

“In Rome, in Paris, / in Moscow, in Berlin, in London, and in Budapest”: Antal Németh and the European Theatre

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Abstract: In this paper, I outline Antal Németh’s career from the perspective of his international connections. Németh was the director-manager of the Hungarian National Theatre between 1935 and 1944. His whole career was significantly shaped by his interest in European theatre and his connections with the international theatrical scene. Renowned foreign directors and theatre influencers served as his role models in the 1920s and 1930s, and his academic performance in the international sphere contributed significantly to his directorial career in his homeland. Following World War II, during the era of state socialism in Hungary, he had to give up his leading position in Hungary’s cultural life. He lost some connections, and his ability to keep contact with the remaining ones was limited. Nonetheless, he maintained a deep interest in scholarly literature and Western theatrical influences.

Antal Németh, a theatre director, theatre theoretician, and former manager of the National Theatre in Budapest, arranged his written memories at the end of his life: his entire correspondence, notes, diaries, contracts, official documents, book plans, and autobiographies are all available for research at the National Széchényi Library. There is no doubt that Németh worked for posterity: here and there, he added comments and explanations in red on the margins of papers and the edges of envelopes.

In the following, primarily based on the papers, I outline Antal Németh’s career path from the perspective of his international connections. Although several books have been published on Németh recently, an institute was named after him, and efforts have been made to rehabilitate him, the academic study

of his actual theatrical oeuvre has not been carried out; it has barely even begun. The most significant work on Németh, *Set Design on Antal Németh’s Stage*, is by Mária István, who does not portray him as a solitary anti-naturalistic Hungarian director but as an artist who had connections with European stage designers of his time and was aware of stage design trends.¹ His collaborations with set designers are thus analysed from this perspective. In this paper, I also concentrate on international relations, highlighting how they shaped Antal Németh’s professional career as a director. Since his vast theatrical output is exceptionally well documented, I only aim to provide a general overview rather than delving into details, emphasising that throughout his entire career, from its inception to its conclusion, Antal Németh consistently measured his work against European standards, engaging with and relating to Europe’s perspectives and scale.

The two earliest biographies by Tamás Koltai² and Elek Selmeczi respectively,³ both refer to a manuscript authored by Péter Mártonfi entitled *Dr. Antal Németh: An Outline of a Biography*.⁴ However, this text is almost

¹ ISTVÁN Mária, *Látványtervezés Németh Antal színpadán (1929–1944)*, Művészettörténeti Füzetek (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1996), This work has an English summary.

² KOLTAI Tamás, „Az ismeretlen Németh Antal”, in NÉMETH Antal, *Új Színházat! Tanulmányok*, ed. KOLTAI Tamás, 5–23 (Budapest: Múzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1988).

³ SELMECZI Elek, *Németh Antal: A Magyar Színház Enciklopédistája* (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 1991).

⁴ MÁRTONFI Péter, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, (n.d.), OSZMI K Q11.124.

completely identical with Antal Németh's *Curriculum Vitae*, an autobiography written in the third person.⁵ The latter appears to be an earlier version dating back to the mid-1940s. Antal Németh's father was called Márton Németh. 'Mártonfi' means 'son of Márton'. Therefore, it seems that Antal Németh's biography has persisted primarily through his own interpretation, that is, Németh authored his own biography.

Avant-garde

The student Antal Németh became familiar with the arts through the reading of international avant-garde trends in Hungarian art activist journals, such as *A Tett* and *MA*. Németh was born into a working-class family in Budapest in 1903. After excelling in elementary school, at the request of his teacher, he was enrolled in a secondary school, where he was able to complete his studies owing to scholarships and private tutoring. According to his autobiography, at the age of fourteen, his favourite writer was Anatole France, and he studied Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He was not only a regular reader of *MA*, edited by the avant-garde poet and artist Lajos Kassák, but also frequented the editorial offices of the journal on Váci Street and later on Ferenciek Square. There he had many conversations with János Mácza, the group's theatre theorist, who later emigrated to Moscow.

Németh mentions three small episodes to illustrate that it was Lajos Kassák and his circle who made the greatest intellectual impact on him during WW1 and the ensuing years: 1) He was almost expelled from school after reciting Lajos Kassák's poem *Mesteremberek* (Artisans) in a Russian shirt in the assembly hall of the Tavaszmező Street Secondary School on May 1, 1919. 2) At a matinee performance where one of the invited artists to recite did not show up, the di-

rector János Mácza asked the young Németh, who was aspiring to be an actor at the time, to step in and recite the poem. 3) When pedestrians often laughed or were puzzled by contemporary works of art, linoleum prints, and sculptures displayed in the storefront of *MA*'s editorial office, some of those inside, such as Iván Hevesy or Németh, would go out into the street to engage in debates with them, persuading people of the legitimacy of the new artistic goals.

The influence of the avant-garde on Németh's later productions is evident in several ways. His attraction to the visual arts and media originates from here, as does his interest in stage technical innovations that enable an emphasised, expressive, and theatrical role for visuals and movement on stage. His theatrical work was marked by a demand for abstraction and the creation and use of stage spaces, following the principle that was first heralded in the early 20th century by the reforms of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig. Inspired by the avant-garde, Antal Németh's directorial profile can also be characterised by his efforts to achieve synthesis in the theatre arts and to reach large audiences. He aimed to introduce a cultural movement that conflicted with the traditions and aesthetics of bourgeois illusion theatre. In terms of aesthetics, as a contemporary of Artaud and Brecht but not under their influence, his interest in theatre went beyond Europe and extended to the Orient. In his 1929 doctoral dissertation, he refers to the Oriental theatre as a place where the purpose of the stage is not to create illusions and the task of the actors is not merely to depict humans.⁶

He was influenced by Craig, and he also considered the director a sovereign creative artist. This was the period in European theatre history when the first world-famous theatre directors emerged. Not only the narrow profession was familiar with the works of

⁵ NÉMETH Antal, „Curriculum Vitae” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/61.

