóné. „Színterek. Nádas Péter drámái”. In MÉSZ Lászlóné. *Színterek*, 437–454. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1988. Reprinted: Budapest: Korona Kiadó, 1995.
- NÁDAS Péter. „Protokoll. Elbeszélésnek alávetett tragikomédia”. *Alföld* 41, No. (1990): 6–11.
- NÁDAS Péter. *Színtér*. Budapest: Magvető, 1982.
- NÁDAS Péter. „Takarítás”. In NÁDAS Péter. *Színtér*, 5–87. Budapest: Magvető, 1982.
- NÁDAS Péter. *Nézőtér*. Budapest: Magvető, 1983.
- NAGY SZ. Péter. „Háttérben Sodoma. Bereményi Géza: Trilógia; Nádas Péter: Színtér”. *Új Írás* 23, No. 9. (1983): 117–120.
- PÁLYI András, „Egy érzéki színház. Szélgjegyzetek Bajcsay Mária játékához”. *Színház* 14, No. 3. (1981): 41–43.
- P[ETŐCZ] M[iklós]. „A stúdió első bemutatkozása. Takarítás”. *Kisalföld*, 1980. dec. 6., 5.
- SZEKRÉNYESSY Júlia. „Dalolva szép a takarítás”. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1980. dec. 13., 13.
- SZÖRÉNYI László. „Nádas Péter: Színtér”. *Mozgó Világ* 9, No. 10. (1983): 92–93.
- TARJÁN Tamás. „Gondolatok egy drámagyűjtemény kapcsán”. *Kritika* 8, No. 5. (1979): 8–9.





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

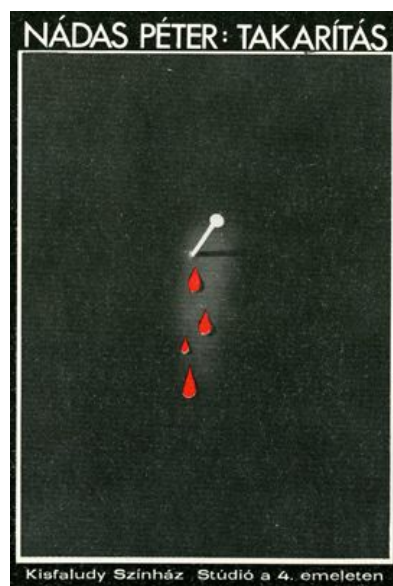


Fig. 2. Poster of the production of *Cleaning* at the National Theatre of Győr (1980)

## Poetic Rituality in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre. An Overview

ENIKŐ SEPSI

**Abstract:** In order to describe the different connections between the poetic text and the ritual executed on stage, in addition to the remarks and insights of the well-known authors (Richard Schechner, Erika Fischer-Lichte), the present study uses the relevant points of the Bielefeld-based researchers, Wolfgang Braungart and Saskia Fischer, who have both worked on formulating the concept of poetic rituality. The concept of poetic rituality refined in my previous works<sup>1</sup> is a useful guide because it makes contemporary performances accessible. Among the Hungarian writers, poets, and directors we highlight some works of Attila Jász, Sándor Halmosi, János Pilinszky, Ottó Tolnai, János Térey, András Visky, and Attila Vidnyánszky, stating that the number of chapters on the history of Hungarian theatre dealing with the interaction of theatre and poetry is meager in the Hungarian reception.

### *Poetry and ritual*

The interrelation of poetry and theatre lead to diverse actualizations: poetry itself has its theatricality, if we think of T. S. Eliot, Mallarmé or Yves Bonnefoy (the latter of whom also called one of his poetic cycles *Théâtre in Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*). These poems, or poems in general, can also be a starting point for a performance which definitively becomes, by its materiality, a poetic theatre. At a third level, one can dif-

ferentiate a theatre where metaphors and their metonymic nature become the directing principle of the direction, rather than causal and temporal relations.

Rites and associated festivities evoke the most defining events in the history of a given community, and from the perspective of the impact on the participants, based on the summary of Erika Fischer-Lichte, they can be described through the concepts of liminality, periodicity, regularity, and transgression.<sup>2</sup>

The ritual is an action, and the significance of this action is drawn from its esthetic presentivity. This also applies to literature. The aspect of literature that generates esthetic significance is usually defined as “form” (inherent to rituals, as well as to literature). The Bielefeld school of rituality (directed by Wolfgang Braungart) underlines the ritual aspects of literature. Because understanding ritual is connected with esthetic explicitness, this school examines the ritual forms of literature. Ritual being a social act, rituality in literature implies a community: the writer and the reader take part in a symbolic community, even though the reader remains an independent individual. “Establishing a community by remaining an individual is the ritual secret of literature”, states Braungart.<sup>3</sup> Our international research group “Rite, Theatre, and Literature”<sup>4</sup> extended this original concept of “po-

<sup>1</sup> Enikő SEPSI, *Poetic images, Presence and the Theatre of Kenotic Rituals* (London – New York: Routledge, 2021); Johanna DOMOKOS – Enikő SEPSI, eds., *Poetic Rituality in Theatre and Literature* (Budapest – Paris: L’Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, „Színház és rítus”, trans. by Gabriella KISS, *Theatron* 6, Nos. 1–2. (2007): 3–12, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang BRAUNGART, „Ritual and Aesthetic Presentivity”, in SEPSI – DOMOKOS, eds., *Poetic Rituality* 13–27, 17.

<sup>4</sup> More information about the research group: <http://www.kre.hu/portal/index.php/ritus->

etic rituality" to embodied ritual on stage, which I take as a conceptual frame.

### *On poetic rituality*

In order to describe the different connections between the poetic text and the ritual executed on stage, in addition to the remarks and insights of the well-known authors, I shall use the relevant points of the Bielefeld-based researchers Wolfgang Braungart and Saskia Fischer, who have both worked on formulating the concept of poetic rituality. According to Braungart and Fischer, poetic rituality sheds light on the liminal characteristics of poetic as well as dramatic forms, and refers to ritual practices, forms, and structures which are set in motion in a way that allows new esthetic characteristics and semantic aspects to arise.<sup>5</sup> Theatre becomes poetic (*poiesis*) due to their form and the manner of their construction, which broadens the possibilities of poetry. In reformulating Antonin Artaud, I would add that poetry, within the confines of a space – that is, the theatre –, uses the language of theatre as we experience it in our dreams, substituting ordinary meanings for others which form the basis of a metaphor. As theorist, director, and playwright Richard Schechner emphasizes in his essay "From ritual to theatre and back: the efficacy-entertainment braid", "so-called 'real events' are revealed as metaphors."<sup>6</sup> Poetry (i.e. metaphorical signification and universal acts in a timeless construct) broadens the potentials of social ritu-

[szinhaz-es-irodalom-cimu-kutatasi-projekt.html](http://szinhaz-es-irodalom-cimu-kutatasi-projekt.html)

<sup>5</sup> Saskia FISCHER, „Poetic Rituality and Transculturality. Bertolt Brecht's Didactic Play *Die Maßnahme* (The Measures Taken)", in SEPSI – DOMOKOS, eds., *Poetic Rituality...*, 29–55, 23–25.

<sup>6</sup> Richard SCHECHNER, "From ritual to theatre and back: the efficacy-entertainment braid," in *Performance Theory* 112–169 (London – New York: Routledge, 1988 [1977]), 128.

als toward the theatre, and represents the main characteristics of the so-called poetic theatres. In other words, poetry may appear as an organizational and temporal logic in ritual on stage, and, on the other hand, poetic (literary) texts can have ritualistic elements, such as repetition, performativity, etc.

"That means: poetic rituality describes a specific literary and dramatic adaptation of ritual patterns, types, genres, symbols, ways of speaking and phrases."<sup>7</sup> The "poetic ritual" of art goes further, to become self-reflexive, self-questioning. The spectator approaches this self-enclosing object anamorphically, when it is a matter of ritual. In other words, it is only in being immersed in the rite that certain meanings become visible. To resume, we go beyond the anthropological (Schechner, Turner, etc.) approach of the subject by valuing the terms of "poetic" rituality. That perspective opens the interest towards the subject known thus far almost exclusively in the German-language-speaking area.

### *The extensibility of poetic rituality in terms of the afterlife of János Pilinszky's theatrical vision*

In several writings and conversations, I have dealt with the theatrical vision of the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky, who was the most eminent figure of interrelating poetry and theatre to ritual in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He summed up Grotowski's work in several essays, as well as Robert Wilson's first European performance, *Deafman Glance* in poems and in "a novel of a dialogue" which we can consider a highly sophisticated book of essays on theatre (*Conversations with Sheryl Sutton*). I have analyzed in detail the nature of poetic rituality in his encounter with Robert Wilson's work.<sup>8</sup> Pilinszky's impact on Hun-

<sup>7</sup> FISCHER, „Poetic Rituality...", 36–37.

<sup>8</sup> Enikő SEPSI, „On Bearing Witness to a Poetic Ritual: Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* as seen by János Pilinszky", in *Poetic Images, Presence and the Theatre of Kenotic Rituals*,

garian poetry and the ritual approach to theatre has been recently examined.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of poetic ritual is a very useful guide because it makes contemporary performances approachable, such as Péter Dóczy's *I Think* (*Azt hiszem*), compiled from poems, diary excerpts and prose of János Pilinszky, or the Magyarkanizsa performance of *Nighttime* (*Éjido*) recently seen at MITEM,<sup>10</sup> directed by Kinga Mezei (not her first time directing Pilinszky). The latter performance was framed by the Pilinszky poem *Apocrypha*, and a comprehensive artwork (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) performance was created with poems, music, dance, graphics, puppets, and masks to help depersonalize the play. I consider the creative process that the director-actor himself reported on to be remarkable from the perspective of the subject of our present study, namely that during the work on the performance, which otherwise worked with a lot of text, more and more texts were transformed into images, and texts disappeared or were simplified during the transformation into images. Even during the rehearsals, texts disappeared this way. Natural materials that appear in the scenography (wood, white linen sheets, mirrors on the back

of the plate) are, without exception, stage materializations of materials that occur in Pilinszky texts. In other words, the presence of poetic ritual is evident not only in the plays written by Pilinszky immediately after the Wilson experience and in the poems born from the experience of the performance, but as an inherent part of the Pilinszky oeuvre as a whole.

The concept of poetic ritual also provides an opportunity to examine poetic oeuvres touched by Pilinszky's poetic and theatrical vision; for instance, Otto Tolnai's, especially the Pilinszky poetry cycle, for example the poem *Pilinszky kiskanala* (*Pilinszky's coffee spoon*), which evokes Pilinszky's figure in action, tied to objects and rituals (small spoon, black coffee). The cognitive metaphor of the poem, which evokes the Pilinszky ritual of self-mockery ("Yugoslavs"), built around the color black and a small spoon, is the "stenciled" spoon, which circles the cup surrounding the cooled coffee. It is an image of mundaneness slowing down to freezing, a perfect and close-to-person ritualization of Pilinszky's motionless poetics.

Among the younger writers, we can highlight the poetry of Attila Jász, for example, the poem *Four-Handed with the Angel*, which evokes the *Four-Strings* of János Pilinszky.

*iv, four-handed with the angel*

Our selves shake the vacuum foliage of  
our years,  
cold light signals in a pack,  
you left the fish alive in the tub,  
forgive me for all my transgressions.  
(Attila Jász: *Instead of resurrection*.  
*P/versions*)

Attila Jász turns *Fabula* by János Pilinszky<sup>11</sup> into a children's tale in *The Wolf Man's Tale*

103–114 (Routledge, London – New York, 2021); „On Bearing Witness to a Poetic Ritual: Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* as seen by János Pilinszky”, in, *Text and Presentation 2017*, ed. by Jay MALARCHER, 167–179 (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018); SEPSI – DOMOKOS, eds., *Poetic Rituality...*, 135–148.

<sup>9</sup> See SEPSI Enikő – MACZÁK Ibolya (eds.), *Pilinszky János színházi és filmes víziója ma* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, Károli Books, 2022). PRONTVAI Vera: *Költészet és ritualitás a kortárs magyar színházban. Vidnyánszky Attila rendezései és Visky András színpadra állított drámái*, PhD thesis with my supervision (Budapest: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2022). The thesis will be published in Károli Books by the end of 2023.

<sup>10</sup> June 2019, Magyarkanizsa; September 2021, Budapest.

<sup>11</sup> „He stood all through the night, with wide eyes / and on into the morning when he was beaten to death.” János PILINSZKY, *The Desert of Love*, selected poems translated by János



(*Farkasember meséje*), where the wolf is not killed at the end. From Sándor Halmosi's latest volume of poems, *Neretva*, which has an apocalyptic tone, here are also a line or two having reminiscences of Pilinszky's poems: "How could we not live / with the grace of suffering? To put such an animal face on this angelic/frame, how dare we?" (*We couldn't*);<sup>12</sup> "A scandal that is never finite" (*Mountain of Skulls*).<sup>13</sup> The method of questioning, the short montages, the oxymoron-based editing method, the alliteration-based tuning of the source, the enumeration of actions, and the prompts are the main features of these performative texts.

In my previous writings, I compared János Pilinszky's theatrical idea, which includes poetic elements, with Mallarmé's works, in that theatre is a place of "Thought" that reveals a succession of mental images and includes not only plays, but also a kind of poetic writing style, as well as reading as a mental staging.<sup>14</sup> Under the influence of the action that takes place during the theatrical performance, philosophical thoughts appear as a result of the play. János Pilinszky's broadly construed 'theatre' includes not only lyrical and dramatic plays, but also poetic writing as an imaginary theatre in the Mallarméan sense, as well as reading as a stage.<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenon of poetic ritual in the afterlife, draws attention, in my view, to the fact that we have come across the fundamental characteristic and structure of the Pilinszky oeuvre as a whole, which also pro-

vides a key to why he tried to integrate the film and theatrical genres into the poem.<sup>16</sup>

*Poetic ritual in contemporary  
Hungarian theatre: Ottó Tolnai,  
Szilárd Borbély, and Attila Vidnyánszky*

Ottó Tolnai, Hungarian poet and dramaturg from Palics (Palić, Serbia), who was a considerable inspiration for the metaphors in Josef Nadj's performances, can also be considered as a significantly inspiring source of poetic and ritualistic theatre, where metaphors in space (Artaud) are the key elements of theatrical performances. *Roses*, for instance, directed by András Urbán in 2010 in Subotica, based on *Rose of Chişinău* [*Kisinyovi rózsá*], a poem by Ottó Tolnai, was an almost wordless performance.

Some of Vidnyánszky's directions and part of András Visky's dramas have their roots in mystery plays, miracula or passion plays, originating from much before the socialist realist era of forty years, as well as from the creative theatrical vision of János Pilinszky in the 20th century.<sup>17</sup>

*Funeral Pomp* (*Pompa funebris*) is the stage-writing and pictorial representation of Szilárd Borbély's poems. It focuses on the problem of the human body experiencing violence. The performance is based on the tragedy of Szilárd Borbély's parents and the volumes of the Debrecen poet *Death Splendor*, *Sidelines of a Murder*, and *While the Jesus of Our Hearts Sleeps* (*Halotti pompa, Egy gyilkosság mellékszálai, Míg alszik szívünk Jézuskája*). The textual recitation of the montage-like poems depicted in the stage picture is only one element in addition to gestures and movements, as well as an intense musical

---

CSOKITS and Ted HUGHES (London: Anvil Press, 1989), 50.

<sup>12</sup> *Nem tudtunk*.

<sup>13</sup> *Koponyák hegye*.

<sup>14</sup> Enikő SEPSI, *Le théâtre de János Pilinszky lu dans l'optique de Mallarmé, Simone Weil et Robert Wilson* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 35–36.

<sup>15</sup> SEPSI Enikő, *Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson műveinek tükrében* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2015), 27–30.

<sup>16</sup> See SEPSI Enikő, „Pilinszky színházi és filmes víziójának továbbélése versben, papírszínházban és színpadon”, in *Pilinszky János színházi és filmes víziója ma*, 11–25.

<sup>17</sup> SZÉKELY György, „Misztériumok a Nemzeti Színházban 1924–1942”, *Irodalomtörténet* 86, No. 3. (2005): 297–308.



background, a chorus of actors and intense sound effects. *Funeral Pomp* is a spatial description of Borbély's poems and poem fragments enriched with tribunal reports, which, according to the creators of the performance, "become concrete situations on stage, while also being very metaphorical."<sup>18</sup>

In the center of the ceremonial space organized and directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, murderous acts, death cries, depictions, and body separations take place. The first stage image is a giant puppet lying in a horizontal position, from which death is recognized. Then his head is set on fire, it is dismembered, and his body parts are dissected, while the mourning ceremony, arranged for the stage, begins. The dissection table set up on the stage is a place with metaphorical meaning, a space of the sacrifice: an altar where the mutilation of human bodies takes place. After that, with the murder of the elderly parents (Anna Ráckevei and Sándor Csikos), the presentation of various versions of violent death in stage pictures begins. Parents, waiting for their son to arrive home at Christmas, are killed by actors turned from nativity characters into murderers, the faces of the elderly man and woman sticking to the window glass, which becomes bloody the moment the violent act is committed. The spiritual paralysis caused by the murder is reinforced in the work by sequence VII, played in the voice of Szilárd Borbély, which is a textual repetition of the meaningless concept of redemption: "He does not move, he listens, he does not forgive, / and he is never resurrected again."<sup>19</sup> The meaning of sacrifice is called into question, as well as redemption.

After the scandal of Auschwitz, the idea of the gospel message becoming weightless is

one of the defining questions in Borbély's oeuvre. The inertia against vulnerability and the suggestion of the meaninglessness of life – as defining experiences of existence – accompany the performance, and in light of the anticipation of the closing scene, each situation bears traces of an absent presence. The central scene of *Funeral Pomp* is not the murder of the parents, but the reference to redemption, the stage image, and the cross that appears against the backdrop of the Jews heading to Auschwitz. Under the influence of the metaphor's workings (every human body that has suffered violence can be identified with the body of the dead Christ), the characters on the stage portray their self-imposed resolution of their captivity as images of Christ.

The simultaneous display of Christian and Hassidic traditions in *Funeral Pomp*, with the already *here* and the *not yet-to-come*, maintains a metaphorical discourse of the absence of Christ.<sup>20</sup> The sign system of the theatrical performance is based on clues that come from the only dead one, Christ, who is not present, marked by different corps or bodies. The cross behind the backs of the Jews in the wagon on stage flashes the reading that the evil that has happened in the world can only be conceived in the consciousness of redemption. Although the main figure is not present on stage, he is replaced by various body events, metamorphoses and mutilations, hinting that in every death his death is repeated again (*imitation Christi*); to quote Borbély: "The Newborn has blood flowing / every day into streams".<sup>21</sup>

*Funeral Pomp* carries the mourning of the human lives that have been extinguished or intended to be extinguished, mourning the extinction of every human life that ends with a violent death, where the nativity scenes

<sup>18</sup> "Térbeli költészet. Debreceni Csokonai Színház: *Halotti pompa*. Vidnyánszky Attila rendezővel és Rideg Zsófia dramaturggal Molnár Klára beszélget", *A Vörös Postakocsi*, Summer (2009): 9.

<sup>19</sup> BORBÉLY Szilárd, *Halotti pompa* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2014), 36.

<sup>20</sup> See PRONTVAI Vera, „A sebzettség esztétikuma: a hiátus szerepe a *Halotti pompa* színrevitelében”, *Alföld* 70, No. 7. (2019): 78–84, 82.

<sup>21</sup> BORBÉLY, *Halotti pompa*, 71.

turn from one scene to the next into murder scenes. The nativity play turns into a dance of death, and then into a mourning ceremony.

András Visky

*Szcenárium*, a journal created by the creative workshop organized around the National Theatre in Budapest,<sup>22</sup> regularly analyzes the works of director Attila Vidnyánszky, and deals with some studies published in other forums, including the volume entitled *The Poetic Theatre (A költői színház)*<sup>23</sup>, the writings of István Bessenyei-Gedő, Edina Sin, Gábor Turi, and Balázs Urbán,<sup>24</sup> and the intertwining of poetry and ritual in the performances he organizes has not yet been thoroughly investigated. Being a creator who is also engaged in theatre studies, Visky writes about the characteristics of what he calls *poetic theatre*, and the appearances of ritual

<sup>22</sup> The artistic journal of the National Theatre is edited by Ágnes Pálfi and Zsolt Szász.

<sup>23</sup> KORNIA István (ed.), *A költői színház. Hét évad a Csokonai Színházban – 2006–2013* (Debrecen: Csokonai Színház, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> BESSENYEI GEDŐ István, „»Halál! Hol a te fullánkod?« Dedramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (1. rész)”, *Szcenárium* 1, No. 2. (2013): 5–19; BESSENYEI GEDŐ István „»Halál! Hol a te fullánkod?« Dedramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (2. rész)”, *Szcenárium* 1, No. 3. (2013): 24–42; PRONTVAI Vera, „Megéríteni vagy meghaladni Istent? A metafizikai színház jellemzőinek vizsgálata a *Mesés férfiak* című színelőadásban”, in ZILA Gábor, ed., „*Uram, hogy lássak*”, 251–261 (Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2016); SIN Edina, „Vázlat a Vidnyánszky Attila-féle költői színházról”, *Studia Litteraria* 53, Nos. 1–2. (2014): 88–100; TURI Gábor, „Költészet a színpadon (A Vidnyánszky-korszak mérlege)”, *Hitel* 28, No. 8. (2015): 110–121; URBÁN Balázs, „Líra és epika Vidnyánszky Attila színházában”, *Színház* 51, No. 4 (2018): 19–22.

theatrical forms.<sup>25</sup> The author who lives in Cluj-Napoca, is analyzed in three volumes (*As One Sees the Voice*,<sup>26</sup> *Memories of the Body*<sup>27</sup>, and *Side Hustle*<sup>28</sup>) but his staged dramas have not been presented from the perspective of poetry and rhythmic aspects of poetry.

In Visky's poetic theatre, cognitive metaphors (Johnsson and Lakoff), and various manifestations that permeate the entirety of the stage language, drive the workings of the composition of the performances. The theatre, in Visky's words, becomes a communal event “in which all of us, spectators and actors, participate with similar intensity as in an Easter ceremony, and just like there, the one we killed ends up confronting us.”<sup>29</sup> Metaphor in the Schechnerian sense becomes a real event, the viewer's involvement is expected, and the reception is anamorphic.

The number of ten characters staged in *Born for never (Visszaszületés)* also refers to one form of punishment, decimation (the condemnation of one in ten people to death), and is also a recurring rite in Visky's works. The tithes, that appear in the Old Testament law, are due to the God of all things. Interpreted from this point of view, the existence of the Nameless, that is, the tenth man, is inherently resistant to unbelief.<sup>30</sup> In *Disciples*,

<sup>25</sup> András VISKY, *Mire való a színház? Útban a theatrum theologicum felé* (Budapest: KRE – L'Harmattan, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> *Mint aki látja a hangot. Visky Andrásal beszélget Sipos Márta* (Budapest: Harmat, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Jozefina KOMPORALY, ed., *Andrew Visky's Barrack Dramaturg: Memories of the Body* (Bristol, UK – Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> SEPSI Enikő – TÓTH Sára, eds., *Mellézkörej, Írások Visky András 60. születésnapjára* (Budapest: KRE – L'Harmattan, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> VISKY András, “A kudarc”, in SEPSI – MACZÁK (eds.) *Pilinszky János színházi és filmes víziója ma*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> “Without fail you should give a tenth of all the produce of your seed, that which comes forth of the field year by year. And before

the recollections of John and Thomas bring the decimation to life:

“JOHN VLADIMIR: There are two possible cases: when calculating, either you have to say the ten or I have to do it.

THOMAS ESTRAGON: So far stimmt.

JOHN VLADIMIR: If I had to tell you, I'll cut in front of you, step out of line, and shout ten. It's a matter of concentration. This is a classic concentration exercise. There was an example of it.”<sup>31</sup>

Fischer-Lichte, in his book *The Aesthetics of Performativity*, analyzes the performative process and the transformation associated with the rite at length. Although we have attempted to measure empathetic inclusion ourselves,<sup>32</sup> the instrumental measurement of the degree of involvement is difficult, due to several factors. In the words of András Visky: “A work of art extracts itself from the order of measurable things. For it is not the intelligible, but the incomprehensible; not the measurable, but the immeasurable that

---

Jehovah, in the place that he will choose to have his name reside there, you must eat the tenth part of your grain, your new wine, your oil and the firstborn ones of your herd and of your flock; in order that you may learn to fear Jehovah your God always.” *Deuteronomy*, 14, 22-23 (New World Translation, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> VISKY, *A szökés. Három dráma* (Kolozsvár: Koinónia, 2006), 112.

<sup>32</sup> SEPSI Enikő, „A művészetbefogadás pszichofiziológiai vizsgálatának lehetőségei (irodalom, színház, film)”, in LÁZÁR Imre, ed., *A társas-lelki és művészeti folyamatok pszichofiziológiája* (Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2019), 293–299; SEPSI Enikő – KASEK Roland – LÁZÁR Imre, „Művészeti befogadás pszichofiziológiai vizsgálata Noldus Facereader segítségével”, in LÁZÁR Imre, ed., *Érzelmek élettana járvány idején* (Budapest, L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2022), 212–227.

is the world of art.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of theatrical performance, “the most valuable sign of the real impact of the performance is the returning spectator.”<sup>34</sup>

Visky, in his chair lecture at the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Art, described the *circle of transformation* he envisioned, which he considers to be key when analyzing contemporary ritual theatrical performances. In describing the transformation process, Visky captures the process that takes place in the present time of the theatrical performance and also affects the people gathered in that space.<sup>35</sup> The center of *the circle of transformation*, he sees, is the theatrical realization of the *founding event*, the trinity of form and meaning, which carries the possibility of transitioning into a transcendent reality in a theatrical medium, where stage presence depends on the nature of allusions (one of János Pilinszky's ideas<sup>36</sup>). Making the invisible visible is also articulated by Brook when he writes in *The Empty Space* that *holy theatre* not only presents the invisible, but also offers conditions (silence) that make its perception possible. *The circle of transformation* also makes the invisible perceptible in Visky's reading, placing the fragmentariness of man in the mirror of timelessness.

The poetic and theatrical worlds of Térey, Visky, and Tolnai are characterized by the omission of traditional drama texts, the marginalization of psychologizing theatrical attitudes, the lack of traditional plot direction and conflict, and the marginalization of

---

<sup>33</sup> VISKY, *Mire való a színház?*, 234.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>35</sup> It was delivered in the Small Hall of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on March 2, 2016 with the title *What is a playwright? The Creative Freedom Inherent in Anonymity*. An outline of the lecture can also be found online: [https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglalok/Visky\\_Andras\\_Mi\\_a\\_dramaturg.pdf](https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglalok/Visky_Andras_Mi_a_dramaturg.pdf) Accessed October 5, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> PILINSZKY János, *Publicisztikai írások* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 535.

the unraveling of causal relationships. In the theatrical performances associated with their name, the creation of tension constructed by associations, the montage-like alternation of the stage image, the elaboration of moods and states, the expanded moments, the perception of timelessness, and the musicality and the rhythmicity of the performance play a decisive role.

