

The Danse Macabre of “Democratic Dictatorship”: Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* in State-Socialist Hungary

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Abstract: Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* was first staged in a professional theatre in Hungary with considerable delay. The production opened in Szolnok in 1978, thirteen years after the world premiere of the play in Warsaw. “Mrożek had not been allowed to get onto our stages for years,” wrote Grácia Kerényi, the Hungarian translator of *Tango*, with surprising openness in 1978, thus highlighting the discredited status of the play in the cultural policy of the Kádár regime. However, it is a mistake that the premiere in Szolnok in 1978 was the national premiere of *Tango*, even if it was advertised as such on the playbill. Mrożek’s three-act play already had some production history on Hungarian stages, as it had been presented to audiences on several occasions before. Therefore, we cannot talk about a national premiere in the case of the production in Szolnok, but only about the first fully staged performance of the play in a professional theatre in Hungary. But this production still lives strongly in cultural memory. The essay outlines the reasons for this high status and analyses István Paál’s *mise-en-scène* according to the so-called Philther method.

Context of the performance in theatre culture

Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango* was first staged in a professional theatre in Hungary with considerable delay. The production opened in Szolnok in 1978, thirteen years after the world premiere of the play in Warsaw. The first Hungarian *Tango* was born in a small but nationally renowned theatre workshop, which, together with the theatres of Kaposvár and Kecskemét, was referred to as “a place of pilgrimage for enthusiastic lovers of thea-

tre.”¹ Of the ten professional theatres operating outside the capital, these three institutions attracted special attention. Almost all of their premieres were reviewed in national newspapers, and the best ones were shown in Budapest as well as in other major cities of the country, thanks to the extensive performance touring system. *Tango* also toured from Szolnok to the capital, and its performances at the Madách Theatre gained overwhelming success. However, the fifteen-minute standing ovation was fueled not only by the outstanding *mise-en-scène* and acting but also by the euphoric joy of sharing the experience of a play finally released on a professional stage.

“Mrożek had not been allowed to get onto our stages for years,” wrote Grácia Kerényi, the Hungarian translator of *Tango*, with surprising openness in 1978, thus highlighting the discredited status of the play in the cultural policy of the Kádár regime.² *Tango* attracted the attention of Hungarian theatre people already a year after its birth, and the Thália Theatre in Budapest planned to stage it. However, the evaluation of the 1964–1965 season by the Ministry of Culture listed Mrożek’s drama among those plays that “are not necessary for us but can help the artistic experimentation of our thea-

¹ SÜLYÖK László, „Az elődök örökébe lépni: Beszélgetés Kerényi Imrével, a szolnoki Szigligeti Színház igazgató-főrendezőjével”, *Nógrád*, 1978. okt. 8., 9. All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

² KERÉNYI Grácia, „A fordító ajánlása”, in *Tangó*, ed. DURÓ Győző, 116–118 (Szolnok: Szigligeti Színház–Verseggy Ferenc Megyei Könyvtár, 1978), 117.

tres".³ The document, dated June 11, 1965, further states that the Theatre Arts Council dealt with "controversial plays" as well and classified *Tango* as "not proposed." While all of the plays mentioned with *Tango* (such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) were staged within one to three years, the first professional production of *Tango* had to wait another thirteen years.

However, the fact that the premiere in Szolnok in 1978, was advertised as the national premiere of *Tango*, is a mistake, which was subsequently taken over by several newspapers and periodicals. Mrožek's three-act play already had some production history on Hungarian stages, as it had been presented to audiences on several occasions before. It could be first heard at two stage readings organised by TIT (Tudományos Ismeretterjesztő Társulat, a kind of open university) on October 24, 1966, in Budapest,⁴ and then by the National Theatre of Miskolc on May 5, 1967. The article reporting on the latter event even mentioned that the National Theatre of Miskolc intended to stage the play during the next season as "an experimental performance," but this did not happen. However, an amateur company in the capital in the 1970s, staged *Tango*, and the Metro Stage played it for years. When they presented it at the third Budapest Amateur Theatre Festival in 1977, many critics considered that "the glory of discovery" was worthy of recognition, but the director could not find actors equal to his concept because some of them "could not cope with the extremely difficult task".⁵

³ IMRE Zoltán and RING Orsolya, eds., *Szigorúan bizalmas: Dokumentumok a Nemzeti Színház Kádár-kori történetéhez* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2010), 146.

⁴ The event was heralded in *Esti Hírlap* on October 19, 1966, in seven short lines on page 2 of the newspaper.

⁵ SZÁLE László, „Fél van”, *Népművelés* 24, no. 12 (1977): 28–31, 31.