⁶ NÉMETH Antal, „A színjátszás esztétikájának vázlata”, in NÉMETH, *Új Színház!...*, 151–205.

Max Reinhardt or Konstantin Stanislavski, but the wider public as well, through newspapers. At the time of his graduation from secondary school, Németh decided to focus on theatre direction instead of acting. Although he did not maintain personal and regular contact with the activists after the emigration of the *MA* group to Vienna, he continued to follow the work of the avant-garde artists. (For example, as a literary critic, he sent questionnaires to Béla Uitz, László Moholy Nagy, Lajos Tihanyi, and during his tenure as manager, he invited László Medgyes to work at the National Theatre).⁷ However, as his interest gravitated more towards the theatre, he gradually distanced himself from the avant-garde milieu. Despite his wife, Piroska Peéry, regularly performing at Ödön Palasovszky's experimental theatrical evenings in 1928, Németh's opinion in 1931–1932, following two years of fellowships abroad, was devastating concerning the Hungarian avant-garde theatre group.⁸

Nonetheless, his openness to new artistic currents, his constant desire for self-improvement, and the importance of knowledge gained through reading are linked to the *MA* circle in the early years of Németh. His need to have a broader perspective on the artistic life than the domestic palette originated from this circle. He was taught to regard and evaluate domestic theatrical achievements critically. János Mácza's categorical, strict critical style also shines through the young Németh's journal articles.

Scholarships. Rome

Németh began establishing his international relations in the late 1920s, primarily through his travels and secondarily, through professional correspondence. He began his studies at the university in Budapest just after World War I, during the post-Trianon era. This was

⁷ ISTVÁN, *Látványtervezés...*, 11–12.

⁸ NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi Napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/109. 2.

a time when Hungary's cultural and educational policies were relatively progressive due to Minister Kuno Klebelsberg's reform policies. Klebelsberg aimed to establish cultural superiority for Hungary among the nations, especially the neighbouring countries, after the lost war and subsequent financial crisis. His goal was to align Hungary with European academic trends. As part of this effort, scholarships and Hungarian cultural institutes were founded in foreign countries; for instance, the Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin, which supported talented Hungarian students studying there. Through the Collegium, Németh was awarded a one-year scholarship by the Hungarian state, which enabled him to live in Berlin and enrol at Humboldt University for the 1928–29 academic year. While writing his doctoral thesis (*An Outline of the Aesthetics of Performance*), he studied theatre history, theatre directing, and stage design.

The Theatre Studies Department of Humboldt University had been founded five years earlier, in 1923, by Max Herrmann, the founding father of theatre studies in Germany, whose writings were the most influential ones in the field. Hermann claimed that the separation of drama and performance was of utmost importance. Németh attended his classes as well as the lectures of art historian Oskar Fischel and mime researcher Hermann Reich. During the first term (until his death in December) Németh's tutor was Ferdinand Gregori, who was an actor, director, theoretician, and a professor of directing. According to Németh, Gregori was the first to apply the stylized stage, well before Reinhardt.⁹ Németh learned the most from watching performances; he spent almost every night in the theatre. In his diary, he analysed every performance in a professional way,¹⁰ and al-

⁹ NÉMETH Antal, „A rendezőnevelés és a színészképzés problémája”, in NÉMETH, *Új Színház!*..., 76–82, 80.

¹⁰ NÉMETH Antal, „Berlini napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/108. Géza Balogh published the events

so contributed theatre reviews and reports to the Hungarian journal *Napkelet* and other newspapers. He was particularly fond of the works of Alexis Granowsky, Alexander Tairov, and Leopold Jessner, but introduced the names of Leo Reuss, Heinz Hilpert, Erich Engel, Jürgen Fehling, Nikolai Evreinov to Hungarian readers, too. Though Max Reinhardt's very popular theatre and directing style did not impress him greatly, he certainly seized the opportunity to attend some of his rehearsals in June of 1929. "I've learned one thing: how to behave authoritatively without arrogance... without it, one cannot be a good director!" he summarises the lessons of these days in his diary.¹¹

It is clear that Németh appreciated Jessner much more, as he saw in the works of Jessner that the style of directing is not some sort of personal brand, but it is always defined by the material; it is the drama serving as the basis for the performance that determines it.¹² Hence, Jessner's performances were entirely different from one another, although each one is stylized, and 'his strength lies in emphasising the rhythm of the performance, intensifying the intensity of expression beyond realism'.¹³ In Granows-

of the first part of the "Berlin Diary", considering it a "suddenly interrupted chronicle", although Németh continued the diary in another notebook until the end of the scholarship, June 1929. BALOGH Géza, „Németh Antal berlini naplója”, *Szcenárium* 6, no. 6 (2018): 7–33. See NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi napló” (n.d.), OSZK K 63/109.

¹¹ NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, 45. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

¹² Németh calls this type of director "piece-player" or "play-player" and compares them to "character actors". NÉMETH Antal, „Két Shakespeare-rendezés a berlini Állami Schauspielhausban”, *Napkelet* 7, no. 11 (1929): 870–872.

