

The Self-Definitions of the Hungarian Minority in Vojvodina in the Performances of the Tanyaszínház (Grange Theatre)

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Abstract: The Hungarian travelling theatre company named Tanyaszínház (Grange Theater) was founded in 1978 in Yugoslavia, and it has not stopped since. In their performances, one can observe how successive political systems generated social issues that also affected minorities. These issues are not presented as historical facts but rather as everyday realities on stage. Their productions, which are given in villages and small towns, serve as prisms that directly reflect social experiences back to the community. From the history of the company's performances, one can discern the infinitely complex narratives of self-definition for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina (North Serbia), spanning from the late 1970s to the present day. Over the last four and a half decades, they have not only thematized the process of self-identification of the Hungarian community in the province but have also participated in it.

In the spring of 1978, Frigyes Kovács and György Hernyák decided to establish a theatre company that would create performances specifically for the Hungarian population in the small settlements within the province of Vojvodina in Yugoslavia. At that time, Kovács was graduating from the first Hungarian-language acting class at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, and Hernyák was the first Hungarian directing student at the same institution. Both of them came from rural backgrounds and were first-generation intellectuals. The Tanyaszínház (Grange Theatre), which is undoubtedly Yugoslavia's first independent (semi)professional minority theatre

company, began its unique operation in the region during the summer of that same year, and it has not stopped since. Estimates suggest that nearly half a million viewers have attended their free performances so far. Although there have been many changes in terms of organisational structure over the past four and a half decades, this theatre essentially operates outside the system of the province's permanent theatres. Every summer, the company is reorganised for the duration of a production, which, after a few weeks of rehearsal, is performed approximately 25 to 30 times during a tour that lasts about one and a half months. After the evening performances, the actors dismantle the stage, rest, and then move on to the next village in the morning, where they begin setting up the stage again. Apart from the sound and lighting technicians, there is no technical staff to assist them, and they do not have any backstage personnel either. The actors themselves are responsible for constructing the sets, sewing costumes, and creating wigs and props. The backbone of the Tanyaszínház company consists of university students who are currently studying acting at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, joined by volunteer professional actors and invited amateurs. They perform their shows in marketplaces, schoolyards, and pub courtyards, even on football fields. The traditional venue for their premieres is Kavilló in North Bačka, which has a population of only 144 inhabitants according to the latest available data. It is where the first performance was created and where the troupe now produces their shows on their own plot of land in relatively modern conditions, albeit still

under the open sky. Currently, there is no professional Hungarian actor in the province who was not a member of the travelling theatre company during their academic studies. Therefore, a distinctive feature of Hungarian actor training in Serbia is that academy students must familiarise themselves with the unconventional acting apparatus and behaviour required by the Tanyaszínház's unique playing conditions quite early on, often during the summer following their first year. This sometimes happens years before they step onto the stage of a conventional theatre for the first time.

In the examination of theatres operating outside of institutional structures, an important consideration is whether they reconstruct the ideology running the traditional theatres in their region without reflection or are critical of it. According to Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, various modes of playing and functioning appearing on the contemporary theatre stage can no longer be properly described in terms of the dividing line between the traditional, permanent, and independent theatres, but through the contrast between

“the theatrical practice of adopting a given framework for a performance and the practice which shows the framework in the usual theatre, dance, performance, and art spaces and utilising the usual forms, as well as the policies of the institutions and the ideology embedded in them.”¹

Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the performances of the Tanyaszínház, which often reflect on the mechanisms of state power, are almost always and everywhere “sold out,” and over the years they have not only thematized the complex pro-

¹ Nikolaus MÜLLER-SCHÖLL, „Színház magán kívül”, trans. TELLER Katalin, in *Kortárs táncelméletek*, ed. CZIRÁK Ádám, 221–237 (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2013), 222. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

cess of self-identification of the Hungarian minority in Serbia but have also participated in it. In the introduction of her monograph, Ágnes Czérna declares that

“the Tanyaszínház is more than just a travelling theatre troupe in the countryside. Because while it captivates a wide audience in Vojvodina, it also knits communities together. [...] Because it speaks to everyone. Because a villager, dressed in his fine clothes after harvesting, threshing, or milking a cow, enjoys it just as much as a university professor, nurse, or businessman from the city who comes to see the play here. Or perhaps in a different way. But what's common is that they enjoy it. Because the Tanyaszínház is a living experience.”²

