

The Seagull that Transformed Staging Chekhov in Hungary Gábor Székely: *The Seagull*, 1971

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Abstract: A few months after Gábor Székely's appointment as the chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1971, the premiere of *The Seagull* opened a new chapter not only in the life of a small rural theatre, but also in the stage history of Chekhov's plays in Hungary. The production immediately attracted national attention, and together with Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of the same play, opening in Kaposvár a few weeks earlier, prompted a reassessment of the Stanislavsky tradition, which had been a strong canon for Chekhov's plays in Hungary during state socialism. *The Seagull* in Szolnok did not make any significant changes to the text of the play, yet it developed a unique reading, the exploration of which was considered primary in its reviews. Avoiding any overt updating, Székely's *mise-en-scène* orchestrated the performance of *The Seagull* for the perceptual experience of the spectators of the 1970s and brought a turn to the decades-old conventions of playing Chekhov. The essay examines why this production occupies such a strong position in theatre history and how it could break and create tradition at the same time.

Context of the performance in theatre culture

A few months after Gábor Székely's appointment as the chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1971, the premiere of *The Seagull* opened a new chapter not only in the life of a small rural theatre but also in the stage history of Chekhov's plays in Hungary. Almost half of Székely's theatre works are connected to the town of Szolnok: 16 of the 35 productions he directed in Hungary were staged at the Szigligeti Theatre, and his *Seagull* has the most prestigious place in theatre memory. Székely established a "meticulous attention to detail" and "an absolutely different way of working" that was virtually unknown in the rural theatres of the 1970s,¹ and his rapid rise to prominence was primarily due to this, rather than to the support of cultural policy. When *The Seagull* opened, Székely had already spent two full seasons at the Szigligeti Theatre and had created such outstanding works as *The Toth Family* and *Cat's Play* (both by István Örkény), so it was obvious that he would be given the post of chief director after the sudden departure of Gábor Berényi. The 1971/1972 season was Székely's first in this position, and *The Seagull*, the third production of the season, really opened a

¹ Márta Jánoskúti, who worked with Székely on several occasions, recalls that the "meticulous attention to detail" that Székely brought to Szolnok was unusual, because "we usually met directors who were terribly superficial, and some of them did not have a single thought about the work they were staging. And the actors were mostly worn out by falling from one role to another. The work became mechanical. It was into this atmosphere

that Gábor came, who was completely alien to it and dictated an absolutely different way of working." NÁRAY István, "Nánay István beszélgetése Székely Gábor színészeivel és tervezőivel," in *A második életmű: Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*, edited by JÁKFALVI Magdolna, NÁRAY István and SIPOS Balázs, 177–222 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó – Arktisz Kiadó, 2016), 188.

new era and took a major step towards the creation of a much desired “theatre oasis of culture.”² The benefits of Székely’s one-year tenure as chief director are also indicated by the title of an article published about the Szigligeti Theatre in May 1972, evaluating the season that was just coming to an end: “A first-rate theatre.”³

At the time of its premiere at the Szigligeti Theatre, *The Seagull* had already had a stage history of almost 60 years in Hungary, but it had not yet been performed in Szolnok. (However, Chekhov was not unknown to the audience in Szolnok, thanks to Gábor Berényi’s productions of *Three Sisters* in 1962 and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1967, both with an excellent cast.) Gábor Székely’s production of *The Seagull* in 1971 immediately attracted national attention, and together with Gábor Zsámbéki’s staging of the same play, opening in Kaposvár a few weeks earlier, prompted a reassessment of the Stanislavsky tradition, which had been a strong canon for Chekhov’s plays in Hungary during state socialism. It is striking how vehemently the reviews of these two productions called this canon into question, pointing out that it had not really originated with Stanislavsky himself and that false notions and misconceptions had determined the *mise-en-scènes* of Chekhov’s plays so far. The destabilisation of the canon is also shown by frequent references to “live theatre,” “today’s Chekhov,” and “the true legacy of Stanislavsky,” which critics mention in connection with the stagings of Székely and Zsámbéki, stressing that “we have not seen a real, healthy, moving, and truly impactful Chekhov performance on our stages for many

² The expression of Gábor Székely. See RÓNA Katalin, „Fiatal rendező-nemzedék: ‘Három lehetőségünk van’,” *Film Színház Muzsika* 15, no. 49 (1971): 13. Cf. also Árpád KÉKESI KUN, “‘World Theatre in Szolnok’ During the 1970s: Gábor Székely: *The Drake’s Head*, 1973,” *Theatron* 16, no. 4 (2022): 81–95.