¹³ NÉMETH Antal, „Jessner, Leopold”, in *Színházi Lexikon*, ed. NÉMETH Antal (Budapest: Győző Andor kiadása, 1930).

ky's productions, it was the mass movements and the interdisciplinary nature, collectivity, and playfulness of the performances that captivated him. He especially admired movement on Tairov's stage. Németh realised the importance of choreography as he watched Tairov's performances, acknowledging the defining role of space in the actors' movements and valuing the versatility of the ensemble as the Kamerny Theatre performed drama, operetta, pantomime, and comedy with equal skill. (In 1929, Németh was among the first in Hungary to describe contemporary Russian theatre art in the press.¹⁴ He believed that most modern directors were among the Russians,¹⁵ although Meyerhold appeared propagandistic and Stanislavski seemed naturalistic to him.¹⁶)

By the time Németh received his university scholarship, he could boast of having been abroad several times. In 1924, he travelled to Italy and made several visits to Vienna. He first encountered Tairov's book in a bookstore in Vienna, for instance, and two years later, he saw a performance there directed by Tairov for the first time. After the show, he sought him out and got to know him. In 1934, he was among the guests invited by Tairov to Moscow to celebrate the Kamerny Theatre's jubilee. However, he lacked sufficient funds for the trip, so he only sent his paper on *The Tragedy of Man* to the Russian director.¹⁷

Wherever he went—for example, in the autumn of 1927 on his journey through Amsterdam–Haarlem–Hague–Rotterdam—he went to the theatre, if possible. At the same time, travel logs and albums testify that his

¹⁴ NÉMETH Antal, „Alkotó rendezők 1.”, *Délmagyarország*, 1929. júl. 28., 10.

¹⁵ NÉMETH Antal, „Színházi napló”, in *Uj Lexikon*, ed. DORMÁNDY László and JUHÁSZ Vilmos (Budapest: Dante–Pantheon, 1936), 3563.

¹⁶ NÉMETH, „Alkotó rendezők 1.”, 10.

¹⁷ Correspondence between Alexander Tairov and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/3018 and 63/4259.

interest in classical music or art history was also significant. He was a great admirer of technological development, and film art occupied him almost as much as theatre. In Cologne, where he spent only a few hours, he went to the cinema and saw Eisenstein's film entitled *Strike*. In Rotterdam, he toured the town in an aeroplane. When Clarence Chamberlin (who held the endurance world record in transatlantic flight crossings) landed in Berlin in the summer of 1927, he kept a single flower from Chamberlin's car as a souvenir.

In addition to travels, another way of building international relationships was through collaborative theoretical work conducted from afar: in 1928, Németh was editing the *Lexicon of Acting*. The goal of this lexicon was to comprehensively summarise knowledge about theatrical arts—not only strictly about the theatre but also about dance or the circus. Foreign experts wrote the articles on international subjects. Németh had many Hungarian experts, from Sándor Hevesi to Antal Szerb, working on the lexicon. By that time, Németh, who appeared in public for the first time as a journalist, has already been already in contact with the entire Hungarian theatre industry, and he was able to mobilise them.¹⁸ The importance of the lexicon, as later evaluators see it, lies in its “broad perspective in time and space, proportional treatment of practice and theory,” and its “astonishing topicality”: it discusses the latest contemporary global theatre events and breaks them down into performances and roles.¹⁹ It reports, for example, on the leading actors of the Latvian or Lithuanian national theatres of the time, discuss-

es the history of theatre in Portugal, Romania, or the USA, and reflects on productions from 1928 or 1929. The list of foreign collaborators of the lexicon are Disher Willson (London), Edmund Erkes (Leipzig), Mario Ferrigni (critic and playwright, lawyer, son of Cocoluto-Ferrini, an Italian playwright; from Milan), René Fülöp-Miller (Vienna), Joseph Gregor (the head of the theatrical history collection at the Vienna National Library; he was the one who helped Németh begin networking), Franz Hadamowsky (Vienna), H. Jelinek (Prague), S. Jugović (Belgrade), Hjalmar Krag (Oslo), María Los (Berlin), Albert Maybon (orientalist, Japanese-French translator; from St. Cloud), Paul Alfred Merbach (theatre scholar and director, head of the science department of the Magdeburg Theatre Exhibition; from Berlin), Robert Nendham (Copenhagen), Franz Rapp (director of the Theatre Museum in Munich), Georges Reymond (Geneva), Wilhelm Treichlinger (theatre director of the Deutsches Theater, Berlin), and Otakar Zich (composer and aesthetician, Prague). Németh's authored editorial preface to the *Lexicon of Acting* makes it clear that the lexicon was intended for the “audience of Europe,” as a similar work had only appeared in the German language a hundred years earlier.²⁰ However, the work is still waiting to be translated into any other language to this day.

During the visits back home, Németh made diary entries in Budapest: “Directing: the usual: nothing!”, he declared after a new premiere at the National Theatre.²¹ There was no theatre director in Hungary whom he admired or would like to follow. He was deeply dissatisfied with Hungarian productions. (He himself had directed only one production till then: in the spring of 1928, he

¹⁸ SZÉKELY György, „A hetvenéves kutatómunka önmagában is egyedülálló a színháztudományban: Székely György portréja, 4. rész”, interview by Tamás GAJDÓ, *Parallel*, no 24 (2012): 12–19, 15.

¹⁹ LENKEI Júlia, „A »theatrális művészetek egyeteme«: Adalékok, érdekességek, műhelytitkok Németh Antal Színészeti Lexikona körül”, *Critikai Lapok* 24, no. 7–8 (2015): 17–23.

²⁰ NÉMETH Antal, ed., *Színészeti Lexikon*, 1: [2.]. The *Allgemeines Theaterlexikon* of Hermann Margraff és Carl Herlossohn was published between 1839–1842.

