

Resisting Peter Weiss: A Non-Marxist Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* for the Late 1970s

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Abstract: My study on János Szikora's 1978 staging of *The Trial* seeks to explore the factors that contributed to the growing prominence of neo-avant-garde theatre-making and a kind of counterculture in the National Theatre of Pécs at the end of the 1970s. Additionally, it examines how the production caused such a stir that it eventually led to an actual lawsuit. Szikora's ideas about his production were so resolute that, despite having Peter Weiss's dramatised version available, he and Géza Morcsányi chose to create their own adaptation instead. Szikora (according to his own statement) aimed to preserve the diversity of impressions evoked in readers by Kafka's novel. However, a journalist from

Népszabadság twisted the director's words, claiming that Szikora was essentially "re-proaching" Weiss for his Marxist interpretation of Kafka.

With János Szikora's staging of Kafka after Tibor Déry's *The Giant Baby*,¹ the National Theatre of Pécs seemed to provide a stable space for neo-avant-garde theatre-making and a kind of counterculture, even after István Paál had left the institution.² Before Paál's³ employment as a director in Pécs (1975),⁴ there was no precedent for a professional theatre to employ an amateur artist.⁵ Róbert Nógrádi, the director of the theatre in Pécs, could probably not do so without the permission of

¹ Tibor Déry's *The Giant Baby* is a grotesque, even absurd drama that explores the problems of human nature and society through symbolic scenes. Its protagonist is a gigantic, instinct-driven infant who represents the human hunger for power and the selfishness of civilisation. Written in 1926, the play shows the influence of the avant-garde, particularly Expressionism and Dadaism. The play's informal style and absurdist humour reflect on the turmoil of the modern world, while posing provocative questions about humanity's evolution and social impasses. Cf. Tibor DÉRY, "The Giant Baby," trans. Imre GOLDSTEIN, in *Modern International Drama*, Vol. 20, 5–48 (Binghamton: Max Reinhardt Archive, State University of New York, 1986).

² István Paál (1942–1998) was a Hungarian neo-avant-garde theatre-maker, a follower of Jerzy Grotowski. His overtly critical and radical conception had a great influence on Hungarian theatre. His productions were not only theatre events but also intellectual ones,

and he is credited with introducing the community theatre form. Cf. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "The Danse Macabre of »Democratic Dictatorship«: Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango* in State-Socialist Hungary," *Theatron* 17, no. 4 (2023): 62–74, <https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2023.4.62>

³ István Paál unsuccessfully applied to the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest in 1968, while he was the director of the University Theatre of Szeged between 1960 and 1975. Cf. MAGYAR Fruzsina and DURÓ Győző, „Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal,” *Színház* 11, no. 10 (1978): 32–35.

⁴ "It was an unexpected turn of events that the National Theatre of Pécs invited me to stage a play as a guest, thanks largely to the personal commitment and flexibility of the theatre's management," said István Paál. *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ BARTA András, "A mai magyar színházról – tíz tételben: Beszélgetés Szikora Jánossal," *Mozgó Világ* 12, no. 5 (1986): 103–112, 105.

the leading cultural politician of the Kádár era,⁶ György Aczél, just as Szikora could not have staged “the most revolutionary Hungarian avant-garde play” (as the director called *The Giant Baby*)⁷ without it. However, it was not just Pécs that gave an opportunity first to an amateur (Paál) and then to a professional (Szikora) young theatre-maker. Rather, by the end of the 1970s, state-financed rural theatres had become more open and experimental, abandoning “stylistic monotony.”⁸ Their productions began to reject the ideal of “soothing, beautiful, harmonious performances,” giving way to the representation of “disharmonious, restless, and not always ‘artistic’ reality.”⁹

From 1962, Róbert Nógrádi tried to create a theatre in Pécs whose program policy, while satisfying audience demand, increasingly emphasised diversity, bolder, more irregular plays and styles that were not necessarily well established at the time. Nógrádi did not see the theatre’s task as the consistent implementation of a strong director-principal vision. He believed that the ideal was to have a variety of theatrical ideals represented by directors who differed in taste but agreed on the main issues.¹⁰ The National Theatre of Pécs wanted to become “the best theatre ever” of the 1970s,¹¹ presenting plays, either authors or works, which “could just as well be staged in Budapest, the capital city.”¹²