Since there had been several stage readings and amateur theatre performances of *Tango* before 1978, we cannot talk about a national premiere in the case of the production in Szolnok, but only about the first fully staged performance of the play in a professional theatre in Hungary. In the rather rigid and controlled system of Hungarian repertory theatres of the time, "the deservedly world-famous piece of Mrožek was first given the green light".⁶ The Polish Theatre and Music Days, which took place nationwide between December 1 and 10, 1978, certainly played a major role in it since it provided an excellent opportunity for the premiere in Szolnok. As part of a rich series of events, not only various works of important Polish directors such as Andrzej Wajda and Krystian Lupa arrived in Hungary, but Hungarian theatres also staged plays by well-known Polish dramatists such as Gombrowicz and Słowacki. Among the many guest performances, there was a triptych of one-act plays by Mrožek in the production of the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, and Állami Bábszínház (the State Puppet Theatre of Hungary) produced a masked play based on Mrožek's *Striptease*. The premiere of *Tango* in Szolnok blended into the rich programme, certainly not unnoticed but without becoming outrageous, since the theatre of Dunaújváros presented *The Party* by Mrožek a day earlier and the theatre of Veszprém produced *The Emigrants* a month and a half later. Thus, the season undertook Mrožek's legitimacy in Hungary, albeit covertly, but the memories of *Tango* in Szolnok proved to be particularly enduring.

However, this series of events could not make people forget the more than one-decade delay in the first full professional staging of *Tango*. As an author of the best-known literary weekly stated, "if the play were presented to Hungarian audiences ten years ago, it would have felt like a real novel-

⁶ FABIÁN László, „Legenda egy színházról: A szolnoki évad”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 23, no. 24 (1979): 8–11, 10.

ty, an intellectual excitement. But now it felt like an old dream that had come true. This is not the real thing anymore."⁷ This statement does not contradict the fact that István Paál's *mise-en-scène* was really sensational. At the same time, it highlights the futility of the frequently used procedure of state-socialist cultural policy to reduce the subversive force of a phenomenon so that it would lose its relevance by banning it for years. After all, "what happens [...] if a work of art does not reach the public in time? In the case of *Tango*, the value of the play has appreciably risen,"⁸ wrote the aforementioned critic, referring to the astonishing tumult surrounding the guest performances of *Tango* at the Madách Theatre. This means that, despite the loss of topicality, the reputation of certain works of art released to the public increased significantly after the ban, in many cases regardless of their aesthetic quality. This reputation (growing for nearly a decade and a half) tacitly gave the premiere of *Tango* exceptional status, but it was not only hype that made Mrožek's play viable in Szolnok in 1978. Rather, its director was "able to bring the questions implied by the play to the level of today's public life, meaning that this strange »family drama« was not foreign to the audience at all."⁹

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

István Paál's *mise-en-scène* avoided the cul-de-sacs of both bourgeois humanist and Marxist interpretations. Paál barely modified the dramatic text, but by tuning it, he raised very topical questions. Although *Tango* was not allowed to be staged in a professional theatre for a long time, the Hungarian press extensively wrote about it. The July 1967 issue of the literary magazine *Nagyvilág* pub-

lished a Hungarian translation of the play, and this translation also came out in a collection of modern Polish dramas a year later. Meanwhile, short news about some of the productions of *Tango* in Düsseldorf, London, Paris, etc. was continuously published in various newspapers, and Hungarian-language periodicals in Transylvania and Vojvodina also reviewed the Yugoslav and Romanian premieres. When Mrožek's play was republished by the Szigligeti Theatre and the county library in 1978 as the play text of the production in Szolnok, *Tango* was already fully known in Hungary as well.

This publication makes it clear that only marginal changes were made to the text of *Tango* in Szolnok. This is partly due to the fact that Mrožek's precisely structured dramatic text does not seem to require or allow for deeper transformation. On the other hand, those major revisions that began to form a visible trend in Hungarian theatre after 1989 and started around the mid-1980s were still unknown. István Paál's *Tango* retained the original division of the play; it was performed with two intermissions, but its genre became more concrete. While in the Hungarian editions *Tango* is merely called "drama in three acts," the playbill advertised it as a tragicomedy in Szolnok, and the critics of the production unfolded the dramaturgical background of this modality. The concretization of the genre also shows that the director set *Tango* in accordance with the sensitivities of the 1970s in Hungary and suggested in several ways that it was our own tragicomedy, so it was "meant to mean the fate of us all."¹⁰ At the same time, Paál did not share those interpretations that diminished the subversive force of *Tango*, although the play easily offers itself to a conventional approach that was first developed in one of Péter Nádas's articles. As an employee of *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, Nádas reviewed

⁷ BOLGÁR György, „Tangók”, *Élet és Irodalom* 23, no. 21 (1979): 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ NÁRAY István, „Lengyel dráma – magyar színház”, *Színház* 12, no. 6 (1979): 14–20, 17.