²¹ NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, on 5th April 1929, 7.

staged Strindberg's play *Easter* in Nyíregyháza.) In the spring of 1929, a letter arrives at his Berlin address informing him that in the following season he could work as the chief director at the Szeged City Theatre.²² Here, over the next two years, he got the chance to put himself to the test by directing a total of 50 productions. Meanwhile, he taught set design at Álmos Jaschik's private school. With his supervision and guidance, students designed sets that later supplied the material for a theatre stage exhibition on November 16, 1929, at the city's cultural palace—the second such event in Hungary.²³ He spent two seasons in Szeged as a director. After the first season, he unsuccessfully applied for the manager's position. For political and economic reasons at the end of the second season, the city's supervision and support of Szeged's theatre, along with Németh's directorship, come to an end. At that point, he won another fellowship in the 1931–32 academic year, this time for Opera Direction and Theatre Studies, with stops in Vienna, Munich, Cologne, and Paris. He was allowed to attend university lectures without enrolling in Munich or Cologne. He also spent one month in Vienna (autumn) and one in Paris (spring), observing cultural developments in the theatre. This time he travelled as a theatre director, not as a writer, which is a difference: he obtains permission, for example, in Vienna at the Burgtheater to watch performances from behind the scenes, thus studying the operation of stage machinery.²⁴

During this second fellowship period, he not only wished to learn and be inspired, but he also consciously tries to build his directing

²² BALOGH Géza, *Németh Antal színháza: Éle-tút és pályakép történelmi keretben* (Budapest: Nemzeti Színház, 2015), 11.

²³ The first Theatre Arts Exhibition in Hungary was organised by the Hungarian Association of Applied Arts in Budapest. The opening was on 30th May 1925.

²⁴ NÉMETH, „Színházi napló”, 4.

career. Since he did not receive opportunities for directing in Hungary, he looked for opportunities abroad. In 1932, when the 100th anniversary of Goethe's death was celebrated by the Weimar Republic, Németh organised a theatre exhibition in the Munich Theatre Museum, based on his directorial-scenic concepts for Goethe's dramas. This included set designs and stage models that, according to his instructions, students of the Jaschik school prepare. “A few similar publications and a few exhibitions, and Europe will know us”, he wrote optimistically to Jaschik in the spring of 1932.²⁵ The Goethe exhibition in Munich was invited to Berlin by the board of state theatres, then to Cologne by Carl Niessen, professor at the University Institute of Theatre Studies in Cologne. (Niessen is one of the theatre scholars with whom Németh later remained in contact and correspondence.) From Cologne, the exhibition moved on to Breslau, where it was supplemented with eight Hauptmann dramas that had well-developed directorial concepts. During this period, Németh directed an occasional charity event in Munich, gave two scientific lectures at the Theatre Institute on Hungarian theatre, and published a study on Goethe in German.²⁶ After such precedents, the German consul, László Velics, was already well acquainted with him. Németh presented a directorial concept for the Munich staging of Imre Madách's drama *The Tragedy of Man* to Velics. During months of extensive correspondence, he and his designer friend, Álmos Jaschik, worked on detailed visual plans for the stage performance of the play at the Prince Regent Theatre (Prinzregentheater). Moreover, Németh commissioned accompanying music for the

²⁵ Letter from Antal Németh to Álmos Jaschik on the 17th of April 1932. OSZK K 63/3815.

²⁶ Anton NÉMETH, *Goethe und der moderne Bühne*, vol. 3, Vortrage- Und Veröffentlichungen Der Deutsch-Ungarischen Gesellschaft 5 (München: Südost-Verlag Adolf Dresler, 1932).

production. Although Velics supported them, the plans for the performance experienced ongoing delays and ultimately did not materialize. In Paris, alongside his friend Géza Blattner, Németh visited Lipót Molnos, the manager of the Hungarian Institute, and negotiated with him about a possible Parisian premiere. They agree that the existing translation was not acceptable, and as a first step, a new French text must be prepared.

After his return to Budapest, Németh did not let go of the idea: he reviewed his concept and attempted to have Madách's play performed at either the Royal Opera in Rome or on the outdoor stage in Verona. A new Italian translation was prepared specifically for the stage performance; Antonio Widmar, the press attaché of the Budapest Italian Embassy, did the job. The set designer for this potential production was János Horváth, a young Hungarian designer on a scholarship in Rome at the time, and the re-composed music was handled by Ferenc Farkas, a young Hungarian composer also studying under Otto Respighi in Rome at the time. Németh travelled to Rome, where, with his colleagues, he developed two concepts: one for the Roman stage and one for the Verona stage. However, the performance—allegedly approved even by Mussolini²⁷—at the last moment did not materialise there either. Nevertheless, the completed translation was published in Italian in Milan.²⁸

In the 1930s, the Italian theatre was in crisis, and increased state intervention was seen as a solution. In 1934, the Royal Italian Academy (Reale Accademia d'Italia) organ-

²⁷ Ilona Fried cites from the letter of Antonio Widmar to Arturo Marcipat. FRIED Ilona, *Őxellenciája kívánságára: Színház, kultúra és politika a fasizmus Olaszországában* (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2016), 186.

²⁸ Imre MADÁCH, *La tragedia dell'uomo*, trans. Antonio WIDMAR, La Stampa Moderna (Milano: S.A. Editrice Genio, 1936).

ised an international scientific congress to explore the changing role of theatre in modern mass society, addressing the roles of theatre and culture, and the relationship between theatre and politics. Mussolini proposed the theme and closely followed the preparations. Renowned theatre experts were invited to the conference, including G.B. Shaw, Edward Gordon Craig, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gerhart Hauptmann, Paul Claudel, Jules Romains, W.B. Yeats, Stefan Zweig, Maxim Gorky, Franz Werfel, André Antoine, Jacques Copeau, Konstatin Stanislavskij, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Tairov, Mejerhold, Garcia Lorca, and the architect Gropius.²⁹ Pirandello served as the president of the conference, and Marinetti as the secretary. From the Italian side, Bontempelli and Romagnoli participated, along with Pirandello's "assistant", Silvio D'Amico.³⁰ From Hungary, Ferenc Herczeg, Ferenc Molnár, and Antal Németh were invited. Herczeg and Molnár were popular playwrights abroad, while Németh was not well-known even in Hungary at that time. However, Antonio Widmar, the Italian translator of *The Tragedy of Man*, had alerted his friend, the cultural politician Arturo Marcipat, which resulted in Németh receiving an invitation.³¹

Németh delivered three presentations at the "Volta" congress, two in Italian and one in German, on the following subjects: the role of theatre and the state, the situation of

²⁹ Craig, Yeats, Tairov and 49 more people attended the conference, but almost two-thirds of the invited guests cancelled their participation. See FRIED, *Őxellenciája kívánságára...*, 119–197.