The overall perception of the 1978/79 theatre season in Pécs turned out to be mixed. István Nánay’s interview with Nógrádi, evaluating the season, highlights the fact that

while “a radical series of changes began in Hungarian theatre life, [...] they only partially affected Pécs.”¹³ Although there were signs of strong artistic ambitions in Pécs, Nánay says that “there were also undeniable signs of artistic stagnation.”¹⁴ At that time, there were five divisions working simultaneously in Pécs: opera, operetta, drama, puppet theatre, and children’s theatre. The 1978/79 season brought together a wide variety of productions, aiming to satisfy an exceptionally broad range of audience preferences. Comedies, popular Hungarian plays, farces, and children’s performances were on the programme, alongside the obligatory Soviet plays, operettas, musical plays, and ballet performances, all of which attracted large crowds. Nógrádi admitted that the 1978/79 season was indeed less successful in terms of attendance, which he attributed primarily to offering too much (in his own words) “poetic theatre.”¹⁵ He considered the succession of *The Trial* and Strindberg’s *Dream Play* to be excessive.¹⁶ However, despite the challenges, the director remained committed to the long-term artistic ambitions of the theatre, even though the division into sections and the genre- and style-based diversity later on did not contribute to the development of a clear profile. This “lack of profile” is also reflected in the mixed results of the 1978/79 season, even though the National Theatre of Pécs lived on in the public consciousness as the cradle of contemporary Hungarian drama.

Already during his college years, Szikora distinguished himself with a formal language

⁶ REGŐS János, “Úgy döntöttem, hogy rendező akarok maradni: Szikora Jánossal Regős János beszélget,” *Szcenárium* 3, no. 9 (2015): 65–83, 73.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ KOLTAI Tamás, “Évadok után, évadok előtt,” *Színház* 11, no. 9 (1978): 1–4, 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ CZÍMER József, “Nógárdi Róbert emlékezete,” *Film Színház Muzsika* 33, no. 29 (1989): 6–7, 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ NÁRAY István, “A közönség szolgálata és a nyitottság: Beszélgetés Nógrádi Róberttel, a pécsi Nemzeti Színház igazgatójával,” *Színház* 12, no. 9 (1979): 33–35, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

that was very different from the theatrical ideas of the masters there.¹⁷ The avant-garde and amateur theatre were both fundamental to his theatrical vision. Unlike István Paál, Szikora was admitted to the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, although, as a law student, he had started out in the amateur theatre scene earlier, as a member of the Brobo group (1969–1974), which “moved towards explicitly visual art performances.”¹⁸ The group worked on the creation of a specific theatrical language, “where word, sound, gesture, and musical effects are juxtaposed and organised in an almost syntactical system.”¹⁹ Szikora thus created performances with the Brobo in opposition to stage realism and in the spirit of the neo-avant-garde. His interest in performances and happenings²⁰ was also influenced by the fact that in 1973, he saw the *Petőfi-rock* in Wrocław,²¹ and met István Paál, with whom he later maintained a

close relationship.²² For Szikora, the unusual spectacle of theatrical performance²³ was “not merely a matter of routinely conveying the thought content of a drama”²⁴ and “the elements were not a vulgar formalism.”²⁵

In light of all this, it is no coincidence that Szikora chose Kafka’s world for his first professional theatre works. Szikora was particularly depressed during his college years, so for his last college exam performance, he was looking for a play that could express (in his own words) his “depression,” his sense of life at the time. This is how he chose Rózewicz’s play *The Hunger Artist Departs* based on Kafka.²⁶ Critics noted that Szikora was preoccupied with “the defeats of human struggle” and “the fundamental questions of human existence.”²⁷ But because these “questions of

¹⁷ REGŐS, “Úgy döntöttem, hogy...,” 73.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ GERVAI András, “Az éhezőművész nem megy el... Beszélgetés Szikora Jánossal,” *Mozgó Világ* 6, no. 12 (1980): 74–79, 75.