¹⁰ ZAPPE László, „Történelem a színpadon: Jegyzetek új bemutatókhoz”, *Népszabadság*, 1979. febr. 4., 13.

contemporary Polish theatre in the summer of 1968 and devoted a separate article to the highly successful Warsaw performance of *Tango*. According to Nádas, the spectator identifies with Arthur and follows the events with the gaze of an actor, who does not seem to play but lives his role. So the audience sees the plot “with the clear gaze of a young man who begins the ‘first act’ by saying that he cannot ‘live in such a world’.”¹¹ Arthur is “pure, beautiful, and relatable, as pure and likeable as our best ideals, the ideals that mankind has been working to realise for thousands of years”.¹² He wants order in the world and the right to rebel, but he cannot find a way to do this according to his own ideas, so he sometimes wanders into fascism or into traditions that he himself denies. The first two acts tell the story of Arthur’s rebellion, and the third act shows the order achieved: the perfect petty bourgeoisie created “by the violence of goodness.” But this is not what Arthur wanted; there is a gap between his intention and the reality he created, and it is in this void that fascist dictatorship is conceived: Edek kills the boy and then dances tango with Uncle Eugenius in Arthur’s clothes. According to Nádas, Mrožek conjures world history into “the life of a family, living in Nowhere Land” and makes the “European historical scheme of the first half of the century, humanism fighting fascism and fascism fighting humanism” our lives.¹³

Tango also gave way easily to a Marxist interpretation that can be read in the programme notes of the Polish Theatre and Music Days and in an article in the local newspaper in Szolnok. According to the former text (by an unknown author), Stomil, the father, and Eleanor, the mother, represent an anarchist desire for freedom, which trans-

¹¹ NÁDAS Péter, „Lengyel színház (1) Pótszék-ről: Mrožek”, *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, 1968. júl. 25., 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

gresses all traditions and moral values. Grandma Eugenia and Uncle Eugene are representatives of the homage to rebellion that has degenerated into fashion. Arthur embodies a young generation torn by this turmoil, for whom all that remains is rebellion against rebellion. Arthur’s tragicomedy consists in the fact that he “cannot oppose freedom that has become formless and meaningless” to a new idea, which implicitly means that he will not reach socialism. Arthur’s gaining power is “merely a revival of old conventions,” meaning (implicitly again) that his rebellion is retrograde and logically ends in brute force.¹⁴ According to this approach, *Tango* is a play of ideologically incorrect awakening and aimless rebellion. The article of the local newspaper in Szolnok wove the leitmotif of Marxist literary criticism into this approach, not concealing the fact that *Tango* reveals the absurdity of human and social nonsense. According to the critic, however, the play does so with a noble sense of responsibility for Man, a belief in solid moral values, and the changeability of the world.¹⁵ Thus, the critic made a perceptible effort to integrate the play and its performance into state-socialist theatre culture. While both texts described the characters as mouth-pieces of ideas and representatives of attitudes, István Eörsi noticed with keen eyes that no one can be simply identified with anyone or anything in the play; Edek, for example, can be as much a Hitler parody as a janitor parody. This is because “reality always lurks behind the absurdity of *Tango*, so spectators, readers, and amateur and professional experts can never enjoy unambiguous decipherment”.¹⁶ One of the most signif-

¹⁴ *Lengyel Színházi és Zenei Napok: 1978. december 1–10* (Budapest: A Magyar Színházi Intézet kiadványa, 1978), 48–49.

¹⁵ Cf. VALKÓ Mihály, „A »baromember« tangoja”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1978. dec. 10., 7.

¹⁶ EÖRSI István, „A Nagyvilágban olvastam: *Tangó*”, *Élet és Irodalom* 11, no. 32 (1967): 7.

icant Hungarian literary critics of the time also referred to this when he described Mrožek's masterpiece as "fickle, ambiguous, and even contradictory at certain points, despite the mathematical precision of its structure."¹⁷

István Paál did not use simple identifications either but continued to dissect recurring themes of his *mise-en-scènes*, and the conceptual gravity of his *Tango* lay in the very topicality of the implicit questions formulated through stage events. What does freedom mean if it can really become so "formless and meaningless" that a new idea has to be challenged? Why does the will for freedom always turn into terror and violence? Why does a regime that promotes the idea of freedom end up in a (proletarian) dictatorship? And how does a legitimate uprising against it become a "counter-revolution"? If terror shatters everything anyway, what is the value of any rebellion? What are we to make of a situation in which the former revolutionaries (today the maintainers of an absurd regime) have grown old and complacent and have become opportunistic and cowardly submissive? And how can you be leftist when some people monopolise leftism? More broadly, what idea can be opposed to institutionalised socialism? Can something different be developed against a sclerotic model? Paál's *Tango* in Szolnok carried the opposition inherent in these questions with the same openness as its director's works made five to ten years earlier at the legendary University Stage of Szeged. His *mise-en-scène* in 1978 also highlights the fact that there was hardly another theatre director in the state-socialist Hungarian theatre of the 1970s and 1980s who posed the complex questions of power, freedom, and revolution in such a maniacal and multifaceted way as István Paál.