³⁰ D'Amico later became the head of the Academy of Performing Arts, *Scenario* magazine's editor-in-chief, and stayed in contact with Németh: they exchanged letters, and D'Amico visited Budapest, writing about National Theatre performances. See the correspondence between Silvio D'Amico and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/860 and 63/3611.

³¹ FRIED, *Őxellenciája kívánságára...*, 186.

Hungarian theatres, and his views on radio, film, and theatre.³² It is worth mentioning that at the conference, Németh was practically the only speaker who praised the possible role of radio and film without reservations, and did not fear their impact on theatre.³³ During this conference, he became acquainted with delegates from neighbouring countries and began collaborating with them. His plan, which received immediate support from the top manager of Bucharest theatres, the manager-director and set designer of the Prague National Theatre, the manager of the Athens National Theatre, and a dispatched Yugoslav playwright, was for theatre companies to visit each other during a three-day guest performance framework. On the first day, each company would perform the same play, such as *Hamlet*. On the second day, each company would present a classic play from their own country (for example, the Hungarians would perform *Csongor and Tünde*), and on the third day, each company would showcase a play from the country where they were currently guest performing (Greek, Romanian, Czech, etc.). However, upon his return, he had to abandon this idea as 'according to the guidelines of Hungarian foreign policy, the plan was untimely.'³⁴

Nevertheless, thanks to his participation in the Rome congress, Hungarian cultural policy took notice of Antal Németh.

³² The three presentations titled "Cultura teatrale, scienza teatrale e Stato"; "Rapporte sui teatro di Stato in Ungheria" and "Theater, Film und Radio" were published in the conference volume: Reale Accademia d'Italia, ed., *Convegno di lettere. Il teatro drammatico: Roma, 8–14 ottobre 1934. Atti del convegno* (Roma: Fondazione A. Volta, 1934) according to Németh's notes (OSZK K 63/60).

³³ FRIED, *Őexcellenciája kívánságára...*, 211.

³⁴ MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 19.

At the Hungarian National Theatre

"If we can arrange the conditions of the work, et cetera, to our mutual satisfaction, I personally would be most willing to accept your proposal," Gordon Craig wrote on June 19th to Antal Németh.³⁵ Németh had been appointed to be the manager of the Budapest National Theatre only 19 days earlier. It seems that immediately after his appointment, one of his first tasks was to write to Craig, whom he had met in Rome. In his response, Craig mentions that he no longer designs sets but would make an exception for Németh. The context of the letters revolved around the stage direction for *Oedipus*. Craig wished to visit the theatre before preparing the designs and focused particularly on the technical equipment, especially the lighting.

Antal Németh's appointment as manager was sudden and quite unexpected. His appointment was marked as one of the "greatest scandals" in 20th century Hungarian theatre history,³⁶ a "revolution within an essentially conservative institution, induced by government action."³⁷ In 1935, the strongly right-wing Gömbös government's Minister of Culture, Bálint Hóman, allowed Németh (who was definitely more inclined towards left-wing views in the artistic and aesthetic realm) complete freedom as manager, and he would transform the National Theatre into an entirely new artistic venue. The minister terminated the contracts of most company members and renewed only those with whom Németh truly intended to work. Within a day, Németh secured the top talents

³⁵ Letters from Edward Gordon Craig to Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/1228.

³⁶ JÁKFALVI Magdolna, „Changes: The Rise of Theatre Studies as an Academic Discipline in Hungary”, *Theatron* 16, no. 4 (2022): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2022.4.3>.

³⁷ SCHÖPFLIN Aladár, „A színházi évad és a Nemzeti Színház kérdőjele”, *Nyugat* 28, no. 7 (1935): 59–62, 61.

from Budapest's private theatres. He also received the opportunity and funds to upgrade the theatre's equipment. In the summer of 1935, the National Theatre was renovated inside and out. They made technical improvements, introduced alternating current, and installed transformers. The theatre acquired its own warehouse building and workshop spaces. They also purchased state-of-the-art stage technology equipment: projectors, centrally controlled auditorium spotlights, and sound amplification devices. Although Gordon Craig never came to work in Budapest, Németh did everything possible to upgrade the theatre's stage technology (especially the lighting technology), which matched or even surpassed those of the prominent European stages.³⁸

Németh's role as the manager of the National Theatre can be analysed within the context of international cultural relations from two perspectives: firstly, the "marketing" of Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* can be viewed as the export of a cultural commodity initiated from the authoritative position of Hungary's leading theatre manager (since we have seen Németh's early support for translating and producing the *Tragedy* quite early in his career); secondly, closely related to this initiative, is the intention to introduce various countries' drama and theatrical cultures to the Budapest audience, with a special emphasis on introducing the drama of smaller European nations. Between 1935 and 1944, the Budapest National Theatre staged four Finnish, three Danish, two Swiss, two Austrian, one Estonian, one Bulgarian, one Yugoslavian, and one Polish play.³⁹

³⁸ During the 1936 theatre world congress, for example, when the Deutsches Volkstheater in Vienna staged *The Ronins' Treasure*, backgrounds had to be painted for the stage, since the projection technology was not available for the show.