²⁰ „In the 1970s, theatre movements began to emerge and, after their disappearance, entered the theatre’s bloodstream, [...] with something so different from the official Hungarian theatre [...] we are trying to create theatre here, that it is actually crucial for us to take into account the past, which is primarily your activity and the intellectual environment in which your activity could be created,”²⁰ – said Szikora about the Kassák Theatre during the roundtable discussion held at the Artpool Studio on May 22, 1984. N. N., “Beszélgetés a Kassák Színházról 1984. 22-én az Artpool Stúdióban,” *Artpool*, Spring 1985, 45, accessed 22.10.2024, <https://artpool.hu/Al/al11/KHS-1.html>

²¹ *Petőfi-rock* is one of the legendary performances of the University Theatre Szeged, staged by István Paál on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Sándor Petőfi’s birth. The performance was based on three of

Petőfi’s poems and his diary of the revolutionary days, supplemented with letters and reports sent by the imperial police and a network of informers to the Council of Governors and the Palatine of Hungary. Cf. “Paál István visszaemlékezése,” in *Felütés: Írások a magyar alternatív színházról*, ed. VÁRSZEGI Tibor, 64–69 ([private edition]: 1990), 66.

²² REGŐS, “Úgy döntöttem, hogy...,” 70.

²³ “No doubt, the visual aspect has priority, the most important thing is that the text stimulates my imagination [...], this internal imagery leads to a unique kind of inner cinema [...], for me, the text on its own means nothing” – said Szikora. GERVAI, “Az éhezőművész...,” 74.

²⁴ MÁTYÁS Győző, “»Minő veszély, hogy az ember szabad!« A *Hamlet* győri előadásáról,” *Mozgó Világ* 8, no. 1 (1982): 33–39, 33.

²⁵ MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, “Antiszínház és anti-színház: Déry Tibor drámája Pécsett,” *Nép-szabadság*, May 31, 1978, 7.

²⁶ GERVAI, “Az éhezőművész...,” 75.

²⁷ TARJÁN Tamás, “Galambok: A *Rómeó és Júlia* a miskolci Nemzeti Színházban,” *Nép-szabadság*, February 8, 1984, 7.

existence are few and simple, the way in which the works are realised" is crucial.²⁸

"Kafka's acceptance in Hungary was delayed by long decades: when he had already been discovered in Western Europe, his acceptance in Hungary, like in other socialist countries, was delayed by ideological suspicions of Marxism."²⁹ In the Rákosi era, "Kafka was not even mentioned."³⁰ The first Hungarian edition (*The Judgement*) was published in 1957, and only from 1963 onwards could further works by the writer be published.³¹ "Meanwhile, the international debate on Kafka among Marxists was unfolding, which sought to replace the earlier categorical rejection with a more nuanced and 'understanding' position."³² In 1958, György Lukács took the initiative to discuss the Kafka question and acknowledged the writer's talent, even seeing him as one of the most significant figures of "modern decadence," but in the spirit of socialist realism³³ he continued to reject Kafka's works as "avant-garde, anti-realist literature serving as a mediated apologetic of capitalism."³⁴ Kafka's writings (published in Hungarian from 1963 onwards) were immediately put on the stage. They first appeared in 1963 in one of the occasional programmes of the Budapest Literary Stage, where an excerpt from *The Trial* was adapted into a scene.³⁵ Three years later, in 1966, the

Thália Theatre in Budapest presented a stage version of *The Trial* by Jean-Louis Barrault and André Gide,³⁶ and in 1968 the National Theatre staged an adaptation of Kafka's *America* by Max Brod, directed by Endre Marton. The latter production divided the critics, who criticised the essentially realistic approach.³⁷ Marton had incorporated Kafka into an essentially realistic theatrical language that was being experimented with at the time in some plays by Peter Weiss at the Hungarian National Theatre. Although critics respected the fact that "he did not emphasise the elusive drama, but sought the impossibility of the glamorous stunt,"³⁸ on the whole, he "failed to capture the dreamlike character of Kafka's visions—the essence of Kafka's work," and what was achieved was merely "a grotesque story of the helplessness of the Chaplinian little man."³⁹ Nine years later, János Szikora was far from interpreting Kafka in terms of the concept of alienation. In his production of *The Hunger Artist Departs* at the Ódry Stage, the Theatre and Film Academy's own theatre, "there was more scepticism and incomprehension than enthusiasm."⁴⁰ The audience may have found it hard to cope with the "eerie madness," (a term in a critique), which resulted from the contrast between "breath-

²⁸ GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész...", 74.