Staging

Tango was regarded by contemporary critics as Paál's best work to date and, 25 years later, in retrospective theatre history as one of the four peaks of the director's oeuvre.¹⁸ *Tango* was a text-based and actor-centric *mise-en-scène*; it enforced the effects of the dialogues through the actors' work. It made maximum use of the character comedy inherent in the play, but it also elaborated on the frequently changing situations and made them realistic. Paál did not concretize space and time outside of the here and now and followed Mrožek's stage directions only partially. Although some elements of the long description at the beginning of the dramatic text could be seen on the stage, they did not show an emphatically old-fashioned bourgeois salon. The plot did not start "according to the rules of bourgeois drama" in Szolnok either, and the bier, the main element of the set, did not become visible in the course of the first act, although it was from the beginning.¹⁹ Therefore, the stage did not depict a strange apartment as a whole but only partially incorporated some of its components while revealing itself as a bare stage and its connection to the rest of the theatre building. The performance extended to the auditorium since the actors sometimes arrived or left through its doors, and this became just as important a means of breaking down the distance from the action as the lack of a curtain covering the stage. "The destruction of the virtual wall between the stage and the auditorium" had become a constant feature of Paál's works by this time,²⁰ but in the case of *Tango* it was supplemented by the fact that the audience could catch sight of the dominant colours of the production, red and black, already in the foyer. Furthermore, dur-

¹⁷ TARJÁN Tamás, „Sławomir Mrožek: *Tangó*”, *Kritika* 8, no. 1 (1979): 32–33, 33.

¹⁸ DURÓ Győző, „Az életmű csúcsai”, *Színház* 36, no. 8 (2003): 6–10.

¹⁹ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrožek: *Tangó*”, 32.

²⁰ NÁRAY István, „Partizánattitűd”, *Színház* 36, no. 8 (2003): 2–6, 3.

ing the intervals and even after the curtain call, music played from the speakers, which “fits *Tango* and distances you from it at the same time”.²¹ These things not only hindered the complete simulation of reality but also pushed the performance towards the present, as Paál “articulated the social experiences of the past two decades into the production with the passion of the participant.”²² Thus, Paál and his actors/actresses managed to make the characters of *Tango* familiar in relation to the everyday lives of the spectators with the same “analytical critical consistency” that had determined Paál’s staging of Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf* two months earlier.²³

However, at the beginning and end of *Tango*, the *mise-en-scène* used a purely visual approach that astoundingly suspended all familiarity and made ambiguity irrepressible. The epitome of the staging became the opening and closing scenes, which were different from the rest of the play, and after nearly half a century, based solely on some descriptions and later reminiscences, it is no longer clear what exactly happened in them. In the prelude, eight members of the company turned up to the music of Kraftwerk, while the stagehands furnished the elements of a topsy-turvy apartment in front of the lonely bier. The actors, along with the director, who was “wearing his usual denim outfit and holding his favourite rotary pistol, slowly came forward in a line like the magnificent seven plus one man”.²⁴ Paál aimed his pistol

at the actor playing Arthur, who then showed him a book in his hands. The director hung the pistol on a door frame and went outside. A fog flooded the stage and the auditorium, and amidst the loud music, the lights of a forest of spotlights flickered behind a translucent curtain.²⁵ It is uncertain, however, whether the actors (always) said “Good evening” to the audience, or they just stopped and greeted them as if grimly. It is also unknown whether Paál held the .45 Colt to his forehead or whether he also aimed it at the spectators.

The reconstruction of the postlude seems to be much easier. As Edek was dancing with Uncle Eugene to the sounds of La Cumparsita, a skeleton descended between the two others standing on either side of the stage from the beginning of the performance. Then the stagehands emptied the stage so that only the bier that was initially visible remained. The melody of the tango was replaced by the music of Kraftwerk, and for the curtain call, each actor/actress “brought with them a portrait target painted red and black, depicting his/her contours, and put it in front of the audience.”²⁶ Thus, the main props of the opening and closing scenes were the pistol and the targets, but the events described in these two scenes did not serve clear communication. After all, in the case of the prelude, it was uncertain who came forward: the characters or the actors—that is, whether the entry of the eight people was already part of a fictional world or still part of the reality of the evening of the performance (also lived by the spectator). The actors may have been familiar to the audience from other productions, but István Paál not necessarily. Thus, not all spectators could become aware of the fact that they were seeing the director of *Tango* among his actors. And when Paál raised the pistol to his forehead—if he raised it at all—the spectator could not know whether one of the characters in the play

²¹ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

²² PETERDI NAGY László, „Lengyel színház – magyar színház”, *Színház* 12, no. 2 (1979): 40–42, 42.

²³ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

²⁴ DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10. – It is worth mentioning that John Sturges’ 1960 western, *The Magnificent Seven*, was first shown in Hungarian cinemas in March 1971, but the main cinema in Szolnok screened it for a week in the days of the premiere of *Tango* again.