In the course of performance analyses and the vividness of the experiences, it is worthwhile to approach them from three separate aspects, but not independently from each other. (1) On the one hand, it cannot be ignored that the performances are aesthetically distinct from the productions of the permanent Hungarian and Serbian-language theatres in Vojvodina, although their actors often come from those companies. And that does not just mean that outdoor performances legitimately require much wider gestures or increased volume from the actor. As a result of the form languages of great personalities who emerge from time to time, a special image of the theatre was formed and developed through the types of plays, the pieces performed, and the playing style during the alternation of successive ensembles. (2) On the other hand, the *ars poetica* of the Tanyaszínház (if it had not been formulated in the 1970s) could be considered a kind of TIE (theatre in education), as their perfor-

² CZÉRNA Ágnes, *Tanyaszínház: A harminc évad története (1978–2008)* (Novi Sad: Forum Könyvkiadó, 2009), 7.

mances—although they never reach the level of participation typical of the applied theatrical forms—like theatre in education sessions “deal with moral, micro- and macro-social issues,” and their goal is to “develop a common frame of thought concerning a consciously selected issue and a problem in focus, which allows those involved in the process [...] to define their personal attitudes towards the problem to be investigated.”³ The creators, almost without exception, designate the (social) issues intended to be at the core of the planned productions with a clear pedagogical intention. Armed with this knowledge, they select the foundational text and construct the dramatic structure of the performance to effectively pose their “open questions” to the audience.⁴ (3) Furthermore, since “the unreflected certainty and security in which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour,”⁵ an examination of theatre policies is inevitable, all the more so since the company was formed in 1978 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, experienced the final collapse of the Tito regime (1989), the disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–1999), the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the overthrow of the Milošević regime (2000) and has remained active to the present time. And through all that, it has not stopped its activities, with the exception of 2020. My thesis presupposes that the reason for this is that the creators of performances that focus on the national identification of the eclectically changing community(ies) in the context of the eclectically changing circumstances—as members of the community—legitimately had to redefine themselves again and again.

Practitioners of contemporary cultural studies employ a highly diverse conceptual

³ TAKÁCS Gábor, „Padlóváza a színpadon”, *Színház* 42, no. 2 (2009): 42–49, 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵ Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen JÜRS-MUNBY (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 104.

framework to describe the “uniquely structured cognitive entity” that we have referred to as identity for about three hundred years. However, they mostly concur that it would be futile to seek a “universally valid theoretical definition” for this concept, as “cultural identities [...] resist violent or arbitrary oversimplifications.”⁶ Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that both individuals and communities possess some form of identity, which can be influenced by biological, social, and historical factors alike. According to Predrag Matvejević, “complex civilizations possess and cultivate multiple identities,” and “this holds true for the individuals and works of art that embody or express them.”⁷ Although one’s various identities often have a dominant element, this can frequently give way to another under the influence of external factors. This process of identification is thus “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us”,⁸ which also means that the individual “decides in their functional everyday practice which sense of identity to »use« in a given situation, that is, which node of their identity network to activate.”⁹ Furthermore, Gábor Gyáni draws attention to the fact that if “identity is mostly plural nowadays, then the concept of locality even more so ex-

⁶ Predrag MATVEJEVIĆ, „Identitás-betegség”, trans. BAJOMI-LAZÁR Péter, *Regio* 6, no. 1–4 (1995): 3–6, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Stuart HALL, „The Question of Cultural Identity”, in *Modernity and its Futures: Understanding Modern Societies, Book IV*, eds. Tony MCGREW, Stuart HALL and David HELD, 274–316 (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 277.

⁹ KOLLER Boglárka, „Identitásdilemmák a kortárs Európában”, in *Európai identitás(ok), identitások Európában = Identité(s) Européenne(s), identité en Europe = Europäische Identität(en), identitäten in Europa*, ed. L’Harmattan, 34–55 (Budapest: Károlyi József Alapítvány–L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2017), 42.

presses the fragmentation and further particularization of collective life, as locality serves as the breeding ground for subnational identities."¹⁰ In this context, when examining the portrayal of collective identity in the performances of Tanyaszínház, which thematize the experiences of their own minority community, it is worthwhile to explore the representation of collective identity in its plurality. Beyond the expression of national identity, these performances also incorporate other particular identity elements.

