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The Wreath of Radiant Fire. The RSC's *King Lear* and its Influence on Hungarian Theatre

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Abstract: At the end of February 1964, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) performed two of its recent successes in Budapest: *The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Clifford Williams, and *King Lear*, directed by Peter Brook. It is no exaggeration to claim that these productions had a significant impact on the Hungarian theatre scene, profoundly influencing subsequent Hungarian stagings of Shakespeare's plays. Therefore, this essay aims to achieve two objectives: first, to examine the Hungarian critical reception of the RSC's *King Lear*, with particular attention to how contemporary reviews reflected on the novelties the production showcased. Second, it seeks to trace the broader impact of the RSC's visit on Hungarian culture and the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays.

Between 25–28 February, 1964, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) visited Budapest, performing two productions from their repertoire, *The Comedy of Errors* directed by Clifford Williams and *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook. The impact of their visit?

> "There were young directors who broke down in tears and wanted to give up their careers, and young actors who vowed to start anew. And, of course, there were many who, in a fever of despair or ecstasy, sought to validate their own truth through the example of Brook and his team. Some argued that simplicity was key, others that boldness was essential, some claimed the director was everything, while others in-sisted that the actors' culture was paramount."[1]

At least this is how actor Miklós Gábor described the immediate reaction the productions sparked within Hungarian theatrical circles. While the amount of crying and the emotional intensity he described might have been exaggerated, it is undeniable that the Royal Shakespeare Company's first visit to Hungary was a momentous event. Besides causing an immediate stir, it also significantly influenced subsequent Hungarian stagings of Shakespeare's plays in Hungary.

However, determining exactly the nature of this influence is somewhat challenging. Legend has it that one tangible outcome of the RSC's visit was that leather costumes became ubiquitous in Shakespeare productions across Hungary. Others claim that Brook's interpretation of *King Lear* directly inspired subsequent productions of the play. Yet, many of these claims are difficult to substantiate and may belong more to the realm of urban myths than to verifiable theatre history.

Therefore, this essay aims to achieve two objectives: first, to examine the Hungarian critical reception of the RSC's *King Lear*, with particular attention to how contemporary reviews reflected on the novelties the production showcased. Second, it seeks to trace the broader impact of the RSC's visit on Hungarian culture and the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. This investigation is especially important because, while the RSC's later visit to Hungary in 1972 has been thoroughly researched, the impact of their earlier tour re-

[1] GÁBOR Miklós, "Két előadás emléke," *Film Színház Muzsika*, 13 March, 1964, 4.

mains unexplored. By addressing this gap, the essay hopes to pave the way for further studies in this field.

King Lear – Reviews and Contexts

To commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) launched a tour of Eastern Europe in 1964. Starting in Berlin and continuing through Prague, the company arrived in Budapest on the 24th of February. They brought two of their recent successes: Clifford Williams's *The Comedy of Errors* and Peter Brook's *King Lear.* While both productions were well-received by Budapest audiences, *King Lear* made a far greater impact, stirring the somewhat stagnant waters of Hungarian theatre more profoundly than *The Comedy of Errors.* The generic differences between the two plays partially explain this disparity, but more important was the difference in the two directors' approaches.

Williams's direction utilised elements of commedia dell'arte, broad farce, and clowning, all of which resonated with existing Hungarian theatre traditions of interpreting Shakespeare. This approach echoed the work of one of the most prominent Hungarian directors of the post-World War II era, Tamás Major. His early directions of Shakespeare's comedies, including *Much Ado about Nothing* (1946), *Twelfth Night* (1947), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1948), and *As You Like It* (1949), were described by reviewers as "boisterous, full-bodied comedy"[2], characterised by "intense, crass, and rowdy"[3] humour. By the 1950s, Major had established a distinct comedic style that included over-the-top, almost burlesque comedy, bodily humour, slapstick, and a willing destruction of the fourth wall. As the manager and director of the National Theatre, his productions were frequently revived; therefore, it is not too far-fetched to assume that audiences could have recognised Williams's farcical rendering of Shakespeare's early comedy as something they knew and were able to decipher. Peter Brook's *King Lear*, however, was an entirely different experience. Hungarian spectators—many of whom were theatre professionals—were in for a culture shock.