²⁵ Vö. VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

²⁶ DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10.

wanted to shoot himself or someone (the director in civilian clothes) who had no role within the dramatic world of *Tango*. Furthermore, when Paál aimed the pistol at the actor playing Arthur, the spectator could not know whether a character (unknown to him/her) wanted to shoot another character, and thus the prelude foreshadowed a later event, or whether the director (István Paál) wanted to shoot the character played by the actor (Arthur), or the director (István Paál) wanted to shoot the actor (György Pogány). In short, the spectator could not know whether representation, presentation (demonstration), or self-presentation were taking place.²⁷ The opening and closing scenes thus left the audience uncertain as to their specific meaning, and we have no information about the symbolic meaning the spectators of the 1978 evenings created in their place. However, it is clear from István Paál's memoirs what he himself created, as he saw "*the pure desire for self-destruction*" in these scenes, especially in the imitation of shooting himself.²⁸ We also have the symbolic meaning created by a contemporary theatre expert: the warning of the danger of terror through an apt metaphor.²⁹ And we know the explanation of a contemporary theatre critic: the demonstration of "the personal nature of the performance" in the sense that "*it is about us.*"³⁰ To this, we can add the exegesis of another critic, i.e. "the young man [Arthur] must perish"³¹ and that of a former colleague who re-

calls his memories: "the intelligentsia is an eternal target and an eternal loser against the philistines".³² This dispersion of interpretations illustrates the futility of the attempt to wrap an openly uncommunicable meaning in an image and expect the spectators to decipher it unanimously. It is no wonder that the prelude and postlude of *Tango* caused some confusion in the audience, although the questions that presumably inadvertently popped up in the spectators may have provided a good basis for understanding Paál's approach to theatre, which was not fundamentally interested in answering but posing questions.

By 1978, István Paál's physical appearance in his own *mise-en-scène* had become as much a part of his "Formenkanon" (Einar Schleef) as his use of ludic images as a framework. It had nothing to do with the incorporation of the author-director's personality into a theatre event, as in the case of Tadeusz Kantor, nor with some kind of epic theatricality, i.e. the indication of the artificial and created nature of the performance. Rather, it was about breaking the distinction between theatre and social existence and making it clear that what we claim in the world into which we have entered is about and applies to the world from which we have come from. Therefore, many people rightly perceived the director's "sum of all his work" in *Tango*.³³ After all, Paál's productions had previously dealt with "revolutions of different kinds" and the relationship between freedom and submission; then in his three *mise-en-scènes* in Szolnok prior to *Tango*,³⁴ the examination of vulnerability and manipulation came to the fore, and now, in the staging of Mrožek's masterpiece, these two were closely linked.³⁵

²⁷ Cf. Andreas KOTTE, *Theaterwissenschaft* (Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2005), 189–201.

²⁸ BÉRCZES László, *A végnek végéig: Paál István* (Budapest: Cégér Kiadó, 1995), 113. (Emphasis in original.)

²⁹ Elżbieta WYSIŃSKA, „A magyar rendezői színház lengyel szemmel”, *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 7 (1979): 1076–1079, 1078.

³⁰ BOGÁCSI Erzsébet, „Tangó a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1979. febr. 7., 4. (Emphasis in original.)

³¹ VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

³² DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcspontjai”, 10.

³³ BOGÁCSI, „Tangó...”, 4.

³⁴ *The Cabal of Hypocrites* by Bulgakov, *The Visit* by Dürrenmatt and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* by Albee.

³⁵ BOGÁCSI, „Tangó...”, 4.

Acting

The acting in *Tango* did not differ from the realism that served as the vernacular of Hungarian theatre at the time, but it was free from any exaggeration. Although some elements of the absurd were tempted to it, farce did not prevail, and the actors/actresses succeeded in a sophisticated role-playing that delved into the psyches of the characters but remained "playfully uninhibited."³⁶ Many critics noted the lightness that distinguished the performance, and they enthusiastically drew verbal portraits of the characters the actors had created.

The press described István Fonyó as outstanding in the role of the once rebellious, now idle father, who became ridiculous while walking half-naked in unbuttoned pyjamas without ever falling out of the seriousness of the character.³⁷ Fonyó's acting greatly contributed to the fact that situations that started out tragic sometimes unexpectedly turned into comedy, and Stomil's "faux-anti-conformism mocking faux-Marxists" created a figure familiar to the audience.³⁸ Critics judged György Pogány's Arthur, "this sensitive Hamlet as a medical student",³⁹ less unanimously, and following Jan Kott, they portrayed him as a modern Shakespearean hero. Pogány's acting was based on temper, with which he was able to convey both the misfortune and the lack of compromise of the play's ideologue as well as his fanaticism.⁴⁰ He made impatience and anger the basic traits of a man of principles without

³⁶ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ -kd-, „Az ész megáll, a vadállat uralkodik: Mrożek *Tangója* a szolnokiak produkciójában”, *Dunaújvárosi Hírlap*, 1979. márc. 9., 5.