²⁹ GYÖRFFY Miklós, "Kafka és Magyarország," *Alföld* 59, no. 8 (2008): 76–85, 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

³¹ In 1963, *Letter to my Father* (trans. Ede Szabó), in 1964, *The Castle* (trans. György Rónay), in 1967, *America* (trans. István Kristó Nagy), in 1968, *The Trial* (trans. Ede Szabó). *Ibid.*, 80–81.

³² "In the 1950s, the dogmatic communist cultural policy considered Kafka's work a harmful and forbidden phenomenon, simply because the existentialists saw Kafka as »their prophet«." *Ibid.*, 81.

³³ The task of art is to reflect reality through the human experience, thereby contributing

to the defetishization of the alienated world. See FEKETE Kristóf, "Lukács Kafkát olvas," *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* 64, no. 2 (2020): 155–175, 156–157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ BARABÁS Tamás, "Az Irodalmi Színpad és az irodalmi színpadok: Szállj költemény," *Népművelés* 10, no. 10 (1963): 29.

³⁶ N.N. "»Zsebszínház«, " *Esti Hírlap* 11, no. 236 (1966): 2.

³⁷ N.N., "A kallódó," *Tükör* 5, no. 23 (1968): 19.

³⁸ LÉTAY, "Kafka...", 8.

³⁹ MIHÁLYI Gábor, "Évadvégi gondolatok," *Nagyvilág* 13, no. 9 (1968): 1423–1427, 1426.

⁴⁰ PÁLYI András, "Egy színházatlanított színpad," *Színház* 11, no. 5 (1978): 15–17, 15–17.

taking and [...] ridiculous,"⁴¹ but the auditorium filled up⁴² on several occasions, showing that there was interest in a theatrical vision that had hitherto been little or unheard of.

After the positive reception of Szikora's college performance (*The Hunger Artist Departs*) and his first professional theatre performance, *The Giant Baby*,⁴³ the new work by Kafka was expected to be in the right hands, as well as attract considerable professional attention. Szikora's vision of the production of *The Trial* was so specific that, rather than stage a dramatised version by Peter Weiss, he created his own transcript with Géza Morcsányi, which László Rajk, who had previously designed the set for *The Hunger Artist...* Szikora's choice of play was undoubtedly motivated by his recognition of the serious theatrical potential of Kafka's text, which he was the first Hungarian playwright to exploit in order to wage war on the realistic theatrical reading of Kafka. In other words, he was trying to achieve precisely what, according to the critics, the production in the Hungarian National Theatre had failed to do ten years before. According to Szikora, Weiss's adaptation is a narrow interpretation of the novel that forcibly restricts the story to a particular age⁴⁴ and "seeks to make evident the forces that haunt and oppress K. with a Marxist didaxis"⁴⁵ whereas Kafka has a much more universal⁴⁶ validity. Moreover, the previous stage adaptations had sought to represent his world in the "most puritanical way, deprived of sensual life matter," hence the need

for an adaptation that "does not seek to interpret Kafka, but leaves him in his mystical opacity."⁴⁷ However, the experience of staging the play made it clear that it is precisely this "evocative and corporeal" character that the theatre has difficulty in reproducing.⁴⁸ According to Szikora, the staging of *The Trial* offered intellectual excitement,⁴⁹ but despite its extraordinary visual quality, it could not really transform the intellectual experience into sensual excitement. Szikora was therefore faced with the "impossibility of adaptation,"⁵⁰ so that "Josef K.'s theatrical calvary deviated in detail from Kafka's vision, even if it was close to it in its final result."⁵¹ For the director, this proved once again—and this was Szikora and Morcsányi's main principle for adaptation—that "it is not slavish fidelity, but a full knowledge of the self-concepts of the new genre and the essence of the original work, a full experience of it, and a combination of the two that can produce a true artistic result."⁵²