Brook's reputation preceded him, and in pre-show interviews, he was repeatedly asked about his directorial concepts. In his responses, Brook outlined his intention to break away from 19th-century notions of Shakespeare and traditional theatre. He emphasised his decision to move beyond treating *King Lear* as a period piece, or a historical costume drama, instead situating the play in a non-realist setting where barbarism intersects with civilisation. To approximate the play to a more contemporary reality, he linked it to the works of Samuel Beckett, stating that "*Lear* is the archetype of the absurd theatre from which all good modern theatre originates."[4]

While Hungarian theatre practitioners frequently echoed the slogan of breaking away from 19th-century theatrical naturalism, knowledge of absurd theatre or Beckett's work was far less widespread, since apart from a few insiders, most Hungarian audiences lacked firsthand exposure to these works. During the Stalinist years, absurd theatre was viewed as the antithesis of everything socialist realist art—championed by the regime—stood for. While socialist realism was doctrinally based on ideas of humanism and optimism, the absurd was dismissed as a "form of spiritual decay that stripped humanity of its essence, the pinnacle of bourgeois decadence that transformed drama into

[2] KÉRY László, "Sok hűhó semmiért," *Magyarok*, July 1946, 408.
[3] H.I. "Sok hűhó semmiért," *Jövendő*, June 13, 1946, 8.
[4] GÁCH Mariann, "A lehetetlennel kell birkózni – mondja Peter Brook," *Film Színház Muzsika*, March 6, 1964, 4.

antidrama, unacceptable even in form."[5] As Róbert Takács observes, names like Beckett and Ionesco were invoked solely as warnings, embodying all that was deemed unacceptable. Unsurprisingly, absurdist plays were neither published nor performed during this period.

It was only in the late 1950s that the absurd theatre began to make a tentative appearance in Hungarian literary circles. For example, Eugene Ionesco's play, *The Chairs*, was published in the literary magazine *Nagyvilág* in 1959, and the same journal published an essay on Beckett's novels in 1962. This gradual thawing of attitudes reflected the changing cultural politics of post-1956 Hungary. After the failed revolution, the rigid Stalinist approach to cultural control was replaced by a more nuanced tripartite system, which categorised cultural works as "supported," "tolerated," or "banned." These classifications determined whether a work could be published or performed and under what conditions. The "tolerated" category, however, was intentionally fluid, creating an atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty. No explicit guidelines defined what was acceptable; instead, the regime relied on implicit taboos and the discretion of cultural officials. Within this framework, previously banned works by Beckett and other absurdist playwrights began to shift into the "debatable zone" of the "tolerated" category.

Notwithstanding these shifts in classification, none of the absurdist plays had been performed in Hungary prior to the RSC's 1964 visit. It is reasonable to suspect that most Hungarian audience members only had vague, secondhand knowledge of the works of Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco. Consequently, the changes Peter Brook introduced to *King Lear*, interpreting it through the lens of absurd theatre, were far more shocking and unorthodox for Hungarian audiences, who lacked the modernist theatrical context, than for their Western counterparts.

Let us examine how Hungarian critics reacted to Brook's *King Lear.* First and foremost, reviewers were stunned by the barren stage and the leather costumes Brook designed. By the 1960s, Hungarian stage design was moving away from strict naturalism, but Shakespeare was still performed in period costumes. Brook's worn-out leather garments, intended to convey both masculinity and elegance[6], were singled out in all reviews, seen as a radical departure from tradition. Critics noted how "every worn patch on the clothes, every crease weathered by rain and heat, radiates life,"[7] emphasizing the costumes as vital in bringing the production closer to contemporary sensibilities.[8]

Paul Scofield's portrayal of Lear also struck a chord with Hungarian critics. They noted how his relatively young, powerful, and active king stood in stark contrast to the aged, fairy-tale-like octogenarian Lears that had previously populated the Hungarian stages. Critics praised his "wild joie de vivre"[9] and noted how "through his suffering, a growing strength emerges in him; a certain physical and moral resilience, which, however, is

[5] TAKÁCS Róbert, "50 éve mutatták be Magyarországon Samuel Beckett Godot-ra várva című művét," Politikatörténeti Intézet Alapítvány, accessed: 20.01.2025, https://polhist.hu/programok2/50-eve-mutattak-be-magyarorszagon-samuel-beckett-godot-ra-varva-cimu-muvet/.