³⁹ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

⁴⁰ VÁNCSA István, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna: Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház: *Tangó*”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 22, no. 51 (1978): 8.

hesitation,⁴¹ so his Arthur almost imperceptibly became the "novice domestic tyrant"⁴² who spouted on top of a table until Edek knocked him down with a single blow.⁴³ Since Pogány was considered the problematic centre of gravity of the production, "it was not the rude lackey who defeated the hot-tempered university student, but the stronger actor defeated the weaker one" in the end.⁴⁴

Although the female characters are overshadowed by the dramatic text, the performances of the three actresses of *Tango* in Szolnok were highlighted by critics. The acting of Ági Margitai, who drew attention to the immorality of the mother by subtle means, was called a "stylistic masterpiece,"⁴⁵ and the somewhat grotesque mimicry and sloppy movements that characterised the actress were considered perfectly suited to the figure of Eleanor.⁴⁶ Klári Falvai was also praised for the grotesqueness embodied in the role of Eugenia, who, "wearing tennis shoes for her dress with a long train," fought an endless card battle with Edek.⁴⁷ The actress played the grandmother at the age of 39, but was able to convey "not only the oppressed, crappy old woman of the family, but also the wise irony of old age"⁴⁸ and did not shy away from using more extreme means. Even with less extreme means, Dorottya Udvaros became "one of the most bril-

⁴¹ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ As a critic put it neatly, Arthur's „pursuit ends in the same way as his predecessors: the barren reign of Edek's terror. Arthur himself will be a knocked-down victim of his own *democratic dictatorship*". RÁJK András, „Színházi esték”, *Népszava*, 1978. dec. 15., 6. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

⁴⁴ SAÁD Katalin, „A *Tangó* szerepei”, *Színház* 12, no. 3 (1979): 26–29, 28.

⁴⁵ VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

⁴⁶ BOGÁCSI, „*Tangó...*”, 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

liant surprises of the production"⁴⁹ and portrayed the most normal member of the family in the role of Ala, the niece. Most critics emphasised her deep flirtatiousness, charming femininity, and almost queenly elegance. Rather than using the stereotype of a simple-minded lass, Udvaros caricatured stereotypical feminine logic⁵⁰ and revealed the carefully thought-out nature of her portrayal as she paired provocative, self-indulgent behaviour with gloomy emotions.

Wearing a black suit with shorts and dancing tango with Edek in the finale, János Pákozdy drew with sharp contours the course that Uncle Eugene runs during the three acts. The first likeable "old boy" almost imperceptibly becomes a "spineless rogue serving the ruling power".⁵¹ Dénes Újlaki's Edek became an "acting hit"⁵² by allowing the closemouthed figure of the lover playing cards in a family circle and then the obedient servant, who unobtrusively exerted his influence more and more threateningly on the others, to exploit the great opportunity in a single moment and unscrupulously seize power. Although critics referred to the "lumpen beast born of the people,"⁵³ "the dictatorship of brute force"⁵⁴ and "a terrifying portrait of plebs"⁵⁵ in connection with Edek, it was elegance and economy that predominated in Újlaki's acting. His extreme accuracy also created the terrifying atmosphere of the closing tango, with Uncle Eugene's body almost collapsing in his arms, squeezed into the rhythm. Which was "like making a bear dance. But here the bear was leading."⁵⁶

⁴⁹ SAÁD, „A *Tangó* szerepei”, 28.

⁵⁰ -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² VALKÓ, „A »baromember« tangója”, 7.

⁵³ -kd-, „Az ész megáll...”, 5.

⁵⁴ TARJÁN, „Sławomir Mrożek: *Tangó*”, 33.

⁵⁵ BOGÁCSI, „*Tangó*...”, 4.

⁵⁶ MÉSZÁROS Tamás, „Sok nagyszerű, fontos merény...”, *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 12 (1979): 1866–1871, 1866.

Stage design and sound

The stage of *Tango* did not allow the spatial and temporal separation of events from the present and reduced the environment required by the dramatic text to its most necessary components. The set of the performance was designed by László Najmányi, who was a significant artist of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde and created performances (with László Rajk and Tibor Hajas, among others) under the auspices of the István Kovács Studio from 1971 onward. In 1975, Najmányi became the set and costume designer of the National Theatre of Pécs, where he participated in several productions by István Paál, including *Caligula* and *King Ubu*. He probably signed for Szolnok at Paál's encouragement in the summer of 1978, but a year later he emigrated to Paris, from where he moved to Canada, and then to the United States. His set design for Mrożek's play was thus one of his last works in Hungary before his emigration. The set of *Tango* aimed at eliminating the milieu, using the selective realism familiar from Brecht, but omitting those components (half curtain, etc.) that define the politics of epic theatre. Najmányi's simple design was also connected to the *mise-en-scènes* of Paál's earlier period, since the productions of the University Stage of Szeged also reduced the set elements and props to a minimum.