³ PÁLYI András, „Egy igényes színház,” *Magyar Hírlap*, May 25, 1972, 6.

years.”⁴ Although critics noted that some recent productions had freed the stage from meticulous naturalism, neither István Horvai’s *Uncle Vanya* at the Víg Theatre in Budapest (1970) nor Endre Marton’s *Ivanov* at the National Theatre (1971) had been able to break away from atmospheric dramatic conventions. Nor did György Lengyel’s 1966 staging of *The Seagull* in Debrecen open a new path, even if in many respects it anticipated the approach of Székely and Zsámbéki. This production dissolved realism with a “special stylization,”⁵ loosened “the already familiar tradition of the ‘fourth wall,’” and used tulle curtains instead of set walls.⁶ It also broke the closure of representation in the moments when characters confessed their own fate, not always talking to their stage partners but letting the audience know their feelings and thoughts.

Gábor Székely’s *Seagull* in Szolnok and Gábor Zsámbéki’s *Seagull* in Kaposvár showed a strong deviation from these antecedents and were praised by contemporary criticism together. Not only did the two productions show similarities, but also the careers of the two directors: they both graduated from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, at the same time and became the youngest chief directors of the country (Székely at 27, Zsámbéki at 28). In addition to their parallel Chekhov productions, however, the critics also placed Ottó Ádám’s *Seagull* at the Madách Theatre, Budapest (premiered on 28 January 1972), the less successful work of an artist belonging to an older generation. The peculiarity of the reception of these three *Seagulls* is that they were addressed by critics

⁴ PÁLYI András, „A két Sirály,” *Színház* 5, no. 3 (1972): 11–14, 11, 12.

⁵ SÓS Endre, „Két Sirály: Csehov színműve a Déryné Színházban és a debreceni Csokonai Színházban,” *Magyar Nemzet*, April 1, 1966, 4.

⁶ ABLONCZY László, „Még egyszer a Sirályról: Megjegyzések a rendezésről és a színészi játékról,” *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, April 17, 1966, 6.

as paradigmatic examples of the intersection of aesthetics and politics. On the one hand, in the somewhat simplistic sense that “the theatre director always engages in politics willingly or unwillingly, because his/her relation to a play necessarily reflects his/her relation to the world.”⁷ On the other hand, in such a way that the subtext (as understood by Stanislavsky and frequently mentioned in connection with Chekhov), which is not inherent in the plays but is the creation of the director and the actors, always embodies a peculiar worldview and even a philosophy of art. Insisting on the idea of politicising through Chekhov, critics treated *The Seagull* as a drama of resolution, in the performance of which “the question of the social conception of art cannot be circumvented.”⁸ Therefore they emphasised the opposition arising from that dramatic figure’s approach to art the directors seem to sympathise with, since “Treplev and Arkadina, Nina and Trigorin cannot be right at the same time.”⁹ When examining the directors’ programmes and concepts considered to be condensed into the productions, parallels, contrasts, and serious generational differences were revealed: *The Seagull* of Kaposvár was supposed to be a call for making theatre in a workshop; the one in Szolnok was seen as the triumph of “the efforts of talent” and “an attitude imbued with real life,” while the Budapest one was regarded as a “saving of values and beauty.”¹⁰ In light of the conceptual and stylistic similarity of the two rural *Seagulls*, even the choice of the play was found symbolic, while the loud hammering and building of the stage at the beginning of

both performances was found metaphorical: the destruction of the so-called Chekhovian atmosphere, which expressed “the highly talented theatre directors’ creed and determination to create theatre.”¹¹ Accordingly, both productions were interpreted as a program statement, “a chief director’s opening speech,” an identical opinion about theatre.¹² This approach was reinforced by Gábor Székely’s calling his *mise-en-scène* “a personal confession” about his desires and ideas, his “*ars poetica* about modern theatre always ready for renewal in content and form.”¹³ A year and a half later, he also claimed that *The Seagull* is a standard work for those who choose theatre as their profession, clearly stating all the requirements “on the basis of which theatre must and can be made.”¹⁴ The program Székely laid down through Chekhov in 1971 was formulated as follows: “words must mean what they mean; we must always play out one truth and choose to do so even if it’s not the most effective.”¹⁵ This is the summary of the intellectual unpretentiousness that distinguished Székely’s *mise-en-scènes* in Szolnok after *The Seagull*, his departure from the frivolity of thought and superficial Brechtianism that characterised the stagings of his master, Tamás Major, and the maximisation of the social stakes of theatre.