But positive critical acclaim is in vain if a staff member of one of the most important organs of the Hungarian press misinterprets an interview given by Szikora, thus affecting both the image of the director and his productions. To prevent this potential defamation, Szikora therefore files a "press correction" lawsuit against *Népszabadság*. The background of the case is that one of their journalists, E. Fehér Pál, published an opinion piece titled "Surprises While Reading" in connection with the Szikora interview that

⁴¹ RAJK András, "Az éhezőművész elmegy," *Népszava*, January 13, 1978, 6.

⁴² SIMONFFY András, "Figyelem Szikorát," *Élet és Irodalom* 22, no. 3 (1978): 13.

⁴³ SZILÁRD István, "Fiatal művészek," *Dunántúli Napló*, December 9, 1979, 9.

⁴⁴ SZILÁRD István, "Franz Kafka és A per," *Dunántúli Napló*, November 26, 1978, 8.

⁴⁵ GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész nem...," 76.

⁴⁶ SZILÁRD, "Franz Kafka...," 8.

⁴⁷ GERVAI, "Az éhezőművész nem...," 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "It is also because of Kafka's inexhaustible depth – which I hope I have not shallowed – that I find this the most thought-provoking of all my productions. This feeling is not diminished by the fact that I do not consider the production as a whole, like *The Hunger Artist...* to be very good." Ibid.

⁵⁰ NÁRAY István, "A per – idilli tájban. Kafka-bemutató a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban," *Színház* 12, no. 2 (1979): 12–15, 12.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 12–13.

appeared in the December 1980 issue of *Mozgó Világ*.⁵³ In the KISZ⁵⁴-supported journal, the journalist finds it surprising that Peter Weiss should be “reprimanded” for his Marxist interpretation of Kafka⁵⁵ and criticises Szikora’s self-confidence with a noticeable gibe. And this has been a problem for the director because E. Fehér’s words suggest that the director makes his own adaptations of Kafka because he believes he knows more about theatre⁵⁶ than Weiss or Rózewicz, even though Szikora himself says in the interview that he doesn’t think any of his Kafka adaptations are very good.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the journalist twists the director’s idea of the relationship between acting and inspiration⁵⁸ and

⁵³ E. FEHÉR Pál, “Csodálkozások: olvasás közben,” *Népszabadság*, January 18, 1981, 13. Noémi Herczog discusses the case of Szikora and Pál E. Fehér through the interview with Erzsébet Bogácsi. HERCZOG Noémi, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika a Kádár-korban* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2022), 203–204.

⁵⁴ Hungarian Young Communist League (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ).

⁵⁵ “1./ In the interview quoted by the author, [Szikora] did not criticize Peter Weiss, but only his adaptation of Kafka, not »because he is a Marxist«, not »because he tried to interpret Kafka according to the principles of Marxism«, but because he is didactic.” Quote from a letter of 31 January 1981 from Szikora’s lawyer to the editor-in-chief of *Népszabadság*. Manuscript. Source: archives of János Szikora.

⁵⁶ “2./ [Szikora] did not claim in the interview that »Peter Weiss does not understand the stage«.” Ibid.

⁵⁷ “3./ He also did not declare – especially not »confidently« – that »he knows the theatre«. On the contrary, on several occasions during the interview he expressed his critical displeasure with his own productions.” Ibid.

⁵⁸ “4./ Contrary to what is written in the article, [Szikora] did not claim that »in real theatre, artists only act when the hour of inspiration has come«.” Ibid.

wryly comments that the director feels like a “paid opposition” while directing in a leading position at the Kisfaludy Színház in Győr.⁵⁹ And because the newspaper did not respond to Szikora’s lawyer’s request for a preliminary correction,⁶⁰ the case went to court. He won the case at first instance; the court ordered *Népszabadság* to rectify the situation, but the newspaper appealed to the Supreme Court (Curia of Hungary), where the director was dismissed on all points, and *Népszabadság* won the case.⁶¹

Although Szikora’s words were not sufficient (in court) to refute the journalist’s claims, his arrangement was all the more able to disprove them. For the director, the era of

⁵⁹ “5./ He did not say during the interview either that he felt like a »paid opposition«, »because a year after graduating from college, he was appointed to a senior position in the country’s most modern theatre building«.” Ibid.