At the world premiere of *Tango* in Warsaw, three people were sitting at the table of a salon, which was (as in Mrożek's stage directions) "indescribably chaotic" when the curtain rose.⁵⁷ Thus, the Polish production was based on the stage design and the exposition familiar from bourgeois theatre, made its conventions an expectation, and triggered its perceptual mechanism. *Tango* in Szolnok did not use the curtain of the theatre, and the audience was not faced with confusion. In the middle, a single bier stood in a glass cage between candles, but the can-

⁵⁷ NÁDAS, „Lengyel színház...”, 2.

dles were not burning. At the beginning of the production, the empty stage elevated the drama to an almost metaphysical level, since “the infinity of the starry sky was shining” in the background, where only the bier stood and a forest of spotlights were placed behind it.⁵⁸ Subsequently, the elements introduced in the prelude made this setting more concrete but did not represent a real place. The interior place of the plot was indicated by a simple door frame, and the flat of Stomil’s family was indicated by an old table, a couple of bentwood chairs, an armchair, a screen, a pram, and a bird cage. Avoiding naturalistic details, the equipment was reduced to the very essential objects, and the auditorium, whose doors were often used for the entry and exit of the actors/actresses, provided maximum room for the plot. With minimal visual evocation of the disarray in which Arthur’s rebellion takes place, the set seemed “funnily abstract”.⁵⁹ Moreover, the set created an almost “surrealist atmosphere”, since it “turned into a closed circle [by the second act] from which one cannot exit, even if there are no walls to prevent this exit”.⁶⁰ (As if Paál crossed Mrožek’s play with Buñuel’s 1962 film, *The Exterminating Angel*.) In addition, the scene was created with undisguised theatricality, in front of the spectators’ eyes (by the stagehands during the prelude), and it was also removed in front of the spectator’s eyes (in the postlude), leaving only the actors’ red and black targets with the seemingly immovable bier. Meanwhile, Edek and Uncle Eugene started to dance tango and then “plunged into infinity as the lights artistically went out”.⁶¹

The costumes did not change the requirements of the dramatic text as spectacu-

⁵⁸ DURÓ, „Az életmű csúcsai”, 10.

⁵⁹ VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

⁶⁰ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Darabválasztás és kompromisszum”, *Nagyvilág* 24, no. 4 (1979): 587–595, 591.

⁶¹ MÉSZÁROS, „Sok nagyszerű, fontos mérény...”, 1866.

larly as the set, and critics paid little attention to them, apart from some of their striking components. However, the dresses designed by Nelly Vágó were described as “inventive in their details,”⁶² “tailored to the characters,”⁶³ and “delightfully ironic.”⁶⁴ Acoustic effects based on Kraftwerk, i.e. on utterly contemporary music, in addition to the obligatory *La Cumparsita*, were described by critics as “well-timed and intensified.”⁶⁵ László Najmányi may have taken part in finding the appropriate music for the production too, since he was one of the founders of *Spions* in 1977, a punk band that gave a musical snapshot of the conditions in “Nirvania” at three troubled concerts. Twenty years later, Najmányi described these conditions as “total enervation, constant waiting, total immorality, which I began to realise at that time, and which sometimes still outrage me.”⁶⁶

Impact and posterity

Although there was an undisguised professional consensus in the assessment that the Szigligeti Theatre “created a performance of European standard,”⁶⁷ the reception of *Tan-*

⁶² BOGÁCSI, „Tangó...”, 4.

⁶³ RAJK András, „Színházi esték”, *Népszava*, 1978. dec. 15., 6.

⁶⁴ VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

⁶⁵ RAJK, „Színházi esték”, 6.

⁶⁶ MARTON László Távolodó, „Tilost csinálni. Jegyzőkönyv: Najmányi László a Kolibri Pincében”, *Balkon* 6 (1998): 7–8, 10–15, 12. – To put it another way, Nirvania was „par excellence the place of insignificance, which is only worth abandoning, from which it is only worth running away, fleeing; the key to departure and escape to cultural, moral and artistic survival, i.e. *condition humaine*.” K. HORVÁTH Zsolt, „A gyűlölet múzeuma: *Spions*, 1977–1978”, *Korall* 11, no. 39 (2010): 119–144, 137.