In the works of both Vidnyánszky and Visky, the boundary between the events taking place in the present and the past disappears by entering the central cognitive metaphor(s), the performance based on metaphors becomes metonymic, showing the part-whole relationship. The metaphor written in the stage space becomes part of real life in the human body. In Lehmann's words, "in the metonymic relation or contingent, the stage space, the main definition of which is not that it symbolically represents another fictional world, but that it is highlighted and filled as a real part or continuation of the theatrical space, can be called metonymic."<sup>37</sup>

#### János Térey

The playwright Térey performs his lifeless, soulless puppet characters in *Table Music* (*Asztalizene*) at the White Cube restaurant in Buda. The empty, bloodless immobility of the characters, reflected in computer games, is greatly heightened by the character of the text's speech opera, as well as by the in-depth dialogue of the text with the dramaturgy of the musical score from Ernst Jandl to Thomas Bernhard: the dramaturgy (*allegro, andante, presto*), articulated into musical movements, reaches the emotional state of the actor from the intonation, and not from the psychological path, following the path of Meyerhold, and not that of Stanislavsky.

<sup>37</sup> Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Posztdramatikusszínház*, trans. by BERCZ Zsuzsa, KRCSFALUSI Beatrix, SCHEIN Gábor (Budapest, Balassi, 2009), 178.

The theatrical world premiere of *Table Music* in the Radnóti Theatre<sup>38</sup>, which was worthy of considerable theatrical success, was not followed by further presentations, although both the theatrical and literary receptions celebrated Térey's dramatic poem unreservedly. It is as if the presentation and professional success achieved by the sometimes distinctly parading cast and inspired directorial work have failed these works at the same time, dooming them to the fate of a "book drama" that can only be interpreted in a very problematic way in the sense of theatrical history. We can agree with András Visky who states: "What, therefore, in our view, resists the theatrical birth of dramatic poems or poetic dramas in general, is psychological realist dominance, as well as the tyrannical documentary fetish..."<sup>39</sup>

#### *Instead of a Conclusion*

Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the transformative role of the rite when examining its theatrical occurrence; the transition between self-states. This really connects the social and artistic rites, but at the same time, the optionality of participation in the theatre is striking. As a conclusion, it can certainly be argued that in the outlined cases of poetic ritual, the viewer has a way of participating or keeping a distance, but certain meanings do not appear without involvement. We could say, as a conclusion drawn from our previous researches, that empathy plays a greater role in embracing the arts than previously thought,<sup>40</sup> and even more in these shortly analyzed cases, where the realist theatrical tradition does not help the reception. The absence of self-awareness differentiates dramatic identification from empathy, because someone striving for empathetic understanding "only surrenders the bounda-

<sup>38</sup> Date of premiere: 19.10.2007.

<sup>39</sup> VISKY, *Mire való a színház*, 58.

<sup>40</sup> SEPSI – KASEK – LÁZÁR, „Művészeti befogadás...”

ries of his ego occasionally, for some instants,"<sup>41</sup> while in the course of identification, his ego retires completely to the background. Identification pushed to the point of loss of self as the utmost form of involvement is, however, a highly contested idea in current affect theories in the psychology of Art (seeking self-reflective emotional responses to Art). Scholarly literature often differentiates empathy from sympathy as affective and cognitive empathy, and shows some similarity with mentalization (attributing a certain state to others or ourselves). It remains to be investigated whether anamorphism might also function as an analytical principle, according to which an author's intended or hidden meaning only reveals itself from a certain interpretive perspective. Empathy, as Béla Buda defined it in relation to the arts, may assist the interpreter in discovering the proper interpretive perspective.

Peter Brook points out that with *the poetic theatre* that once lived an active life (which he mentions in parallel with the concept of "sacred theatre") neither theatrical creators nor the spectators can now do anything about it, and poetic drama is also treated with reservation, since "it is halfway between prose and opera, neither spoken nor sung, although it is performed in a more elevated tone than prose, and its content is also more elevated, its moral value is also somehow higher"<sup>42</sup>. Brook's insight indicates that while the interweaving of poetry and theatre broadens the frames of theatre, this theatrical form language is difficult to define and grasp. Strong arguments in favor of *poetic theatre* could not be made by the reception in Hungary either<sup>43</sup>, and the frequency of chapters

on the history of Hungarian theatre dealing with the interaction of theatre and poetry is negligible in the Hungarian reception. According to Edina Sin, "Examining the classical Hungarian theatrical history and theoretical works, it can be seen that there is no strong outline of the poetic theatre forming among the Hungarian dramaturgical traditions."<sup>44</sup> The works of our research group are one of the first tentatives.

### Bibliography

- „Térbeli költészet. Debreceni Csokonai Színház: *Halotti pompa*. Vidnyánszky Attila rendezővel és Rideg Zsófia dramaturggal Molnár Klára beszélget". A *Vörös Postakocsi*, Summer (2009): 6–12.
- BÉCSY Tamás. „Ami megnyilatkozik, és ami rejtve marad". *Színház* 20, No. 7. (1987): 27–32.
- BESSENYEI GEDŐ István. „»Halál! Hol a te fulánkod?« Dedramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (1. rész)". *Szcenárium* 1, No. 2. (2013): 5–19.
- BESSENYEI GEDŐ István. „»Halál! Hol a te fulánkod?« Dedramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (2. rész)". *Szcenárium* 1, No. 3. (2013): 24–42.
- BORBÉLY Szilárd. *Halotti pompa*. Pozsony: Kalligram, 2014.
- BRAUNGART, Wolfgang. „Ritual and Aesthetic Presentivity". In *Poetic Rituality in Theatre and Literature*. Edited by Enikő SEPSI and Johanna DOMOKOS, 13–27. Budapest:

the innermost level of drama in the play is not able to manifest itself, what manifests itself from the work, is the issue of love relationships, which, now viewed from here, is more than just who was the lover of whom and how she reconciled." Tamás BÉCSY: "Ami megnyilatkozik, és ami rejtve marad", *Színház* 20, No. 7. (1987): 27–32, 29.

<sup>44</sup> SIN Edina, "Vázlat a Vidnyánszky Attila-féle költői színházról", *Studia Litteraria* 53, Nos. 1–2. (2014): 88–100, 92.

<sup>41</sup> BUDA Béla, *Empátia. A beleélés lélektana* (Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2012), 312–324.

<sup>42</sup> PETER Brook, *Az üres tér*, trans. by Anna KOÓS (Budapest, Európa, 1972), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Tamás Bécsy also gets into trouble with the premiere of T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* in the Castle Theatre in Budapest: "Since



- L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2020.  
<https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-21928-8>
- BROOK, Peter. *Az üres tér*. Translated by KOÓS Anna. Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 1972.
- BUDA Béla. *Empátia. A beleélés lélektana*. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2012.
- DOMOKOS Johanna – SEPSI Enikő. *Poetic Rituality in Theatre and Literature*. Budapest – Paris: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2020.  
<https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-21928-8>
- FISCHER, Saskia. „Poetic Rituality and Transculturality. Bertolt Brecht's Didactic Play *Die Maßnahme* (The Measures Taken)”. In *Poetic Rituality in Theatre and Literature*. Edited by Enikő SEPSI and Johanna DOMOKOS, 29–55. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-21928-8>
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika. „Színház és rítus”. Translated by KISS Gabriella, *Theatron* 6, Nos. 1–2. (2007): 3–12.
- KOMPORALY, Jozefina, ed. *Andrew Visky's Barack Dramaturgy: Memories of the Body*. Bristol, UK – Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017.
- KORNIA István, ed. *A költői színház. Hét évad a Csokonai Színházban. 2006–2013*. Debrecen: Csokonai Színház, 2013.
- LEHMANN, Hans-Thies. *Posztdramatikus színház*. Translated by BERECS Zsuzsa, KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, SCHEIN Gábor, Budapest: Balassi Kiadó. 2009.
- PILINSZKY János. *Publicisztikai írások*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999.
- PILINSZKY János. *The Desert of Love*. Translated by CSOKITS János and Ted HUGHES. London: Anvil Press, 1989.
- PRONTVAI Vera. *Költészet és ritualitás a kortárs magyar színházban. Vidnyánszky Attila rendezései és Visky András színpadra állított drámái*. PhD thesis, Budapest: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2022.
- PRONTVAI Vera. „A sebzettség esztétikuma: a hiátus szerepe a *Halotti pompa* színrevitelében”. *Alföld* 40, No. 7, (2019): 78–84.
- PRONTVAI Vera. „Megérinteni vagy meghaladni Istent? A metafizikai színház jellemzőinek vizsgálata a *Mesés férfiak* című színelőadásban”. In *„Uram, hogy lássak”*. Edited by ZILA Gábor, 251–261. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2016.
- SCHECHNER, Richard. *Performance Theory*. London – New York: Routledge, 1988 [1977].  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203361887>
- SEPSI Enikő – MACZÁK Ibolya, eds. *Pilinszky János színházi és filmes víziója ma*. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2022.
- SEPSI Enikő – KASEK Roland – LÁZÁR Imre. „Művészeti befogadás pszichofiziológiai vizsgálata Noldus Facereader segítségével”. In *Érzelmek élettana járvány idején*. Edited by LÁZÁR Imre, 212–227. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2022.
- SEPSI Enikő. „A művészetbefogadás pszichofiziológiai vizsgálatának lehetőségei (irodalom, színház, film)”. In *A társas-lelki és művészeti folyamatok pszichofiziológiája*. Edited by LÁZÁR Imre, 293–299. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2019.
- SEPSI Enikő. „On Bearing Witness to a Poetic Ritual: Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* as seen by János Pilinszky”. In *Text and Presentation 2017*. Edited by Jay MALARCHER, 167–179, Jefferson: McFarland, 2018.
- SEPSI Enikő. *Le théâtre de János Pilinszky lu dans l'optique de Mallarmé, Simone Weil et Robert Wilson*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014.
- SEPSI Enikő. *Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson műveinek tükrében*. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2015.
- SEPSI Enikő. *Poetic images, Presence, and the Theatre of Kenotic Rituals*. London – New York: Routledge, 2021.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003163930>

- SIN Edina. „Vázlat a Vidnyánszky Attila-féle költői színházról”. *Studia Litteraria* 53, Nos. 1–2. (2014): 88–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.37415/studia/2014/53/4030>
- SIPOS Márti. *Mint aki látja a hangot. Visky Andrással beszélget Sipos Márti*. Budapest: Harmat, 2009.
- SZÉKELY György. „Misztériumok a Nemzeti Színházban 1924–1942”. *Irodalomtörténet* 86, No. 3. (2005): 297–308.
- TURI Gábor. „Költészet a színpadon (A Vidnyánszky-korszak mérlege)”. *Hitel* 28, No. 8. (2015): 110–121.  
<https://doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/14115>
- URBÁN Balázs. „Líra és epika Vidnyánszky Attila színházában”. *Színház* 51, No. 4. (2018): 19–22.
- VISKY András. „A kudarc”. In *Pilinszky János színházi és filmes víziója ma*. Edited by SEPSI Enikő and MACZÁK Ibolya, Budapest: L’Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2022.
- VISKY András. *Mi a dramaturg? A névtelenségben rejlő alkotói szabadság*. Akadémiai székfoglaló előadás kivonata, accessed: 2022. 10. 05,  
[https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglalok/Visky\\_Andras\\_Mi\\_a\\_dramaturg.pdf](https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglalok/Visky_Andras_Mi_a_dramaturg.pdf).
- VISKY András. *Mire való a színház? Útban a theatrum theologicum felé*. Budapest: L’Harmattan – Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, 2020.
- VISKY, András. *A szökés. Három drama*. Kolozsvár: Koinónia, 2006.

## The Responsible Hands of Theatre. Minor and Major Forces on the Stage of Metanoia Artopédia

VERA KÉRCHY

**Abstract:** In this study, I analyze the 2013 performance of Metanoia Artopédia, *Ice Doctrines. Variations on Nazi Rhetoric* in the context of the history of the Hungarian independent theatre group. Using Judith Butler's thoughts on hate speech and Gilles Deleuze's minor/major use of language, I try to show that the shift to "major" forms and topics (the power of representation and the representation of power) from an Artaud-ian "minor" theatre does not mean a radical change in the group's history, and the theatre of "kings and princes" gets necessarily deconstructed on the stage of Metanoia. After 20 years of owning a minor perspective – the world of the "saint idiots" – the group takes the perpetrator's point of view and stages the Lingua Tertii Imperii (the language of the Third Reich). Still, *Ice Doctrines* remains "minor" as it finds the "lines of escape" within representation.

Judith Butler begins her book on hate speech by recalling the anecdote from Toni Morrison's lecture she gave after getting the Nobel Prize in 1993.<sup>1</sup> The story is about an old blind woman, whose wisdom is challenged by young people who are trying to trick her. One of them asks: "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." After a long silence the woman answers: "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know

is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." Morrison gives an explanation by identifying the bird with language and the hands with the usage of language and points out that "the blind woman shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised". Butler uses the story to unfold her theory about the performative power of language, how we can do things by words<sup>2</sup>, how words themselves can hurt (kill the bird or keep it alive), and what the tools are of resisting this power, how we can distract the effect of the speech act by pointing at the hands of the speaker, in other words at the rhetoric aspect of language. This is exactly what happens on the stage of *Ice-Doctrines*, Metanoia Artopédia's current performance, which aims to stage the Nazi rhetoric as we learn from the subtitle: *Variations on Nazi Rhetoric*.<sup>3</sup> The play is staging

<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter – „Burning Acts, Injurious Speech” – Butler analyses J. L. Austin's famous book of speech act theory, *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) suggesting that *How to Do Things by Words* would be a better title to express the specificity of the illocutionary speech act, its capability „to perform itself, producing a strange enactment of linguistic immanence”. BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Participants: Andrea Erdély Perovics, Hermina G. Erdély, Ágnes Diószegi, Szilárd Szokol, Péter Varga, Zoltán Lengyel, Zoltán Perovics. Photographer: Balázs Zoltán Tóth. Costume Designer: Anna Csúri. Creator of Cardboard Figures: Attila Etele Kiss. Sound Designer and Live Narration: Zoltán Lengyel. Director's / Editor's Contributor: Andrea Erdély Perovics. Director / Visual Design: Zoltán Perovics. Special thanks to Gyula Lencsés

<sup>1</sup> Judith BUTLER, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York – London: Routledge, 1997). Morrison's speech can be fully read here: Toni MORRISON – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022. Thu. 9 Jun 2022.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>

the hands, which are not just responsible tools of fatal acts (can be covered in blood or can stay clean in a Poncius Pilatus way), but also the corporeal expression of speech, therefore the source of instability (considering that “the unknowing body marks the limit if intentionality in the speech act”),<sup>4</sup> hence the tool of deconstruction. By enhancing the performance aspect of theatre (amplifying the bodily acts, the physical presence, and the voices instead of the meaning or message), *Ice-Doctrines* follows the tradition of Metanoia performances and deconstructs the mechanism of representation, while – for the first time in the group’s history – it also puts representation in the focus in terms of content.

Problematizing the relationship between representation, violence, and sovereign identity has always defined the aesthetics of the now 32-year-old Metanoia Artopédia, independent theatre group from Szeged. In the manner of the neo-avant-garde icons – Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor or Robert Wilson – the group holds an Artaud-ian view of imitation being injurious, therefore Western theatre has to be reformed. As per Derrida, “theological” theatre is the emblem of logocentrism, “more than any other art, it has been marked by the labor of total representation”<sup>5</sup>. A theatre performance based on a dramatic text pretends to convey the meaning, from the author through the director and the actor to the audience, following the chain of representations, supposing that there is a “layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance”.<sup>6</sup> This kind of direct transfer of meaning, in other words the ideology

and the staff of Grad Café. Date premiered: 2013.

<sup>4</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques DERRIDA, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”, in Jacques DERRIDA, *Writing and Differance*, trans. by Alan BASS, 232–250 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 234.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 235.

of transparency, gives the illusion of sovereignty connecting the stage with the discourse of power, or what Deleuze calls the ‘major’ usage of language:<sup>7</sup> as the manifestation of the essential Cartesian ego, who guarantees the meaning by his presence and his speech “the traditional actor enters into an ancient complicity with princes and kings, while the theatre is complicitous with power... The actual power of theatre is inseparable from a representation of power in theatre...”<sup>8</sup>

In this kind of theological theatre a play is constituted “as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from

---

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze defines major and minor languages as follows: „We could define major languages even when they have little international importance: these would be languages with a strong homogeneous structure (standardization) and centered on invariables, constants, or universals of a phonological, syntactical, or semantic nature. [...] major languages are languages of power...”, while „one must define minor languages as languages of continuous variability... A minor language is comprised of only a minimum of structural constancy and homogeneity.” Gilles DELEUZE, „One Less Manifesto”, trans. by Eliane dal MOLIN and Timothy MURRAY, in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime. The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. by Timothy MURRAY, 239–258 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 243–244. Later on he prefers to talk about major and minor usages of languages instead of the languages themselves being major or minor, he writes: „there is no imperial language that is not hallowed out, swept away by these lines of inherent and continuous variation, that is, by these minor usages. Major and minor languages, therefore, qualify less as different languages than as different usages of the same language.” DELEUZE, „One Less Manifesto”, 240.

<sup>8</sup> DELEUZE, „One Less Manifesto”, 241.

it or equally to intervene in it".<sup>9</sup> This function does not depend on the actual content. It is the representational structure itself that does the positioning even in the case of the most "innocent" topic. We cry or we laugh because we identify with a perspective from which the *mise en scène* seems readable, without questioning the implied ethos on which the fictional world is based. Since the codes of the construction are hidden, everything seems to be natural and necessary, thus we reassert our (often offensive) cultural clichés without noticing. The power dynamics of theatrical illusion can not be destructed by explicit criticism. If a play criticises an oppressive system by following the logic of representation, it uses the same power discourse it tries to subvert. So critical discourse has to start with aiming at the representation itself, and not the content.

The two main paths of subverting representation is well known from theatre history. On one hand, there is the Artaud-ian way (radicalized by the performances of the 60s): replacing language with the bodily act, meaning action. And on the other, there is the Brechtian way (improved by postmodern theatre): reflecting on the mechanism of representation by staging the illusion, and unveiling it as a construction. For the first 20 years (from the formation in 1990 to 2011, when Andrea Erdély, professional actress from the Serbian theatre, Kosztolányi Dezső Színház, joined the group) Metanoia (first „Metanoia Commando”, then „Metanoia Theatre”, later „Metanoia Artopédia”) followed the Artaud-ian path. There were very few textual parts in the plays, and if there were any, language did not function as the conveyor of meaning. The fragments, intertextual collages, were recited in extreme slowness, by sluttering or with breathing backwards. The actual cast –

changing from time to time depending on the actual personal encounters – was mostly of non-professionals (“actors, fine artists, literary professionals, musicians, university students and teachers, unemployed and even disadvantaged people”<sup>10</sup> – as we learn from the website). Pero – Zoltán Perovics, the founder and director of the group – especially liked working with people with slight speech defects (similarly to András Jeles, well-known neo-avant-garde director, with whom Pero cooperated several times in different productions, mostly as stage designer). He treated speech as an exciting instrument of music, as a wealth of possibilities of special sound effects. The “assignifying *intensive utilization* of language”<sup>11</sup> and the immobility or the very slow, not “natural” motion deprived the character of its anthropomorphic modality, therefore the speaking actor was no longer a model of the Cartesian subject bearing “an ancient complicity with princes and kings”.

The actor was not in the focus in the Metanoia productions anyway, at least not in the anthropocentric sense. It is telling that any time Pero is asked about the early times, he starts to speak about the installations he made for the performances. The objects he created for the actual production were as important as the human participants, which does not mean that the human participants were devaluated. It was more about exploring the objects’ liveliness, transgressing the binary opposition of human/non human. The objects – which were also exhibited in independent events – are usually very small, such as figures made of toilette paper, cradles and rifles hanging on thin strings swaying rhythmically, little light cores floating in the dark, thin automatic pendulums clicking grace-

<sup>9</sup> Andrew PARKER – Eve Kosofsky SEDGWICK, „Introduction. Performativity and Performance”, in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. by Andrew PARKER – Eve Kosofsky SEDGWICK, 1–18 (New York – London: Routledge, 1995), 11.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.metanoiaartopedia.hu/>

<sup>11</sup> Gilles DELEUZE – Félix GUATTARI, „What is a Minor Literature?” in Gilles DELEUZE – Félix GUATTARI, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan, 16–27 (Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 22.



fully, tiny universes unfolding in tiny spaces, depending on where the group had the opportunity to play, in an apartment, in a small cinema, or in a basement. A black box, the setting of the 1999 production, *Protected Animals* (Védett állatok), serves as an emblem of the Metanoia style, since all the performances operate with black and white, with darkness and narrow spaces. Sometimes there are even veils and obscure screens covering the view, leaving only silhouettes behind, in the manner of shadow theatre. Human participants merge with two-dimensional cardboard figures. Everything is very slow and delicately choreographed. The visual opera rhymes on the symphony of breath, creak and rustle.

We are extremely far from realist theatre here, from the aesthetic of transparency, of clearly showing and telling the one and only true meaning of the play. We are dealing with traces, absences, and uncertainties, close to what Deleuze calls a 'minor' theatre:

"That is, to eliminate the constants and invariants not only in language and gesture but also even in theatrical representation and what is represented on the stage. Thus to eliminate every occurrence of power: the power of what theatre represents (the King, the Princes, the Masters, the System), but also the power of theatre itself (the Text, the Dialogue, the Actor, the Director, the Structure)."<sup>12</sup>

The aim of the "amputation" is to give "free reign to a different theatrical matter and to a different theatrical form",<sup>13</sup> "a new potentiality of theatre, an always unbalanced, non-representative force...",<sup>14</sup> "to impose a minor treatment or a treatment of minoration to extract becomings against History, lives against culture, thoughts against doctrine,

graces or disgraces against dogma."<sup>15</sup> Deleuze talks about the Italian director, Carmelo Bene who eliminates the represented power by excluding the kings and the generals from Shakespeare's plays, but in Pero's case – who does not work with dramatic base – there are no such characters in the first place. If we just take a look at the titles, we find subordinated figures in the center of the plays: *Garden of Fools* (Balgák kertje, 1992), *Damned Story* (Átkozott történet, 1994), *Nursing Home* (Öregek otthona, 1996), *Protected Animals* (Védett állatok, 1997) as if they – the fools, the damned, the old people, and the animals – were an assembly of the „saint idiots”<sup>16</sup>. Kata Demcsák, former member of the group, recalls the mise en scène of *Idea Time* (Eszme-idő, 1991), the very first performance of the group:

"For example, the world of *Idea Time* put figures from different times next to each other, sometimes as a collage, other times side by side. Kaspar, the Alchemist Poet, the Bride, the Prisoner, the Renaissance and the Baroque Fellow, the Old Man Feeding the Pigeon, the Traffic Inspector, or the Bride... this Bride limping in orthopedic shoes existed as a single, concrete, tangible figure free of stereotypes... as she listened to the cricket chirping in the middle of the greatest chaos..."<sup>17</sup>

Or remembering the rehearsals of *Damned Story* (Átkozott történet, 1993), in which she played Fool Terka, she writes (citing from her own diary entries, she wrote at the time):

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 243.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 250.

<sup>17</sup> DEMCSÁK Katalin, „Világ-nyelv-töredék(ek). A Metanoia Különítmény korai előadásai”, in *Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák*, szerk. IMRE Zoltán, 508–527 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008), 520–521.

<sup>12</sup> DELEUZE, „One Less Manifesto”, 251.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 241.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 242.

"The KZ [Konzentrationslager] inmate wearing boots and clothes with stripes is dragging hack hammers, an iron wedge tied to his wrist, and stones tied to the hack hammers. A thick rope is stretched around the back of the man's neck, who has become genderless in women's clothing. The other end of the rope, on which small white clothes are hang out, is around Terka's neck. Terka tries to free herself as she slowly backs into the space. This is the most difficult scene, we should live together completely, as if the rope were an umbilical cord, while the rhythms, the pace, and the action are opposite."<sup>18</sup>

The recurring title of the exhibitions, "Metanoia Lumber Room" and of Pero's writings (published mostly on the homepage), "Collection of Unnecessary Texts" also refer to the oppressed, to the marginalized, to the useless. The black and white costumes in the performances, the hat and the suit with a mid-twentieth design evoke Kafka's world of minorities: the immigrants, the children, the animals, who are (opposite to the powerful, totalized, sovereign identities) open to metamorphosis, to becoming ("the becoming-dog of the man and the becoming-man of the dog, the becoming-ape or the becoming-beetle of the man and vica vesra"<sup>19</sup>). The opening page of the Metanoia website starts with Braille writing. But even the name of the group refers to a kind of physical disability: 'artopédia' is a portmanteau of the words 'art' and 'orthopedy'. Since 'metanoia' means 'turn' in Greek with the connotation of religious turns like the one of Saint Paul, the name itself defines the ars poetica of the sublime oppressed.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 519.

<sup>19</sup> DELEUZE – GUATTARI, „What is a Minor Literature?“, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Pero talks about the name of the group here:

It is clear that in this first period, Metanoia performances owned a minor perspective. The 2010 production, *Thirteen Months (in House Arrest)* (Tizenhárom hónap [házi őrizetben]) can be considered the closure of the era. This is the first time Pero works directly with the theme of the Nazi persecution of the Jews.<sup>21</sup> The performance is inspired by the life of the Hungarian rabbi, scholar, botanist, and politician, Immanuel Löw, who was imprisoned during the white terror in 1920–21. During his captivity he wrote his main work, *Die Flora der Juden*, the taxonomy of Old Testament plant names. As such, the perspective of the play is still minor, and the style of the performance is still postdramatic for resisting the language of signs, and „amputating“ the components of power. There is no actor in the center, the texts are fragmented and not emphasized in a natural, communicative way. There are screens concealing the clear view, the motion is static or very slow, and there are some tiny lighting objects in the back, moving mechanically, invoking a surreal mini cosmos in the narrow space.

Interestingly, the next performance continues the topic of persecution, but changes the perspective from minor to major by switching from the victim's to the perpetrator's point of view. And this is the moment we can talk about Metanoia's turn (meaning 'the turn of the turn'), even though – and this is the most exciting aspect of it – the group has never stopped being minor, never broke up with the Artaud-ian critic of logocentrism. It is only the method that changes: instead of „amputating“ the major elements, they

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s\\_z8wFkeLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s_z8wFkeLI)

<sup>21</sup> The play was preceeded by a performance in 2007: *Preparations, Boards, Pallets* was defined as „preparations for a performance that aims to get informed/to inform about the life and work of Immanuel Löw – using archival documents“

(<http://www.metanoiaartopedia.hu/>).

are amplifying them to the level where they explode (or in the words of Miklós Erdély, another inspiring predecessor of Pero's work, to the level of „extinction of meaning”<sup>22</sup>.)