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

The Seagull in Szolnok did not make any significant changes to the text of the play, yet it developed a unique reading, the exploration of which was considered primary in its reviews.

⁷ KOLTAI Tamás, „Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok: A rendezői ‘szövegálati’ három Csehov-előadásban,” *Nagyvilág* 17, no. 5 (1972): 775–779, 776.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 775.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 779.

¹¹ PERÉNYI Balázs, „Lelőtték-e a Sirályt? A kilencvenes évek *Sirály*-előadásai,” *Ellenfény* 5, nos. 1–2 (2000): 2–10, 2.

¹² KOLTAI Tamás, „Színházi esték: Az utolsó hősszerelmes – A *Sirály* Szolnokon,” *Népszabadság*, January 21, 1972, 7.

¹³ N.N., „Céltalan élet nem lehet tiszta,” *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, November 28, 1971, 6.

¹⁴ BÁTKEI Mihály, „Tájékozódás a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban,” *Élet és Irodalom* 17, no. 20 (1973): 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

No new adaptation was made: the text used was the one translated into Hungarian by Gyula Háry more than two decades earlier. The *mise-en-scène* kept the internal logic of the plot in mind, so little of the dialogues was omitted. (Only one review mentions a “curtailed text”, which is a mistake, and the critic may have misunderstood the up-tempo of the performance.¹⁶) The goal was to build “a coherent and intelligible stage world” around the text,¹⁷ starting from the subtext and making it as complex and precise as possible. However, autotextuality was coupled with pervasive ideotextuality,¹⁸ since the psychological subtext was placed in the centre, and the essentially psychological events were shown to go beyond themselves, i.e., they were given topical overtones without any actualisation. In this way, Chekhov’s “struggling heroes [also] made the dilemmas and feelings of contemporary intellectuals and dissidents” audible.¹⁹ In addition, most comic elements were left unexploited, since Gábor Székely, who claimed that Treplev’s “tragedy is poignant,” did not stage *The Seagull* in accordance with its genre, i.e., not as a comedy.²⁰ Thus, the production in Szolnok focused on Treplev and Nina, on “the choice of their fate and its contemporary aspects,” and through Treplev’s dissatisfaction, it questioned the “routine solutions and prejudices” of the theatre of the time.²¹ Only one critic called it a “violent directorial concept,” seeing it as exclusively formal and stating that the staging did not convey “the complexity, beauty, inspiration, and deep poeticism that Chekhov expresses. Neither in the psychology of the young, nor in the environment, nor

in creating atmosphere and dramatic tension.”²² All other critics took the opposite view.

A striking feature of the reviews about *The Seagull* in Szolnok is their focus on the reading of the drama. In contrast to Chekhovian productions in the 1950s and partly in the 1960s, it was no longer ideological legitimation that was important, but the stage director’s interpretation, which represents a major shift in critical reception. Many of the reviews of *The Seagulls* made at the turn of 1971 and 1972 compared the various readings and created a generational contrast between the directors, such as the one between Nina–Treplev and Arkadina–Trigorin in Szolnok and Kaposvár, and brought out Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki victorious against Otto Ádám. In the case of *The Seagull* in Kaposvár, several critics mentioned the lack of strong relationships: the break with the concept of the Chekhovian “still water,”²³ which reduces the characters to helpless strugglers or victims to be pitied, and instead the creation of figures tormenting and torturing each other, thus destroying everything between and around them. This gives rise to the “drama of human disconnectedness,” where art cannot flourish in the midst of negative human feelings (jealousy, vanity, indifference, etc.). Thus, “the sensitive Treplev is destroyed by the harsh reality of the loss of ideals, and Nina is submerged in the swamp of mediocrity.”²⁴ In terms of staging and acting, *The Seagull* in Szolnok was similar to *The Seagull* in Kaposvár, which spoke with “cruel sobriety and impetuosity,” but it conveyed a different interpretation of the play.²⁵ Gábor Székely’s staging elaborated the relationships of the

¹⁶ Cf. BARTA András, „Sirály: Csehov színműve Szolnokon,” *Magyar Nemzet*, December 16, 1971, 4.