⁶⁰ “As the facts stated in the article are untrue, I request that the Editor-in-Chief, Comrade T., provide me with a correction within eight days, failing which my client would be forced to initiate civil proceedings to protect his rights.” Ibid.

⁶¹ “The first instance hearing is scheduled for March 12 at 11 a.m. In the afternoon of 11 March, the lawyer is informed that the place and time have been changed. The hearing will be held on 12 March at half past two in the afternoon in the main courtroom. No verdict is announced but it is announced that it will be announced on 18 March at 13:40. On 18 March at 11 am a phone call is made that there is no verdict but a new trial is ordered. The judge tells the lawyer that she had a conflict of interest and therefore a new judge is needed. The new judge is an economic judge, a member of the party, and the new trial is announced for 10 a.m. on 24 March 1980.” Handwritten note by János Szikora. Source: archives of János Szikora.

The Trial (the early 1910s) was still a “bourgeois idyll”, but for him, “this superficial tapestry of beauty was penetrated by human filth, the signs of the war that was about to break out.”⁶² The setting for the performance was accordingly an idyllic landscape: a white-lit stage with bright green hills⁶³ framed by a grove of real pine trees.⁶⁴ Although the stage of *The Trial* was “neither narrow nor grey, no labyrinth, lacking gates, doors, passages, dead ends, and low attics,”⁶⁵ it was not without the familiar realistic props of the Kafka world. In the green meadow that served as a playground, details of bourgeois interiors and elements of bourgeois life appeared: elegant clothes, porcelain sets, and period furniture,⁶⁶ iron washbasins, mirrors, skinned animal skulls, antlers, gilded antique armchairs and tables.⁶⁷ But the vast space, lacking the intimate complexity of the room’s decorations, maintained a chaotic, surreal state. It was not the first time the director had adapted Kafka’s text in nature; his college exam production, Rózewicz’s adaptation of *The Hunger Artist Departs*, was also the first time the actors had been forced to move constantly by an outdoor⁶⁸ paternoster. Both of László Rajk’s sets evoked nature, but he made no secret of his artistic vision, and this duality—and the resulting tension—defined the visual world.⁶⁹

Szikora has captured the perpetual motion of the Kafkaesque world by making the performance both natural and artificial, realistic and magical, and oscillating between the

serious and the ridiculous, the concrete and the abstract. Moreover, the audience was made aware of all this from the very beginning of the performance: the idyllic green landscape begins to distort as, in the ghostly, shimmering light—in which the outlines of the trees are just visible—a “silhouette appears in the depths of the stage.”⁷⁰ First we can only see his hat, then, as he steps up the hill from behind, the whole man, stooping slightly, but with a relaxed stance.⁷¹ Walking stick in hand, the man slowly, ceremoniously marches through the bushes when suddenly⁷² from the right, then from the left and left front, another dark shadow in uniform emerges from the trees.⁷³ By the time Josef K. reaches the front of the stage, he has almost been surrounded by the others, and the first words are uttered: “My breakfast!”. In this opening, the centuries-old ritual of civil life is almost instantly obliterated by the arrest procedure, with the two courtroom mewls, the onstage strangers staring at him, and the officials acting like monkeys. With this opening scene and “a few minor characters, Szikora created the atmosphere of the performance, the grotesque atmosphere of Kafka’s world, since K. was not so much disturbed by the arrest as by the figures swarming around him, especially the old men peering out of the windows of the house opposite [a recurring topic in the novel].”⁷⁴ The similarly counterpointing scenes were imbued with Gustav Mahler’s “majestically flowing symphonic scores,” composed by István Mártha (a frequent

⁶² N.N., “F. Kafka: A per. Pécsi Nemzeti Színház 1978,” *Dunántúli Napló*, November 19, 1978, 6.