*Ice-Doctrine* stages the Nazis, the “Kings”, and the “Masters”, with a professional actress in the center, reciting a large amount of texts, which – according to Deleuze's description – makes her appear as their collaborator. Andrea Erdély (after her marriage with Pero: Andrea Erdély Perovics) joins the group in 2011, and immediately gets into the center of the productions. She is not just the leading actor, but also Pero's creative companion, the co-author of the productions. This can be due to her talent and their fruitful encounter, but also the way Pero has always worked: relying on and inspired by the current conditions. So far *Ice-Doctrine* has been the most important performance of this period, still running at the time of writing this paper, already past the 40th show.<sup>23</sup> The title comes from Hans Hörbiger's world ice theory (Welteislehre, WEL), which became the official cosmology of the Third Reich, “according to which the explanation of astronomical phenomena lies in the supremacy of ice”<sup>24</sup>. The textual fragments are from Hitler, Himmler, Eichmann, Horthy, archives from the Nazi regime, and today's media release: manifestations of far-right politics and events, neo-Nazi pop songs, manipulating TV programs, and everyday chat full of “innocent”, unconscious racism (Gipsy

and Jewish jokes). Standing in the middle of the small stage, Erdély is shouting sentences like “Each animal only mates within its own breed. The stronger must rule over the weaker and must not merge with the weaker, as this would mean the sacrifice his own greatness.”<sup>25</sup> Or lines from the Hungarian Numerus Clausus Laws: “Members of the Chamber of the Press, as well as the Chamber of Actors and Cinematographers, Lawyers, Engineers, and Medicine, were allowed for Jews only in proportions where their number did not exceed twenty percent of the total number of members of the Chamber.” As if the whole performance staged “the radicalization of evil linked to the fall into the language of communication, representation, information”.<sup>26</sup> By connecting the content to the oppressive power of logocentrism *Ice-Doctrine* shows that

“Nazism has indeed been the most pervasive figure of media violence and of political exploitation of the modern techniques of communicative language, of industrial language and of the language of industry, of scientific objectification to which is linked the logic of the conventional sign and of formalizing registration...”<sup>27</sup>

But how does this all turn into its own criticism? What makes the direct staging of majority irony, and from which point of view would the “fall into a language of mediate communication” actually appear as the “origi-

<sup>22</sup> ERDÉLY Miklós, „Marly tézisek”, <https://artpool.hu/kontextus/mono/nullpont6b2.html>

<sup>23</sup> Just take a look at the title of some other productions of the period: *I am perfect* (Én tökéletes vagyok, 2015) or *I'm Fine, Thanks!* (Köszönöm jól! 2011) seems to mirror a major point of view in contrast with the stupid's, the elders' and the cursed' minor word.

<sup>24</sup> SIRBIK Attila, „A gonosz banalitása. Interjú Pervics Zoltán rendezővel”, *Tiszatáj*, 2018. dec. 1. <https://tiszatajonline.hu/szinhaz/a-gonosz-banalitasa/>

<sup>25</sup> Here I would like to thank Zoltán Perovics and Andrea Erdély Perovics for making the script available to me. Every translation of the citations are mine.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques DERRIDA, „Force of Law: The »Mystical Foundation of Authority«, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. by Drucilla CORNELL – Michel ROSENFELD – David Gray CARLSON, 3–67 (New York – London: Routledge, 1992), 58.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 58.

nal sin" itself?<sup>28</sup> How can we talk about minority in the case of *Ice-Doctrines*? Here I refer to another part of the subtitle: "variations". It is not just about the theatrical cliché that every performance changes from night to night (this time accompanied by the direct aim to utilize the spectator's responses on the questionnaire filled out at the beginning of the play), but about shifting the meaning, diversifying the cited lines in one and the same production, re-reading "at the outset",<sup>29</sup> making the text differ from itself. This is what Roland Barthes calls "critical difference" as the object of all deconstructive criticism: "The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself."<sup>30</sup> *Ice-Doctrine* aims to show the inner difference of every kind of text, even the one that gives the illusion that it is "irreversible, 'natural', decidable, continuous, totalizable, and unified into a coherent whole based on the signified."<sup>31</sup> Therefore it returns to the major topics and forms of logocentric theatre, and demystifies the ideology of totalization by revealing the "lines of escape"<sup>32</sup> within its representation. Since "there is no imperial language that is not hallowed out, swept away by these lines of inherent and continuous variation"<sup>33</sup>, even the most iconic major language, the Nazi rhetoric can be deconstructed, or to be more precise, it deconstructs itself. We only have to reveal its inner vulnerability; point at the "hands" holding the bird.

The main tool of this task is resignification. Breaking with the prior context, citing

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Roland BARTHES, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard MILLER (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara JOHNSON, "The Critical Difference", *Diacritics* 8, No. 2. (Summer, 1978): 2–9, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>32</sup> DELEUZE – GUATTARI, "What is a Minor Literature?", 26.

<sup>33</sup> DELEUZE, "One Less Manifesto", 244.

with difference opens up the essential iterability of any text: its independence of intention and dependency of social rituals. Racist speech, like all performative act, "works through the invocation of convention".<sup>34</sup> It appears as if the speaker is the source of the speech act, though he only cites and maintains a social convention. Following Althusser's idea on interpellation and Derrida's conception of iterability, Butler takes the example of the judge to show how performativity precedes and creates the subject at the same time:

"it is through the citation of the law that the figure of the judge's 'will' is produced and that the 'priority' of a textual authority is established. Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary 'act' emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions."<sup>35</sup>

Pointing at the gap between intention and effect, citing with difference reveals that "the force of the speech act is not a sovereign force"<sup>36</sup>; the subject is not the source of hate speech. At this point hate speech turns against itself, going against its original purposes.

Though we can speak about a professional actress and articulated speech in the case of *Ice-Doctrines*, there are no centralized roles, lineal dramaturgy, or mimetic scenery in the play. Erdély is dressed like a weird clown in a tight black costume with a hood and a ruff collar; she is masked as a burlesque actor, a carnival figure. Taking on multiple roles during the performance, Er-

<sup>34</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Judith BUTLER, "Critically Queer", *GLQ*, Vol. 1. (1993): 17–32, 17–18.

<sup>36</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 38.

dély – just like Carmelo Bene's actor in Deleuze's description – "make[s] [herself], or rather unmake[s] [herself], according to a line of continuous variation".<sup>37</sup> "The play initially involves itself with the fabrication of the character, its preparation, its birth, its stammerings, its variations, its developments".<sup>38</sup> The setting around her is more like a monochromatic diorama than a realistic environment, with life-size cardboard silhouettes and small two-dimensional figures: well dressed ladies from the golden times of peace of the early twentieth century, a melancholic cemetery angel, and the sleeping lion from Dürer's painting of Saint Jerome. There is a sheer veil in the middle and a pulpit in the back which Erdély can bring into play during the show. The shifts between the roles are undisguised; no mimetic props are used to build realistic characters. Most of the time the actress's gender does not fit to the role. Thus, no transparency is created, the fragments remain citations, and the happening unveils itself as a theatrical construction.

This does not mean that the play would turn into a parody, or the cited texts would be deactivated and neutralized. Erdély precisely works with the performative power of hate speech, which makes the performance extremely disturbing. As "there is no way to invoke examples of racist speech, for instance, in a classroom without invoking the sensibility of racism, the trauma and, for some, the excitement"<sup>39</sup>, the theatrical stage – in spite of its critical aspiration – "becomes precisely the instrument of their perpetration."<sup>40</sup> This already starts with the questionnaire, which shocks the respondent with its explicitness. The option to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 your approval of statements such as "Gypsies are inherently more prone to crime", "Above all, Jews are the reasons for the existence of anti-Semitism", or the Arendt-ian

idea of relentless conformity: "in an environment where participants equally share the same xenophobic view, we cannot talk about incitement, but rather about the agreement of the participants" makes us nervous. The audience gets a taste of how oppressive language is, even in this conditional form; always already being violence itself, not merely a representation of it. "[T]he threat begins the performance of that which it threatens to perform".<sup>41</sup> What follows next is more explicit: Erdély uses the power of physical performance to invoke the effect of hate speech. The "roles" she occupies for a minute are always very intense, she uses her whole body, her physical and psychic energy to shock the audience by switching between different tones of insulting, e.g.

"[t]he demand to ban infected people from giving birth to infected offspring is a requirement of common sense... are you seriously not gonna stop with this fucking whistling, you gay immigrant! Do you know what you are? You are blonde, you are gypsy and you are gay. [...] We need to create a new man so that our people are not destroyed by the typical degenerative phenomena of the new times."

So even though the theatrical construction is unconcealed (by the undisguised role changing and the explicit intertextuality), the experience of verbal threat is real.<sup>42</sup>

But it is also the body that invokes another important aspect of hate speech, which, contrary to its unavoidable efficiency, is related to the failure of the performative act.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Here we have to mention that Andrea Erdély has participated in international workshops led by famous performance artists such as Min Tanaka and Richard Nieoczym several times. The intensive use of physical energy on the stage may come from these experiences.

<sup>37</sup> DELEUZE, „One Less Manifesto”, 240.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 239.

<sup>39</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 38.



Butler refers to Felman to remind us that “the speaking is itself a bodily act”<sup>43</sup>, which means that language cannot be completely controlled. Since body and language are both unseparable and irreconcilable, “the act of a speaking body, is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, that it always says something that it does not intend.”<sup>44</sup> This is precisely the condition of a critical response to hate speech: to call attention to the hands of the bully means to call attention to the bodily instrument, in other words to the vulnerability of the speech act. The violent behavior Erdély summons relies on the ideology of representation, transparency, hiding the medium (the body) behind the message. Hate speech is a ritual of subordinating others, constructing the subject “through a violating interpellation”.<sup>45</sup> To unveil this process as constructive (“not descriptive, but inaugurative”)<sup>46</sup> is to expose that “interpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark.”<sup>47</sup> So the intensive corporeality of Erdély’s performance not only invokes the effect of hate speech, but subverts it at the same time, since it reveals the performative basis of representation. This is how the inner tension of language is staged in the play, completed by other variations of incongruity. For example, as Erdély keeps shouting louder and louder, with applying all her physical and psychical energy: “Fulfil the commandment to annihilate others!”, tears begin to roll down her face, giving the impression that she is embodying the perpetrator and the suffering victim in one and the

same performance.<sup>48</sup> Or when one of the versions took place in the Old Synagoge of Szeged, the remains of the altar became part of the setting, which generated insoluble tension within the play, in connection with the anti-Semitic message.

We have to talk about the other characters of the stage, who at first glance seem more like figures of the earlier minor period, but later on it turns out that they are also variations of Erdély’s “major” character in a way. There is the patient’s and the nurse’s unified symbiosis in the front, and the silent drummer in the back, who is more like a machine with his smeared sad clown face and rigid appearance. The patient sits on the nurse’s lap covered by worn-out ruffles and ribbons (her costume is like an old woman’s nightgown, but also like a swaddle of an oversized baby). As the nurse holds the patient’s trembling elbows, we are confused whether the old arms are moving independently or are controlled by their supporter. These two characters seem to be inseparable, like a hybrid rag doll, a union of puppet, and the puppeteer. They are all pegged down in the same spot during the play, making minimal movements, slight unnatural gestures. While the drummer is like an automatic toy, an object from “Metanoia Lumber Room”, the patient-nurse hybrid is definitely a living, contagious creature. We learn from their lines that the patient is an old lady with far-right commitment, shouting incoherent sentences, mixtures of racist statements and obscene everyday swearing:

<sup>43</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 10. Butler’s reference: Shoshana FELMAN, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. by Catherine PORTER (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Mikola Gyöngyi put this scene in the center of her study on Ice-Doctrines: MIKOLA Gyöngyi, „A kegyetlenség evangéliuma, mint kulturális örökség”, *Tiszatáj* 2014. július 16. <https://tiszatajonline.hu/szinhaz/a-kegyetlenseg-evangeliuma-mint-kulturalis-orokseg/>. She also performed her paper in English at „THEATRE an Crises” conference in 2018, which can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyhN5R77HXY>.

"Our official state cosmology is the Doctrine of the Eternal Ice .../ that little piece of shit.../ the doctrine of the re-birth of our people./ What is that little piece of shit barking about/ Monumental icebergs on the milking parlor,/ a huge mass of icy archipelagos hit the Sun.../ 'I can't hear you, come here, I can't hear you'/ As a consequence of the universe/ the dicks just stick out of her ass at 004/ We come from the land of snow and ice./ Beautiful, glorious,/ hard and white/ strong and good.../ the icebergs, the icebergs/ ice is our origin ..."

Her head is trembling, her voice is squeaking as she wiggles restlessly on the nurse's lap, who is Hanna Arendt at the same time, according to the script. In this context the mechanical drummer can be seen as an allegory of the everyday man who got involved in the Nazi machinery as a faceless cog, like Eichmann, the icon of the banality of evil, the "guilty everyman", the "scary normal", who blindly follows all orders of the totalitarian system.<sup>49</sup>

The crackling archive recordings, the whining of the patient-nurse hybrid, Erdély's shouting and the musical fragments (from classic compositions through Hungarian folk-songs to pop hits) assemble a weird opera. The restaging and resignification of Nazi rhetoric results in an avant-garde symphony, in which language falls apart, as we have already seen it in the case of the patient. But even Erdély's monologue on Numerus Clausus ends up in nonsense: "They are selling the ...! Who are selling it? ... strangers... To whom? To strangers... this and that... alo-pex, lopex, pex, pix, pax, puchs, fuchs..." The separation of intention and utterance, the exploitation of the vulnerability of hate speech makes "all totalization of the identity

of the self or the meaning of a text impossible".<sup>50</sup> Metanoia encounters *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (the language of the Third Reich) by opening up representation, unleashing inner difference, and finding the "lines of escape" in major discourse. It melts the ice of the Ice-Doctrines by pointing at the (warm) body, at the squeezing hand, so it manages to rescue the bird and keep language alive (considering that "language remains alive when it refuses to 'encapsulate' or 'capture' the events and lives it describes."<sup>51</sup>) *Ice-Doctrine* clearly shows the ethical stake of deconstruction; its effort

„not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical, academic discourses but rather [...] to aspire to something more consequential, to *change* things and to intervene in an efficient and responsible, though always, of course, very mediated way, not only in the profession but in what one calls the *cit  *, the *polis* and more generally the world."<sup>52</sup>

### Bibliography

- ARENDT, Hanna. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: The Viking Press, 1963.
- BARTHES, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard MILLER. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- BUTLER, Judith. *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York – London: Routledge, 1997.
- BUTLER, Judith. „Critically Queer". *GLQ*, Vol. 1. (1993): 17–32.
- DELEUZE, Gilles. „One Less Manifesto". Translated by Eliane dal MOLIN and Timothy MURRAY. In *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime. The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy MURRAY, 239–258. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Hanna ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).

<sup>50</sup> JOHNSON, „The Critical Difference", 3.

<sup>51</sup> BUTLER, *Excitable Speech*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> DERRIDA, „Force of Law", 8–9.

- DELEUZE, Gilles – GUATTARI, Félix. „What is a Minor Literature?” In Gilles DELEUZE – Félix GUATTARI. *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana POLAN, 16–27. Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- DEMCSÁK Katalin. „Világ-nyelv-töredék(ek). A Metanoia Különítmény korai előadásai”. In *Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák*. Szerkesztette IMRE Zoltán, 508–527. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. „The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”. In DERRIDA, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan BASS, 232–250. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. „Force of Law: The »Mystical Foundation of Authority«”. In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Edited by Drucilla CORNELL – Michel ROSENFELD – David Gray CARLSON, 3–67. New York – London: Routledge, 1992.
- ERDÉLY Miklós. „Marly tézisek”. <https://artpool.hu/kontextus/mono/nullpont6b2.html>
- JOHNSON, Barbara. „The Critical Difference”. *Diacritics* 8, No. 2. (Summer, 1978): 2–9.
- KELEMEN Zoltán, ARTNER Szilvia, PEROVICS Zoltán, JÁSZAY Tamás, „Hasonló a hasonlóknak – Metanoia Artopédia”, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s\\_z8wFkeLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s_z8wFkeLI)
- MIKOLA Gyöngyi. „A kegyetlenség evangéliuma, mint kulturális örökség”. *Tiszatáj*, 2014. július 16. <https://tiszatajonline.hu/szinhaz/a-kegyetlenseg-evangeliuma-mint-kulturalis-orokseg/>
- METANOIA Artopédia Homepage, <http://www.metanoiaartopedia.hu/>
- MORRISON, Toni. „Nobel Lecture”. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022. Thu. 9 Jun 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>
- PARKER, Andrew – SEDGWICK, Eve Kosofsky. „Introduction. Performativity and Performance”. In *Performativity and Performance*. Edited by Andrew PARKER – Eve Kosofsky SEDGWICK, 1–18. New York – London: Routledge, 1995.
- SIRBIK Attila. „A gonosz banalitása. Interjú Perovics Zoltán rendezővel”. *Tiszatáj*, 2018. december 1. <https://tiszatajonline.hu/szinhaz/a-gonosz-banalitasa/>

## “A rose by any other name”. Contemporary Hungarian Shakespeare Adaptations on Stage and in Cyberspace

VERONIKA SCHANDL

**Abstract:** The essay is a survey of recent Hungarian Shakespeare adaptations. In the first part, the essay looks at adaptations that experiment with the Shakespearean text, yet they still market themselves as Shakespeare productions; while they keep most of the Shakespearean plotlines, they freely alter the structure of the Shakespearean texts, dismantle chronologies, shift language registers, and contextualize the plays in a contemporary Hungarian setting. Examples are Örkény Theatre’s 2019 *Macbeth* and *The Shaxpeare Car Wash in Kertész Street*. In the second part, the essay moves over to appropriations that are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare’s play; they use Shakespeare and the Shakespearean plotlines as cultural metaphors. The plays we discuss (Káva Cultural Workshop’s 2016 *Lady Lear* and Éva Enyedi’s 2018 *Lear’s Death*) both adapt *King Lear*, and strangely, they both appropriate the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting. The final example the paper introduces is a Shakespeare burlesque, written by Zolt Györei and Csaba Schlachtovszky, that premiered at the Gyula Shakespeare Festival in 2021. The essay contests that although the play camouflages itself as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century melodramatic tragedy, using reflective nostalgia, it becomes a voice of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity and subversion.

“Shakespeare is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian author”, as the great Hungarian Shakespeare scholar, Kálmán Ruttkay used to say. His joking remark, however, did contain more than a grain of truth, since, indeed, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare’s works were read and performed in translations that originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Trans-

lated by some of the most important poets of Hungary and canonized in the *Collected Edition of Shakespeare’s Works* in 1955<sup>1</sup>, Shakespeare’s texts appeared for the Hungarians as poetic, yet somewhat aged. Even if these translations contained factual errors, or were almost illegible for theatregoers, changing them was considered a sacrilege.<sup>2</sup>

This long-upheld practice slowly changed after the 1990s, when theatres started to ask for custom-made re-translations of Shakespeare’s plays for their productions. Ever since then, most new Shakespeare translations in Hungary are commissioned by theatres, yet only a few of them, among others, poet and linguist Ádám Nádasdy’s translations, reach canonical status, and are taught in schools, too. All in all, the wider variety of texts available does influence productions to pick and choose, thus allowing for Shakespeare to be represented in textual plurality in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Hungary. This plurality also effected the surge of new Shakespeare adaptations that appeared in the past twenty or so years. Indeed, we can finally claim that today Shakespeare’s texts are “no longer treated with the reverence that had characterized earlier periods of the Shakespeare cult, [since] (m)ore and more typically, the Shakespeare text – whether published in a literary edition, or only available as a newly translated performance script – is treated as

---

<sup>1</sup> KÉRY László (ed.), *Shakespeare Összes Művei* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the controversies around István Eörsi amendments to János Arany’s *Hamlet* in 1983, in Veronika SCHANDL, *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary: Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain* (Leicester: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 53–81.

raw material, as a jumping board, rather than the unchanged and unchangeable core of the production design.”<sup>3</sup>

With all that said, it must also be remarked that the Hungarian theatre world has traditionally been extremely text- and literature-centered, both in production and in reception. It has not emancipated itself from the primacy of literary discourse and the postdramatic theatre that Lehmann describes, which questions the linearity of narratives, while stressing the “simultaneous and multiperspectival form of perceiving”<sup>4</sup>, is not integral to the history of mainstream Hungarian theatre.<sup>5</sup> In a recent volume of *Theatralia* that concluded a two-year V4 project on the post-1989 Central-European reception of Shakespeare, several essays on Hungarian Shakespeare productions lamented this relative conservatism of the Hungarian theatre-world, and Shakespeare’s reception in it.<sup>6</sup> We agree with Kornélia Deres who noted that “(i)n the post-Socialist area, theatre aesthetics before, and even for years after, 1989 were highly dominated by realism, and as a consequence, a text-based

dramatic perspective influenced the routines of audience reception and interpretation” (...) therefore postdramatic theatre initiatives “have not been able to enter into mainstream theatre practice, or become recognized by critics”; they were introduced by independent companies, and remained in relative cultural isolation.<sup>7</sup>

This essay does not wish to dispute this statement, yet it wishes to argue that the Shakespearean adaptations of the past ten years have shown a slight change in these trends. The plays the essay considers are open to postdramatic experimentation, willingly challenge the hegemony of classical texts, and in some cases, they successfully reach broader audiences. The essay offers an overview of these recent Hungarian adaptations, while considering the means of textual and contextual alterations that were made, and the audience these adaptations wished to reach. Finally, the essay will seek answers to the question what Shakespeare was used for in these reworkings.

### *Shakespeare the contemporary*

In the first part of my survey, I will look at adaptations that experiment with the Shakespearean text, yet they still market themselves as Shakespeare productions. Although they keep most of the Shakespearean plotlines, they freely alter the structure of the Shakespearean texts, dismantle chronologies, shift language registers, while recontextualizing the plays in a contemporary Hungarian setting.

My first example, Örkény Theatre’s recent, 2019 *Macbeth* is a production that, uniquely in Hungary, uses a text that incorporates all existing Hungarian translations, furthermore, director Ildikó Gáspár and dramaturge Barbara Ari-Nagy inserted archaic folk prayers as the witches’ speeches, Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 12* as Fleance’s speech in act 2, scene 1, and *Sonnet 30* as Banquo’s speech at the

<sup>3</sup> FÖLDVÁRY Kinga, “Reappropriation of History on the Post-Communist Hungarian Stage” in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 239–253, 227.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen JÜNS-MUNBY (Routledge: London and New York, 2006), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. DERES Kornélia, “Emerging postdramatic aesthetics and Shakespeare in Hungary”, in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 105–119.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. DERES, “Emerging...”, ALMÁSI Zsolt, “Textuality, Heritage, and Identity in Hungary: Contexts for the Interpretation of Szikszai’s Insertion in *Macbeth*”, in *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity. Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021): 222–238.

<sup>7</sup> DERES, “Emerging...”, 107, 115.



banquet. This *Macbeth* that opened in Budapest in the studio space of Örkény Theatre in March 2019, repositioned the play into a museum.

The audience is led into a small theatre space where, in a glass cabinet, a replica of the Hungarian crown is displayed. A female guide repeatedly calls their attention to the fact that what they see is not the original, but a true replica that is almost as valuable as the original. Translated to the production, this sets the basic tone: what we are to see is not the original, yet in its true replica-form it could be as valuable as that. Tongue-in-cheek as this assertion seems, the Örkény *Macbeth* strives to place itself on the threshold between historical and contemporary, between museum and theatre, between illusionary and real. Throughout the play, the audience is given a running commentary by the four museum guards who also play the roles in *Macbeth*, on what they are about to see, often followed by ironic remarks on the play and the world it represents, effectively discarding all cultural relevance to the Scottish play. The characters comment on the play having too many foreign names to remember, they joke about the idea that Macbeth's name should be pronounced in an English, not a Hungarian manner<sup>8</sup>, and keep calling all the Scots who appear in Macbeth's court, younger Lennox<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> "GUARD NO. 3: Same place. Macbeth and Banquo.

GUARD NO. 2: Or Banquo and Macbeth...

GUARD NO. 4: Mecbeeeeth.

GUARD NO. 3: We're in Hungary, I can't even pronounce that. It'll work as Mákbet, too."

All quotations from the play are from the play's promptbook. I would like to thank Ari-Nagy Barbara for sending me the final manuscript copy of it. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup> "GUARD NO. 3: We're in Forres. On one of the corridors of the royal palace. A young Lennox and another young Lennox, very similar to him, converse."

Besides this running commentary, theatrical illusion is also constantly broken by the inclusion of prompter, Éva Horváth, who has an active role in the play – e.g. when the witches wind up the magic circle and they switch off the light, she is called out to switch it back (GUARD NO. 3: Évi, light, we cannot see anything – ÉVI: Sorry.), or when Macbeth wants to know the end of the play, he walks up to her, tears the last pages from the promptbook, reads and then eats them.

Further dismantling the divide between theatrical and real, the banquet scene is played in the interval, with Lady Macbeth and Macbeth serving *pogácsa* (Hungarian salty scone) and orange juice to audience members, while singing a duet from the operetta *The Csárdás Princess*.<sup>10</sup> Later the audience is transformed into the forest of Birnam, then a crowd demanding Macbeth's removal. The production ends with a quick repartee that once again creates then deconstructs the theatrical moment:

"GUARD NO. 3: Good is good again...

GUARD NO. 4: ... and bad should be bad!

GUARD NO. 2: Filth should clear up!

GUARD NO. 1: And dirt shall be no more!

GUARD NO. 3: Évi, the lights!"

The heavily cut and amended text of the Örkény *Macbeth* provides ample playroom for the four actors to also include improvisations, while creating an intertextual web of associations that allows the Macbeths' story to unfold, as well as the play to be linked to contemporary events, while also questioning the validity of classical plays in a modern context. The central image of the play, the replica of the Hungarian crown, immediately links the events to Hungarian history. There is further mention of Macbeth's move to Castle Hill that resembles the move of the Hungarian prime minister's office to Buda Castle. The porter keeps referencing contemporary political events in his speech, and

<sup>10</sup> Composer: Emmerich Kálmán.

when Macbeth kills the guards, in Guard no. 1's purse a radio plays Viktor Orbán's famous 1989-speech he gave at the funeral of 1956-martyr, Imre Nagy. Finally, it is the audience members, who, acting as Macduff's soldiers, with whistles and stomping, must chase Macbeth away, thus actively taking a stance against his tyranny. But what I find interesting here is that the Örkény production opens up a path that combines endeavors of post-dramatic theatre, that is to be political in its mode of representation, while addressing issues of political and public nature. *Macbeth* has been a favorite of Hungarian theatres in the past ten years, yet this Örkény production is one that is the most experimental in its usage of the text and the visuality of the play, still, it is one that asks the most questions about the possibility of an artform – in this case theatre – to start a conversation about public issues, thus transporting the Shakespearean play to being our contemporary.