[6] GÁCH, "A lehetetlennel...," 4.

[7] MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, "Tévedések vígjátéka – Lear király," *Népszabadság*, February 29, 1964, 8.

[8] See also: KOLTAI Tamás, "Hogy kerül a csizma a színpadra?," *Élet és Irodalom*, March 7, 1970, 13.

[9] GYÁRFÁS Miklós, "Hamlet monológja a Royal Shakespeare Company színészeihez," *Film Színház Muzsika*, March 6, 1964, 4.

coupled with profound tenderness"[10]. Reviewers were particularly struck by Scofield's subdued and quiet delivery, even in the storm scene, where he spoke "sometimes in an almost whisper-soft manner."[11] This approach was a drastic change, different from previous Hungarian portrayals of Lear, characterised by bombastic displays of rage.

Critics likened Scofield's Lear to "the owner of a commercial shipping enterprise," "Hauptmann's Herschel carter"[12] or "a colonial general." [13] One critic went so far as to compare him to "[a] true autocrat with a bristly haircut, a veteran colonel-sergeant accustomed to a lifetime of ensuring no one dared utter a word in his presence and that his wishes were carried out as commands, [...] the type who knows he has grown old and understands that this grants him a unique position. (You might encounter him at a tram stop, shoving a pregnant woman off the stairs under the pretext that he is elderly.)[14] Yet, despite these unflattering analogies, critics unanimously acknowledged the tragic heights Scofield reached by the play's conclusion.

Some reviews identified Lear's tragedy as stemming from how power had distanced him from reality[15], while others focused on his journey from blindness to sight, marked by his growing empathy for the poor and homeless[16]. What all reviewers agreed upon was that, after seeing Scofield's performance, it was impossible to return to the traditional portrayals of Lear. As Tamás Dersi summarised, the general mode of reception was of celebration:

> "In editorial offices, print shops, barber shops, espresso bars, and social gatherings, the question was asked: are they really that good? Is it true that their performance is a rare experience? Well, the acclaim surrounding the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions was not exaggerated; the widespread rumour was true. The ensemble, with their outstanding performance, orchestrated a celebration when they appeared at Vígszínház."[17]

However, the recognition of the production's brilliance, with its depiction of *King Lear* as an early modern *Endgame*, led to a cognitive dissonance among Hungarian reviewers. They were compelled to celebrate the production while simultaneously condemning its artistic roots in absurd theatre. This struggle is painfully evident in several reviews. Some critics dismissed Brook's *Lear* as merely one possible interpretation of the play, cautioning that it should not be seen as definitive or followed by everyone.[18] Others criticised the production for misinterpreting Shakespeare's humanity, particularly in scenes like Gloucester's blinding. In Brook's staging, the servants' caring lines—"fetch some flax and whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face"[19]—were omitted, leaving Gloucester to stumble offstage, bleeding, as the house

[10] KÉRY László, "A stratfordi Shakespeare-Társulat Budapesten," *Nagyvilág* 9, no. 5 (1964): 787.
[11] KÉRY, "A stratfordi...," 788.
[12] MOLNÁR GÁL, "Tévedések vígjátéka...," 8.
[13] GÁBOR Miklós, "Bizonytalanságok egy bizonyosságról," *Új Írás* 6, no. 9 (1966): 106.
[14] TAXNER Ernő, "A Royal Shakespeare Company – Budapesten," *Jelenkor* 7, no. 6 (1964): 565.
[15] GÁBOR, "Bizonytalanságok...," 107.
[16] DOROMBAY Károly, "Színházi krónika," *Vigília* 29, no. 3 (1964): 181.
[17] DERSI Tamás, "A Royal Shakespeare Company vendégjátéka," *Esti Hírlap*, February 29, 1964, 2.
[18] See e.g.: MÁTRAI-BETEGH Béla, "Korhűség és korszerűség," *Magyar Nemzet*, March 1, 1964, 11.
[19] William SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, The Folger Shakespeare, accessed: 20.01.2025, https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/king-lear/read/3/7/

lights came up. Critics condemned this omission as an interpretative mistake. Similarly, the final scene, in which Edgar drags his brother's corpse offstage while the storm gathers momentum in the background, drew criticism. Péter Molnár Gál jokingly compared the production to the horror genre, quipping that it "made Alfred Hitchcock seem like a gentle storyteller in comparison."[20]