In one of Erika Fischer-Lichte's seminal texts, which responds to the influences of cultural turns, she treats it as a fact that by the end of the 1990s, theatricality had become a key concept in cultural studies. According to her argument, theatre can be considered a cultural model for two main reasons. On one hand, this is because researchers no longer "pretend to examine reality, but rather focus on the meaning attributed to this reality by individuals and groups."¹¹ On the other hand, the theatre collects the problems appearing in cultural activities like a prism, and then it reflects the concentrated beam towards the community, resulting in making problems visible that are not discursive elements of the social sciences. All of this is possible because striking similarities can be observed "between the transient event space of today's culture and the transient nature and eventness of theatre."¹² In light of this, the performances of the Tanyaszínház can be considered *aesthetic dramas* (in the sense that Victor Turner defines them), which are able to model the *social dramas* of the social changes in Vojvodina—which exponentially affected the minority Hungarians—that came to pass since 1978 to the present day. According to Turner, these

¹⁰ GYÁNI Gábor, „Identitás, emlékezés, lokalitás”, 2000 20, no. 6 (2008): 19–26. 20.

¹¹ Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, „A színház mint kulturális modell”, trans. MESZLÉNYI Gyöngyi, *Theatron* 1, no. 3 (1999): 67–80, 71.

¹² *Ibid.*

two “drama types” interact: if there is a change in one, it will be demonstrable in the other; moreover, theatrical activity can be interpreted as a community act.¹³ Thus, during the examination of the performances, the momentary social changes and problems that have influenced (and are influencing) the identification of the Hungarians of Vojvodina in the last four and a half decades can be outlined.

A community always defines itself along the lines of its relationship with another community. It becomes unique in its separation from the other. Homi K. Bhabha refers to this as the “symbolic demand of cultural difference”,¹⁴ and Edward W. Said calls it the “clash of [cultural] definitions.”¹⁵ At the same time, according to Judith Butler, identity is a performative accomplishment, “which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”¹⁶ Gábor Virág defines this in the following manner:

“Living as a Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, until recently (until the end of the 1980s), while not entirely without challenges, was considered an enviable

¹³ Victor TURNER, *On the Edge of the Bush* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 300.

¹⁴ Homi K. BHABHA, „DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy J. HALE, 717–733 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 730.

¹⁵ Edward W. SAID, „The Myth of »The Clash of Civilizations«”, (Northampton: Media Education Foundation, 1998): 2–14, 7, last download 31.10.2023, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Edward-Said-The-Myth-of-Clash-Civilizations-Transcript.pdf>.

¹⁶ Judith BUTLER, „Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–531, 520.

situation, at least from the perspective of other Hungarian minority communities and even from the standpoint of the motherland. The blessings of Tito's socialism concealed, or at least pushed to the periphery, the negatives. [...] However, the hyphen, as mentioned by Derrida, even if only implicitly, was there, creating tension between Yugoslavian and minority identities."¹⁷

It is well known that in the former Yugoslavian republics, by the early 1990s, the centrifugal effects of local nationalisms intensified dramatically. This gave rise to mutual distrust between the majority and minority communities. The Hungarian minority in Vojvodina had to seek new modes of identification instead of the previously accepted Yugoslavism, as the conditions of its discourse changed alongside the representational system. Therefore, they had to rearticulate their relationship with Serbia, Hungary, and Vojvodina, which entailed the reconfiguration of their "believed" identity constructs of being Yugoslavian, Hungarian, or Vojvodinian.

The central question is whether the troupe of Tanyaszínház, in reflecting on this process of definition, resorts to the simplest (mimetic) model of artistic effectiveness or if it critically engages with its own representational and perceptual framework. This is why it is quite telling that the performances of the past four and a half decades have borne the marks of various types of plays. The ensemble consciously staged stories and myths using genre-specific frameworks and patterns that were well-known and readable to

¹⁷ VIRÁG Gábor, „A NEM-mel keresztülhúzott ÉN: A kisebbségi magyar nem”, *A Magyar-ságtudomány Műhelyei*, 2005. 08. 24–25, Budapest, last download 31.10.2023, <https://hungarologia.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Virag-Gabor-dri2005.pdf>.

an audience and that were both vertically and horizontally strongly segmented.

The question arises as to how the creators utilised and reinterpreted dramatic traditions, thereby positioning their own community and its history within society. Upon examining the repertoire of Tanyaszínház spanning forty-five years, representing three politically well-defined periods, four major thematic groups seem to emerge.