Similarly, contemporary and iconoclastic in the same vein, although with very different means are Péter Závada's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Poet, musician, and playwright Péter Závada is the most prolific Shakespeare adaptor of the contemporary theatre scene. Most of his Shakespearean adaptations are basically retranslations of the plays into a contemporary idiom, laden with slang and slam poetry. (In chronological order these adaptations are: *As You Like It* – Kamra Theatre Budapest, 2016, directed by Dániel Kovács D., *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017, Vígszínház, directed by Dániel Kovács D., *Love's Labours Lost*, 2017, Pesti Színház, directed by Péter Rudolf, and *Richard III*, 2018, Radnóti Theatre, directed by Andrei Șerban). Závada reshuffles scenes, renames characters, and relocates events, but in most of his rewritings he still keeps Shakespeare's plotlines. The essay will engage with *As You Like It*, Závada's first take on Shakespeare, as it is also a prototype of his subsequent works.

Závada's text is a rich tapestry of cultural references, from consumerism to classic literature, yet it mostly relies on and uses the argot of the Y and Z generations. Recognizing similarities between early modern theatrical language and slam poetry, Závada employed his knowledge of the latter to use twisted commonplaces as the building blocks of his playscript. Relying on Ádám Nádasdy's already modern translation, and using much of it, this version of *As You Like It* wishes to approximate Shakespeare's plays to a young adult audience, and by doing so, it successfully annihilates the poetic layers of the text, too. This effort is consciously amplified in the production by Dániel D. Kovács's direction, that stresses physical theatre, meta-theatrical elements, and often operates with filmic solutions, thus introducing an enticing multimediality onto the stage. Props like a full-sized deer carcass, or hundreds of papers thrown over the stage strengthen the theatricality of the production, and invite audiences to create new, contemporary interpretative techniques to Shakespeare's plotlines.

Závada's latest adaptation, a version of *Romeo and Juliet*, entitled *The Shaxpeare Car Wash in Kertész Street*, a production directed by Viktor Bodó in 2019 for the Örkény Theatre in Budapest, goes even further. There, Závada used the Shakespearean text only as a starting, metatheatrical reference point, and the production was shaped by Bodó's strong directorial vision, as well as the improvisations of the actors. Although the audience can recognize the Shakespearean play, the plot is transferred into the dodgy 8<sup>th</sup> district of downtown Budapest, where rivaling gangs rule the streets. The play is no longer a romantic tragedy, but Romeo's bad drug-induced trip, in which he imagines himself in love with Juliet, who instead ends up with Paris. The disillusioned ending of the play is counterbalanced by the overall heightened atmosphere of the production, sometimes movie-like, sometimes melodramatic.

Viktor Bodó should here be mentioned as a co-author of the script, not only as the di-

rector of the production. Trained as an actor and a director, Bodó is one of the most significant contemporary Hungarian directors, who, since the dissolution of his independent company, Sputnik, in 2015, has mostly been working in Germany and Austria. Combining improvisations that he developed with Sputnik and the postdramatic traditions of German theatre, Bodó has developed a directorial vision that links him to the tradition of directors like Christoph Marthaler, Roland Schimmelpfennig, Luk Perceval, or Karin Beier. Reviews applaud his timing, his humour, as well as the associative framework of cultural and pop-cultural references in his productions that Kornélia Deres has likened to the aesthetics of *cool fun*.<sup>11</sup> His works also often include elements of trash and camp. The trademarks of his directorial style are his tendencies to tilt every comic situation towards the burlesque, the aim to break down teleological narratives, to demonstrate the failure of language as a communicative device, as well as to use intermedial scenography recalling filmic elements. His *Shakespeare Car Wash* is also playfully and ironically self-reflexive, often with the aim to challenge the expectations of the viewers by questioning linear interpretations and traditional audience behaviour. The few occasions he was directing in Hungary since 2010, his productions can often be read as political satires, or at least commentaries about the current state of the country, for instance *Revizor (The Government Inspector)*, Vígszínház 2014); *Koldusopera (The Beggars' Opera)*, Vígszínház 2015); *A Krakken-művelet (The Krakken-operation)*, Átrium 2018). *The Shakespeare Car Wash in Kertész Street* is no exception in this respect – here he taps into the petty underworld of downtown Budapest, the crimes, the drugs, and the parties.

The play that is set in an old carwash in Budapest's 8<sup>th</sup> district, consciously violates audience expectations on various levels. It is

neither romantic, nor a tragedy, its logical narrative flow is constantly broken by gags and a loose web of associations that include music, films, slang, and subcultural references. It disregards the commonly perceived theatrical rules of conduct, since it starts in the foyer, and those who leave the auditorium in the interval miss a fiery sex scene between Paris and Lady Capulet. With all that said, however, the production, with a website geared towards teachers and high-school students clearly wishes to educate and integrate postdramatic theatre into an already existing curriculum, thus taking on a social role despite its iconoclastic stance.

### *Shakespeare the cultural metaphor*

In the second part of the essay, we move over to appropriations that are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare's play, but they use Shakespeare and the Shakespearean plotlines as cultural metaphors. They both adapt *King Lear*, and strangely, they both tap into a contemporary theatrical trend, seen in recent British productions as well,<sup>12</sup> by appropriating the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting.

---

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Ian McKellen's recent portrayal of Lear, Akbar ARIFA, "Ian McKellen's Dazzling Swan-Song weighted with Poignancy" *The Guardian*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/26/king-lear-review-ian-mckellen-duke-of-yorks>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022, or Glenda Jackson's thoughts on her gender-bending Lear: Terry GROSS, "Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear: Gender Barriers 'Crack' with Age", an interview with Terry Gross, NPR, April 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/23/716305342/glenda-jackson-on-playing-king-lear-gender-barriers-crack-with-age>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

---

<sup>11</sup> DERES Kornélia, "Szürreália emlékezete", *Színház* 48, no. 4. (2016): 14–17, 16.

*Gabi néni*<sup>13</sup> had a stroke

The first production, an interactive theatre project by the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) from 2016 entitled *Lady Lear*, rewrote the Shakespearean plot as a parable of a typical Hungarian family, where the aging mother's illness challenged the independence of her three sons. Using *Lear* as a cultural symbol of parents/authority figures, who, despite their physical weakness, wish to control the lives of their children/subordinates, the play confronted audiences in dialogues initiated by the actors to discuss how they would react in a similar situation, thus addressing the problem Western countries all face: that of an aging society. It asks how long we are expected to take care of our parents, how much of a personal sacrifice we should be willing to make to help them.

The fictional Lady Lear of the play, a former leader, not of a country, but of a school choir, a widowed mother of three boys, got a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. In the course of the play her boys and her only grandson try to resolve the crux this situation has brought into their lives. As the ensemble website indicates, it is "a crap of a situation with a capital C, served with lots of bittersweet humor."<sup>14</sup>

As it is clear from this short description, this adaptation of the Lear theme is a domestic version of the play, where "the main emphasis is on family dynamics"<sup>15</sup>. It primarily addresses a social concern many of us re-

fuse to face, the aging of our parents. Indeed, in Goethe's understanding of King Lear's figure<sup>16</sup> it challenges the audience to grasp "the sad commonness of the (Lear) experience rather than providing the rarified emotional distinction craved"<sup>17</sup> by many. This, as Peter Conrad convincingly argues, is what the play itself teaches, by doubling the fate of Lear with that of Gloucester's. In this sense "every old man is a deposed king"<sup>18</sup>, even if in this case she happens to be a woman (but more of that later). This commonality is what ultimately enables the play to engage the audience in conversations during the two "openings" the production accommodates.

The play light-handedly molds some themes from *King Lear* to fit the scope of the project – Gabi néni, the mother, starts out from her own flat with her youngest son taking care of her, then slowly loses all aspects of comfort she enjoyed in that first situation. She temporarily must reside in her second son's apartment, where her pregnant daughter-in-law is disgusted by her "old person smell", and where she is stranded in the living room, as Lear on the heath, naked, since she is unable to put her dress on again alone. Gradually all three sons of hers cease to care for her, and as a final blow, her doctor, one of her former students who admires her for her energy and vitality, refuses to administer her a self-inflicted death by sleeping pills. In the penultimate scene of the play, it is her grandson who tries to keep her spirit alive,

<sup>13</sup> In Hungarian, every elderly woman is called 'néni', which roughly translates as auntie, while every elderly man is called 'bácsi' that roughly means uncle. Both terms can be used with family and Christian names as well.

<sup>14</sup> <https://kavaszhaz.hu/lady-lear-en/>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> For similarly angled adaptations see Christy DESMET, "Some *Lears* of Private Life from Tate to Shaw", in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. by KAHAN, Jeffrey, 326–350 (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> "(e)in alter Mann ist stets ein König Lear", Johann Wolfgang GOETHE, *Zahme Xenien*, in: *Gedichte*,

[http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+\(Ausgabe+letz-ter+Hand.+1827\)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+(Ausgabe+letz-ter+Hand.+1827)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3), last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Peter CONRAD, "Expatriating Lear" in *To Be Continued*, 95–152 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97.

<sup>18</sup> CONRAD, "Expatriating Lear", 98.

only to witness her second stroke,<sup>19</sup> which leaves the family with “the worst that is yet to come.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, very differently from *King Lear*, the boys in *Lady Lear* are not simply male versions of Lear’s pelican daughters – even if communication is not their forte, they still try to help. When they fail on their own, they are willing to hire a full-time nurse to assist their mother, or look for a well-established nursing home. Their mother, who claims that caring for her is *their* job, immediately turns these ideas down with pain and disgust. What she does not realize is how much, similarly to her, her sons are also determined by their particular life situation they cannot escape: the oldest lives abroad with his second family, and apart from regular money transfers and Skype calls with his son from his first marriage, he cannot leave his new life and family for longer periods of time. Her second son has just started his own family, and his wife – who fails to see herself as a prefiguration of her mother-in-law – is not willing to share the last months of her pregnancy with Gabi néni daily. Her youngest boy still lives at home, but has finally, after many years of failure, found a job he likes – he becomes a tour sound technician, a work that leaves him much less time at home.

Although far less of a dragon than Lear, the play shows Gabi néni as temperamental and outspoken, with rather harsh opinions of her sons. According to the list of characters, she is supposed to be a 78-year-old retired music teacher, yet the play itself presents her as someone much older, something of an anachronism. She is given a gray wig and a home dress (“otthonka”) – a usually 100-percent nylon piece of clothing that was

popular among women as loungewear in the 1970s, but is rarely worn today.<sup>21</sup> Her taste of food is also rather conservative, she only eats traditional Hungarian food, mostly from warmed up tins, is baffled by take-away pizza, and is proud of her family’s secret “pogácsa” recipe. These characteristics are the source of most of the bittersweet humor the play’s website promises, but they age Gabi néni unfavorably, making her closer to 98 than 78, and a thing of the past, almost a caricature.

What complicates her portrayal even more is that although the play’s title promises us *Lady Lear*, she is played by her three sons, who take her role one after another. A choice applauded by all Hungarian reviews as an ingenious doubling that foreshadows the future fate of the sons, it is, at the same time, a decision that did significantly change the gender relations of the play. While *King Lear* does give spectators the image of an old man, frail and weak at times, *Lady Lear* deprives the audience of seeing an elderly woman on stage. When the middle son clumsily tries to undress then redress his mom, it is a middle-aged male body on display that we see. When the grandson readies to give a pedicure to his grandma, it is giant male feet we see soaking in a bowl of hot water. The annihilation of a fragile elderly female body on stage, and the extinction of an actual female voice deprived the play of the connotations the gender switch the title promises would have brought along, the associations one has with the body of one’s mother. This is an especially problematic change, since it is a production that very much relies on audience reactions.

Due to the naturalistic acting style present all through the production, the image mediated by the boys, while recalling early modern practices, is primarily masculine, distancing the idea of a mother from the audi-

<sup>19</sup> As the doctor explains it was an atrial fibrillation, but the consequences are the same for the family.

<sup>20</sup> This is the final sentence of the play, spoken by the middle son as a conclusion to previous events.

<sup>21</sup> See slideshow here:

<http://kollokvium.figura.ro/play/en/18>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.



ence. Whereas Lear's journey is a passage during which he must grapple with his own femininity, Lady Lear here is prevented even from showing her femaleness. Although still there in the playscript<sup>22</sup>, on the stage, she is absent. Similar to how her boys decide her fate, the production also deals with her without giving her an actual presence.

*Lear bácsi is dying*

The second production the paper intends to introduce is a two-person play entitled *Lear's Death* that premiered in the studio space of the Miskolc National Theatre in 2018. While *Lady Lear* repositions the Shakespearean plot into a wider contemporary social setting, this production digs into the personal psyche of an aging Lear. Accompanied by his Fool, the play follows "Uncle Lear" through several stages of self-investigation ending in his death.

*Lear's Death* is a play with no linear plotline, it is series of scenes, linked by loose association and the two characters that perform them: Lear and the Fool. Lear plays himself, while the Fool takes on several roles: he becomes Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, Death, James the butler, and, of course, Lear's Fool. In a short paper it is nigh impossible to do justice to the manifold connotations the play unlocks, so the essay merely attempts to introduce a few aspects to be able to discuss the gender dynamics of the play.

*Lear's Death* is, first and foremost, a journey into Lear's psyche. It starts with the sentence: "I don't want to die!"<sup>23</sup>, and ends with Lear's death and him concluding: "There's! Nothing! Wrong! *Va bene!*" It is a journey of

self-confrontation, of self-annihilation, and personal growth; a journey towards the acceptance of death. In a whirlwind ride of scenes, full of grotesque and farcical situations – at times hilariously macabre or tearfully honest, the two actors who play Lear and the Fool discuss aspects of Lear's death.

Secondly, the play is a metatheatrical tragicomedy, a commentary on Shakespeare in performance. As if it wanted to show arm-chair critics complaining about the inability of theatrical productions to display a plethora of interpretations one can ponder about in the quiet of one's mind with a glass of sherry in hand, the production gives spectators just that. We first see Lear on the heath, being investigated by the Fool, sometimes more his executioner than his companion, then he becomes a whining old man in a chaotic Hungarian hospital with the Fool forcing him to swallow all the medicine he ground up in a mortar while singing a botched-up version of the song *Brazil* about the lure of death. Later, he morphs into Szabolcs, the Leader, the hero of the first Hungarian translation of *Lear*, who, in turn becomes the actor playing Lear, Attila Harsányi himself, disclosing his own innermost feelings for his mother, only to transform into Lear again seemingly dead, but alive enough to listen to his eulogy. The list could go on. It is a dance macabre across a modern version of Hell that contains circles of burlesque halls, cabarets, or for that matter, a Jerry Springer-like tabloid talk show that hosts the play's mock-trial scene.

Besides the virtuoso performance of the two actors (Attila Harsányi as Lear and Krisztián Rózsa as the Fool) there is a video screen showing flashing images or extra scenes<sup>24</sup>, as well as the monologues the two actors improvised into the text that all add to the overt metatheatricity of the play. So does the live accompaniment of music and

<sup>22</sup> The playscript is available here:

[http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava\\_Lady\\_lear\\_2017\\_marcus.pdf](http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava_Lady_lear_2017_marcus.pdf), last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> ENYEDI Éva, *Lear's Death*, trans. by Philip BARKER, MS, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Like that of the two hilariously confused murderers, also played by Harsányi and Rózsa, who discuss whether to blind, castrate, or simply kill Lear and Cordelia.

effects by Ákos Varga Zságer, who remains on stage throughout the production. While *Lady Lear* wished the audience to internalize the events they were watching, *Lear's Death* continuously distances viewers from Lear's vicissitudes on stage. Frailty and death are depicted here as “concepts that are incomprehensible, that are only to be reflected upon with the help of an adequate toolkit.”<sup>25</sup>

While displaying a vast array of interpretational possibilities, the play also reflects on its own idiosyncrasy. In several asides to the audience, the two actors debate how this production fails to present the “famous royal costume drama from the pen of the greatest of all playwrights, the Bard of Avon.”<sup>26</sup> They discuss what tricks it would take to gain “serious professional recognition, critical acclaim, if not the occasional invitation abroad”,<sup>27</sup> and in an interlude entitled “Long Live Youth – Festival Interlude”, they satirize the backward theatrical hierarchies of the country's theatres.

Yet, at the bottom of this metatheatrical extravaganza, at the core of Lear's quest for the acceptance of death, is Lear's struggle with his daughters. Although the three daughters never appear in person on stage, they are recalled and are played by the Fool from the first scene to almost the last. They are evoked in their father's curses,<sup>28</sup> pre-

sented as relatives who never visit their father in the hospital, appear as speakers of Lear's eulogy who lie to put him in a favourable light, portrayed as rather simple creatures with broad countryside accents who dis their father in front of the TV cameras, but are also seen as victims of child abuse (Cordelia), and finally as the ultimate source of consolation. As if a magic mirror would have refracted the chronological events of *King Lear* into myriad pieces that display to us all the viewpoints of the characters, we also hear Goneril's and Regan's woes and Cordelia's aches besides Lear's laments. Since no single narrative can do justice to Lear's journey, we get all of them.

We are in Lear's head; therefore, everything is uttered in a male voice – all three daughters are played by the Fool, and although their portrayal, their tones change from scene to scene, they are ultimately all mediated through the Fool's persona, a male presence. To complicate matters more, the production plays with the similarity of the two actors so often (their faces are morphed into each other on the video screen, and even the poster of the production uses this image<sup>29</sup>) that they seem to be just two faces of the same person, two voices of the same experience. As if their roles could be reversible, their lines could be uttered by the other, their roles could be switched, if one wished so. Consequently, the Fool can also be read as a projection of Lear's mind, or vice versa, an interpretation that questions the validity of the daughter's utterances even more.

However, no matter what the ultimate source of these two voices is, it is only when they become harmonious, in a somewhat

till the day she died! And I was an idiot! Having them taught, and they were girls! I thought they'd be grateful and take care of me when I got old and sick! But they're beasts! My God, what will happen to me when I get sick? ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> <https://mnsz.hu/eloadasok/single/734>, accessed: 31 August, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> ALMÁSI Zsolt, “A halál geometriája”, *prae.hu*, accessed: 31 August, 2022, <https://www.prae.hu/article/10829-a-halal-geometriaja/>

<sup>26</sup> ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> I was a great king! I had three daughters! Now here I am whimpering like a miserable worm! (...) But how could they be so vile? I gave them all I had! I raised them alone. Do you know how much Goneril ate when she was little? Her nappies always full of crap! You know how much nappies cost? (...) I always had to buy new clothes for Regan, and games, and a horse, and a blackamoor! Their mother was to blame, always spoiling them

classical reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia, that Lear's journey nears its end. When the antagonism, the continuous bickering between the Fool (also as Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia) and Lear subsides and they mutually forgive each other, is Lear finally ready to die. It is first Lear who asks for Cordelia's forgiveness:

LEAR: Thank you! You must put up with me. I was cruel to your mother and didn't give a shit about you three. I only cared about gaining more and more power. I got everything. Flat, property, car, country! I got new kidneys, a new liver, a new face. I didn't want you to have the kingdom. I didn't trust any of you. You are too good-hearted. Goneril's stupid. Regan's greedy. Or vice versa. Regan's stupid and Goneril is greedy. I'm always mixing them up. I wanted to be king even after my death. Please forgive me for everything. I am an old fool. Senseless. I had no sense. Pity.<sup>30</sup>

Replying, Cordelia admits that she was stupid to compare her love for her father to salt<sup>31</sup>. They embrace and plan to stay like that forever. Everything seems to be ready for a celebration.

A festive dinner follows, a burlesque-take on the classic drunk butler routine,<sup>32</sup> a reconciliatory banquet, or a wake – for Lear who is finally ready to die. The Fool, who, this time, plays James, Lear's butler, seats an impressive circle of guests at the table: Goneril, Regan, a guest called Albany-Cornwall-Kent-

Burgundy-Frank, Mr. Trump, Mr. Bean, Death, and finally the filthy, smelly, diabolical Poor Tom, a.k.a. Edgar Gloucester. As a mocking summary of all the previous scenes, the Fool speaks all the lines of the guests and drinks their drinks. As he gets more and more inebriated, Lear keeps asking him where Cordelia is. But she never arrives. After the final dessert course James/The Fool faints/dies so it takes the onstage musician, Zságer, to announce that Cordelia has died and will never come.

This utterance turns the banquet retrospectively into an unplanned wake for Cordelia, too. Her death, as in Shakespeare's play, happens offstage, and is only reported by outsider onlookers. She is given no final words, no tragic treatment. If she was projected onto the stage through the Fool's words, then her death is rather farcical – a drunken stumble and a stunt-like fall. Yet, the void that her absence created during the dinner lingers there in the final scene of the play, too. Instead of the pieta we are accustomed to at the end of Shakespeare's play, here, in the last scene, we can see an old man agonising *with* and later *on* a stool – Cordelia's empty chair – that represents Cordelia, or more specifically, her absence.

Lear's dearest daughter, who has previously been mediated through the Fool, is ultimately objectified as a stool, similar to those that stood in for her older sisters in Shakespeare's mock trial scene. Her role here, however, could not be more different. Her presence in absence is the final push Lear needs to be able to die. Although the play asserts that dying is a lonely act, Cordelia's nothingness, her non-attendance is vital for Lear's acceptance of death.

Similarly to *Lady Lear*, *Lear's Death* also interprets *King Lear* as a story told from a male perspective, in which female viewpoints can only be mediated through authoritative male voices. Yet, while *Lady Lear* wishes to camouflage this absence, in *Lear's Death* this marked void is interpreted as presence. This reverberates in the final text

<sup>30</sup> ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> The play continuously uses the Hungarian folk tale motive of the youngest daughter loving her father as much as people love salt instead of the lines from *King Lear's* love scene where Cordelia says "Nothing".

<sup>32</sup> See:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8xPhU5132I>, last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

of the play, a poem by Lajos Kassák, recited in Lear's voice: "Who's gone is gone, said my mother, never grieve over wayward souls. / Who's gone is gone, say I as well, but at the same time I feel profoundly / those once with us can never leave us completely."<sup>33</sup> With these words Lear climbs back to the Fool's shoulders, and the cycle starts again.

*Shakespeare, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian*

The final example the paper introduces is a Shakespeare burlesque, written by Zsolt Györei and Csaba Schlachtovszky that premiered at the Gyula Shakespeare Festival in 2021. The Shakespeare burlesque is a genre that had its heydays in nineteenth century London, and was born out of necessity, as a reaction to the Licensing Act of 1737 that prohibited illegitimate theatres from playing spoken drama. Since most of the English dramatic repertoire fell under that category, using the loophole ingeniously, London theatres transformed classical plays into operettas and burlesques, that is, into sung drama. The burlesque that was invented out of need quickly became a popular artform that appropriated Shakespeare's plays, too.

By definition,<sup>34</sup> a burlesque is an imitation of a serious work of art in a grotesque style, laden with puns and contemporary references. It uses visual gags, crossdressing, and is performed amidst over-the-top stage machinery in extravagant costumes. When it comes to Shakespeare, the burlesque uses the reduced plot of the Shakespeare classics, reverts iambic pentameter into rhyming couplets, transforms soliloquies into popular songs, yet most importantly, it acts as a cultural authority. As Richard Schoch convincingly argues,<sup>35</sup> the Shakespeare burlesque

did not wish to attack Shakespeare per se, it rather criticized contemporary cultural practices that revered Shakespeare unconditionally. It railed against the extremely realistic contemporary theatrical approach to Shakespeare, it attacked scenic illusionism, and overall, it wished to overthrow authentic productions' claim of authority. Its metatheatricality and self-reflexivity helped the burlesque to style itself as "the norm to which transgressive theatrical practices should revert."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between iconoclastic postmodern theatrical tendencies and the burlesque, since "(h)owever much it attacks dominant cultural practices, the Shakespeare burlesque always implies – indeed, sustains – a nostalgia for a culture which would no longer need to be attacked if only it were properly performed. Yet (...) it is the burlesque's bitter irony never to bring into being the culture which it can only imagine."<sup>37</sup> It is this nostalgia that sets the burlesque aside from other Shakespeare adaptations, and it is this nostalgia that makes the burlesque all the more topical, too, since, as cultural theorist, Svetlana Boym asserts: "(t)he first decade of the twenty-first century is not characterized by the search for newness, but by the proliferation of nostalgias that are often at odds with one another. Nostalgic cyberpunks and nostalgic hippies, nostalgic nationalists, and nostalgic cosmopolitans, nostalgic environmentalists and nostalgic metrophiliacs (city lovers) exchange pixel fire in the blogosphere. Nostalgia, like globalization, exists in the plural."<sup>38</sup> Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia, where the former sees itself as truth and tradition,

<sup>33</sup> ENYEDI, *Lear's Death*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley WELLS (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques* Volume 1 (London: Diploma Pres Lund 1977), xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Richard SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 65.

<sup>36</sup> SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> SCHOCH, *Not Shakespeare*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Svetlana BOYM, "Nostalgia and its Discontents", *The Hedgehog Review* 2007, Summer, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents> last accessed: 31 August, 2022.

while building on the sense of loss of community and cohesion, and offering a comforting collective script for individual longing. The latter, reflective nostalgia, on the contrary, calls ultimate truth into doubt, since it thrives on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging, and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. It is the interplay of these two kinds of nostalgias that energize the burlesque and set it apart from postmodern parodies.

Györei's and Schlichtovszky's burlesque, *Hamlear*<sup>39</sup>, as its title indicates, is a burlesque of both *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The authors, well-versed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian literature, transfer the events of the plays to the medieval past, yet use the 19<sup>th</sup>-century genre of a melodramatic tragedy to do so. The first act of the play is a burlesqued version of *Hamlet*, with Hamlear as its title character, while the second act is a *King Lear* persiflage, where Hamlear returns as a twisted Lear character, who adores his smallest, but wicked daughter, Cordelia, yet detests his two elder, honest daughters, Goneril and Regan. These plotlines are crafted in the vein of John Poole and classical Shakespeare burlesque, however, with a Hungarian touch, since they use the language of the classic Hungarian Shakespeare translations of János Arany and Mihály Vörösmarty. Indeed, the play once again asserts that Shakespeare is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian author. *Hamlear* is written in iambic pentameter, uses heroic couplets at the end of the scenes, and quotes Shakespeare at length, although these quotes are often recontextualized; something is rotting in the state of Denmark, since it is likened to a headless fish, Hamlear's jacket is undone, his stockings are unfastened, since he had been drinking all night, and there are more things in heaven and earth than missed kindergarten recitals. In true classical bur-

lesque style, Hamlear becomes an anti-hero (he is described by Polonius as a "melancholic snotbag"), who, as it turns out, has murdered his father and is responsible for most of the tragedies in the play.