Literary critic and Shakespeare scholar László Kéry was more severe in his critique and was eager to distance himself from the existentialist moments of the productions. Echoing earlier Marxist condemnations of absurd theatre, Kéry relegated Brook's *Lear* to the realm of "decadent Western bourgeois culture," claiming that:

> "Beckett and his contemporaries absolutise the "sense of life" experienced by a segment of Western intellectuals—the feeling of disintegration and decline—attempting to elevate resignation to decay, aimlessness, and a sad yet pitifully ridiculous sense of abandonment into a peculiar "philosophy" they consider a "human situation." [...] Not only has the hero disappeared from modern bourgeois literature, replaced by the anti-hero, but even the ranks of characters with normal minds and senses have thinned. They've been displaced by the simple-minded, the clinically insane, prematurely aged children, infantile old men, alcoholics, perverts, and others. In Beckett's work, this tendency reaches its extreme. Half-witted vagabonds, senile old men, and physically and mentally impaired human wrecks carry on dialogues and monologues built on the comedy of absurdity and despair. While moments of artistic truth may occasionally shine through, the overall effect is a distorted image of a world seen through a distorted lens. The primary "guarantee" of this falsification lies in these allegorical human substitutes themselves. They are deprived not only of human dignity but almost of any possibility of becoming truly human. Each is irrevocably and hopelessly barred from being what they should be. At best, they are still capable of suffering."[21]

Kéry rejected the absurdist existential tones in Brook's direction as fundamentally oppositional to Shakespeare's humanistic worldview. He attributed the narrowing down of the play's broader range to Polish academic Jan Kott's essay entitled "King Lear, or *Endgame*," which Peter Brook had consulted. In this essay, Kott approximated the cruel tragedy of *King Lear* to Beckett's play, *Endgame.* While largely unknown to Hungarian readers, it was familiar to some literary scholars who had accessed it through French or English translations. Meanwhile, in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, Kott's readings of Shakespeare had already been criticized by leading Shakespeareans.[22]

Kéry and other Hungarian critics were grappling with a paradox: how could a production as excellent as Brook's, which Kéry himself lauded, be based on an interpretation he found so repulsive? Kéry resolved this dilemma in a way that was echoed by other reviewers. He contended that the production succeeded *despite* its Beckettian or Kottian influences. In his view, because Brook retained much of Shakespeare's text, the play itself resisted a narrow existentialist interpretation, allowing Shakespeare's humanism to shine through and ultimately dismantle the absurdist elements.

Other critics came to similar conclusions:

[20] MOLNÁR GÁL, "Tévedések vígjátéka...," 8.
[21] KÉRY, "A stratfordi...," 788.
[22] See: Madalina NICOLAESCU, "Kott in the East," in *Empson, Wilson Knight, Barber, Kott – Great Shakespeareans Volume XIII*, ed. Hugh GRADY, 130–153 (New York: Continuum, 2012).

> "Some local critics, and even more so the press reactions following the Royal Shakespeare Company's tour in Poland, trace Peter Brook's interpretation of *King Lear* back to Jan Kott's Shakespeare studies, which have garnered significant international attention. (Brook himself does not deny this assumption.) However, this influence can only be formal, as the Polish author is primarily concerned with the problem of dehumanisation, seeking connections between Samuel Beckett and Shakespeare for this reason. For Peter Brook, however, the most important thing is humanity. The stark, almost barren stage design may indeed seem to symbolise a dehumanised world, yet on this stage, profoundly human passions and emotions rage. Flesh-and-blood characters move about, and the living voice and movement so command our attention that the symbolic nature of the stage design loses its significance, receding into the background to better serve the expression of ideas. [...] Amidst all the horrors, Shakespeare's Renaissance belief in humanity is proclaimed, contrasting Beckett's sense of hopelessness by emphasising the necessity of moral renewal. This production is extraordinarily intense because every moment is born from the clash of opposites, and through this, the true Shakespearean image emerges—a portrayal of life's swirling chaos, unembellished and raw."[23]