⁶³ ZAPPE László, “Történelem a színpadon: Jegyzetek új bemutatókhoz,” *Népszabadság*, February 4, 1979, 13.

⁶⁴ TARJÁN Tamás, “Franz Kafka: A per,” *Kritika* 8, no. 3 (1979): 34–35, 35.

⁶⁵ N.N., “Régi ismeretlenek,” *Tükör* 15, no. 53 (1978): 28.

⁶⁶ TARJÁN, “Franz Kafka...,” 35.

⁶⁷ NÁNAY, “A per...,” 13.

⁶⁸ HARANGOZÓ Márta, “Doktor díszlettervező: Beszélgetés Rajk Lászlóval,” *Esti Hírlap*, April 12, 1989.

⁶⁹ TARJÁN, “Franz Kafka...,” 34.

⁷⁰ NÁNAY, “A per...,” 13.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² VÁNCSA István, “Credo, quia absurdum: Pécsi Nemzeti Színház: A per,” *Film, Színház, Muzsika* 22, no. 49 (1978): 6–7, 6.

⁷³ NÁNAY, “A per...,” 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

collaborator of Szikora's from the Brobó period onwards), and the effect of the images was deepened by the music's "sometimes grotesquely mocking, sometimes dramatic motifs"⁷⁵ — as revealed in the reviews of István Nánay and István Vánca.

At the end of the opening scene of *The Trial*, the lights were dimmed, the actors in the first scene continued their actions with slow movements, while the stagehands were still doing their job. While Weiss wrote closed scenes, Szikora composed merging ones, thinking not so much in scenes as in images, which evoked the episodic character of the novel. Scene changes involved a comic rearrangement of the sets, creating a sense of incompleteness, permanence, and action that had already begun.⁷⁶ The production worked with a unified set, but the furnishings that appeared in it constantly changed the overall picture. The set changes were often made by the actors, who were responsible for moving and rearranging the various pieces of furniture, objects, and equipment; however, this did not change the basic scenery.⁷⁷

János Szikora and László Rajk made the performance timeless with stylistic features and artistic references that transcended the ages.⁷⁸ The unchanging backdrop of the stage is an image inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), a landmark of modernist cinema. The ominous photograph not only reveals the traces of a mysterious murder but also raises the question of how much we can believe what we see or whether there is any point in seeking the truth if it is only available in vague details. In *The Trial*, as in Antonioni's film, the derailment of the

simulation of reality contributed to upsetting the conventional notion of the stability of reality and the corresponding order of perception. The critics of the performance also saw Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* as evocative of Bosch's world, but also of Dalí's surrealism,⁷⁹ and yet the whole was organised into a unified vision.⁸⁰ The performance thus sought to make a sensual impact with all its means.

The performance "almost forced the spectator to replace the 'horror' of what was happening behind the 'beautiful' surface with associations of his own experience."⁸¹ The production did not provide a tendentious interpretation of Kafka's novel (which was actually expected in the Hungarian theatre of the 1970s). Since Szikora placed the whole story in a dream reality beyond logic, where improbable, irrational sequences alternated, the performance was not metaphorical, did not refer to historical situations, and certainly was not actualised.⁸² Rather, it was a profound, thoughtful adaptation of Kafka's novel.⁸³ He did not apply the mechanism of "doublespeak" and thoroughly tested the audience's reception norms of the era.⁸⁴ The clock on the stage, the mythological picture, the phallus sculpture covered with a red shroud, etc.,⁸⁵ did not carry meaning in themselves but rather became part of a cultural landscape that was inscribed in the natural landscape. However, their co-existence, their apparent incompatibility, and their striking chaos provided a good basis for playing on the absurd humour of the novel.

Critics of the era were surprised to find that while "most theatrical adaptations of *The Trial* are sombre and difficult to digest,"⁸⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ SZILÁRD István, "A per: Franz Kafka-bemutató a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban," *Dunántúli Napló*, December 10, 1978, 9.

⁸² VÁNCSA, "Credo, quia...", 6.

⁸³ TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka...", 35.