Highly metatheatrical, *Hamlear* is a parody of classical theatrical clichés, too. Old Hamlear's full armor is ridiculed the same way as Hamlear's drive to constantly soliloquize, or the forced tragic ending when bodies must cover the stage. Contemporary theatrical tendencies are also mocked: Hamlear is a pretentious experimental director, ("As a writer-director I imagine a strong, alternative and groundbreaking space, where stage and auditorium melt into each other, and my actors enter through the audience."<sup>40</sup>), while his daughters, Goneril and Regan imagine him as a utopistic theatre manager, who, while experimental, is also caring and insightful:

"REGAN: He was guiding his nations,  
As masterly as a director of a theatre  
troupe,  
Who would give his life for his col-  
leagues.

GONERIL: Who provides all the actors  
with roles  
Tailored to their temperaments and,  
touching their souls,  
He uncovers the hidden motives of the  
heroes,  
He instructs and directs with sophisti-  
cation.

REGAN: In the name of holy artless-  
ness...

GONERIL: Yet in an alternative and  
transgressive fashion...

REGAN: Therefore, he is followed by  
loud applause wherever he goes."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Hamlear* is their second Shakespeare burlesque, the first is entitled *Bem, a debreceni gács* (2002) [Bem, the Galician of Debrecen], and is an *Othello* burlesque.

<sup>40</sup> GYÖREI Zsolt, SCHLACHTOVSKY Csaba, *Hamlear, a dán királyfiból lett brit király*, (Budapest – Gyula: Gondolat Kiadó – Gyulai Várszínház 2021), 47.

<sup>41</sup> GYÖREI, SCHLACHTOVSKY, *Hamlear*, 86.



The play jabs at burlesques as well, when characters comment on how some jokes and songs can hide bad acting: “Why don’t we write a musical comedy instead? Two-three funny songs and no one will notice that Laertes laughs the whole play to pieces.”<sup>42</sup>

*Hamlear*, however, has a more direct Hungarian connection, too, since a non-Shakespearean character, Bánk Bán, hero of the most famous Hungarian tragedy, also appears in the play. As a friend of Hamlear, he is instrumental in delivering a fatal end to Claudius and Getrude, and is also the only survivor of the Lear-related calamities of the second act. His character allows the play to reflect not only on theatrical and Shakespearean clichés, but also on Hungarianness, and on the validity of classic Hungarian literature. Moreover, Bánk’s running commentary on the events allows the play to ridicule certain aspects of national restorative nostalgia that regards the mythic past of Hungarian history as superior to all European cultures. Yet, by inserting Bánk into the *Hamlet-Lear* play, the burlesque also asserts that he is a tragic hero of the same magnanimity and posture as Hamlet and Lear. Indeed, although an underdog and an outsider at first, Bánk emerges from the double tragedy as the ultimate hero, king of England and Denmark. In the tone of playful reflective nostalgia, the play thus gives us the fulfilment of a national myth in which the Hungarian hero does, after all, triumph over the rest of Europe.

As a text, *Hamlear* takes itself seriously, it indulges in the peculiarities of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatrical language and tradition it invokes, and frolics in the mesmerizing variety of cultural references it uses and abuses. Although in its structure it resembles a classical play, yet, I wish to argue that with its innate playfulness that is the burlesque’s own, it can challenge teleological narratives, can show diversity and multi-perspectives. Although *Hamlear* camouflages itself as a

19<sup>th</sup>-century melodramatic tragedy, it is a voice of cultural plurality, healthy self-reflexivity, and subversion, and as its historical antecedents, a norm to which transgressive theatrical practices can indeed revert to.

### Conclusion

This short survey of Hungarian Shakespeare adaptations of the last decade hoped to show that, despite the relative conservatism of the Hungarian theatre scene, there are voices that advocate postdramatic ideas. Artists who openly experiment with narrative structures, metatheatricality, and intermediality, yet are equally interested in entering a social, cultural dialogue about literature, about theatre, and about that 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian author, William Shakespeare.

### Bibliography

- ARI-NAGY Barbara, GÁSPÁR Ildikó. *Macbeth*. MS
- ENYEDI, Éva. *Lear’s Death*, translated by BARKER, Philip. MS
- GYÖREI Zsolt, SCHLACHTOVSKY Csaba. *Hamlear*, Budapest – Gyula: Gondolat Kiadó – Gyulai Várszínház, 2021.
- ALMÁSI, Zsolt. “A halál geometriája”, *prae.hu*, <https://www.prae.hu/article/10829-a-halal-geometriaja/>
- ARIFA, Akbar. “Ian McKellen’s Dazzling Swan-Song weighted with Poignancy”. *The Guardian*. July 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/26/king-lear-review-ian-mckellen-duke-of-yorks>
- BOYM, Svetlana. “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, *The Hedgehog Review* 2007, Summer, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>
- CONRAD, Peter. “Expatriating Lear”. In *To Be Continued*. 95–152. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>42</sup> GYÖREI, SCHLACHTOVSKY, *Hamlear*, 42.

- DESMET, Christy. "Some *Lears* of Private Life from Tate to Shaw". In *King Lear: New Critical Essays*. Edited by KAHAN, Jeffrey, 326–350 (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
- DERES, Kornélia. "Emerging postdramatic aesthetics and Shakespeare in Hungary". In *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity*. *Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, 2021. 105–119.
- DERES, Kornélia. "Szürreália emlékezete". *Színház* 48, no. 4. (2016): 14–17.
- FÖLDVÁRY, Kinga. "Reappropriation of History on the Post-Communist Hungarian Stage". In *Shakespeare in Central Europe after 1989: Common Heritage and Regional Identity*. *Theatralia* 24, Special Issue, (2021), 239–253.
- LEHMANN, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by JÜNS-MUNBY, Karen, Routledge: London and New York, 2006.
- SCHANDL Veronika. *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary: Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain*. Lewinston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.
- SCHOCH, Richard. *Not Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- WELLS, Stanley (ed.). *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*. London: Diploma Press Lund, 1977.

## Rulership in Early Modern England: Shakespeare's *King Lear* in Context

NATÁLIA PIKLI

**Judit MUDRICZKI.** *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear. An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage.* Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020. 115 p. + bibliography.

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not only a popular stage play, frequently and continuously performed since the early seventeenth century, but has also been discussed in numerous books and articles with a strictly scholarly focus, as well as in essays which use the playtext as a springboard for discussing philosophical or other intellectual issues. This essayistic approach characterizes, for instance, early twentieth-century Shakespeare scholars from A.C. Bradley<sup>1</sup> to G. Wilson Knight,<sup>2</sup> and lingers in Jan Kott's famous *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*,<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes's rather imaginative *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*,<sup>4</sup> or Simon Palfrey's more recent *Poor Tom. Living King Lear*.<sup>5</sup> Judit Mudriczki positions her research

at the other end of the spectrum, and promises rigorous scholarly acumen, philological precision and logic; however, despite its many inspiring insights and merits, the monograph does not always meet such expectations.

Although at the very beginning Mudriczki declares that "this book is the revised and edited version of the PhD dissertation defended in 2010,"<sup>6</sup> the revision leaves much to be desired. A PhD dissertation and its revised version in a published monograph are not cast in the same mould. First of all, the scholarly achievements of the decade that elapsed between 2010 and 2020 are hardly taken into account; in addition, editing and revising errors remained in the published book. For instance, the references to added emphases, "coloured green, blue, and red" in the comparative appendix of the quarto and folio texts of a scene lose meaning in black and white typography, together with other markings (underlined lines) that receive no explanation in the main body of the text.<sup>7</sup> With careful editing and proofreading, the book might have escaped such embarrassing errors.

The book focuses on the printed version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which came out in 1608 and is known as the 'Pied Bull Quar-

---

<sup>1</sup> A.C. BRADLEY, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> G. Wilson KNIGHT, *The Wheel of Fire. Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedy* (Cleveland, New York: Meridian Books, 1930).

<sup>3</sup> Jan KOTT, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Ted HUGHES, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Simon PALFREY, *Poor Tom. Living King Lear* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226150789.001.0001>

---

<sup>6</sup> MUDRICZKI Judit, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear. An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage* (Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020), 7.

<sup>7</sup> "Appendix. The conflated texts of the 1608 quarto and the folio", MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy...*, 84–86.

to.' This is a laudable and clear starting point, since the two extant textual versions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (the 1608 quarto and the 1623 First Folio texts) already fostered much scholarly discussion and editing dilemmas, with by now classical works in the field like *The Division of the Kingdoms*.<sup>8</sup> These philological and canonised axioms are mentioned and used in a relevant way by Mudriczki, attesting to her knowledge of such questions concerning Shakespeare's play. However, this scholarly acumen seems to disappear on occasion, when other contemporary sources are discussed and enter into a dialogue with *King Lear*. For instance, the earlier *King Leir* play, which forms an important and integral part of the argumentation in Mudriczki's book, was published with a new introductory essay by Tiffany Stern already in 2002, which scholarly edition must have been taken into account.<sup>9</sup> One may or may not agree with Stern's proposition that Shakespeare wrote his version of the Lear story earlier than the publication of the *Leir* quarto in 1605, making this latter publication a printer's advertising hoax, capitalising on the King's Men successful new Lear story.<sup>10</sup> This claim is supported by the 'best guess' date of 1605 as for the writing of *King Lear* by Martin Wiggins in *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, which is the most recent and trustworthy guide regarding dates of early modern drama.<sup>11</sup> It is not to be disputed that *The*

*True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* came earlier than Shakespeare's *King Lear*, since we have a record of a performance, and an entry for a planned publication for *King Leir*, both in 1594,<sup>12</sup> therefore Shakespeare must have known this play from theatrical productions before writing his own version, even if one does not accept Stern's and Wiggins's suggestion of the first performances of *King Lear* preceding the publication of the *King Leir* quarto. However, such issues should be addressed (at least in passing) in a book that is so much focused on Shakespeare's contemporary sources and influences.

Shakespeare scholars, if they consider the early modern context, like Judit Mudriczki, tread on uneven and only partially charted terrain. There is little hard evidence concerning specific dates or facts related to the thriving theatrical world of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In order to avoid making easily refutable claims, one must first clarify and bear in mind how complicated the traffic of ideas and motifs was in early modern print and theatre, and adhere to the necessary scholarly rigour of positioning one's claims on the spectrum of the possible, the plausible, and the proba-

---

IX. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–2018).

<sup>12</sup> Philip Henslowe's *Diary* records that 'Kinge leare' was staged twice by the Queen's and Earl of Sussex's Men in April 1594, and the entry of 14 May 1594 in the Stationers' Register has 'Leire Kinge of England and his Three Daughters', as quoted in R. A. FOAKES, "Introduction", William SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, Arden 3 (London: Thomson Learning, 2005, editorial material 1997), 90. Foakes also agrees with Stern that the 26 November 1607 entry in the Stationers' Register for Shakespeare's version as well as the detailed title page of the 1608 published quarto suggest a marketing ploy on part of the printer-publisher to make the 'new' play simultaneously similar to and different from the 'old' one. (Ibid.)

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Division of the Kingdoms. Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, ed by Gary TAYLOR, Michael WARREN (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> ANON., *King Leir*. Globe Quartos, ed by Tiffany STERN (London: Routledge, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203063484>

<sup>10</sup> Tiffany Stern as quoted by Jeffrey KAHAN, "Introduction", *King Lear. New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203090084>

<sup>11</sup> Martin WIGGINS, Catherine RICHARDSON, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*. Vol. I-

ble.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Mudriczki's repeated claim that the very first performance of *King Lear* took place in an elite setting, on St Stephen's Day, 1606 in Whitehall for a royal audience<sup>14</sup> takes a marketing ploy at face value; thus, her analysis of the potential implications of the published playtext being specifically suited to fit the performative context of such an elitist first night (enjoying special attention as the first performance after a plague-ridden year, written for a smaller and more intimate stage with 300 people in the audience, St. Stephen's Day being a day of charity, etc.) is, inevitably, based on a faulty premise. No one can tell for certain when and where the first performance of *King Lear* took place, we only have possible and probable indicators, as they are summed up, for instance, by Jeffrey Kahan (whose edited book is cited by Mudriczki in another context). Title pages in quarto editions served as advertising tools, and they can only be taken for fact with extreme caution. They have to be read critically, as, for in-

<sup>13</sup> This clarification of claims as 'the possible', 'the plausible', and 'the probable' is a necessary requirement in contemporary Shakespeare scholarship. The taxonomy was clarified, for instance, in T.G. SCHOONE-JONGEN'S *Shakespeare's Companies: William Shakespeare's Early Career and Acting Companies, 1577–1594* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008) but it has been employed in some form in serious scholarly monographs since 2000s, most recently, in David MCINNIS, *Shakespeare and Lost Plays. Reimagining Drama in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108915250>

<sup>14</sup> "the date given in the Stationers' Register [26 November 1607] and the allusion to the performance on the cover page of the Pied Bull Quarto suggest that Shakespeare's play debuted on stage at the royal court in 1606 during the monarch's winter solace" MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesie...*, 13, and later, 29, 115.

stance, Tiffany Stern pointed out in her *Documents of Performance*.<sup>15</sup> For this fact of the early modern print market, corroborated by numerous examples, the title page of the Pied Bull quarto is an often cited one: "M. William Shak-speare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of TOM of Bedlam: As it was played before the Kings Maieste at Whitehall upon S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes. By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe on the Bancke-side. London, Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls Churchyard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere S. Austins Gate, 1608." Mudriczki accepts every piece of information on this title page as factual evidence, without making the distinction between what is clearly objective information and what is an advertising tool. The phrase "As it was played..." does not necessarily signify a debut performance, rather falls in line with other marketing triggers like "the sullen and assumed humour", the popular comic-madman phrase "Tom o' Bedlam", and the reference to the well-known story of the ancient king with his three daughters. All we can say with certainty is that *King Lear* was performed at both venues, Whitehall Palace and the Globe Theatre, in Shakespeare's lifetime, as supported by other evidence, and it is probable that it was quite new when it entertained the royal audience, probably during the Christmas festivities in 1606–1607, after a plague-ridden year when public theatres were closed for a long time. However, no production – even by professional acting companies – was allowed before the King unless the Master of Revels (then George Buc) had seen a previous performance of it. Although Mudriczki claims, quite correctly,

<sup>15</sup> Tiffany STERN, *Documents of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



on page 14 that “it is impossible to prove whether the king was present at the performance of *King Lear* or not”, such caution with the plausibility of premises (and analyses built on them) is not exercised consistently throughout the monograph.

The emphasis on the quarto version of *King Lear* is a necessary but not entirely adequate focus for the whole book, which falls into three equally promising parts, after a general introduction of the historical context and an overview of previous scholarship. However, for the most part, this overview relies on canonical *Lear* scholarship up to the 1990s, not taking into consideration recent developments. For instance, Mudriczki simply repeats Urkowitz’s claim from 1980 that the Pied Bull quarto is based on Shakespeare’s manuscript, the so-called ‘foul papers’, while both the monograph itself and later scholarship question the validity of this idea, calling attention to the elements that are characteristic of a performance text put into print with no emendation.<sup>16</sup> Although such an overview of previous scholarship is a necessary feature in a doctoral dissertation, it could have been condensed and brought up to date for the current monograph, to provide more room for the author’s own findings, elaborated in the following three chapters. More significantly, the claims the book makes would have been more nuanced, had performance and repertory studies been taken into account, forming a significant portion of Shakespeare scholarship from Rosalyn Knutson’s important book in 1991<sup>17</sup> through Tiffany Stern’s *Documents of*

*Performance* to Lucy Munro’s recent monograph on the King’s Men repertory.<sup>18</sup>

Each chapter approaches the 1608 quarto of *King Lear* from a different viewpoint: Chapter 1 focuses on “The dramaturgical and theatrical heritage: A contrastive reading of *Magnyfycence*, *King Leir* and *King Lear*”, Chapter 2 relates the poetical and rhetorical elements in Shakespeare’s playtext to a highly influential rhetorical treatise of the age, George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), highlighting two scenes, and the last chapter discusses the images of the body in *King Lear* as compared to the political-philosophical concept of the king’s two bodies, which was indeed a highly popular and much contested notion in late medieval and early modern England. All three focal points are relevant and promise new insights, however, they are only loosely held together by the emphasis on the 1608 quarto as the basic text for discussion. The reader would benefit more from such a structure if these three chapters had been connected more consistently, and, for instance, the highly inspiring references to emblems in Chapter 2 had been brought into meaningful dialogue with corporeal imagery discussed in Chapter 3. In addition, the length of the book (only 115 pages) does not allow for detailed and in-depth studies of such complex issues, thus, analyses remain somewhat superficial, by necessity.

The leading idea of the monograph features in the title of the Introduction, declaring *King Lear* as “a dramatized early modern mirror of governance,” citing King James’s own writing in the genre of ‘the mirror of princes’, in modern terms, a ‘guidebook’ for rulers, his *Basilikon Doron*. However, the book fails to discuss either *Basilikon Doron* in more detail or mention the first and most famous proponent of connections between historical royal performances and performed

<sup>16</sup> In addition, Mudriczki makes two opposing claims on the same page that would need explanation to be reconciled: “based on Shakespeare’s foul papers” and “the text derives from a performed version,” MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare’s Art of Poesie...*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> ROSALYN KNUTSON, *The Repertory of Shakespeare’s Company 1594–1613* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> LUCY MUNRO, *Shakespeare in the Theatre. The King’s Men* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262606>

kings in the age: Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*<sup>19</sup> does not even appear in the bibliography. On the other hand, the Introduction aptly summarizes and rightly criticizes the claims of a narrowly minded historicist approach, which would connect the inception of *King Lear* to James I and his personal issues, illnesses, and political problems. The monograph takes a more solid stance and promises to focus on available printed material, first discussing the Lear quarto text "on a macrostructural level" together with other 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century dramatic pieces, then "on a microstructural level", that is, analysing figurative language, and finally from a "theoretical viewpoint", negotiating contemporaneous ideas on governance. Even though I fail to see why dramaturgical elements would create "macrostructure" and tropes "microstructure", the intention to create a logical line of argumentation is acceptable, though the execution is marred by the lack of detailed and in-depth elaboration from each perspective, and by insufficient coherence between the chapters.

The first chapter engages in the comparative discussion of three dramatic texts: John Skelton (1460?–1529), King Henry VIII's court poet's "goodly interlude", *Magnyfycence*, the 1605 *King Leir* quarto and the 1608 *King Lear* quarto, with the aim to establish "an interpretive frame for a historicized understanding of Shakespeare's dramaturgy."<sup>20</sup> While the *Leir* play was undoubtedly close enough to the conception and later playhouse re-formulation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and comparing these two plays is a valid – though often discussed – research question, the choice of Skelton's elite play proves more tenuous. Mudriczki's claim that *Magnyfycence* "was undoubtedly available in print in his [Shakespeare's] life-

time"<sup>21</sup> is based on one scholarly article in 1999 (which I could not get hold of), whereas none of the available studies on the sources and influences of Shakespeare's *King Lear* after 2000 corroborate this, or even mention Skelton. Neither the *Short Title Catalogue* nor *Early English Books Online*, the two scholarly databases of early modern print, know about any printed edition of Skelton's play after 1533, although his other works were more or less continuously published between the 1560s and 1620s.<sup>22</sup> *Magnyfycence* was only performed in court sometime in the 1510s or early 1520s. Therefore, Shakespeare's awareness of *Magnyfycence* after more than 70 years of it being out of print and being never performed in public playhouses is a bold claim. Nevertheless, the comparative reading of an early 16<sup>th</sup> century allegorical morality play, a so-called Tudor interlude for the royal court and an early 17th century play, primarily intended for the public playhouse, may offer valuable insights. This chapter indeed makes very interesting observations, which present the new and innovative elements of this monograph, but a conscientious scholar must first clarify that what is being revealed about the similarities and differences in dramaturgy is educational for us in a historical perspective, but cannot be seen as influence. On the other hand, the "conceptual similarities" discussed are rather general, monarch figures did feature in lots of plays, and even the division of the kingdom appeared in a number of other, more contemporary plays. Nevertheless, what this chapter says about the significance of the mirror motif, of Fortune's wheel, and Poverty warning *Magnyfycence* similarly to

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>22</sup> The *Short Title Catalogue* (<http://estc.bl.uk>, last accessed 20 November 2022) gives 1530, but the only extant copy as it appears in *Early English Books Online*, printed by J. Rastell, gives 1533, indicating that it is a second edition (<https://www.proquest.com/legacyredirect/ebo>, last accessed 20 November 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen GREENBLATT, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 21.

Kent warning Lear, etc. is interesting and would be a good starting point for more in-depth analyses. The focus on flattery (and its rhetorical expression) as the main component in the kings' downfall in all three texts offers further valuable insights.

A more dramaturgically-oriented approach emerges in the second part of this chapter, which combines 'good' and 'bad' characters, and calls attention to the figure of the jester. The labelling of characters as good or bad, "attacking" or "protecting royal dignity", however, risks oversimplification, since the figures of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear* can hardly conform to such clear-cut distinctions. Categorizing the characters in *King Lear* as representing some moral choice (Lear's daughters, Perillus, Skalliger) or simply entertaining (Mumford, the Mariners) would be more illuminating if they were compared to their Shakespearean counterparts. The jester figure, however, is analysed in more detail in all three plays, although significant viewpoints are missing. The monograph wisely emphasizes and employs classical 'fool studies' by Enid Welsford,<sup>23</sup> David Wiles,<sup>24</sup> and Peter Happé,<sup>25</sup> in discussing the Vice character in pre-Shakespearean drama, however, mentions of Hungarian scholarship in the field are sorely missing, especially since Ágnes Matuska's groundbreaking studies on the Vice figure in interludes and Shakespeare were already published in 2005 and 2008, not to speak of her monograph on

the subject, which came out in 2011.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Mudriczki's analysis would have benefited tremendously from Indira Ghose's discussion of Lear's Fool regarding the Erasmian *Praise of Folly* context, or considering the concept of the carnival in *King Lear*.<sup>27</sup> Although being not only specific to these three plays but being more generally employed, the dramaturgical elements discussed in Mudriczki's comparative analysis (the use of letters, disguise, suicide attempts, and recoveries) offer an interesting and inspiring take on the texts, one would love to see that in a more elaborated form. In sum, this chapter proves the most inspiring one, even if it could have profited from acknowledging the achievements of the last decades of Shakespeare studies, both in international and Hungarian contexts. Since Mudriczki's monograph discusses early modern texts relating to Shakespeare's play, it would have been essential to address how recent scholarship shifted the focus from an earlier, rather positivistic way of source-hunting to different forms of interaction among early modern works and authors, influencing each other in multiple ways.<sup>28</sup>

The chapter on 'microstructural', that is, rhetorical elements is less satisfactory than the preceding comparative one. Again, phil-

<sup>23</sup> Enid WELSFORD, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> David WILES, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Peter HAPPE, "Fancy and Foly: The Drama of Fools in *Magnyfycence*", *Comparative Drama* 27, No. 4 (1994): 425–452.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1993.0034>

<sup>26</sup> MATUSKA Ágnes, *The Vice-Device. Iago and Lear's Fool as Agents of Representational Crisis* (Szeged: JATE Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Indira GHOSE, "Lear's Fool", in *Shakespeare and Laughter. A cultural history*, 169–208 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). For the carnivalesque in *King Lear* here and the mock trial scene, see, for instance, Natália PIKLI, "King Lear: Carnival's anti-carnival", in *The Prism of Laughter: Shakespeare's very tragical mirth*, 119–153 (Saarbrücken, VDM Verlag, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Janet CLARE, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic. Imitation, Borrowing and Competition in Renaissance Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<https://doi.org/10.1017/cb09781139626934>

ological accuracy leaves much to be desired at the beginning of the chapter: Mudriczki lists several potential claims for George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (only printed editions in 1589) bearing direct influence on Shakespeare, however, she does not clarify her position, and unfortunately does not exclude such obviously false claims as the one that Puttenham might have been Shakespeare's tutor, made by the conspiracy theorist Charles Murrey Willis, a proponent of Shakespeare not having written Shakespeare's works (he proposed that *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* was in fact written by Puttenham). Despite such problems, it is quite plausible that Puttenham's popular and frequently used treatise on rhetoric must have been known by Shakespeare to some extent. The following close reading of the love contest and the mock trial offers good and valuable insights regarding the tropes and figurative language dominant in these scenes; however, the allusions to and direct quotes from Puttenham's work do not add anything to the otherwise interesting analysis, merely repeat or rephrase the definition of the specific trope. More interestingly, the chapter discusses the significance and contemporary complexity of such concepts as the 'bond', and includes meaningful references to other relevant contemporary parallels and influences, like *The Tragedy of Gorboduc* (1561),<sup>29</sup> and emblem books depicting hearts and tongues in their representation of flatterers. The elaboration on the 'indecent' of the mock trial scene, however, suffers from a lack of a more informed perspective again,

failing to recognize the connection between indecent clothing, sumptuary laws, and carnivalesque aspects, or to point out that Puttenham's concept of 'indecent' in rhetoric is worlds apart from the treatment and representation of 'indecent' (both in clothes and behaviour) in the public theatre in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The final chapter on the body politic could be extended into a full-blown monograph alone: the late medieval and early modern concepts of the 'king's two bodies' and the corporeal analogy of the kingdom (with the king being the head, the counselors the eyes, etc.) were indeed highly popular and frequently used in politics and in literature. What can be done in 26 pages, however, is rightfully executed: the chapter clarifies the long and complicated line of thought from Plato to Shakespeare's contemporary, William Camden, and the famous tale of the belly in *Coriolanus* (1608), and even rightfully acknowledges that the 12<sup>th</sup> century author, John of Salisbury's Latin work on the subject might only have been known to Shakespeare via indirect transmission through Camden, Ben Jonson, and others. The chapter then turns to the disintegration of the body politic in the Lear story, and offers illuminating analyses on how different body parts relate to this concept in Shakespeare's 1608 playtext, which discussion could have been made fuller by referring back to the previously mentioned but not elaborated parallels with emblems.

In conclusion, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear* is a valuable introduction to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and its contemporary context regarding significant questions and popular motifs of the time. However, it needs to be read critically, especially concerning philological issues, and the reading of the book must be complemented and reconsidered in the light of recent scholarly achievements in Shakespeare studies.

<sup>29</sup> Being a morality-type play, and first performed before a monarch (Queen Elizabeth I in Whitehall in 1561), *Gorboduc* is a much more plausible influence on Shakespeare than *Magnyfycence*. It also contains the problem of the division of the kingdom, with printed editions in 1565, 1570, 1590 and a recorded performance, for instance, in Dublin in 1601.