This is how, in a "now you see it, now you don't" trick, Hungarian reviewers "domesticated" Brook's absurdist ideas by aligning them with existing notions of Shakespeare's humanism. In doing so, they celebrated the production's innovations while framing it as confirming preexisting interpretations—interpretations that Brook's production, they also agreed, in fact, rendered obsolete.

The publicity surrounding the RSC's visit ensured that references to Beckett and Kott reached a wider audience. I argue that the critical reception of Brook's direction helped spark broader conversations about these authors, paving the way for their works to appear in Hungary. In 1965, philosopher Ágnes Heller published a lengthy review of Kott's book *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* in the journal *Valóság*, calling it her "favourite Shakespeare book." [24]. Her in-depth analysis spurred translations of chapters published in literary journals, culminating in a full translation of the book, published in 1970. Kott's interpretations of Shakespeare deeply influenced a generation of Hungarian theatre-makers who emerged in the 1970s, leading to a series of Shakespeare productions "out-Kotting"[25] one another.

While Jan Kott quickly gained canonical status in Hungary, the authorities continued to keep a close watch on absurdist plays. Nevertheless, after 1964, a general thawing in that field is also visible. In 1965, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* made its Hungarian debut in the small studio space of the Thália Theatre in Budapest, a production that was followed by a heated debate on the play's artistic merits in literary journals. Although further stagings of Beckett's plays were halted or relegated to amateur ensembles, his works became a topic of critical discussion. As Róbert Takács explains, "This was the peculiar revenge of the 'circular publicity.' [...] If something passed the initial filter—for instance, by being published in a small-circulation journal—it became a point of reference and,

[23] TAXNER, "A ROYAL...," 566.
[24] HELLER Ágnes, "Kortársunk, Shakespeare," *Valóság* 8, no. 6 (1965): 88–93. f
[25] Wilhelm HORTMANN, "Shakespeare on the political stage in the twentieth century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, eds. Stanley WELLS and Sarah STANTON, 212–230 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219.

within a few years, could potentially be considered for release as a book or adapted into a theatre production."[26] Especially after Beckett received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, his works began to be reclassified as "realist" and were slowly published in Hungary, too.

As demonstrated, one indirect consequence of Brook's *King Lear* was the introduction of Jan Kott's ideas and absurd drama to a wider Hungarian public. However, the question remains: how did the RSC's production directly influence Hungarian theatrical performances? The answer is manifold, and the scope of this paper does not permit an exhaustive exploration[27]. Instead, it will present a few select examples to outline the broader context. Theatrical memory recalls how, following Brook's production, costumes underwent significant changes, ushering in the so-called "leather age"[28] of theatre in Hungary. We intend to look beyond these leather façades to explore how interpretations of Shakespearean plays evolved after the RSC's visit. Theatre practitioners openly embraced inspiration from Brook's work, as actor-director Tamás Major aptly summarised:

> "Watching the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance, I was struck by the thought that following artistic trends is not merely a right but a duty for the artist. However, if one imitates these trends superficially, they become a plagiarist; yet if they internalise and live them, they become an artist in the truest Shakespearean sense of the word."[29]

The following sections will examine two examples to illustrate how this philosophy was put into practice, showcasing the ways Brook's direction influenced Hungarian interpretations of Shakespeare.

King Lear, 1964/1967/1974, National Theatre[30]

In a daring and unusual move, just three months after the RSC's visit, the National Theatre of Budapest premiered a *King Lear* in May 1964.[31] Even contemporary reviewers wondered how the director, Endre Marton, would navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of not copying Brook while also not ignoring the innovations he had introduced.[32] Judging by the 1964 reviews, it seems that Marton successfully avoided both pitfalls—but let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us examine the production in detail and consider the critical reactions.