¹⁷ PERÉNYI, „Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...” 3.

¹⁸ Patrice Pavis’s terms. Cf. Patrice PAVIS, „From Page to Stage: A Difficult Birth”, in Patrice PAVIS, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Cultures*, 24–47 (London–New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁹ PERÉNYI, „Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...” 4.

²⁰ N.N., „Céltalan élet...” 6.

²¹ BARTA, „Sirály...” 4.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf. SZERB Antal, *A világirodalom története*, Vol. 3. (Budapest: Révai, 1941), 286.

²⁴ KOLTAI, „Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...” 777.

²⁵ Ibid.

figures in a complex way and contrasted an artistically and humanly almost dead couple or generation (Arkadina and Trigorin) with another, clearly talented couple or generation (Nina and Treplev). Treplev had an “ecstatic innovative program” instead of a superficial artistic vision, detached from the praxis, but he proved to be “a talent unable to survive,” unlike Nina, in whom “talent triumphed,” albeit at the cost of great suffering.²⁶ In contrast to the strong reading of Székely and Zsámbéki, Ottó Ádám’s staging renounced the uniqueness of *Konzeptregie*, making it seem as if there was no interpretation at the Madách Theatre, Budapest.²⁷ Presumably, the play was staged only because of the versatile possibilities offered to the actors, but it came across as a “misinterpreted bestseller,” unlike the works of the two young directors, which aimed to reveal the “anti-bestseller,” a play that was decidedly unsettling.²⁸ Some critics thought that Anatoly Efros’s image of Chekhov influenced the reading of *The Seagull* in Szolnok and Kaposvár, presumably because the program guide of the Kaposvár performance included a quotation from Efros, but no one went into the parallels in any depth. The references seem to have served only to legitimise the aspirations of Székely and Zsámbéki by touching upon a new current of Soviet theatre.

Staging

Avoiding any overt updating, Gábor Székely’s *mise-en-scène* orchestrated the performance of *The Seagull* for the perceptual experience of the spectators of the 1970s and brought a turn to the decades-old conventions of playing Chekhov. *The Seagull* in Szolnok (as well

as the one in Kaposvár) already signalled this turn with its opening: with the lack of a sustained moment and atmosphere.²⁹ The aforementioned Chekhov productions by István Horvai, Endre Marton, and György Lengyel had already done away with naturalism, but Székely and Zsámbéki were the first to eliminate the so-called “Chekhovian atmosphere” when they began their productions with loud hammering and the carpentry of the stage on stage built for Treplev’s play. However, in Szolnok, the backdrop had also disappeared, and the mood-shattering hammering was carried out visibly and audibly by the set workers.³⁰ The conventions of Stanislavski’s theatre were clearly replaced by those of Brecht’s: the image of the stage on stage was reinforced by the consciousness of theatre in the theatre, and the alienation thus taking place was also facilitated by the objective working lighting. Several critics noted that not only was the blackness of the stage more penetrating in Székely’s *mise-en-scène*, and not only were the lighting effects colder than in Zsámbéki’s, but the whole production was “more starkly composed,”³¹ “more extreme and more harsh.”³² From the very first moment, the audience at the Szigligeti Theatre saw “a relentless destruction of illusion” in a “radically anti-Chekhovian production,”³³ as the usual gloomy pace and uneventfulness were replaced by agitation, loudness, and bluntness. The tension erupted in broad movements, perpetual motion, and even running, so there was no trace of “languid reverie,” “the melancholy of soft movements” and “pretty talk.”³⁴ The production was unusually fast-paced, and the impulsive events taking place in just over two hours translated Chekhov’s play into “the experience of the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ PÁLYI András, “Három *Sirály*-előadás,” *Magyar Hírlap*, February 5, 1972, 7.

²⁹ Cf. KOLTAI, “Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...,” 776.

³⁰ Ibid., 777.

³¹ MAJOROS József, “Vitában Csehov-színházunkról,” *Színház* 7, no. 9 (1974): 27–31, 28.

³² PÁLYI, “A két *Sirály*,” 12.

³³ MAJOROS, “Vitában Csehov-színházunkról,” 29, 28.