## How to Deal with Multitudes?

ÁDÁM BETHLENFALVY

**MCAVOY, Mary and O'CONNOR, Peter, eds.**  
*The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*. London: Routledge, 2022. 610 p.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914>

*The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education* is a fifty-seven-chapter strong compilation of writings on the wide concept of drama in education. It is a “comprehensive resource for scholars, artists, and educators”,<sup>1</sup> according to the editors Mary McAvoy and Peter O'Connor. The scope of themes, contexts, approaches, localities, methodologies and authors included in the volume reflect their aim, and it seems beyond question that the publication has all the characteristics needed to become a seminal reference point for those writing about drama education. It also seems evident that the book will be used as a steppingstone by many who are studying to become scholars, artists, or educators in the field of drama education.

The book presents the writings in three parts. The first one, containing twelve chapters is titled *Boundaries and contours*. The second part titled *Methods, programmes, and partnerships* offers thirty-eight chapters, while the third part, titled *Futures and possibilities*, contains seven writings. The nature of the chapters in the three sections are clearly quite different. While writings in the first part address larger themes, overarching issues, the second part feels more like looking into a drama-kaleidoscope, and getting impressions from a variety of drama projects

and research from around the globe. The third part reflects more on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our field, with chapters discussing the relationship of drama education and digital technologies explicitly.

In my reporting on the specific chapters of the publication I will start from this third part and head back to the beginning step-by step. As the reviewer of this massive and important collection of writing, I am not able to do justice to all the authors, my reflections on the chapters will admittedly be subjective and will cover topics within this diverse field that I am most engaged in.

While there are references in many chapters to the impact of the pandemic, one of the most tangible consequences for our field is a greater openness to the inclusion of digital technologies in drama education. David Cameron and Michael Anderson provide an extremely useful analysis of the changing position of digital technologies in the field of drama, highlighting that digital tools have become an important part of young people's creative activities and personal development, hence the authors also examine concepts like mediated self and augmented self. They argue that “the next phase of drama education and technology should see its demise as a category as we collaborate with students to see technology in drama education as commonplace and unremarkable”.<sup>2</sup> A chapter by Adisti Anindita Regar reports on a research project exploring the use of trans-media theatre experience that was built around

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary MCAVOY and Peter O'CONNOR, “We contain multitudes: An introduction”, in *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, ed. by Mary MCAVOY and Peter O'CONNOR, 1–6 (London: Routledge, 2022), 1.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-1>

---

<sup>2</sup> David CAMERON and Michael ANDERSON, “Evolution, diffusion and disturbance: Drama, education and technology” in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 513–523, 521.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-56>



the South Australian Slingsby Theatre's performance. The researcher explored four different possibilities of how the theatre performance can be followed up in the digital space, reflecting on both the challenges and the productive outcomes of the experiment.<sup>3</sup> Amy Petersen Jensen and Kris W. Peterson focused on how "digital technologies might inform gesture, space, place, and the performance of identity in contemporary drama education experiences". Through assignments for their students they created a framework that allowed young people to explore and reflect on their bodily expressions on digital media, and come to a deeper understanding of their own use of these platforms and the impact it had on their non-digital communication.<sup>4</sup> On a different note, Matt Omasta's chapter titled number count makes an argument for the implementation of quantitative research in the field of drama education.<sup>5</sup> This piece offers a survey of quantitative research done in drama, but surprisingly does not refer to the DICE research, one of the few big surveys, conducted in the field of theatre and drama education, that built highly on

<sup>3</sup> Adisti Anindita REGAR, "Designing a trans-media THEATRE experience for drama education", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 524–530, 525.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Petersen JENSEN and Kris W. PETERSON, "Digital bodies/live space, How digital technologies might inform gesture, space, place, and the performance of identity in contemporary drama education experiences", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 531–544, 531.

<sup>5</sup> Matt OMASTA, "Numbers count, Quantitative research in drama education", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 553–563, 553.

quantitative methods.<sup>6</sup> Omasta's chapter comes to the undebatable conclusion that "we might most benefit from carrying out mixed-methods studies that deliberately blend multiple methodologies, thus benefiting from the strengths of each approach incorporated".<sup>7</sup>

I will now take a step back to the second part of the book and offer the chance to take a quick glimpse into the kaleidoscope, I will offer some examples of the many interesting projects and case studies presented there. Cletus Moyo shares a self-reflective journey of focusing on facilitation at Lupane State University, Zimbabwe while teaching drama classes at the tennis court of the institutions.<sup>8</sup> Chipso Marunda-Piki reflects on the possibilities offered by using Teacher in Role in English as a Second Language education introducing the story of the Gruffalo in Zimbabwe.<sup>9</sup> Branka Bajić Jovanov presents a collaboration between a theatre, the municipality, and the pre-school institutions in a district of Belgrade to use process drama in the ecological education of preschool children.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> CZIBOLY Adam, *The DICE Has Been Cas: Research findings and recommendations on educational theatre and drama* (Budapest: DICE Consortium, 2010), 8.

<sup>7</sup> OMASTA, "Numbers count...", 562.

<sup>8</sup> Cletus MOYO, "Looking back and forward: Reflecting on my facilitation as a drama in education teacher and facilitator at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe" in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 484–487, 484.

<sup>9</sup> Chipso MARUNDA-PIKI, "Formulating a learning context using teacher in role for reading fluency in ESL students", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 408–412, 408.

<sup>10</sup> Branka Bajić JOVANOV, "Ecological education of preschool children using process drama", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 166–171, 166.

Christine Hatton shares an in-depth and rare account of a school project in Australia based on Heathcote's transdisciplinary rolling role system of teaching, in which teachers of different subjects come together to form a fictional context that allows them to implement their curriculum, teaching from within the fiction.<sup>11</sup> Anne Richie G. Balgos reports on using Theatre of the Oppressed in teaching literature in the Philippines.<sup>12</sup> Peter Duffy conducts a 'project autopsy' centred around a longitudinal research conducted in the *Read to Succeed Camps* in rural South Carolina, US. The rigour in the detail and the description of the research and the honesty in the disappointment with the results are a rare example of raising productive questions that ought to make the field think beyond the assumptions we have about the impact of drama.<sup>13</sup> While most chapters use a classic academic format, others are set as dialogue between practitioners,<sup>14</sup> and besides the wide geographical and methodological spectrum,

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-17>

<sup>11</sup> Christine HATTON, "Drama as a pedagogy of connection: Using Heathcote's rolling role system to activate the ethical imagination" in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 153–165, 153. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-16>

<sup>12</sup> Anne Richie G. BALGOS, "Boal in the Philippine classroom: Using Theatre of the Oppressed in teaching literature", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 338–344, 338.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-35>

<sup>13</sup> Peter DUFFY, "Mixed methods in drama education research, A project autopsy", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 297–309, 298. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-32>

<sup>14</sup> Dontá MCGILVERY and Claire K. REDFIELD, "Little Red and the Wolf: Devising with young people at Eastlake Park", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 246–249, 246.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-27>

there is also variety in relation to age-groups, with a chapter reflecting specifically on drama in education for adults.<sup>15</sup> These one-liners do not do justice to the work that is shared by the contributors of this publication, scanning the list of chapters is worthwhile to find themes or authors that reflect one's interest.<sup>16</sup> The 'multitudes' referred to in the title of the introduction, besides its many and obvious positive aspects, does also contain limitations. While the scope of what is offered is exasperating, offering a breadth of reference points and even some provocations, many of the fifty-seven chapters only offer a passing glimpse into the project, research, or theory shared by their authors. The references, of course, can be followed further for those who want to track the given subject, but in some cases an explicit offer at the end of the chapter on how to engage with the topic in greater depth would have offered much needed further context for these pieces. While the introduction of the editors at the onset of the book discusses the diversity of *Companion's* content, it seems a missed opportunity that apart from the titles of the three parts, they do not offer a compass or other form of support for those braving to navigate this multitude of thoughts and practices. Especially in the case of the second part, discussed above, where the sheer number of chapters is overwhelming, some pointers would help readers take in more of the richness that is on offer, and some form of intervention from the editor could also balance the attention among the work of the authors who face strong competition from each other in the book.

<sup>15</sup> Cortney MCENIRY KNIPP, "Trauma-informed considerations for drama in education with adults", 350–356, 350.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-37>

<sup>16</sup> A full list of the chapters and even some of the full chapters have been made downloadable on this website:

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003000914>

The chapters in the first part of the book discuss different aspects of drama education in a greater depth, offering useful insights and provocations. John O'Toole's historical mini-tour of the educating process of drama offers much useful insight into how different ages and cultures related to drama, even providing an example of an eighth-century English monk, Ceolfrith, stepping into the role of different characters from the Bible, basically using a form of hot-seating to make Bible teaching more accessible.<sup>17</sup> O'Toole discusses DiE as a pedagogy stemming out of the movement of Enlightenment, and offers a simplified overview of the history of drama education to come to what I see as the central question of his piece: to what extent should those "enlightened" core values at the heart of this pedagogy be negotiated to make the global spreading of drama possible and to face those unprecedented challenges that are before us. O'Toole frames his writing with the story of a visit to China by a group of drama experts in 2019. The organisers of the conference asked Prof. O'Toole to change some paragraphs in his keynote speech after asking for a copy to help the translation of the talk. He recounts rewriting his speech in code to test the water. "Instead of 'drama for social change', I wrote, 'drama to help people make their lives better'"<sup>18</sup>. The reported incident brings an exciting uneasiness to the whole chapter. O'Toole closes his chapter by stating that "We just need to find the right stage – or, to use a more contemporary metaphor, an appropriate public platform to sell our merchandise – to let people know that drama is, or could be, in PETA's words, 'the cheapest form of em-

<sup>17</sup> John O'TOOLE, "Whose enlightened pedagogy? A historical mini-tour of the educating process of drama", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 65–79, 67.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-8>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 75.

powerment'."<sup>19</sup> The metaphor of peaceful merchants selling their products can very rightfully open the question of where the boundary is between 'making accessible' and the commodification of this unique artistic-educational genre, a question that we might need to think about in the context of neoliberal agenda of the commodifying education.

Making drama education accessible is an issue that is touched on by Adam Cziboly, Mette Bøe Lyngstad, and Sisi Zheng in their important examination of the influence of the "conventions approach" on the practice of drama education in different cultures. The authors researched the impact of the three editions of Tony Goode and Jonothan Neelands' book *Structuring Drama Work* in Hungary, Norway, and China, collecting data from drama teachers and analysing their responses in detail. The paper offers a rich discussion of different perspectives on the "conventions approach" citing critiques and also Neelands' response to the questions raised. These offer a useful context for the opinion of the practitioners working in the field that is brought in through the responses to the survey. The authors come to the conclusion that the accessibility offered by this format might carry the danger of instrumentalization and also point out that:

"For those facilitators who have learnt about planning and leading more complex processes and can combine the conventions in a meaningful way, access to a wide variety of work forms (a total of 100 conventions in the third edition) can be enriching. However, for those who try to use the handbook as kind of a "recipe book", and simply read the descriptions of the conventions without understanding how these conventions can be organised, the mere application of stand-alone conventions in order to achieve a curriculum learning objective might result in a stockpile

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

of empty forms. Sadly, the book offers little help on how conventions could and should be organised.”<sup>20</sup>

While the chapter above focused on the conventions and the forms used in drama lessons, Eva Hallgren’s research concentrates on the value of the process in drama and the significance of the fictional role in relation to agency. She analyses the interaction in and out of role through the use of visually representing the communication of the participants of the drama, and finds that the students in a lesson based on the story of *The Seal Wife* use their fictional roles to alter the classroom hierarchy even when the teacher moves out of role. She argues that the “student’s use of the role could be perceived as a powerful protest against the teacher’s input, but was created entirely in accordance with the aesthetic expression and performed in several rounds and added new layers of content. The teacher-in-role did not meet these actions, and, instead, ignored the in-role actions and went out of role. The student’s actions lost their agentic power.”<sup>21</sup> This research offers important and practical evidence of the social impact of drama, something that Dorothy Heathcote also points to in her seminal *Signs and Portents*<sup>22</sup>, though not using these terms.

---

<sup>20</sup> CZIBOLY Adam, Mette BØE LYGSTAD and Sisi ZHENG, “The influence of the ‘conventions approach’ on the practice of drama in different cultures”, in MCAVOY and O’CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 94–109, 96.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-10>

<sup>21</sup> Eva HALLGREN, “Drama in education and the value of process”, in MCAVOY and O’CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 45–52, 50.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-4>

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy HEATHCOTE, “Signs and portents”, in *Collected Writings on Education and Drama*, ed. by Cecily O’NEILL and Liz JOHNSON, 160–

In the first chapter of the book, Kelly Freebody looks at the concept of social change and also discusses her own different readings of Heathcote’s work in different stages of her life. Her self-examining piece explores the relationship between drama and social change through examining her own bookshelf and ideas, the thoughts and theories perched on the shelves, in a seemingly meandering but actually highly structured way. The four reference points she builds her writing around – the significance of youth; knowledge leading to change; drama being prosocial; and that schooling is inherently political – offer useful theoretical reference points for the analysis of our field,<sup>23</sup> and also allow us to recognise how theories outside the world of drama can become formative for our discipline.

Mindy R. Carter’s chapter explores which “specific drama strategies (...) could be used to best teach Canadian Indigenous topics to pre-service teachers”.<sup>24</sup> The study examines courses across Canada. Perhaps the starting question of the investigation, aiming to connect specific drama strategies with specific topics, is not productive, because of the complexity of how “the multilayered and sometimes contradictory relational assemblages of our individual and collective identities are always becoming”.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on the context in Canada, Carter finally suggests

---

169 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 161.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly FREEBODY, “A personal genealogy of the idea of drama education as a force for change”, in MCAVOY and O’CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 9–17, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-3>

<sup>24</sup> Mindy R. CARTER, “Pedagogical assemblages exploring social justice issues through drama education”, in MCAVOY and O’CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 32–44, 32.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-5>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 41.

that for “settlers who seek to teach Indigenous topics, this may mean that before we consider how we want to teach, we need to ask for help or partner with Indigenous people(s), and/or to ‘unsettle’ ourselves before coming to this work by understanding white privilege, intersectionality, positionality, and that we need to start social justice work from a place of openness where we listen more than we speak.”<sup>26</sup> While the suggestion to listen to those who are in a socially unjust position can be wholeheartedly embraced, this chapter also raises some concerns for me. Though it is only present implicitly, the chapter seems to discuss drama strategies as tools to convey stories and morals, rather than as a possible artistic form that allows participants to critique the narrative’s underlying messages. I believe that the latter is a more appropriate understanding of drama’s relationship to narratives. Also, compartmentalising culture and art within ethnic boundaries might lead to losing the possibility of understanding the common points of differing practices that communities have created to understand, reflect on, and engage with the human situation. Differing contexts define which aspects of human existence were engaged in and which forms were found the most appropriate by members of various communities to engage with them, but discourse around appropriation – from an East-European perspective – seems to be creating fear in teachers of engaging in what is different and also what the common human points of connection among different people living in different worlds are. While the acknowledgement of historic injustice is a crucial process that we, drama practitioners, have to surely connect with, the fear of engaging in certain narratives and art forms for cultural-political reasons needs to ring the warning bell for those who believe we are in the business of understanding the relationship of the individual and the social ele-

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 42.

ments of the human condition with our student-partners.

Stig Eriksson’s chapter examines the topos of distancing in process drama, distinguishing three orientations within distancing: protection, aesthetic principle, and poetic–didactic device.<sup>27</sup> Eriksson discusses the differences in detail and also offers profound theoretical background examining distancing in relation to its roots in theatre practices, particularly Brechtian theatre and the concept of *alienation*, which Eriksson argues, was translated misleadingly and *defamiliarisation* would be a more appropriate term as the translation of *Verfremdung*. While alienation has often been juxtaposed to the ‘being’ in the fictional world of process drama, defamiliarisation stands closer to theories aligned to opening gaps from within the fiction.<sup>28</sup> Eriksson offers useful practical examples of frame distance that is related to the main task of the role offered to participants in relation to the main events focused on in the drama. While the chapter is a really important summary and clarification of the concept of distancing, I believe it would have been useful to explore the concept of frame independently of role in more detail. For example, when Heathcote started a drama lesson with the question “what would you like to make a play about?”, she framed the participants as artists, who are collectively creating a play. She offers the task that frames the participants’ point of view without giving them a specific role. She also offers them a role later, putting them in the position of

<sup>27</sup> Stig A. ERIKSSON, “Distancing as topos in process drama”, in MCAVOY and O’CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 18–31, 19.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-4>

<sup>28</sup> David DAVIS, *Imagining the Real: towards a new theory of drama in education* (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2014); BETHLENFALVY Ádám, *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama* (Budapest: KRE – L’Harmattan, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-20662-2>



Prisoners of War in the famous Three looms waiting video, but the frame distance of the POW role and the frame of artists creating a drama remain independent entities to some extent. Hopefully, Eriksson will discuss the relation of these concepts further in future publications.

As this review is published in the leading Hungarian journal for Theatre Studies, concluding this piece by referring to Moema Gregorzewski's proposal to discuss Drama in Education in the theoretical framework of postdramatic theatre seems cogent. She argues that the "reconceptualisation of DiE practice as PDT performance events provides us with a contemporary lens through which to explore the notion of metaxis, a DiE participant's sense of simultaneous belonging to fiction (a fictional narrative) and reality (her existence in her own lifeworld)." The article does not refer to, but connects in some ways to Gavin Bolton's argument in his late paper that "it's all theatre", to perceive the different approaches and methodologies in our field within the framework of the genre of theatre.<sup>29</sup> Gregorzewski's argument is con-

---

<sup>29</sup> Gavin BOLTON, „It's all theatre", in *Gavin Bolton: essential writings*, ed. by David DAVIS, 163–175 (Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2010).

vincing and she concludes by explaining that "such an expanded theoretical framework can offer emerging guidelines and compelling provocations for future DiE practice. It can further our understanding of the potential of DiE to catalyse learning experiences that foster critical thinking and critical empathy in the complex and often contradictory hypertechnological world of the twenty-first century."<sup>30</sup>

I have only been able to offer a brief reflection on this colossal compilation of theory, research, and practice. It is hard to imagine the amount of thought, work, and energy that Mary McAvoy and Peter O'Connor, the editors of this milestone publication in drama in education, put into creating this volume. It will surely be an important reference point in our field for a long time.

---

<sup>30</sup> Moema GREGORZEWSKI, "Reimagining drama in education: Towards a postdramatic pedagogy", in MCAVOY and O'CONNOR, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education*, 80–93, 88.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000914-9>

## Living Through Extremes in Process Drama

CHRIS COOPER

Ádám BETHLENFALVY. *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama*. Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár Univeristy of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020. 279 p. <https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-20662-2>

This is a very useful, challenging and to my mind, timely book; a refreshing change from drama cookbooks packed with recipes.

As I write, a victorious Taliban are in control of Afghanistan once more, after a catastrophic 20 year, UK backed, US 'war on terror' designed (publicly at least) to defeat them. My emotions swing somewhere between rage, despair, shame, and disgust and when I listen to Tory government ministers, feelings of all four at once. The emergency debate (if it could be called that) in Parliament was as delusional as it was poverty stricken. There was talk of 'Global Britain' acting independently without the Americans (where have they been for the last fifty years?) when the reality is Post-Brexit Britain is alone and without friends and needs its armed forces to deliver food to supermarkets. No one even bothered to mention the fact that the UK had already withdrawn its troops from Helmand province in 2014. I have heard the betrayal of Afghanistan described as the greatest foreign policy disaster since Suez. This of course is self-serving nonsense. You only have to look at Iraq, amongst many other places, to recognize that. But as Charlotte Lydia Riley so eloquently put it:

"Invoking Suez is not really about learning new lessons. Rather, it is about signalling a particular idea of what it means to be British in the world, and constructing a history of British foreign policy in which the nation has made one, single mistake, which no event

since has ever beaten in disaster or ignominy. It's a comforting fiction."<sup>1</sup>

We live in extreme times, described sometimes as a post-truth age, in which comforting fiction abounds. The fiction of English exceptionalism is fed by delusional narratives like the one about Suez. This is what Bond has identified as Site A, our epoch. It's hard to make sense of it all. How do we find center ourselves in this chaos? In Ádám Bethlenfalvy's book, extremes and the narratives we construct, or are ideologically constructed for us, to negotiate our way through this crisis are central concerns for drama praxis. It's about drama for living. *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama*, based on his PhD research, is about exploring the connection between 'living through drama' and Edward Bond's approach to theatre or, as Bond refers to the work that he is doing, 'drama'.

Bethlenfalvy began this particular journey following the work he did with Big Brum TiE and having engaged with the work of Professor David Davis. Davis was the supervisor for his PhD and provides a very useful foreword to the book to frame the reader. I ought, perhaps, to declare an interest here. I was Bethlenfalvy's director during his time at Big Brum, and he is both a longstanding and close colleague and friend. This probably disqualifies me as a useful and impartial reviewer. But I'll leave it to the reader to decide.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Lydia Riley, "Was Afghanistan Britain's worst failure since Suez? It's a comforting fiction", *The Guardian*, 4 September 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/04/afghanistan-britain-worst-failure-since-suez-uk-foreign-policy>, last accessed: 03.15.2022.

In his introduction, Bethlenfalvy candidly notes that his own teaching, built on stale dramaturgy and a limited use of drama conventions had brought him to a turning point. "I began to suspect that my lessons lacked depth, they seemed quite mechanical."<sup>2</sup> Who hasn't been there? Encountering the work of Edward Bond through Big Brum proved to be a formative experience and set him on the path towards his PhD. Bethlenfalvy set out to explore "*if Drama Events can be created in Living Through Drama*. This would mean that participants of drama lessons would create gaps in meaning that challenge dominant social narratives on their own from within the improvisations in the fiction."<sup>3</sup>

The question is vast, and he isn't able – by his own admission – to comprehensively answer it in this publication. But there is a lot to learn from this exploration of Lived Through Drama (LTD), Bondian theory and the documented practice of his teaching. There are no simple recipes here, but the book clearly identifies connections between LTD and Bond and possibilities for new action research which, I believe, is necessary if we are to create participatory drama that penetrates ideological narratives and explores the relationship between self and society.

Chapter One is titled "Living Through Drama". Bethlenfalvy provides a very useful historical context and clarification of terms for the reader.

"As drama lessons based on a variety of approaches to drama in education can include living through improvisations it is useful to differentiate between living through drama and Living Through Drama with capital letters. The latter focuses on creating improvisation

where participants are in role and experiencing and dealing with some sort of crisis within the fictional situation."<sup>4</sup>

This latter interpretation is his area of interest. Here, Bethlenfalvy outlines the origins of the form, and Heathcote's 'man in a mess' approach; presenting participants with a crisis (what they are living through), stepping into the fiction by building belief and developing the self-spectator which according to Bolton is "a conception that enactment leads to seeing oneself in the fiction one is making."<sup>5</sup>

Bethlenfalvy then describes the key features of three interpretations of LTD by Gavin Bolton, Cecily O'Neill and David Davis. The latter is critical to the book because while Bolton and O'Neill create awareness of the art form in participants, Davis also emphasizes learning about theatre as well as part of his process. Like Bolton, Davis strives for metaxis, seeing from two worlds simultaneously by being both in the drama and outside at the same time. But crucially, Bethlenfalvy notes, that Davis wants to use metaxis to "involve us in such a way that we meet ourselves giving us the possibility of reworking the ideology that has entered us: the possibility of glimpsing how society has corrupted us."<sup>6</sup> This, of course, is the critical dimension that Bethlenfalvy seeks to embed from Bondian drama into his drama teaching which Davis acknowledges in his foreword to be "entirely new."

The rest of the chapter surveys critiques of LTD outlining connections with Bondian dramaturgy and Drama Events (DEs). Of fundamental importance is not only how to use drama to create gaps in dominant social narratives in order to understand our world (Site A) but for participants to do that from within the story or specific situations (what Bond calls Site B). Bethlenfalvy's survey of LTD concludes that his research drama les-

<sup>2</sup> Ádám Bethlenfalvy, *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama* (Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020), 15.

<https://doi.org/10.56037/978-2-343-20662-2>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 52.

sons could be based on three areas: a) Qualities of narratives b) Aspects of structuring c) Understanding created.<sup>7</sup> It's worth underlining again here, I think, that Bethlenfalvy is aiming for metaxis rather than self-spectatorship, understanding from within the (story) drama rather than from outside.

Chapter Two is dedicated to exploring: "What is a Drama Event". This is a clear and comprehensive explanation and analysis of DEs beginning with Bethlenfalvy's own experience as an actor in Big Brum's production of *The Under Room* in 2005 (the 5<sup>th</sup> play commissioned from Bond by the Company). Where it gets most interesting, in my opinion, is where he broadens the scope of the book out from the section on 'Confusing reality and Fiction – Ideology'. He quotes Bond referring to the gap between cause and effect.

"The gap referred to by Bond above is a central element in his theory. The gap between cause and effect in this case, or between matter and its value, or action and its meaning are filled up through the use of imagination, and the meaning or the value of reality is actually created in the mind of the individual as it structures these interpretations into an image of the world. Bond explains that 'we can know the objective world only through our subjective presence in, and awareness of, the objective world. It's as if there were two realities: the objective reality and the subjective, conscious, reality', this latter one is the understanding of the objective reality in the mind. This subjective reality is constantly re-created as individuals experience events and Bond also links it to the formation of the self ..."<sup>8</sup>

This leads on to a fascinating section on the self and what Bond calls Radical Innocence. Bethlenfalvy introduces us to the think-

ing of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Althusser, Daniel N. Stern and Damasio, and Amoiropoulos and Roper. As Bethlenfalvy acknowledges, Amoiropoulos and Roper, along with Davis and Katafiasz benefited enormously from having the practice of Big Brum working with Bond to develop their thinking around over a number of years. Bethlenfalvy's research, and his book, is shaped by the same spirit of openly sharing his own practice, and despite the complexity of the drama theory, avoids esoteric and obscure academic speak. When he presents his explanation of the "human paradox", I think we are at the core of the book in terms of how we can realize a dramatic practice that liberates seeing from ideologized spectacles.

"Bond sees the self as a 'palimpsest of maps' that is built on the need to be at home in the world, the radical innocence, but contains the layers of understanding of the world where culturally determined values mix with those based on personal values. ... Bond conceptualizes this conflict within the self as the 'human paradox'. 'The paradox is the sudden, dramatic assertion of radical innocence when it is confronted by a conflict between itself and social teaching, which social teaching cannot reconcile or conjure away', states Bond. Responding to these unresolvable conflicts are acts of creating the self, according to Bond, as the responder creates her stance in relation to the questions arising from the conflict. He states that drama's subject is 'society in people'.<sup>9</sup>

It is the Drama Event that creates this gap and the audience (or participant in process drama etc.) must use the imagination to resolve the conflict.