Visually, Marton was undoubtedly inspired by Brook. The characters wore heavy woollen

[26] TAKÁCS, "50 éve..."

[27] One intriguing example of Brook's influence on Hungarian theatre can be seen in the career of director Tamás Major during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Major was well-versed in Brechtian theatre and frequently employed its techniques, a closer examination of his Shakespeare productions from this period reveals that many of his artistic choices—both in the selection of plays and their staging—bear a striking resemblance to Peter Brook's approach, perhaps even more so than to Brecht's. Unfortunately, such an analysis would stretch the limits of this paper.

[28] CZIMER József, "Csizma a divat," *Kortárs* 14, no. 6 (1970): 981.

[29] Major Tamás, "Okulni kell a vendégjátékból!," *Film Színház Muzsika*, 13 March, 1964, 6.

[30] For a detailed analysis of the production see: Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "The Final Performance of the Old National Theatre: Endre Marton: *King Lear*, 1964," in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 95–104 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021), accessed: 20.01.2025, https://real.mtak.hu/164884/1/AmbiguousTopicalityaPhiltherofState-Socialist.pdf

[31] See here.

[32] NAGY Péter, "A magyar Lear királyról," *Élet és Irodalom*, May 30, 1964, 9.

costumes, reminiscent of the RSC's leather gear. The scenery was designed by Czech artist Josef Svoboda,[33] who envisioned an almost barren stage framed by black curtains, with giant rectangular prisms moving up and down. These prisms sometimes denoted rooms on the stage, while at other times they projected cold white light onto the stage. This innovative and visually striking stage design, however, was not utilised by the production and was deemed a failure even in the otherwise enthusiastic reviews.

In terms of interpretation, the casting of Lajos Básti, then 53, as Lear, also showed Brook's, and more specifically Scofield's, influence. However, it is worth noting that Básti was not the first middle-aged actor to play Lear in Hungary. Just weeks before the RSC's visit, Gábor Mádi Szabó had taken on the role in Szolnok at the age of 52.[34] So, it might have even been his example that prompted the casting choice in the National Theatre.

Básti's Lear aimed to depict how power corrupts all who hold it, showing his gradual return to his true self after relinquishing it. While most reviews praised the production for softening the harsher elements of Brook's *Lear* and restoring Shakespeare's humanist vision,[35] the concept also received some criticism. In a review that linked the stage events to contemporary history, Gábor Mihályi commented:

> "The director's contemporary interpretation of *King Lear* as the foundation for staging the play feels debatable. Endre Marton stated in an interview that he aimed to depict how a person, cast out from power, comes to realise life's truths and, stripped of their royal mantle, becomes a truly virtuous individual. However, history offers few examples of fallen leaders learning from their defeats; more often, it shows them clinging even more tightly to their flaws."[36]

Mihályi continued by enumerating various interpretative shortcomings of the production. Yet even his somewhat critical review concluded that "[t]he National Theatre's production of *King Lear* is a high-quality, prestigious, and beautiful performance, even if it cannot quite compete with Scofield and his company's essentially unparalleled production."[37] This review stands out as a rare dissent among the otherwise overwhelmingly positive responses. Most critics celebrated the production as a worthy reaction to the challenge posed by Brook's groundbreaking direction. For Básti, *Lear* became the defining role of his long and illustrious career. After his death, in a moment of inspired mythmaking, the author of *Képes Újság* even fabricated a timeline to claim that "[t]he world-renowned English director Peter Brook, during the early 1960s when his Royal Shakespeare Company performed in Budapest, remarked that Básti's acting, even in Hungarian, would hold its own on any stage in England."[38]

The production was revived in 1967 and again in 1974, a decade after its initial premiere. However, the show did not age well, as evidenced by the critical reception, which disparaged both the production as old-fashioned and Marton's directorial vision as limited and inconsequential. They also called attention to how it failed to build upon the innovations introduced by Peter Brook. We have a 1977 TV recording of the production in

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[33] http://www.svoboda-scenograph.cz/en/productions/

[34] Indeed, it is hard to determine how much the Szolnok performance, which also featured a young László Mensáros as Gloucester and a modern backdrop as scenery, all elements that could have influenced Marton in equal measures as Brook.