³⁹ N. MANDL Erika, „Színház és metapolitika”, in *Társadalomtudományi gondolatok a harminadik évezred elején*, ed. KARLOVITZ János Ti-

After World War II, Németh was accused of fascism by one of the validation committees tasked with examining the conduct of Hungarian citizens during the Horthy era.⁴⁰ Németh's successful and active involvement in Hungarian-German cultural relations provided a piece of evidence against him. He had directed performances in Germany and had been honoured with the German Order of the Eagle for his merits. Németh defended himself by stating that he never wore the Order of the Eagle, and, as a state theatre, he was obliged by the government to invite German guest theatre managers. While he directed in Germany, through his productions of *The Tragedy of Man* and his entire oeuvre, he aimed solely to familiarise international audiences with Hungarian culture and establish it abroad. In his autobiography, he claimed that he had negotiated the staging of Hungarian classics abroad in exchange for performing German classics (which would have been performed at the National Theatre anyway).⁴¹ He also drew attention to the fact that the National Socialist German cultural policy regarded Hungarian culture as part of German culture:

“Following the advance of Nazism in Germany, the Stuttgart »Auslandsdeutschum« began vigorous agitation

bor, 241–247 (Komárno: International Research Institute, 2013).

⁴⁰ Németh appeared before multiple validation committees. The first one verified him in December 1945. However, a report was filed against him, leading to another committee conducting the proceedings, resulting in a job loss verdict. He appealed against the decision, and in the summer of 1947, the court annulled the validation committee's ruling. However, following this, Németh couldn't secure a job anywhere, and it was only after 1956 that he managed to obtain a theatre contract again.

⁴¹ MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 51–54.

to increase public awareness about Southeast Europe belonging to Germany's living space not only economically but also culturally. They claimed that the entire Hungarian culture had German origins. One evening, during the German Minister of the Interior, Frick's, visit to Budapest in the summer of 1938 or 1939, he went to the open-air theatre on Margaret Island, where they were performing the legend of Saint Margaret. The German minister seemed to be surprised, and after listening to a few sentences he asked, 'In what language are the actors performing?' He was astonished when they explained to him that it was Hungarian, because he thought in Hungary everybody spoke German."⁴²

Németh saw himself as consistently resisting Nazi propaganda through legally possible means. He used the theatre's programme as the primary evidence for this. Indeed, between 1938 and 1944 the right-wing press continuously attacked Németh. Disputes arose with the right-wing Theatre and Film Arts Chamber, and in the summer of 1944, he was removed from the head of the theatre. During the certification process after World War II, Lipót Molnos (the former director of the Hungarian Institute in Paris) and Artur Saturnus, a Swiss journalist, testified in Németh's favour.⁴³ They emphasised that Németh advocated equally for the French and Swiss premieres of *The Tragedy of Man* (although the latter actually came to fruition in Bern) as he did for the German performances. The Danish playwright Jen Lochers also endorsed Antal Németh.⁴⁴ Locher's

⁴² Ibid., 56–57.

⁴³ MOLNOS Lipót, „Statement”, in [Németh Antal igazolásai, 1945–1947, Forráskiadvány](#), ed. POROGI Dorka, Theatron Könyvek (Budapest: Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2023), 180.; SATERNUS, „Statement”, 166–167.

⁴⁴ LOCHERS, „[Statement]”, 192.

play, *The Revolt of the Parents*, along with two other Danish plays, was performed at the National Theatre. Adorján Divéky, a private lecturer at the University of Warsaw, acknowledged that Németh took the initial steps in theatre relations by translating and ceremoniously presenting Krasin's dramatic poem *The Undivined Comedy* (*Nieboska Komedia*, in Hungarian: *Pokoli színjáték*) on November 11, 1936.⁴⁵ Additionally, Németh hosted the manager of Teatr Polski in Budapest, and then travelled to Warsaw to negotiate *The Tragedy of Man's* performance. László Bényi, the painter and journalist, emphasised Németh's role in the creation of Slovenian and Serbian translations of *The Tragedy of Man* and highlighted his participation in the 150th anniversary of Slovenian theatre and the performance of Milan Begovic's play *Who is the Third?* in Budapest.⁴⁶

Németh's legacy contains only one letter from Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki, though two of her plays (*The Women of Niskavuori* and *The Bread of Niskavuori*) were staged in Budapest in 1941 and 1942.⁴⁷ The letter is dated a few years earlier and contains an invitation to Marlebeck, Wuolijoki's estate, which Németh visited in the summer of 1938, securing the rights to her plays. Wuolijoki, an Estonian-born millionaire who was later imprisoned due to her Soviet connections and eventually became a member of the Finnish Parliament, had connections with Brecht and Gorky and maintained a left-winged literary salon. In his autobiography, Németh mentions that the Finnish Writers' Association and later the Hungarian Ministry of Culture attempted to put pressure on him to select another Finnish play.⁴⁸ Consequently, the National Theatre also premiered Jaerviluoma's drama *Northlanders*, but

⁴⁵ DIVÉKY, „Statement”, 191.

⁴⁶ BÉNYI, „[Statement]”, 176.

⁴⁷ Letter from Hella Wuolijoki to Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/3332.

⁴⁸ MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 27–28.

Németh insisted on staging the two plays by Wuolijoki.