"Bond is very specific in his definition of what needs to happen on stage to make

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.* 67–68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 86–87.

this possible, he developed a set of concepts that can be used in the artistic process. I discuss these in detail in the following chapter. The central concept of my research, the Drama Event is linked strongly to the human paradox discussed above. *It is the dramatic expression of the clash produced within the self between our human need for justice and the elements of the culture we live in that become ingrained in our selves.*"<sup>10</sup>

Having outlined the ontology underpinning DEs, the chapter develops understanding a DE within the context of its metonymical structures and the concept of cathexis<sup>11</sup> which is critical to realizing the power of objects in Bondian drama and to his own teaching practice. Bethlenfalvy offers useful examples from Bond's plays too, like the DE in *Coffee* discussed by Davis<sup>12</sup> and in *A Window* discussed by Amoiropoulos,<sup>13</sup> before turning to a detailed and highly illuminating analysis of the DEs using the brick in *The Children*.<sup>14</sup> In the chapter summary he categorizes the Bondian devices that are present in the creation of DEs: Centre, Enactment, Cathexis, Site and Gap.

Chapter Three is "Bringing together the Artistic and Educational Praxis". Critical to this is Davis' characterization in his own book, *Imagining the Real*, of the relationship between metaxis and DE through what he calls "understanding from within the stream". Bethlenfalvy then assesses what is needed to structure a "Bondian LTD".

"For this to be possible in fictional situations the classroom drama needs to be planned in a way that provides four different functions.

a) It needs to be engaging enough for the group so that they are motivated to

enter it and be involved in the making of it.

b) The meta-text of the situation needs to contain elements or expressions of dominant cultural narratives that can surface and be reflected on from within the story.

c) The fiction needs to have a powerful angle of connection with the participants' actual social context so that the metaxis function steps into operation.

d) An awareness of the central dilemmas and the aim of creating gaps for other participants and those watching..."<sup>15</sup>

This leads him to identify structures used in both Bondian and LTD drama to develop his own classroom action research.

In Bondian drama the key elements are Story – the 'Framework of fiction', Site – the 'Framework of Connecting Different Spheres', 'Situation' (everything is situated in time and space) and 'Extremes Encountered – Comparison of the Crises Engaged'.

In LTD he focuses on – Sequencing, Internal Coherence, Focus and Pre-text.

Finally, our attention to the concept of the Centre.

"I think that using the concept of the Centre can be very useful for developing classroom dramas as it incorporates the principal organising points referred to above but in some aspects, it offers more than focus and pre-text do and plays an important role in creating DEs."<sup>16</sup>

In my own view that 'something more' lies in the holistic and flexible (rather than fixed) and very practical tool the concept of the Centre provides practitioners. Bond once remarked to me in an email that 'everything comes through the Centre' and over the years I have come to realize that this really is true, and it extends beyond the central speech

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>11</sup> See ibid. 88–89.

<sup>12</sup> See ibid. 100.

<sup>13</sup> See ibid. 101.

<sup>14</sup> See ibid. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 142.



and lines that he identified in his original thinking, to central images, actions, objects and even sounds. This provides a very useful tool for rehearsals of a play or indeed, structuring drama lessons.

In what is a very insightful short section of the book, Bethlenfalvy then connects the Layers of Meaning (Heathcote's Levels of Explanation in an action) to 'Enacting the Invisible Object...'

"Bond uses the phrase 'acting the Invisible Object' referring to someone from within the drama showing the situation without its ideological interpretations. Davis explains that 'the invisible object can be misleading as a term. It does not necessarily relate to an object but to the objective situation – what is objectively there rather than what is perceived in ideology'. The term is profoundly rooted in Bond's theory, explained in detail in the second chapter, which says that we use a culturally formed toolkit for interpreting situation and what we perceive as reality is actually deeply informed by the cultural narratives that we use as reference points in the process of interpretation. Acting the Invisible Object refers to showing that there is a human situation that is covered by ideological interpretations."<sup>17</sup>

He then cites an example used by Amoiropoulos from *A Window* to demonstrate the difference between interpreting actions through the Layers of Meaning approach and Enacting the Invisible Object.

"From the perspective of Bond's theory the four layers of meaning behind the action can be seen as different interpretive narratives that are present in our culture. So, for example, to the model level question of where an action was

learned from people could give a response that is based on their usual cultural understanding of such situation, this would simply reinforce their viewpoint rather than question it. To bring an example from my own praxis, in a drama lesson engaging with a situation of bullying I asked participants to make a depiction of the model level for the bully's action, to show where he learnt what he was doing, and in most cases they brought back situations of bullying at home, in which the bully was a victim. I believe that this a narrative ingrained in our culture that is widely used to explain why someone becomes a bully. In this case this narrative was reinforced rather than questioned. It is possible that I did not structure or facilitate the task well enough, nevertheless it still shows the problem with the structure. The case would be very similar on a psychological level of motivation or the philosophical level of life-view.

Adapting this structure to a Bondian approach would mean that these interpretive narratives that are part of our usual cultural understanding need to be identified so that they can be shown as artificial interpretations of the situation. The linearity of these narratives of interpretation needs to be ruptured in the DE. Showing them would enhance that a gap is opened to create another, a 'real', a human interpretation of the situation. The wide scope of my research has not allowed me to develop this specific idea further practically, it remains an exciting territory to explore in the future."<sup>18</sup>

I share his excitement here about future possible territory for exploration, especially when I think about the dominant narratives of the current 'culture war', itself a misleading term,

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 146.

consciously deployed I believe, to obscure what it really is, class war.

Chapter Four outlines the “Research Methodology” and Chapter Five, “Data Analysis”. I am well beyond my ZPD here, but I can appreciate that the research design offers a useful model for praxis<sup>19</sup> and more importantly the data analysis allows for a substantial and detailed sharing of Bethlenfalvy’s drama lessons. I would direct the reader to the Narratives section in the Second Cycle of teaching of the *Wild Child* lessons (*Wild Child* is based on the story of a feral child, Oxana Malaya, from the Ukraine), which gives an interesting insight into how the participants negotiated their interpretations of the narrative from a philosophical, values-based point of view, within the constraints of their roles as members of the NGO. This resonates strongly with what is written earlier about metaxis and “understanding from within the stream.”

In a key moment, Bethlenfalvy describes his approach to structuring the next series, as part of the ‘Second Cycle’, of *Wild Child* lessons by creating a prologue making conscious use of the Centre as a tool.

“I shared the Centre that the drama was aiming to investigate explicitly so participants could use it as a reference point through the lesson. ... With *Wild Child* I also made the research of this theatre approach part of the prologue, so I was asking them to investigate with me the inclusion of Bondian structures and concepts into the drama lesson, framing them as co-researchers exploring the implementation of this specific theatre theory and practice.”<sup>20</sup>

This proves to be somewhat of a breakthrough in moving his teaching closer towards creating DEs in the drama lessons described here. The descriptions of the improv-

isations as part of the *Wild Child* drama<sup>21</sup> are extremely useful. The book records the reflections of participants on their experience and the thoughts of one is quoted, some four months after the event.

“I have quite intense memories of the situation – it was perhaps the first improvisation of my life. The strongest feeling was the excitement. I got engulfed in the excitement of the situation, of finding out something special and new in the examination of Wanda [the *Wild Child*]. I also remember the uncertainty that I realised in the middle of the scene that I don’t know how I should behave in such a situation. We had planned the scene with M. (for example that I will be recording my comments on the side) – but what does a researcher comment? What is significant and what isn’t? The importance of things change when you have a human living like an animal. The classic stories like Mowgli and Tarzan are useless here, this is an issue that creates a hole in human thinking – when the borders of the categories we know shift we freeze, we feel uncomfortable, and don’t know what to do.”<sup>22</sup>

The paradox between allowing herself to be engulfed by the moment (being in the situation) and the realization that she (her self) didn’t know how to behave in that situation indicates the kind of metaxis that Bethlenfalvy is seeking which perhaps opens the door to creating DEs. Furthermore, he goes on to reflect that:

“Altogether, the participants’ reflections and the analysis of the activity of participants in the drama lessons shows that offering drama concept and structures and a frame does not hinder the

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* 159.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 215.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.* 220–21. and 223.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 221.

improvisation, it adds an awareness of the artistic dimensions of the living through experiences of participants in the drama lessons. It is also visible that participants are able to incorporate structures offered in scenes they create and a more delicate break-up of tasks, an appropriate rationing of responsibility placed on participants could make it possible for participants to include them in improvisations as well.<sup>23</sup>

All of which served to deepen the improvisational work of the participants in the *Wild Child* drama. It also seems quite apparent that their consciousness of the Centre and the form of theatre (and therefore its function) led to very interesting reflections on society, and the dominant narratives at work in any given situation. Bethlenfalvy notes that *Wild Child* did not build on any specific social concern but it did reflect many different aspects of social life. As another participant remarks:

“It was interesting that we had a lot of ethical questions coming up at different points. The main question was: what is good for her and what does society expect? So, I think this was a constant question, are we doing something that’s good for her, or is it because of the expectations of society.’

The question in this form connects powerfully to one of Bolton’s three long-term aims in drama, that Davis argues is disappearing from drama in education: ‘to help the student know how and when (and when not) to adapt to the world he lives in’. The classic trope of the feral child carries the duality that gives space to work on these questions in specific situations.<sup>24</sup>

Given the situation, the existential crisis, the species is in, helping young to know “how and

when (and when not) to adapt” to this world, to question dominant narratives is crucial. It seems to me that the familiar trope of the feral child offers the particular through which to explore the universal (or what Bond calls the relationship between the kitchen table and the edge of the universe), the fundamental questions of what it is to be human are opened up.

The findings from the two cycles of dramas are succinctly summarized on pages 228–229 and Bethlenfalvy finishes by outlining future possibilities for research in Chapter Six. There is plenty here for the reader to pick up on and develop in their own practice, but there is one thing that strikes me perhaps above all, and it relates to the *Wild Child* lessons. The *Wild Child* drama, like the moments described from Bond’s *The Children, A Window* and *Coffee* are extreme.

In his plays, Bond pushes moments in the drama to extremes. That’s because in real life when we enter extreme moments – usually moments of crisis – we must find out who we are. All our prejudices, our mindless assumptions, and the ideological veil before our eyes falls away, and we meet ourselves. Bond seeks to use this strategy (part of the tragic tradition) to create this freedom in the drama to meet ourselves on the stage. It provides an opportunity to separate the real out from under the ideological veil.

The extreme does not have to be violent it can be comic. But it enables us to see beyond convention in a new or different way. Fairy tales use the extreme all the time to engage self-creativity, for example, the abandoning of children in *Hansel and Gretel*. We often underestimate the distancing power of fiction itself – that children know (and enjoy) it’s a story/not real. In Bondian drama the extremes are built into the site and the situation. Bethlenfalvy demonstrates this by providing a very useful example of this using the (cathexed) brick in *The Children* referred to earlier.

In *The Children*, bricks appear throughout the play. There is a stoning of a doll. Joe, the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 223.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 225.

protagonist in the play, tries to smash his own doll with a brick in frustration because he feels trapped. Later a Man, appears. He kills other children by smashing their skulls in with a brick. He too is trapped, by grief, and is taking revenge for the death of his own child. This structural element running through the play, helps the audience follow something in the play, not through a role but the object. At one point we see the Man kill a child with a brick. But the extremity comes not from the killing but from the way he talks about his love for his own child as he cradles the brick like a baby beforehand. The Man suddenly becomes very human, just before he kills. This extremity forces us to completely re-think what we have been thinking (or judging) up to this point.

I asked Bethlenfalvy about the extreme in his research in a recorded conversation, and he stated that:

"I found what I learned about the 'extreme' really interesting, which I have a sense of from working in theatre. But as a drama teacher I was quite cautious about it, and for the same reasons as for example the teachers observing my lesson with nine/ten year olds who were thinking 'is that alright?' In *The Children* drama lesson a mother asks her child to burn down the house. As a parent that's really extreme and disturbing. The kids in the drama lesson, they were [in role as] friends with this child – I was playing the child who was asked to burn the house down by the mother. But they thought that was really exciting, because – and they very explicitly said – you know, unless there is a real problem it will be boring. And what I also realised was that having this extreme problem made them very aware that it is fictional, and it's not real life. So, they said if it had been real life that would be too much, but in a story it's okay, because we need exciting things.

And they also pointed out that its really different for an adult looking at it from outside than from the perspective of a child participating in it. So they said 'ah, we can imagine the teacher thinks it's too much, but actually it was great fun for us because we had something to deal with'. So, I found it really interesting how, for example, extremes in a story can reinforce its fictional nature for children, like in fairy tales for example.... You have dragons and giants and all sorts of horrible, terrible things. I mean, if they existed in real life that would be a real problem. And we do have them in real life, but in different forms. But to understand how they work you need to engage with them in fiction."

So, the extreme can not only penetrate ideology, but it can protect us too; if I know it's fiction, then I can decide how much I want to feral child's *situation* prompting the "ethical questions" referred to. It is a very clear indication of what makes the most powerful stories and situations for engaging young minds.

There is undoubtedly more learning to be gleaned from this book than the above. It is full of thought-provoking and challenging thinking for any drama teacher who may be feeling like their lessons have become mechanical. The appendices containing interviews with Mike Fleming, Cecily O'Neill and Edward Bond add substantial meat to some of the core concerns of the book for example. But as an artist and teacher struggling to make sense of this complex and crisis ridden world, trying not to become numb with rage at the suffering of Afghan people today, or the ecological breakdown tomorrow, and trying to orientate my practice so that I can drive into the crisis of these extreme times, I know we need new narratives and new approaches to drama to help us know ourselves and society. Ádám Bethlenfalvy has made an important contribution to learning how to do that.

## East is East?

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

**Kalina STEFANOVA, Marvin CARLSON, eds. 20 *Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe: 30 Years After the Fall of Iron Curtain*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. XLI+311 p.**

*20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe*, edited by Kalina Stefanova and Marvin Carlson, delivers exactly what it promises in its title: a concise profile of twenty living directors – with the exception of Eimuntas Nekrošius, who died in 2018 – who were born and worked in Eastern Europe, and who have had a profound influence on the culture of their country, their region, and the continent.

All sentences formulated with similar brevity need to be explained, and the following review contains some comments and observations. The exceptions which immediately strike the reader are, of course, those which spectacularly omit the above definition. First of all, there is Árpád Schilling, whose last Hungarian premiere, *A harag napja* (*The Day of Fury*), dates from 2015, and who himself has been living in France since 2018 and (apart from his project in the United States in spring 2022) has worked all over Europe. We can also name another director who is impossible to categorize: Oliver Frlić, born in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He started his career in Croatia, where he was considered an undesirable person a few years ago, now directs in Germany, Austria, Poland and elsewhere; as long as they let him. Among the older generation, we can mention Andrei Șerban, who (for the first time) did not make a career in Romania, but in the United States, in the 1970s.

When talking about any book, the first question must be: was it necessary to write? Is there a real need for it among professionals and interested readers? Does it address a phenomenon whose systematic analysis is timely and necessary? In this case, the answer

is a resounding yes: the volume is undoubtedly a unique and thorough undertaking, especially when considering the small number of works that attempt to provide an encyclopaedic overview of contemporary world theatre. In English, with a specific focus on Eastern European directors living and working today, no work of comparable quality was available, until now.

The need for such a collection is demonstrated by the simple fact that of the *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, edited by Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, which is a concise collection of prominent European theatre-makers, and which was published for the second time in 2020, only Silviu Purcărete and Krzysztof Warlikowski are also introduced in the present book (the first edition of it in 2010 only included Purcărete).<sup>1</sup> *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* is a companion that will benefit professional and amateur theatre-goers, academics and students of theatre studies alike. We cannot name other works with similar focus, and this may be partly due to what Marvin Carlson mentions in his short foreword<sup>2</sup>, i.e. that until the 1960s, Western theatre studies were not interested in what was happening on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The two relatively recent collections<sup>3</sup> with an Eastern Eu-

---

<sup>1</sup> Maria M. DELGADO, Dan REBELLATO, eds., *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010<sup>1</sup>, 2020<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> Marvin CARLSON, „The Directors of Eastern Europe”, in Kalina STEFANOVA, Marvin CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), XXI.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis BARNETT, Arthur SKELTON, eds., *Theatre and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007) and Kalina STEFANOVA, ed., *Eastern*



ropean emphasis, which Carlson mentions as a refreshing exception, do not even attempt a systematic overview: instead, they present case studies of theatre cultures in the region, organised in a rather random order.

Each of the eighteen theatre scholars, researchers, and critics who wrote the twenty chapters did an extremely thorough job in condensing the directorial careers into studies of about fifteen pages, which are similarly, yet not uniformly, structured. The directors' careers on average date back to the last twenty to thirty years, but sometimes even span half a century. The volume is also current: the vast majority of the studies were written in 2019, and the premiere dates of performances cited in them generally end around 2018.

The two distinguished editors, Kalina Stefanova, who teaches and researches in Sofia, and Marvin Carlson, who is currently mostly active in New York, are two of the most important theatre scholars who, in addition to their studies and lectures, have summarised current theatre histories in numerous individual and collected volumes over the past decades; not only focusing on Europe. Their new joint volume is a panorama spanning a broad spectrum, and a puzzle that is still being added to.

If I have any dissatisfaction with what is, again, a very useful volume, it is precisely the lack of drawing the undeniable connections: the web of connections between the many direct and indirect ways in which the directorial trajectories communicate with each other is almost completely hidden from the reader. It could be said that this will be the task of another volume or volumes, but it is striking how the chapters written by the same author communicate with each other, if not overtly, in a number of ways. Tomasz Wiśniewski prepared the chapters on Włodzimierz Staniewski and Grzegorz Bral, which shed a sharp light on the careers of two artists of different generations, who started out

in related regions but had a decidedly different artistic approach, and who also trace the web of connections between Jerzy Grotowski, "Gardzienice" and the Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre). The same can be said of Rasa Vasinauskaitė's two protagonists: the stories of the great elder of Lithuanian theatre, Eimuntas Nekrošius, and the prominent representative of the next generation, Oskaras Koršunovas, who absorbed his aesthetic but was still a different generation from him, are also fascinating in their parallels and contrasts.

Both examples are also a particular mutation of the master–disciple relationship, and further parallel stories could have been told in this area. In addition to the Staniewski–Bral circle, which focuses on ritual and myth, the most influential artist of the older generation of contemporary Polish theatre is Krystian Lupa, under whose guidance Krzysztof Warlikowski, Jan Klata and Grzegorz Jarzyna, all discussed in the volume, have emerged. And although the master himself is mentioned in the chapters on his disciples, it is regrettable that the chapter on Lupa does not emphasize the director's seminal work as a pedagogue.

Let's play with the idea, which is perhaps not far from the editors' intention, what if one wants to know the big names of contemporary Eastern European theatre solely from this book. In other words: what are the characteristics of the typical (?) groundbreaking director in Eastern Europe? One thing seems certain: almost all of them are male; with the exception of Gianina Cărbunariu, the names of female directors are barely even mentioned in the book. There is a thirty percent chance that the person in question is Polish: six out of the twenty directors featured were born in Poland. There are also three Lithuanian and three Romanian directors, two Hungarian and two Czech, and one each from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Latvia, and Bulgaria.

Eastern European directors are well into their forties: eight of the directors featured in this volume were born in the 1970s. Six men were born in the sixties, four were born in the

fifties, and two in the forties. At the two extremes are Andrei Șerban and Silviu Purcărete, born in 1943, and Daniel Špinar, born in 1979.

Most of the directors in the book studied theatre directing at their home art universities, but it is not uncommon for someone to have come to theatre directing from a social sciences or humanities background, especially among the members of the newer generation. Some of the directors have not become prophets in their own countries: many of them are better known and respected at festivals abroad than in their homeland. It is striking that most of them still think in terms of companies and theatres, when this heritage urgently needs to be reconsidered across Europe. Many directors are, or have been for longer or shorter periods in their careers, leaders of renowned institutions, definers and active shapers of their artistic image.

The idea of the “new theatre”, which is not precisely defined as it means something different in different contexts, reappears again and again. Another common feature is the departure from the mainstream, from the traditions that define the theatre culture of a given country; quickly adding that, in many cases, the paths that started on the periphery tended towards the centre over time, and their creators have been long established there. In most cases, the directors’ careers did not stop at the borders of their own countries: international recognition and acceptance, particularly in Western Europe, played an important role in the selection criteria to be discussed below.

Of course, the biggest differences lay in the chosen method and theatrical aesthetics. Yet, most of them have produced and continue to produce their defining productions in the wake of (mainly Western and/or national) dramatic literature. There are, of course, performances inspired by documents (Cărbunariu), Theatre in Education (Schilling), improvisations by actors (Frlić), autobiographical and social experiences (Béla Pintér), readings and shared traumas (Warlikowski), among many others. And there is another,

perhaps not insignificant, feature that Kalina Stefanova draws the reader’s attention to in the introduction, when she highlights five of the most memorable *Hamlet* performances: most of the directors (including Bral, Frlić, Jarzyna, Klata, Koršunovas, Jan Mikulášek, Nekrošius, Schilling, Špinar, and Warlikowski) staged the world’s best-known drama at one time or another.

Looking again at the dates of birth, it is clear that most of the directorial careers discussed in the book began immediately before or right after the regime changes in Eastern Europe (the subtitle of the volume indirectly refers to this: *30 Years After the Fall of the Iron Curtain*). A (Western European) reader not thoroughly familiar with the region would have benefited from an introductory study of what happened here at the turn of the 1990s. This context is not replaced by Alvis Hermanis’s eloquent words, quoted in the book, on the “reboot” of the Eastern European zone: “An electrician comes and turns the counter to zero. That was exactly the moment in the Eastern European theatre in the early nineties. A zero point. Everything that had been before was effectively erased. It didn’t work anymore, it was drained out.”<sup>4</sup> I find the lack of a definition of “here” problematic, i.e. a definition of Eastern Europe that is valid within the volume: in his brief introduction, Marvin Carlson merely says that the area in question is “between Germany and Russia”<sup>5</sup>.

In her long foreword, Kalina Stefanova succinctly informs us about the method and criteria of the selection: “after consultations with a lot of colleagues I’ve come up with the current choice.”<sup>6</sup> She explains that while six

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Edīte TIŠHEIZERE, „Alvis Hermanis: »To Be Everything and Nothing at All«, in STEFANOVA, CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking...*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Marvin CARLSON, „The Directors of Eastern Europe”..., XXI.

<sup>6</sup> Kalina STEFANOVA, „The Life-Changing Theatre of Eastern Europe”, in STEFANOVA, CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking...*, XVIII.

directors from Poland were selected, there are countries that do not appear in the selection at all. If we look at the selection noted by Stefanova, her own definition is certainly true: "The directors included here have been major catalysts for a change in the face of the Eastern European theatre at large during the last three decades."<sup>7</sup> It would not have been useless, however, if the editor had at least discussed here the reasons for the volume's quite disturbing male dominance.<sup>8</sup>

Two forewords by the two editors open the selection. Kalina Stefanova's informative text, which confidently moves a large body of empirical material, clearly sets the tone for the volume when she gives the title of her introduction, *The Life-Changing Theatre of Eastern Europe*. And indeed, the superlatives, which seem to presuppose some kind of a peculiar Eastern European common taste and flavour, are just a string of adjectives without further elaboration: 'unforgettable', 'breath-taking', 'overwhelming', etc. I can imagine readers questioning this level of enthusiasm, but there is no need to worry: if the language of this introduction is "hot", the essays in this volume are decidedly "cool"; moreover, all of them show a passionate commitment to the subject of the chapter.

In Marvin Carlson's short foreword, I would like to highlight, in addition to what has already been mentioned, the theatre scholar's indication that he has not seen nearly as many of the performances listed in the volume as his Bulgarian colleague. This might sound strange for some readers, but it could even be an advantage for a similar project with a large, international cast of authors: it is the task of the unbiased outside eye to

point out when there is too little or too much information to understand.

Thereafter, the twenty chapters, alphabetically arranged by the director's last names, follow a similar, but not identical, structure. Some start with a single, paradigmatic performance that determines the director's career. In Jan Klata's case, the emblematic *H.*, the 2004 adaptation of *Hamlet* at the Gdańsk Shipyard, is the starting point: the origin of his entire thinking. The chapter on Krystian Lupa, written by Katarzyna Waligóra, is particularly fascinating because it begins with an analysis of a production that was not loved by critics and audiences either, *Miasto snu* (*The City of Sleep*) from 2012. The way Noémi Herczog presents Béla Pintér's career, identifying and interpreting each turning point through the term "national theatre", is inspiring and thought-provoking. Others take a more traditional approach, starting the presentation of the directorial portraits with education and the early years, then moving on to the stages of arrival, with a constant focus on the artist's international presence. The material used for the studies is mainly based on the authors' own experiences as viewers/critics/analysts, but the authors also include published reviews, artist statements, interviews, and sometimes even personally ask the main character of the chapter.

The analyses of chosen performances, summarised in few long paragraphs, highlighting the essential aspects, are enjoyable. These are almost never mini-reviews, but rather succinct summaries of the creative thinking and artistic credo. We must pay tribute to the authors, who identify and describe in an insightful way the stages of three to five decades of careers that are still going on today. Each of these chapters is a goldmine for a student preparing for an exam, as the main stylistic features of the directors and the characteristics of their theatre are summarised in the headings. Each chapter ends with a typical performance photo, followed by a bibliography of the works used for the chapter –

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> For its possible reasons see Katalin TRENCSÉNYI, "Directors' Theatre in Eastern Europe, 1945–2018: A Survey of Some Trajectories", in David BRADBY, David WILLIAMS and Peter M. BOENISCH, eds., *Directors' Theatre*, 183–208 (London: Red Globe Press, MacMillan International, 2020), 192–193.

the latter is often not representative, and it would have been useful to include a short, recommended reading list on each director.

For the reader who is relatively familiar with the directorial trajectories and methods presented, the comments, which could certainly not be read elsewhere, are a real treat. These little puzzle pieces always fit into the big picture. Here are a few examples that I had not previously been aware of. I had never read about Alvis Hermanis's early career as a film actor (p. 44), or that the title of the Dorota Maślowska play *Między nami dobrze jest* (*We Are Pretty Good*), directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, refers to a song of the Polish punk band Siekiera (p. 66). I learned that the famous Walpurgis scene in Silviu Purcărete's emblematic 2007 production of *Faust* was inspired by a childhood experience of the director, the cattle fair of Bolintin (p. 184). And now I also know that Rimas Tuminas made the endless Vilnius-Moscow train journey countless times as a young man, which is where the travel motif recurring regularly in his performances may have originated from (p. 237).