[35] See e.g. NAGY, "A magyar Lear...," 9.

[36] MIHÁLYI Gábor, "Három Shakespeare előadás," *Nagyvilág* 9, no. 8 (1964): 1261.

[37] MIHÁLYI, "Három...," 1260.

[38] GYENES András, "Szegedi Szabadtéri Játékok 1977," *Képes Újság*, July 16, 1977, 15.

which the voice and the diction of the actors still impress the viewer, yet their performance functions more as a soundscape than as meaningful dialogue. As Árpád Kékesi Kun observes, "our present-day theatre bares hardly any similarity to the performance recorded more than five decades ago. Acting presents us with a multitude of meaningless ingredients", including frequent shifts in diction from one sentence to the next, unnatural pauses in unexpected places, as well as "the regular lack of reactions, that would be expected as a sign of psychological realism, following substantial utterances".[39] The 1974 revival, which even contemporaries questioned—Ernő Taxner humorously suggested, "I can only explain the renewal of Endre Marton's *King Lear* direction from ten years ago at the National Theatre by the severe shortage of plays"—suggests that the production may have been flawed from its inception.

From our perspective, the National Theatre's 1964 *King Lear* appears more as a tribute to the past than as a progressive continuation of Brook's legacy. The enthusiastic critical response it received reveals more about the traditions of Hungarian Shakespearean productions than any discernible influence of Brook on Hungarian interpretations of *King Lear.*

Hamlet, 1962/1964, Madách Theatre

At the time of the RSC's visit, the most popular Shakespeare production in Hungary was *Hamlet* at the Madách Theatre. Directed by László Vámos, it had already been running for two years and had already become iconic. This *Hamlet* was not only the Shakespeare production Hungarian audiences adored but also the one the RSC cast members and accompanying British journalists attended during their tour. As a result, Vámos's *Hamlet* received an unusual level of international attention, with enthusiastic reviews appearing in British newspapers. J.C. Trewin, writing for the *Illustrated London News*, called the production one of the most exciting performances of his life,[40] while Ossia Trilling of *The Times* described it as "one of the best *Hamlets*" he had ever seen.[41] The Hungarian reception was equally enthusiastic. The production is remembered in theatrical memory as the formative Shakespeare experience for a generation of theatregoers, running 288 times between 1962 and 1967. It also became synonymous with Miklós Gábor, the actor playing Hamlet.

Despite its star-studded cast, the production was unequivocally a one-man show, consciously built around Gábor. His portrayal became iconic, not only because of his established reputation in both film and theatre but also due to his interpretation of Hamlet as a disillusioned intellectual. Gábor's Hamlet was the superior intellect of his stage Denmark, a character defined by his versatility and ability to surprise those around him. Tragic yet comedic, grotesque yet ironic, his portrayal embodied a modernity that resonated deeply with audiences and critics alike. Reviewers praised Gábor's ability to portray a contemporary Hamlet:

> "The most distinctive feature of his performance is that it portrays a modern Hamlet. […] Hamlet, after all, is a figure wrestling with contradictions, plagued by doubts and inner turmoil, seeking truth, often ironic, intellectual, always unpretentious, and free of pathos—traits that closely resonate with contem-porary individuals. Moreover, Miklós Gábor's interpretation brings his character closer to today's audience. He presents the Danish prince in a way that makes us see ourselves as Hamlet, with the stage of his tragedy not the

[39] KÉKESI KUN, "The Final Performance…," 101.
[40] KOLTAI Tamás, ed., Madách Színház: *Hamlet*, programme note, 38.
[41] KOLTAI, ed., Madách Színház: *Hamlet*, 38.

> castle of Elsinore, but his own self—the actor's and the viewer's soul."[42]

Critics praised Gábor's "daring shifts in the rhythm of his speech and performance," his "brilliant speech technique" and the "unadorned simplicity with which he dissolves the distance between stage and audience." [43] They highlighted the "intimacy"[44] and "the lack of pathos"[45] in his performance.