Németh's correspondence confirms that he sought to maintain cultural ties not only with the Nazi Third Reich, but he also aimed for the same elsewhere. Among his five foreign productions, three were stagings of *The Tragedy of Man*: in Hamburg (1937), in Frankfurt (1940), and in Bern (1943). In the early 1940s, he seriously negotiated for premieres in Paris and Sweden, which were thwarted by the war and the subsequent political situation in Hungary.⁴⁹ According to László Szűcs, the dramaturge of the National Theatre, negotiations with Americans were also ongoing.⁵⁰

During the period when Németh was manager of the National Theatre, several German directors came to Budapest to stage Schiller's and Goethe's dramas. Some newspapers at the time lamented the absence of Hungarian directors working in the National Theatre; foreign directors had been a rarity.⁵¹ Each of the foreign directors staged a play from their own national literature. These productions were all classics: the revival of *Mary Stuart* in 1935 was entrusted to Hermann Röbbeling, the director of the Vienna Burgtheater (and also the director of *The Tragedy of Man* in 1934); in April 1937, the theatre presented *Faust*, directed by Kari Wüstenhagen, the superintendent of the Hamburg Staatliches Schauspielhaus; and Hans Meissner, the superintendent in Frank-

furt, directed *William Tell* at the Margaret Island Open-Air Theatre in the summer of 1940. He directed again at the National Theatre two years later, presenting *Don Carlos* in November 1942. Additionally, Heinrich George staged *Intrigue and Love* in April 1942. Furthermore, the Budapest National Theatre participated in theatrical exhibitions and tours in Vienna,⁵² Frankfurt, and Berlin during Németh's time as a manager.

The theatre's stage designers participated in the 1937 World's Fair in Paris with their designs, and one of them, Mátyás Varga, won a silver medal for the set of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, directed by Németh. The National Theatre celebrated its centenary in 1937. *The London Observer* gave coverage of this event, and a special issue in the *Theater der Welt* was published.⁵³

Cold War times

It seems that Németh began writing his autobiography during the validation committee proceedings, approximately between 1945 and 1947. This is indicated by the text of his *Curriculum Vitae*, in which he still hoped for a Swedish production of *The Trag-*

⁴⁹ The set designs for the Paris premiere were ready; they were made by Ernst Klaus, a French designer, who lived in Budapest in illegality.

⁵⁰ Szűcs László, „Witness Testimony in the case of authentication of Dr. Antal Németh, former director of the National Theatre”, in POROGI, ed., *Németh Antal igazolásai...*, 106–108, 107.

⁵¹ In the late twenties, newspapers couldn't stop talking about Martin Karlheinz and Alex Stein (from Vilnius) working as directors at a private theatre: the Magyar Theatre.

⁵² The Hungarian National Theatre was on tour to Vienna in 1892 for the last time. Silvio D'Amico, the Italian theatre scholar, reported on the guest performance of the Budapest National Theatre in Vienna in the magazine *Scenario*. See the correspondence between Silvio D'Amico and Antal Németh. OSZK K 63/860 and 63/3611.

⁵³ *Theater der Welt* was edited by Carl Nielsen and published in Amsterdam, the “Ungarische Nummer” was released in October 1937. *The Observer* published an article about the National Theatre of Budapest on September 12, 1937. HANKISSNÉ HARASZTI Jolán, „A Nemzeti Színház és a külföld”, in *A százéves Nemzeti Színház: Az 1937/38-as centenáriumi év emlékalbuma* (Budapest: Pallas, 1938), 145, 148.

edy of Man,⁵⁴ and the fact that the writing is cut short before the proceedings of 1946–47. In the later version by Mártonfi, he continues with the story of the validation committees and mentions his intention to describe the following ten years, but ultimately does not do so.⁵⁵

Németh's trip to Sweden was arranged by one of his students, Gabriella Margalit, who was on a fellowship to Stockholm at the time.⁵⁶ She wrote her testimony in support of Németh during this period, explaining that in the winter of 1944, the National Academy for Theatre Management and Direction, led by Németh Antal, was the only school in Budapest where students' documents of origin were not required.⁵⁷ Margalit contacted Agne Beier, the director of the Drottningholm Theatre History Museum, with whom Németh became acquainted in Rome, along with writer Siegfried Siewertzen and Prince Wilhelm of Sweden. In the spring of 1947, the secretary of the Swedish Institute visited Budapest and presented the Swedish government's proposal to the Hungarian Ministry of Culture.⁵⁸ The essence of the proposal was that the Swedish Royal

⁵⁴ NÉMETH, „Curriculum Vitae”, 41–42; MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 56.

⁵⁵ MÁRTONFI, „Dr. Németh Antal vázlatos életrajza”, 72.

⁵⁶ Margalit studied at the National Academy for Theatre Management and Direction's directing course in 1944 while volunteering alongside Raoul Wallenberg. After the war, she travelled to Stockholm on a theatre history fellowship settled there. Later, she married Torsten Kassius, a Swedish writer and literary historian.

⁵⁷ MARGALIT Gabriella, “[Statement]”, 18th February 1947, in POROGI, ed., *Németh Antal igazolásai...*, 163–164.

⁵⁸ Antal Németh's notes on Scandinavian drama (OSZK K 63/334) and his planned study trip (OSZK K 63/34). All the following information about the trip is from here.

Academy (and other organisations) would host 10–15 Hungarian scientists, writers, or artists for 1–3 years to help them recuperate from the hardships of war and regain their creative spirit in suitable working conditions (research institutes, laboratories, etc.). The Hungarian Ministry of Culture accepted the proposal but disagreed with the Swedes on the selection of individuals. Despite the Swedish delegate offering the Hungarian government to create their own list alongside theirs and ensuring that the same hospitality would be provided to all the delegates from Hungary, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture insisted on modifying the Swedish list. Consequently, Németh's name was removed from it.

According to the plan, Németh would have spent three years in Sweden, primarily engaging in scholarly work (he had begun writing a monograph titled *Scandinavian Drama in Hungary*) but also directing a theatrical performance each year. Gustav Hilleström, a colleague from the Drottningholm Institute, personally invited him, but Németh could not leave Hungary as he did not receive a passport from the authorities. Németh's interest in Swedish culture had deep roots: he began learning the language at university and was familiar with Selma Lagerlöf's and Prince William's works; he had previously adapted radio plays from both of their writings. When he was allowed to travel abroad for the first time in the 1960s, he was still contemplating a work trip to Sweden to reconnect with his old contacts.