We could label as allegorical those performances that, through fictional, fairy-tale-like, or mythical worlds, often present satirical stories, confronting the audience with their own reality. One example is the adaptation of George Orwell's cult novel *Animal Farm*, brought to the stage by dramaturg Nándor Katona. It was performed in the summer of 1992, during the Yugoslav wars, mainly featuring academy students and high school amateur actors, as a significant number of male actors eligible for military service had fled the country to avoid conscription.¹⁸ Under the direction of Lajos Soltis, the well-known story of the pigs' takeover gained a clear contemporary political significance even without any specific localization. By

¹⁸ As it is known, the leaders of the Yugoslav member states, who were fond of nationalist rhetoric, did not stand idly by Slobodan Milošević's power aspirations. In June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia unilaterally declared their independence, plunging the once seemingly united common Yugoslav state into a bloody fratricidal war, gradually fragmenting it. The frontlines almost without exception ran through regions of the country that were ethnically heterogeneous, which several successor states claimed. In the initial phase of the war, the bloodiest battles took place in Slavonia and Baranja, which are adjacent to Vojvodina and now belong to Croatia. Mass mobilisation began in Serbia, which did not spare the Hungarian population, and in fact, some municipalities with a majority of Hungarians received disproportionately many conscriptions.

1992, the grandiose socialist slogan of “brotherhood and unity” had become thoroughly hollow, and political decisions affecting the community were now being made by those who considered themselves more equal than others. It's interesting that in 2016, Anna Terék wrote an allegorical drama for Tanyaszínház, placing the pigs at the centre of the narrative, more specifically at the top of the power hierarchy. In the world of the play *Hangos disznók harapnak* (Loud Pigs Bite), the titular characters hold humans in a bestial order, keeping them in pens. If they resist authority, they are slaughtered. Zoltán Puskás's staging revolved around everyday experiences that define minority identity, such as vulnerability to state power, party-based employment, and the economic emigration that disproportionately affects the region.¹⁹ The series of mythical perfor-

¹⁹ The post-war transition, instead of consolidation, brought about numerous uncertainties, ultimately leading to disillusionment. Zoran Đinđić, the first Prime Minister of democratic Serbia and a standard-bearer for pro-Western policies, was assassinated in front of the parliament in 2003, just two years into his term. While the newly formed states embarked on the challenging path of reconciliation, Balkan societies often still attempt to position themselves and their neighbors between the categories of guilt and victimhood, even two decades after the peace accords. Meanwhile, the economy in Serbia is developing slower than expected. While guest work in welfare states, particularly in Germany and Austria, has been a common practice for the region's population since the 1970s, livelihood migration and the partly related population decline are taking on increasingly alarming proportions. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), approximately 60,000 people leave Serbia annually. While there isn't a precise breakdown for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, the 2011 census indicated that

mances was enriched by the 1993 production titled *Csantavéri passió* (Passion of Csantavér), which drew inspiration from medieval mystery plays. Exploiting the fact that the story of Christ's suffering is fundamental knowledge for the Catholic Hungarians in the region, it contemplated the possibilities of moral purity and the responsibility of minorities in the face of the threat of war.

We could characterise those performance texts as parabolic, which focused on small- and micro-communities whose stories could be likened to the histories of Hungarian rural communities in Vojvodina. In doing so, they mostly stayed within the framework of mimetic representation. The 2013 production of *Ilja próféta* (Ilya the Prophet) directed by Gábor Nagypál, based on the play by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, revealed the process of religious mass psychosis and manipulation by power. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the unnamed Eastern European village seemed to merge with the Vojvodina audience seated around the cross-shaped stage. László Sándor's staging of *A bor* (Wine, 2015) by Géza Gárdonyi, while remaining within the genre framework of folk drama, placed particular emphasis on the motifs of domestic violence and alcoholism in certain scenes of the performance.

The third group includes stories set in Vojvodina, mostly in contemporary times, which encompass texts specifically written and localised for the Tanyaszínház and for the troupe. Among the mentioned works, we can include the most famous piece by the Dubrovnik poet and playwright, Vlaho Stulli, originally published in 1800, titled *Nagyszájú Kata* (Big-Mouthed Kate), whose adaptation was presented by the troupe in 1980. The tragicomedy, originally set in a poorhouse in Dubrovnik, steeped in human misery, was transposed by the newly joined dramaturg,

there were over 250,000 Hungarians living in the region at the time. However, as of 2022, their numbers have dwindled to just over 184,000.