A 1963 TV recording of the production, preserving the original cast in black and white, complicates the contemporary narrative surrounding its modernity. Seen today, the production appears slow, theatrical, and staged, making it difficult to discern the freshness that so captivated its original audience. The production's foundation lay in Hamlet's soliloquies, which Gábor delivered with minimal movement and a lyrical style akin to film voiceovers. He employed sustained poses and exaggerated gestures—reminiscent of silent film acting—to encapsulate the emotional dynamics of his speeches. Hamlet's perpetual theatricality and self-aware reflection on his circumstances were influenced by Brechtian *Verfremdung* and sought to convey mood through evocative images rather than psychological realism.[46]

However, the primary inspiration for Gábor's Hamlet was Laurence Olivier's 1948 film. Entire scenes mirrored Olivier's staging, reflecting his enduring influence in Hungary, where his interpretation was considered the gold standard of Shakespearean performance as the only Western Shakespearean production available after 1945. By the 1960s, however, Britain had moved beyond Olivier's conventions. New trends in Shakespearean performance, led by younger actors like Richard Burton and David Warner, rejected the formulaic traditions of the earlier generation. The foundation of the RSC in itself symbolised this shift.

Accustomed to Olivier, it is no surprise, then, that Gábor was deeply shaken after seeing Brook's *Lear*, particularly Scofield's interpretation of the title role, and immediately recognised the limitations of his own portrayal of Hamlet. In his diaries, published in parts from 1968 onwards, Gábor documented his ongoing struggle in which he grappled with Brook's ideas:

> "I'm crushed. I can't take joy in what I see. My vanity, my Hamlet, my image of Shakespeare all protest but find no arguments. Brook's ensemble bows, hand in hand, smiling, while the audience roars. Where do they find the energy for such enthusiasm? I glance at those around me. But I'm clapping too: Brook's gaze cuts through us: he's won! From tomorrow, I'll have to play like this too. And: I don't want to play like this! I don't want this! Self-defence and homage clash within me. But secretly, I already know I'll appropriate Brook—and just as secretly, I'll keep singing my own tune. I know very well that my irritation stems largely from Brook's power: I'd be foolish to deny his existence just because he challenges my established views. And yet Brook can do nothing else but serve me with what I need."[47]

While Gábor's personal adjustments to his *Hamlet* remain undocumented, the production itself underwent significant changes following the RSC's visit. Director László Vámos, inspired by Brook's portrayal of Regan in *Lear*, reimagined Claudius as a "man of commanding stature, who, despite seizing

[42] CSERÉS Miklós, "Az új Hamlet," *Ország-Világ* 6, no. 5 (1962): 19.
[43] CSERÉS, "Az új Hamlet...," 19.
[44] ILLÉS Jenő, „Hamlet királyfi," *Film Színház Muzsika* 6, no. 5 (1962): 7.
[45] Ibid.
[46] GÁBOR Miklós, *Tollal* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1968), 38.
[47] GÁBOR, "Bizonytalanságok...," 106.

the throne through fratricide, aspired to rule as a good king. He was a 'smiling villain,' adept at winning over the court and the queen to his side."[48] Ferenc Bessenyei was cast as Claudius, matching Gábor's Hamlet in stature and skill. Other changes included removing the drop curtain between scenes, simplifying costumes for a more everyday appearance, and discarding Gábor's iconic blonde wig, an homage to Olivier.

Research into these revisions is complicated by the scarcity of records from the updated production, since most surviving documentation pertains to the 1962 version. Furthermore, the contemporary appeal of the production—the way it was seen to reflect on the political context of 1956—is largely inaccessible to modern audiences. Critics noted that Gábor's Hamlet embodied the disillusioned intellectual, a character who did not seek the throne but was willing to die for truth. His Hamlet found joy in duelling and conversing with the players, relishing moments of "philosophical lightness."

Ultimately, this *Hamlet* represented an artistic dead end, similarly to the National Theatre's *King Lear*, with its innovations neither sustained nor revitalised by subsequent productions. Hungarian Shakespearean theatre found renewal not in Vámos's production, but in the countryside and in amateur theatres founded at universities. Among a new generation of directors, inspired by different artistic movements, not the RSC's visit.

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[48] MIHÁLYI Gábor, *Hamletekre emlékezve* (Budapest: Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1976), 24.

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