

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

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

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

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

Hungarian theatrical context, 1896–1918

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the competition for Hungarian authors' plays, the Vígszínház had a significant advantage in the first decade of the century. Recognising the opportunities in Hungarian playwrights promptly required good sense, boldness, and quick decision-making to select the right works. Within a well-functioning system and with above-average remuneration, authors willingly offered their plays to the theatre. Within the framework of the Hungarian drama series that began with Sándor Bródy's *The Nurse* (*A dada*) in 1902, Hungarian drama reached its first real breakthrough success in 1907 with Ferenc Molnár's *The Devil* (*Az Ördög*), through a Hungarian Cycle⁵ initiated by Mór Ditrói.⁶ This was followed by Sándor Bródy's *The Schoolmistress* (*A tanítónő*) in 1908, and then plays by Menyhért Lengyel and Dezső Szomory. The increasing audience interest, press publicity,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hungarian–German Culture

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

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

in Budapest on numerous occasions.⁹ It is at one of such guest performances that the already renowned Hungarian writer, Sándor Bródy, and the future German director, Max Reinhardt, first met in 1899.¹⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³ KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 65.

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

of Hungarian authors' plays performed on German stages.¹⁵

The concept of export plays

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andor Gábor's comedy *The Beautiful Woman* (*Szépasszony*) was presented at the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház) in 1916,²¹ depicting the story of an adulterous woman, and the devaluation of a marriage can be followed in Ferenc Herczeg's salon play *The Blue Fox* (*Kék róka*) in 1917.²²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four export plays in focus

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

²⁷ See BÉCSY, „Sikerdarabok...”, 132–148.

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

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

²⁹ BARDI ÖDÖN, *A régi Vígszínház* (Budapest: Táncsics Kiadó, 1957), 48.

³⁰ KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 67.

ending.³¹ Although Bródy was bilingual (Hungarian and German), he did not undertake the translation of the play into German; this task fell to Miksa Ruttkay-Rothauer (Ruttkay György). The translation was successful, with an excellent cast, but the Hungarian village drama did not win the favour of the Berlin audience, and was only performed seven times.³² Returning home, the author summarized the reason for the failure: "Imagine that despite my begging and threatening, Reinhardt refused to go into marriage, and we failed. Thoroughly."³³ Bródy's disappointment is understandable, and the failure of *The Schoolmistress* in Berlin serves as an instructive example for Hungarian playwrights: alternative directions must be pursued for foreign audience success. However, not long after the January Berlin premiere, and *The Schoolmistress* was back on stage, this time in Budapest. It became one of the plays for the upcoming German theatre guest performance, and the German-language version with the original ending was seen by the Budapest audience on May 29, 1909.³⁴ Therefore, within a year, the Vígszínház staged two different versions of Bródy's play: two productions and two endings. The play's history also includes numerous translations into other languages, but in its rewritten version; the original ending was not reconstructed until 1954. Nearly fifty years after the play had been written, it was presented at the Jókai Színház without a happy ending.

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

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

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

³² KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 67.

³³ BÁRDI, *A régi...*, 48.

³⁴ KESSELHEIM, „Alexander Bródy...”, 68.

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

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

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

³⁸ KÉRI, „*Liliom...*”, 185.

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

The premiere of Ferenc Molnár's play *The Guardsman* took place on November 19, 1910, at the Vígszínház. The casting appeared excellent, with Irén Varsányi playing the female lead, the actress, as she had done well in previous Molnár plays, and her partner was Gyula Csortos. The drama was well-received by the audience: the presentation of the play was splendid, both in terms of the costume of the titular guardsman⁴² and the stage setting of the second act. The stage was narrowed down to a large opera box; the stage was dimly lit, with red wallpaper, red velvet curtains, mirrors with golden frames, red plush pouffes, and chairs. On the opposite side, the opera audience could be seen,

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

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

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

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

and throughout the act, the music of *Madama Butterfly* played. *The Guardsman* was performed six times a week, quickly reaching its 50th performance, and thanks to the already existing international connections, it did not take long for the play to premiere in Vienna⁴³ and later in Berlin. In Vienna, under the direction of Josef Jarno, the play was staged at Deutsches Volks-theater on February 1, 1911. It is undeniable that Molnár's drama became a theatrical sensation, but the fact that the play's path in Vienna was accompanied by minor scandals also contributes to this. Julius Ludassy (Dr. Ludassy Gyula), the author of a one-act play entitled *Fidelity of Women*, which was staged in Leipzig in 1903, claimed after the Hungarian premiere that the theme, or the idea itself, belonged to him, and he accused the Hungarian writer of plagiarism.⁴⁴ The dispute was going on in the press, and although Molnár repeatedly stated that the accusations were baseless, the Austrian author remained adamant and wanted to prevent the Viennese premiere at all costs. Ludassy succeeded in having his play, *Fidelity of Women*, staged at the Josefstadter Theater before the premiere of *The Guardsman* (*A testőr*). The dispute ended with a reassuring outcome for Molnár, as the Viennese theatrical community did not find Ludassy's accusations well-founded. The play also achieved significant success in Berlin: the German audience was able to see *The Guardsman* on the stage of the Kleines Theater in the autumn of 1916, and it was not long before the play sold out a hundred and fifty times. Additionally, rehearsals for the play began in several locations, including St. Petersburg, with the premiere scheduled for the autumn season.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁸ N.N., „A táncosnő”, 35.

⁴⁹ N.N., „Színház...”, 15.

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

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

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

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

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

Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁷ See BÉCSY, „Sikerdarabok...”, 132–148.

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

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