Another destination he aimed to reach was England. The final phase of Németh's career in directing began after 1956, when, after a ten-year silence, he was appointed chief director in theatres of Hungarian cities: Kaposvár, Kecskemét, and Pécs. These few years in his later career were documented as meticulously as the works from his youth. Despite ten years of unemployment, nearing sixty, and fully aware that there was practically no chance for a real career or future in the theatrical life of Hungary (even the chief

director positions had extremely stringent requirements in his case), the surviving documents attest that he worked with nearly the same ambition as before. Although, due to the policies of state socialism in Hungary, he practically, could not leave the country. He tried to minimise its impact. In the 1950s, while learning Russian, he also studied Shakespeare extensively, followed English theatre culture, and read professional literature. In the years when there was no hope of directing in the theatre, he started a work about the Shakespeare cult in Hungary. In his legacy, he has six boxes of notes solely on Shakespeare. Although he did not have access to John Houseman and Jack Landau's 1959 work, *The American Shakespeare Festival*, he had someone prepare extracts from the book; the descriptions can be found in his papers, as well as notes from C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, among others.⁵⁹

In 1955, he wrote a letter to Herbert Marshall, a writer-editor, who had included an image from the set design of Németh's first *Hamlet* production in his book *Hamlet Through the Ages*.⁶⁰ In the letter, he informs Marshall about his further interpretations (how he reconsidered *Hamlet* later) and requests audio recordings. He already had Moissi's "To be or not to be" and John Barrymore's "Hecuba" monologues in his possession but made inquiries about obtaining Forbes Robertson, Ben Greet, Henry Ainley, and Maurice Evans recordings, including the 1913 film version of the play. He could not get hold of recordings of Gielgud's and Laurence Olivier's monologues, but in the letter, he states that this time, he would try to arrange the purchase through the Dramatic Division of the Hungarian Cultural Institute. Also, in the spring of 1955, he contacted Nicoll, the editor of *Shakespeare Survey*, and asked for the book *New Hamlet* because he

was developing a new concept for *Hamlet* on paper, related to his work on the Shakespeare cult in Hungary.⁶¹ The *Survey*'s secretary replied and requested a report from Németh about Shakespearean activities in Hungary. The relationship continued: in 1959, the *Shakespeare Survey* discussed Németh's *Othello* production in Kecskemét two years prior, and in 1961, his *Macbeth* production in Pécs from the previous year was mentioned in the *International Notes* section.⁶² Németh sent photos of his performances, aiming for international recognition. The English-language *Theatre World* covered Németh's 1957 *Othello* performance extensively, describing the Hungarian theatre and crediting Németh's leadership in the Kecskemét theatre for the staging of the performance.⁶³ In connection with *Othello*, Németh gave an English-language radio interview and outlined a six-year plan for himself. For the Shakespeare anniversary in 1964, he planned to stage six Shakespearean plays, concluding with *The Tempest*, after which he intended to retire from stage directing.⁶⁴ Only a part of these plans material-

⁶¹ Antal Németh's letter to Allardyce Nicoll on the 25th of March 1955. OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/4.

⁶² Allardyce NICOLL, „International notes”, ed. Allardyce NICOLL, *Shakespeare Survey* 12 (2 January 1959): 109–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521064252.014>; Allardyce NICOLL, „International notes”, ed. Allardyce NICOLL, *Shakespeare Survey*, 2 January 1961, 116–125, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521064279.013>.

⁶³ Ossia TRILLING, „Hungarian Theatre Today”, *Theatre World, Le Theatre Dans Le Monde* 54, no. 398 (1958): 36–39, 45.

⁶⁴ “This performance of *The Moor of Venice* at Kecskemét tonight has been the first step on a new road in my theatrical work. This road had been indicated to me once by my paternal friend, Gordon Craig, as it was in accordance with my endeavours concerning theatrical aesthetics. His photograph in my study

⁵⁹ OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/3 and Fond 6/6/19.

⁶⁰ Antal Németh's letter to Herbert Marshall on the 31st of March 1955. OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/4.

ised; he directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and once again, and finally, *Othello*. This was the same year when Laurence Olivier performed the drama's title role at London's Old Vic. Naturally, Németh could not witness this performance, but the programme booklet can be found among his documents.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Antal Németh's career was significantly shaped by his interest in European theatre and his connections with the international theatrical scene. Renowned foreign directors and theatre influencers served as his role models, and his academic performance in the international sphere contributed signifi-

at Budapest, dedicated to me a quarter of a century ago, has never been a mere action of formality to me: it meant animation to realize myself on the stage in the mask of enlivening the plays I had to give reality to. I think I succeeded in taking off this mask and enlivening Shakespeare with complete subjectivism. I needed ten years of quietness, meditation to make – thorough the language of modern theatre and by help and benevolence of Shakespeare – this master-piece of my own lyrical revelation. Of course, this does not intend to make any distortion against the genius of Shakespeare, only to live through the spirit of the work more maturely, profoundly. I should like to work out, observing the views, a short Shakesperae-cycle, consisting of those of his dramas, that stand nearest to me: besides *The Moor of Venice*, *Hamlet*, two of his comedies, *Troilus and Cressida*, and finally *The Tempest*. I should like to celebrate in 1964 the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth with staging these six dramas in a unific conception. This would be my »six years plan« in the realm of staging." Statement by Antal Németh for the Hungarian Radio's English-language broadcast. OSZK K 63/79.

⁶⁵ OSZK SZT Fond 6/1/3.

cantly to his directorial career in his homeland. However, following World War II, when he had to give up his leading position in Hungary's cultural life, he lost some of these connections, and due to the constraints of state socialism in Hungary, his possibilities for keeping in touch with the remaining ones was limited. Nevertheless, he maintained a keen interest in scholarly literature and all aspects that transpired from Western theatrical life into Hungary.

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