Following the twenty portraits, the book concludes with two sets of responses to a series of questions, in which the directors write about their artistic family trees and the role of theatre in the contemporary world. Some do so briefly, others at greater length: for me, these answers did not add much to the picture already formed.

Finally, some annoying little things. The possible lack of time does not excuse the unpleasant typos and inconsistencies in the volume, such as when the chapter on Béla Pintér lists 1948 instead of 1848 or when we read that Nekrošius lived from 1952 to 1918. I cannot understand why Nekrošius's own world-famous company, Meno Fortas, is not mentioned once in the chapter on him, and it is only presented briefly in a footnote, nearly a hundred pages later, in the section on Jonas Vaitkus. A different kind of omission, but equally incomprehensible to me, is that the

chapter on Hermanis makes no mention of the director's infamous 2015 statement on refugees.<sup>9</sup> Before anyone misunderstands me, I do not want to pick on the director, but the reader would then surely read the short description of a scene in Cărbunariu's *Artists Talk* in a more different context, not to mention that Oliver Frljić's *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje* (*Our Violence and Your Violence*), which is described at length in the volume, also contains a quotation from Hermanis's text.

A few other inconsistencies: the chapter on Grzegorz Jarzyna says that Krzysztof Warlikowski left Teatr Rozmaitości in 2007 to found the Nowy Teatr, but later the volume says it happened in 2008. The book is also inconsistent in naming the theatres and the titles of the performances and plays in their original language. The main text does not say, merely appears in a caption, that the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague should be sought out as Divadlo na Zábřadlí by the theatre lover who travels to the Czech capital. The names Stary Teatr, Nowy Teatr, i.e. Old Theatre, New Theatre, which are common in Poland, are sometimes used in both languages, sometimes either in Polish or in English.

Even with these caveats, *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* is an important and timely volume that helps to identify and recognise the directorial signatures that have shaped and continue to shape the theatre culture of the Eastern European region in recent decades.

<sup>9</sup> „Alvis Hermanis sagt aus Protest gegen Flüchtlings-Engagement Thalia-Inszenierung ab“, *Nachtkritik.de*, 4/6. Dezember 2015, last accessed 30 August 2022.

[https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11864:alvis-hermanis-sagt-aus-protest-gegen-fluechtlings-engagement-thalia-inszenierung-ab&catid=126&Itemid=100890](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11864:alvis-hermanis-sagt-aus-protest-gegen-fluechtlings-engagement-thalia-inszenierung-ab&catid=126&Itemid=100890)

## Shakespeare Matrix Across the Continent

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, Florence MARCH, Paul PRESCOTT, eds. *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages*. London – New York: Bloomsbury, 2022. XV+235 p.

„Triumph my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. / He was not of an age but for all time!” Ben Jonson’s famous eulogy in the 1623 edition of Shakespeare’s works could well be the motto of this informative and inspiring volume of essays written and compiled by eminent international scholars of Shakespeare, published in the prestigious *The Arden Shakespeare* series. In twelve fascinating chapters, seventeen authors of *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* show how the influence of the Bard can be seen in the second half of the twentieth century to the present day through a specific medium and genre, the performing arts festival.

Ideally, a festival is much more than a series of random events. Festival research is a relatively new, dynamically developing academic field, and although in the last decade or two researchers have approached the phenomenon mainly from the perspective of economics, marketing, and management, we find that Alessandro Falassi’s definition, which claims to be complete, is much more helpful for our interpretation. According to the researcher, who viewed the phenomenon from the perspective of anthropology and ritual, „[i]n the social sciences, *festival* commonly means a periodic celebration composed of a multiplicity of ritual forms and events, directly or indirectly affecting all members of a community and explicitly or implicitly showing the basic values, the ideology, and the worldview that are shared by com-

munity members and are the basis of their social identity.”<sup>1</sup>

However careful and thorough our definition, the festival field is a relatively fast-changing area, where it seems that events that make it clear early on exactly what makes them different from other related events can survive and thrive for a long time. This is important to emphasise because a naive reader might think that there are few more boring themes than festivals centred around a single playwright. One may believe that they all work the same way: the audience is treated to a succession of better or worse performances of the works of the chosen author.

Some might treat this volume with similar prejudices, but they could not be more wrong: *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* shares knowledge that goes far beyond the individual case studies, when it also offers some thoughtful contributions to the relationship between cult and canon, and the practical aspects of the Shakespeare industry. In addition, the volume offers a range of concrete examples of current trends in contemporary world theatre such as community theatre, collaborative creation, cross-cultural theatre, and site- or city-specific art.

The foreword, co-authored by the three editors of the book, Nicoleta Cinpoేశ, Florence March, and Paul Prescott, is a careful introduction to the chosen topic, which, in addition to defining all four words of the title with exhaustive precision, also indirectly explains the reason for the book’s publication, convincingly arguing for its necessity. The authors do not exaggerate when they define the genre of their book as a ‘travel compan-

---

<sup>1</sup> Alessandro FALASSI, „Festival”, in Thomas A. GREEN, ed., *Folklore* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 296.



ion<sup>2</sup> on the first page: as the reader moves further and further away in time and space from 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Stratford and London, the itinerary of a brand-new Shakespearean Grand Tour, structured and organised in a different way from any previous one, is nicely outlined.

The tour is conducted by qualified tourist guides: theatre scholars, English Renaissance and Shakespeare scholars, critics, dramaturgs, artistic advisors lead the ambitious tourists through the various chapters of the guidebook. As a result, the speakers often occupy an intermediate position: they view the festival as an unbiased, 'objective' external eye, while the texts are made truly exciting by the 'internal' perspective that often emerges. In other words, all the texts here are written by the person who *had to* write them. The careful editorial work is evident in every contribution.

These are well-prepared, thorough analyses that provide a wealth of factual information, but also offer an interpretation of it, and although they could be used for promotional purposes, either directly or indirectly, in a rather injudicious way (if only because many of the events presented in the book are members of the European Shakespeare Festival Network /ESFN/), they actually complement the protean image of Shakespeare, with an attempt to delineate a cultural phenomenon as highly variable as the protagonist. The texts, as the foreword emphasises, oscillate between 'love and alienation' (p. 3), while at the same time proudly claiming to celebrate rather than criticise the phenomena they analyse.

The editors immediately make the rules of the game clear: according to them, the focus would have been greatly misplaced if the

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul PRESCOTT, Nicoleta CINPOEȘ and Florence MARCH, „Shakespeare on European festival stages: an introduction”, in Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, Florence MARCH, Paul PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 1.

United Kingdom's Shakespeare-related events had been included. However, the country's traditional, or more accurately, highly conservative tradition of acting Shakespeare, i.e. the performances and the festivals in the UK are not really worthy of a separate volume.

The concept is therefore to be welcomed, if only because of the other, not so hidden agenda behind the decision: the volume is clearly thinking in terms of dislocation and decentralization, festivalization, eventification, and inclusiveness. I must admit that, while it was very enlightening to read about the functioning of important hubs of the European (Shakespeare) festival circuit, such as Avignon or Craiova, I felt privileged to learn about Shakespeare events taking place, for example, in the courtyard of a school in a small village in Bulgaria, or within the ancient walls of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian villa.

The only Shakespeare festival happening in a village (!) in Europe is hosted in a Bulgarian settlement of 1,500 inhabitants. What has been going on in Patalenitsa since 1999 is a model for the continent: the event, which was born from pro bono work in the backyard of a school, is in fact a redefinition of the term festival. Two decades of the festival have changed the whole image of the village: there is an exceptional pedagogical and intergenerational work of social inclusiveness, which is also increasingly followed and supported by professional theatre professionals.<sup>3</sup> Yesterday's child actors are now returning to the village as graduate directors and actors: a social model is being built, with Shakespeare's name on it.

Villa Stanković, half an hour's drive from Novi Sad, has hosted the annual Itaka Shakespeare Festival since 2014. While the organisers often select lesser-known plays of the author and promote innovative, alternative,

---

<sup>3</sup> Boika SOKOLOVA, Kirilka STAVREVA, „From a schoolyard play to civic festival: Shakespeare in the Bulgarian village of Patalenitsa”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 160–164.

transcultural approaches, they also place great emphasis on contextual events. Artistic Director Nikita Milovijević sums up his expectations for the invited productions: "For me it is most important to ask how to turn Shakespeare into something I can relate to, how to make Shakespeare my own experience."<sup>4</sup>

I have chosen my two examples for a reason: while there is a strong tradition of Shakespeare festivals taking place in castles and fortresses on the continent, there have been some refreshingly unusual venues for some time now. As the essays in this volume sharply point out, in the case of theatre location is never just one of the components, but a factor influencing and determining the totality of the performance at any given time: aesthetics always stem from the choice of location, but if a director consciously confronts the site, it can also give rise to some enlivening contradictions.

One would hardly dispute that Shakespeare is a "truly globalized phenomenon". However, this constellation is made more exciting and contemporary by the addition we find on these pages: the most recent portrait of Shakespeare is above all "pan-European and post-English" (p. 4). And this is by no means the end of the definition that prevails on the pages of this volume: as the chapters progress, we encounter new definitions of Shakespeare, each one dependent on social contexts, historical circumstances, language, and culture.

During the great post-World War II frenzy of festival creation in Western Europe, Shakespeare is most often seen as a 'peace fighter'. His universal, transnational character was recognised not only by cultural diplomats, but also by artists, many of whom have staged Shakespeare's core works of the West-

ern canon. The next turning point was marked by the fall of the Iron Curtain, when Shakespeare's works became "vehicles for – *inter alia* – an opening of borders and reconnection with a cross-national network of theatre-makers, a celebration of local, regional and national excellence, and (not insignificantly) a pretext for restorative joy" (p. 9). Shakespeare is also a brand (not only within the theatre world), a playwright with mythical status, who has a leading role in promoting theatre as a form of communication worldwide. Not only that: many of the essays in this volume confirm the comment made in the context of the Shakespeare festivals in France that the playwright is "a catalyst for creativity, a factor of social cohesion and a vector of emancipation" (p. 27). In Eastern European countries, Shakespeare often appeared at key historical moments in close association with (lost) freedom: in the Czech regions he was a symbol of change and cultural emancipation (p. 56-57), and in the Romanian dictatorship he was a "language for survival" (p. 96).

As for the structure of the volume, after the helpful introduction, eleven separate chapters give an account of seventeen European Shakespeare festivals. There is an almost equal number of festivals in Eastern and Western Europe, and the editors have taken care to ensure a representative compilation. The relationship between centre and periphery can also be studied historically: it is instructive to note how, say, the Craiova or Gyula festivals were created from scratch, i.e. without any strong existing local traditions, and then successfully built themselves up.

Craiova is a textbook example of the festival boom that took place around the regime changes in Eastern Europe. The event has grown enormously over three decades, thanks to the consistent building and ambition of festival director Emil Boroghina. The foundation behind the festival maintains a library, supports book publishing, and runs an archive, etc. Its work has an impact throughout the country, as the Craiova Shakespeare Festival

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Alexandra PORTMANN, „Shakespeare's Globe in Inđija: A portrait of Itaka Shakespeare Festival (Serbia)“, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 222.

has made it possible to publish the new translation of Shakespeare's complete works in Romanian.<sup>5</sup>

A decade and a half later, in 2005, the Shakespeare Festival was launched in Gyula, a small Hungarian town on the Romanian border. Its start and development are also linked to one man, director József Gedeon, who revived an old, flickering tradition when he decided to entertain the visitors of the spa town with Hungarian and international Shakespeare performances every year. His bold undertaking has both paid off and failed: since his death in 2016, the festival has had other priorities, but at least it is still running.<sup>6</sup> The presentation of the "Hungarian Shakespeare" was and remains an important goal, with accompanying programmes and a conference to accompany the performances that come to Gyula from all over the world.

The order of the chapters in the book unfolds not on a West-East axis, but on a past-present axis: the Festival d'Avignon, founded in 1947, is the oldest of the festivals discussed, while the most recent offshoot is the open-air event launched in 2014 at Villa Stanković close to Indija, Serbia. Yet the authors sometimes sacrifice strict chronology in order to emphasise geographical, thematic, and cultural links. In Elsinore Castle (Helsingør), Shakespeare has been present almost continuously since 1916, if not in the form of a festival, and not only with *Hamlet*. An example from the other end of the timeline: in the second chapter on Shakespeare festivals in southern France, we find Shake-Nice! in the city of Nice,

<sup>5</sup> Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, „A world's stage for many players: the International Shakespeare Festival – Craiova (Romania)”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 98, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Júlia PARAIZS, Ágnes MATUSKA, „The Gyula Shakespeare Festival (Hungary): Local, national, European, global”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 178–182.

now suspended, founded only in 2015 by Irina Brook.

Almost all chapters are also focused on country reports: the authors summarise a brief history of Shakespeare playing in the region in question, with particular reference to previous festivals or events that could be considered as such. Several regions in Eastern Europe boast of having been visited by travelling English actors as early as Shakespeare's time, in many cases indirectly laying the foundations for playing Shakespeare in the centuries that followed.

Several chapters begin by recalling one or more of the emblematic Shakespeare performances at the festival, which the authors believe have markedly defined the profile of the event, even long term. The Avignon Festival is not a Shakespeare festival in the strict sense of the word, but the English playwright was a prominent presence from the very beginning: Jean Vilar's *Richard II* was staged in four editions between 1947 and 1953, and he directed *Henry IV* in 1950 and *Macbeth* in 1954. However, the note made by Florence March is important to remember: Vilar proudly resisted the temptation of “guaranteed income” or “share capital”, which was the hallmark of Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup> (The history of the Almagro Festivals in Spain is a good example of this real danger. Here, from the 1980s until recently, Shakespeare almost dominated the programme, but in 2019 the new management of the festival decided to favour the great authors of the Spanish Golden Age at the expense of the English playwright.<sup>8</sup>) Back to the performances that create the festival profile: a notable example

<sup>7</sup> Florence MARCH, „Shaping democratic festivals through Shakespeare in southern France: Avignon, Montpellier, Nice”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds. *Shakespeare on European...*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Isabel GUERRERO, „Shakespeare at the Almagro festivals: reinventing the plays in Spain”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 43.

in Craiova is *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth* by the great Romanian director Silviu Purcărete, which premiered in 1990 and was shown in Edinburgh and Braunschweig the following year. The production was a milestone: in a country newly free of dictatorship, it went far beyond itself, and with its help Purcărete was discovered by Western Europe.<sup>9</sup>

The collection is also inclusive in that it includes small, medium, and large-scale festivals by international standards. The history of each festival is not simply recalled by dates, names, and performances: the authors place the subject of their chapter in front of the narrowly defined local, regional, national, and often international context. Among other things, the composition of the audience is discussed, with references to age, nationality, or even the primary interests of the target group. They also talk about subsidy and ticketing ratios, and in this context, they discuss the festival as an economic enterprise.

It is welcomed that future oriented thinking is a feature of many festivals, and probably also a key to their survival. Neuss, Rome, Gdańsk, Patalenitsa are just a few of the many examples where the management imagines the present and the near future with workshops and performances made by and made for young people, addressing and activating as wide a circle as possible. The editorial work for the publication took place during and after the pandemic, with several authors describing the strategy of each festival under the unexpected circumstances: in Craiova, an online edition of recordings of Shakespeare performances from the past decades was organised, and in Patalenitsa *Measure for Measure* was presented in a minimalist staging.

The details on the different festivals' program structure are fascinating. In Hungary, we often complain that, despite the fact that we have three dozen Shakespeare plays left,

directors keep coming up with the same four or five tried and tested titles. The next time we hear a similar complaint, we should remember that other theatre cultures with much more favourable financial and infrastructural conditions cannot necessarily be called risk-taking in this respect either. It would seem from this volume that even the largest and oldest festivals do not use more than fifteen to twenty titles from all the author's works, and that the favourites are mostly coincided everywhere, regardless of tradition or geographical location. It is fair to say that *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest* have been the most frequently performed Shakespeare plays across Europe for many decades.

The venues, as I have pointed out, speak for themselves. The architectural solutions that are (almost) contemporary with Shakespeare, or at least communicate in their design and construction with the English Renaissance theatre of the time, form a separate group. By bringing the medieval Cour d'Honneur du Palais des Papes into play, Avignon created an important (new) tradition early on, by breaking the architectural code of the Italian playhouse and repositioning its audience. The Almagro Festival's 17th century Corral de comedías is a very exciting venue in terms of its history. The opening of the courtyard of Prague Castle by Václav Havel to Shakespeare was a clear message: the democratic ethos that pervaded the author's world was suddenly in the hands of ordinary Czech citizens in 1990. The popularity of the outdoor Shakespeare Festival at Elsinore Castle hardly needs explaining, and Anne Sophie Refskou draws the reader's attention to a qualified case of dislocation when she describes the uncanny nature of the venue and writes about the "unhomely encounters" that took place there.<sup>10</sup> In Rome or Neuss, Globe replicas

<sup>9</sup> Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, „A world's stage...”, 93–94.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Sophie REFSKOU, „Unhomely Shakespeares: interculturalism and diplomacy in

## The Authors in this Issue

**ÁDÁM BETHLENFALVY** has worked in the field of Theatre in Education and Drama in Education for the past two decades in Hungary and the UK. He has also taken part in research activities in the field as one of the founders of InSite Drama. Currently he is the course director for the Drama in Education teacher training course and Associate Professor at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. His books titled *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama* and *Dráma a tanteremben* (Drama in the Classroom) were published in 2020.

**CHRIS COOPER** has worked in TiE (Theatre in Education) in the UK since 1988 and was the Artistic Director of Big Brum TiE (1999–2015). Since 2009 he has been working with Drama Rainbow Education, Beijing, and founded an NGO, Jian Xue, with partners in 2017. He works all over Europe on theatre projects, training, lecturing and holding workshops. He has written extensively about theatre and drama in a variety of books and journals. He is now the author of 46 plays.

**KORNÉLIA DERES** is a Junior Assistant Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the University of Cologne, and a Junior Research Fellow at the IAS of Central European University. Her articles were published by *Theatre Research International*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Theatralia*, and *Global Performance Studies*. She is the author of two monographs and co-editor of five volumes. Her current research interests are nineteenth-century interconnections of theatre and science, performativity and archives, and Cold War theatre and art histories.

**MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI** is a professor of theatre history. She has published several books and articles on the topics of contemporary drama theory, both the Hungarian and the European avantgarde, and the ways in which politics of memory interact with theatre. She is the co-founder of *Theatron*, the Philtherhub ([www.theatron.hu/ph](http://www.theatron.hu/ph)) and the Kálmán-project. In the last decade, her research is focused on the state socialist practice of Hungarian theatre after WW2, on the sovietised reception history of performances, on the transformation of the Viennese operetta into 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](http://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**, PhD, dr. habil. is 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 fourteen books and more than eighty 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).

**VERA KÉRCHY** is Associate Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Szeged. She received her PhD in 2012, and completed her habilitation in 2021. Her major research interests are poststructuralist literary theory, postmodern theatre and film. She has published two books: *Színház és dekonstrukció. A Paul de Man-i retorikaelmélet színházelméleti kihívásai* (Theatre and Deconstruction. The Theatrical Challenges of the Paul de Man-ian Theory of Rhetorics) (2014), *Médea lányai. Performatív aktusok a kortárs film „színpadán”* (Medea's Daughters. Performative Acts on the „Stage” of Contemporary Film) (2019).

**GABRIELLA KISS** is theatre historian, translator, drama teacher, Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest and research teacher at Szent István High School, Budapest. Her focus is currently on the relationship of contemporary theatre and theatre in education.

**MÁRIA KURDI** is professor emerita in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Pécs, Hungary. 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.

**PÉTER P. MÜLLER** DSc is Professor at the Department of Modern Literature and Lit-

erary Theory at the University of Pécs, and Director of the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies. From 1999 to 2004 he was Director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in Budapest. He was Visiting Professor in the USA in 1990/91 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Fulbright Professor in 1993/94 at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, and in 2016/17 at Cleveland State University. In 1996 and 1999 he held research scholarship at Darwin College, Cambridge (UK), in 2014 and 2015 at the University of Kent (UK). In 1998 he was awarded the four years long Széchenyi Professorship. He published eleven books so far, the first one, *A groteszk dramaturgiája* (Dramaturgy of the Grotesque) in 1990, the most recent one, *Színház önmagán kívül* (Theatre Beyond Its Boundaries) in 2021.

**NATÁLIA PIKLI**, PhD, dr. habil. is Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She was a guest lecturer at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest between 2016 and 2019. She teaches, researches and publishes in the following areas: Shakespeare and early modern literature and culture; contemporary reception of Shakespeare; contemporary English and Hungarian drama and theatre. She writes theatre criticism and directs amateur student performances in her spare time. Her most recent publication is *Shakespeare's Hobby-horse and Early Modern Popular Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2022).

**ORSOLYA RING** is Research Fellow at the Institute for Political Science, Centre for Social Sciences and Assistant Professor at the Institute of History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her research interests include the theatre history of the Rákosi and Kádár era, with a special focus on theatre management, the history of the National Theatre, the Katona József Theatre and the Orfeo Ensembles.

help to evoke the atmosphere of Shakespeare's time.

In the context of this latter, important location in Germany, Vanessa Schormann draws attention to the possibility of experiencing a characteristic that has been much repeated in Shakespeare studies: that is, the text of the play was primarily to be heard during the Renaissance, and the visual aspects of the spectacle were secondary.<sup>11</sup>

---

Elsinore", in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 198–200.

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa SCHORMANN, „Globolatry in Germany: The Shakespeare Festival at Neuss – a

The stakes are very similar for each of the festivals bearing Shakespeare's name, albeit by different means, in different financial circumstances and cultural conditions: when an experience of similar weight is made directly tangible to the 21<sup>st</sup> century spectator, a bridge is in fact built from the present to Shakespeare's time.

---

dramaturg's perspective", in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 87.

## The Authors in this Issue

**ÁDÁM BETHLENFALVY** has worked in the field of Theatre in Education and Drama in Education for the past two decades in Hungary and the UK. He has also taken part in research activities in the field as one of the founders of InSite Drama. Currently he is the course director for the Drama in Education teacher training course and Associate Professor at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. His books titled *Living Through Extremes in Process Drama* and *Dráma a tanteremben* (Drama in the Classroom) were published in 2020.

**CHRIS COOPER** has worked in TiE (Theatre in Education) in the UK since 1988 and was the Artistic Director of Big Brum TiE (1999–2015). Since 2009 he has been working with Drama Rainbow Education, Beijing, and founded an NGO, Jian Xue, with partners in 2017. He works all over Europe on theatre projects, training, lecturing and holding workshops. He has written extensively about theatre and drama in a variety of books and journals. He is now the author of 46 plays.

**KORNÉLIA DERES** is a Junior Assistant Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the University of Cologne, and a Junior Research Fellow at the IAS of Central European University. Her articles were published by *Theatre Research International*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Theatralia*, and *Global Performance Studies*. She is the author of two monographs and co-editor of five volumes. Her current research interests are nineteenth-century interconnections of theatre and science, performativity and archives, and Cold War theatre and art histories.

**MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI** is a professor of theatre history. She has published several books and articles on the topics of contemporary drama theory, both the Hungarian and the European avantgarde, and the ways in which politics of memory interact with theatre. She is the co-founder of *Theatron*, the Philtherhub ([www.theatron.hu/ph](http://www.theatron.hu/ph)) and the Kálmán-project. In the last decade, her research is focused on the state socialist practice of Hungarian theatre after WW2, on the sovietised reception history of performances, on the transformation of the Viennese operetta into 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](http://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**, PhD, dr. habil. is 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 fourteen books and more than eighty 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).

**VERA KÉRCZY** is Associate Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Szeged. She received her PhD in 2012, and completed her habilitation in 2021. Her major research interests are poststructuralist literary theory, postmodern theatre and film. She has published two books: *Színház és dekonstrukció. A Paul de Man-i retorikaelmélet színházelméleti kihívásai* (Theatre and Deconstruction. The Theatrical Challenges of the Paul de Man-ian Theory of Rhetorics) (2014), *Médea lányai. Performatív aktusok a kortárs film „színpadán”* (Medea's Daughters. Performative Acts on the „Stage” of Contemporary Film) (2019).

**GABRIELLA KISS** is theatre historian, translator, drama teacher, Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest and research teacher at Szent István High School, Budapest. Her focus is currently on the relationship of contemporary theatre and theatre in education.

**MÁRIA KURDI** is professor emerita in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Pécs, Hungary. 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.

**PÉTER P. MÜLLER** DSc is Professor at the Department of Modern Literature and Lit-

erary Theory at the University of Pécs, and Director of the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies. From 1999 to 2004 he was Director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in Budapest. He was Visiting Professor in the USA in 1990/91 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Fulbright Professor in 1993/94 at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, and in 2016/17 at Cleveland State University. In 1996 and 1999 he held research scholarship at Darwin College, Cambridge (UK), in 2014 and 2015 at the University of Kent (UK). In 1998 he was awarded the four years long Széchenyi Professorship. He published eleven books so far, the first one, *A groteszk dramaturgiája* (Dramaturgy of the Grotesque) in 1990, the most recent one, *Színház önmagán kívül* (Theatre Beyond Its Boundaries) in 2021.

**NATÁLIA PIKLI**, PhD, dr. habil. is Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She was a guest lecturer at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest between 2016 and 2019. She teaches, researches and publishes in the following areas: Shakespeare and early modern literature and culture; contemporary reception of Shakespeare; contemporary English and Hungarian drama and theatre. She writes theatre criticism and directs amateur student performances in her spare time. Her most recent publication is *Shakespeare's Hobby-horse and Early Modern Popular Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2022).

**ORSOLYA RING** is Research Fellow at the Institute for Political Science, Centre for Social Sciences and Assistant Professor at the Institute of History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her research interests include the theatre history of the Rákosi and Kádár era, with a special focus on theatre management, the history of the National Theatre, the Katona József Theatre and the Orfeo Ensembles.

**VERONIKA SCHANDL** is an Associate Professor at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. Her research is centred on Shakespeare in performance, specialising in Socialist, politicised productions of Shakespeare in Eastern-Europe. Her book, *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary: Shakespeare Behind the Iron Curtain* was published in 2009. Currently she is writing a monograph on Hungarian director, Tamás Major's Shakespeare directions, and is working on Shakespeare burlesques and theatrical nostalgia.

**ENIKŐ SEPSI** is University Professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest (dean of the Fac-

ulty between 2010 and 2019), Director of the Institute of Arts Studies and General Humanities, Director of the Benda Kálmán College of Excellence in Humanities and Social Sciences, Series Editor, Károli Könyvek (Károli Books), guest professor and research fellow in foreign institutions (Sorbonne, ENS de Paris, EPHE, Lyon 3, Université de Lille, Paris XII). She holds a PhD from Sorbonne University and a habilitated doctor degree from Pázmány Péter Catholic University. Research areas: modern and contemporary theatre and poetry, religious studies, translation. Awards: Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques (2010), Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit (2022).