⁶⁷ BORS Edit, „Mrožek: *Tangó*: Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház”, *Pesti Műsor*, 1979. jan. 31., 51.

go in Szolnok was built on silence: its aesthetic qualities were highly appreciated, but the issues it raised in relation to contemporary public life were all circumvented. The production was immediately canonised by critics, who were unanimously enthused about writing about it and stated that "István Paál's *mise-en-scène* made the premiere an event in theatre history."⁶⁸ To confirm this opinion, they also quoted the statement of some Polish theatre experts who watched the production in Szolnok and defined it as "one of the best of the twenty *Tangos* they saw."⁶⁹ In the meantime, the production toured in various Hungarian cities, and the guest performance in Budapest was a particularly memorable success. Two evening performances of *Tango* were announced at the Madách Theatre, but due to the great interest, a third performance starting at 10.30 p.m. had to be scheduled on the second day. One of the reviewers wrote about "a long-close combat at the box office"⁷⁰ and István Paál mentioned the mounted police standing on the boulevard in front of the theatre in connection with the legendary performance late at night.⁷¹ It is partly due to this that the production still lives strongly in cultural memory.

However, the reason for the special status of the premiere in Szolnok can only be slightly deduced from the press, as "the authorities changed tactics: they did not ban the production, but 'did not advise' the publication of reviews about it either. Only a few articles that gave information, rather than real criticism, received publicity, and the most important journal, *Színház*, could only publish an analysis of the actors' performances."⁷² What kind of undocumented political debates Paál's *Tango* may have generated in the offices and corridors of the party com-

mittee can be guessed from an article published in *Népszabadság* two months after the premiere. According to the official newspaper of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the production in Szolnok leaves no doubt that "it is about ideological issues, more precisely *about the question of ideology*. Whether ideology is good for something or makes some sense, power belongs to brute force anyway and the struggle of principals only creates upheaval, confusion, and helplessness."⁷³ Although the article revealed what its author believed to be the statement of the production, it was not motivated by the purpose of denunciation but by the reflection on the uselessness of silence. Applying the usual phraseology of the newspaper without orthodoxy, the article focused on the "disillusionment expressed in symbols and ideas" of a generation whose chagrin "is not the result of manipulation with counter-revolutionary aims... it is a fact, the feeling of a part of a generation."⁷⁴ Therefore, it is just as wrong to neglect it as to contrast the basic tenets of Marxism with the spirit and view of history of some incriminated productions in order to "curse them from our stages."⁷⁵ The article argues that in order for the "orientation apparatus of our intellectual life" to function properly, theatre critics should provide "relevant, substantive analyses" of these productions, which may give false or extreme answers, but ask real questions. And "just as excommunication does not help to clarify anything... it is equally futile if our criticism is modestly silent about the problems that are repeated quite loudly in our theatres."⁷⁶ After nearly half a century, it is clear that this proposal was rejected and no further progress was made. And some theatre productions of the next decade raised the dilemmas of the almost

⁶⁸ VÁNCSA, „Hamlet, ha feltámadna...”, 8.

⁶⁹ RAJK, „Színházi esték”, 6.

⁷⁰ BOLGÁR, „Tangók”, 5.

⁷¹ BÉRCZES, *A végnek végéig*, 113.

⁷² NÁNAY, „Partizánattitűd”, 5.

⁷³ ZAPPE, „Történelem a színpadon...”, 13. (Emphasis in original.)

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

unbearable nature of existence in the Kádár regime even louder.

Even after the premiere in Szolnok, the reception of *Tango* on the Hungarian stage was not uncomplicated at all. In the 1984–1985 season, the Ministry of Culture did not consent to its staging at the National Theatre but did not object to its premiere at the Pesti Theatre, indicating that they were paying close attention to the rehearsals.⁷⁷ (At the same time, two other plays by Mrožek were not allowed to be staged.) The other three premieres of *Tango* before the regime change were not a patch on Paál's *mise-en-scène*, nor did they come close to it in their impact. Most of the premieres after 1989 either played *Tango* as a farce or tamed it, making it politically impotent. The subversive nature inherent in Paál's approach became exploitable again when a regime offered a good basis for a less heartening examination of the problems of individuality, community, power, past, and present. In the context of the so-called System of National Cooperation,⁷⁸ László Bagossy's 2012 *mise-en-scène* at the Örkény Theatre, Budapest raised questions eerily similar to the production in Szolnok 34 years earlier and recalled to the audience's memories a famous line of Géza Bereményi (songwriter) and Tamás Cseh (singer), that "tango is still fashionable today."

Details of the production

Title: Tango. *Date of premiere:* December 1, 1978. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* István Paál. *Author:* Sławomir Mrožek.

⁷⁷ Cf. IMRE and RING, eds., *Szigorúan bizalmas*, 436–437.

⁷⁸ The System of National Cooperation (In Hungarian: Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere, abbrev. NER) is the network of political and cultural institutions and private corporations closely aligned with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and with the national-conservative FIDESZ party in Hungary.

Translator: Grácia Kerényi. *Set designer:* László Najmányi. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó; *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Klári Falvai (Eugenia, the grandmother), János Pákozdy (Eugene, her younger brother), István Fonyó (Stomil, the father), Ági Margitai (Eleanor, the mother), György Pogány (Arthur, the son), Dorottya Udvaros (Ala, the niece), Dénes Újlaki (Edek).

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