⁸⁴ On „doublespeak” see Magdolna JÁKFALVI, „Kettős beszéd – egyenes értés”, *Alföld* 55, No. 7. (2005): 65–76.

⁸⁵ SZILÁRD, "A per...", 9.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the grotesque elements of Szikora's staging reinforce the ridiculous and tragic figure of Josef K. The wobbling table on the bumpy lawn, the monkey-like employees at the arrest, the often awkward and uncomfortable figures on stage, the prison chaplain in a balloon, and the many strange contrasts all suggest sequences that make you smile, and if we add to this Mahler's music, which "expresses a tremendous inner effort and struggle,"⁸⁷ one can imagine the critics' statement that "laughter was often heard in the theater, which is one of the best recommendations for the reception of the production."⁸⁸

The "highlight" of the performance was the closing scene. The stage emptied after the dome scene, and just as at the beginning of the performance, Josef K. came in from the back in the bright light, followed by a very tall and a very short man.⁸⁹ K. silently got rid of his clothes; the men meticulously folded everything, put K.'s clothes into a bag, and then, stripping down to his underwear, K., who was covering his body with "routine cold movements," was pushed to the floor, held down, and stabbed in the heart.⁹⁰ The men wiped the knife and, holding the black bag in their hands, walked out, side by side. After their grotesque silhouettes slowly disappeared from the stage and briefly went dark, a giant fountain lit by a sharp, almost offensive white light burst from the centre of the stage, while almost jubilant music played — as we learn from the reviews. The column of water shot up almost to the fly loft, and this spectacular stage *Auferstehung* could be a symbolic image of the spiritualism the director had in mind in Kafka's work, which he had drawn from Musil, Rilke, and Mahler, as well as of the unbearable violence inherent in the

religious-historical notion of purification through sacrifice.

Szikora's adaptation technique, which also strongly affected the visual aspect, appealed to the representation of the source work with "maximum formal faithfulness,"⁹¹ as in the case of his previous performance *The Giant Baby*. "The events of *The Trial* are in fact set in a world behind the words, which can only be perceived through intuitive feelings", but Szikora believes that "the actors have overcome this difficulty".⁹² However, "the text did not exactly contribute to the actor's satisfaction," as the nearly forty actors (with the exception of K.) only played minor roles; most of them had a few sentences of text and a few minutes of stage presence.⁹³ For this reason, the ensemble play, which was considered a standard at the time, did not (because it could not) develop.⁹⁴ Rather, the staging illustrated the fact that Kafka has no real, individualised characters, that the figures that appear are likenesses of each other, or as the literary historians describe them: allegorical figures.

Szikora, "whether directing texts by Déry, Kafka, Vian, Genet, or Beckett, always sought a theatrical realisation that "made the audience abandon their preconceptions."⁹⁵ His choice of plays was quite different from that of the previous generation of directors: Szikora did not direct Shakespeare, Molière, and Chekhov, but works by authors who belonged to or were inspired by the avant-garde.

Szikora found himself confronted with the impossible when (unlike Weiss) he did not just transpose the text of *The Trial* into another medium,⁹⁶ but "heard and amplified the grotesque noises of the work and worked through the theatrical means of Josef K.'s calvary."⁹⁷ The result was that "this vision, although different from Kafka's, became similar to

⁸⁷ ZAPPE, "Történelem...", 13.

⁸⁸ SZILÁRD, "A per...", 9.

⁸⁹ NÁRAY, "A per...", 14.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁹¹ SZILÁRD, "A per...", 9.

⁹² N.N., "F. Kafka...", 6.

⁹³ VÁNCSA, "Credo, quia...", 7.

⁹⁴ NÁRAY, "A per...", 13.

⁹⁵ PÁLYI András, "Pécsi színházi esték," *Jelenkor*, 23, no. 5 (1980): 442–448, 446.

⁹⁶ NÁRAY, "A per...", 12.

⁹⁷ TARJÁN, "Franz Kafka...", 35.

him.”⁹⁸ The performance was thus considered a significant achievement in the period following István Paál’s arrival from the National Theatre of Pécs, both in Szikora’s work as a director and in the series of Kafka stage adaptations.⁹⁹

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