Angéla Csipak, into the context of present-day Vojvodina. Director György Hernyák, for whom this production served as his graduation project at the University of Arts in Novi Sad, made the muddy soil of Bačka one of the main characters in the play. In the early 1980s, the troupe actually presented numerous adaptations and localised stories in their repertoire. In 1983, they adapted László Gyurkó's play *A búsképű lovag, Don Quijote de la Mancha szörnyűséges kalandjai és gyönyörű szép halála* (The Melancholy Knight, Don Quijote of La Mancha's Terrible Adventures and Beautiful Death) by the title *Don Quijote '83*. The performance took place in the dust of Bačka. In this version, the roles of Cervantes' hero and his loyal companion were taken over by two contemporary characters (both Vojvodina Hungarians) after their deaths, symbolically continuing the fight against windmills. Then, in 1984, they turned the popular and easily successful musical genre on its head, holding up a distorted mirror to their audience and community. Under the title *Csámpáskirálynő* (The Clumsy Princess), László Kopecky wrote an operetta parody for the troupe based on Imre Kálmán's classic, *The Csardas Princess*. After the turn of the millennium, premieres of original works became more frequent in the repertoire. Judit Ferenc's text titled *Különös ajándék* (The Strange Gift, 2009) explored the complex identity of the audience from Vojvodina, touching upon the Balkan, Vojvodinian, and Hungarian aspects. The setting was a courtyard of a block of flats in the Telep district, the heart of the Hungarian community in Novi Sad. The performers sang the revisionist song *Kalász, kalász* with the same intensity and sincerity as they did the former Yugoslav anthem, *Hej, Sloveni*. The former song (especially the line "adjatok a magyaroknak mindent vissza"²⁰) was a particularly bold undertaking in certain municipalities of Vojvodina. The play addressed the crisis of men wearied by war who deserved

²⁰ "Give everything back to the Hungarians!"

more, as well as the victims of state socialism, the helplessness of those stuck in nostalgia for the old Yugoslavia, and the plight of young people yearning to break free but lacking the means to do so. The latter theme unfolded within the framework of a full-evening performance, *Y-elágazás* (The Y Fork, 2019) by Róbert Lénárd. *Mérföldkő* (Milestone, 2012) also belongs to this group. Thanks to its prominent self-reflective and addressing gestures, it can be connected to the post-dramatic paradigm, as it primarily engages in a dialogue with its own audience.

The fourth group includes productions based on classical dramas that did not respond at all to the contemporary socio-political reality of the audience. Although they contained certain moral and ethical questions, their primary goal seemed to be entertainment. Examples of such productions include *Holdbéli csónakos* (Boatman in the Moon, 1981), *Csongor és Tünde* (1988), *Két úr szolgája* (The Servant of Two Masters, 1995), *A Pál utcai fiúk* (The Boys of Paul Street, 2007), or the anniversary production of *A képzelt beteg* (The Imaginary Invalid, 2017). However, in connection with these performances, we must not forget the specific relationship between the Tanyaszínház and its audience, meaning that in this theatre, actors do not emerge from behind the curtain but rather "from among the people" night after night to perform their stories—to use László Gerold's beautiful metaphor—in the "motherland which means the world."²¹ And in doing so, they "share a common destiny" with their audience. In this way, the micro-communities of Hungarians in Vojvodina become visible during shared events, strengthening their identity-affirming bonds. Addressing the audience becomes equivalent to, and even more emphasised than, the dialogue of the dramatic characters. The space of the performances extends beyond the stage, encompassing the audience as

²¹ GEROLD László, „Színházi napló”, *Híd* 56, no. 9 (1992): 702–705, 704.

well. This opens up to cultural, political, and magical forms imbued with content, such as “gathering, feasting, and ritual.”²² Indeed, “ethnicity-related identity is also just a construct, which becomes understandable through the practical application of certain categories.”²³ So, the shared sense of origin, much like identity, is not inherently given but is actualized in specific situations, “the worldview, or rather the means of self-representation in the world.”²⁴

In the performances of the Tanyaszínház, one can observe how successive political systems generated social issues that also affected minorities. These issues are not presented as historical facts but rather as everyday realities on stage. The productions serve as prisms that directly reflect social experiences back to the community. From the history of the company's performances, one can discern the infinitely complex narratives of self-definition for the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, spanning from the late 1970s to the present day. And, if we were to summarise, in these narratives we encounter the image of the apolitical common man, vulnerable to the mechanisms of power at any given time. This individual, faced with failure, either resigns from public engagement or never even participates in the majority discourse. As a result, they remain nearly invisible while history rushes overhead.

²² LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 51.

²³ PAPP Z. Attila, „Kisebbségi identitáskonstrukciók a kettős magyar állampolgárság által”, *Regio* 22, no. 1 (2014): 118–155, 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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