³⁴ KOLTAI, “Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...,” 776.

contemporary nervous system."³⁵ The critics did not agree on the result of the elimination of conventional staging: some described "depoetization" as a failure,³⁶ or a flawed concept, and considered it a fatal error to deprive the performance of its 19th-century characteristics. Ottó Ádám's staging at the Madách Theatre did not lack this atmosphere and poetic beauty, yet it remained superfluous, because it did not elaborate psychological reactions or analyse the situations precisely.³⁷ There, in contrast to *The Seagulls* in Szolnok and Kaposvár, "the external image of the performance followed the tradition of the preservation of forms," but the meticulous physical actions of previous Chekhov productions were replaced by "motionless sitting and idle standing," and the pauses were filled "not with tension, but with cricket chirping and wind hissing."³⁸ For this reason, *The Seagull* at the Madách Theatre was not even considered to be a "modern Chekhov," unlike the other two, for which several critics used this adjective.³⁹ However, the production in Szolnok was visibly not updated: it mainly used the techniques of historical staging, but avoided its pervasiveness and combined selective realism with slight stylisation. Its loud opening foreshadowed a tense drama, full of passionate outbursts, but due to the historicism applied without exaggeration, "the tensions, anger, and discontent of the present" were not shown directly but covertly.⁴⁰

Székely's staging was based on an admittedly simplified (but not vulgarising) reading of the play, which based the events of *The Seagull* on the confrontation between two

generations and made it clear which of the generations represented the positive and which the negative side in the opposition between new art and empty routine.⁴¹ This highly tendentious interpretation really gained ground in the second part of the performance, where acting further developed the relationships of the characters, and "the raw, hard clashes were charged with emotion," so "the boisterous gestures and running around showed the desperate attempt of the characters to hold on to each other".⁴² The *mise-en-scène* also made a subtle distinction between the members of the young generation: the sensitive and talented Treplev, who lacks a sense of reality, and Nina, who realises her abilities at all costs.⁴³ Some critics insisted on the misunderstanding that *The Seagull* in Szolnok amplified a single voice, "Treplev's impatient voice," but in the end it was the women of the young generation who took the floor from him: Nina and Masha, who became the real protagonists.⁴⁴ Others have rightly pointed out that Treplev's attitude could not be central to Székely's staging, since this Treplev "created an almost caricaturistic impression with his piecemeal gestures and rough outbursts of anger."⁴⁵ Instead, the production "focused on Nina, who was able to overcome her disappointments."⁴⁶ From *The Seagull* of the Szigligeti Theatre, Nina's voice was heard most clearly, and her great confession in the last act did not sound like an exalted self-ideology, but a manifestation of faith and confidence (without any Christian overtones) that

³⁵ SÁNDOR L. István, "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza: Székely, Zsámbéki, Schilling *Sirálya*," *Ellenfény* 9, no. 2 (2004): 4–10, 7.

³⁶ BARTA, "Sirály...", 4.

³⁷ KOLTAI, "Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...", 778.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ For example, KÓCSAG Piroska, "A *Sirály* Szolnokon," *Esti Hírlap*, December 9, 1971, 2.

⁴⁰ PERÉNYI, "Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...", 3.

⁴¹ SÁNDOR L., "Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...", 8.

⁴² KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...", 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ PETERDI NAGY László, "Csehovot játszani," *Színház* 7, no. 7. (1974): 33–38, 33.

⁴⁵ MAJOROS, "Vitában Csehov-színjátásunkról," 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

proved stronger than the dissipating illusions.⁴⁷ Nina in Szolnok was perfectly compatible with the socialist ideal of man, towards which, by underlining her desire for a “meaningful and humane life full of art,” critics guided Nina’s recognition. However, there was no trace of party-state ideology in the production in Szolnok, so the “poetry of true humble talent” in Nina was ultimately described as romantic theatre, and the production was regarded as fighting against empty routine and “fuelled by the romanticism of the young artists’ creed.”⁴⁸ How this manifested itself can hardly be ascertained, because the reviews are full of references to directorial rigour, and less so on the details of the performance. The critics did not highlight a single scene, not a single characteristic moment, so it is not known how Treplev’s ominous performance took place on the plank stage, which was heavily carpentered in the first minutes.

Acting

The Seagull in Szolnok (along with the one in Kaposvár) was appreciated “primarily as an initiative concerning the style of acting”:⁴⁹ as the emergence of a language of performance that became the vernacular of Hungarian theatre in the following decade. According to a much later assessment, put somewhat vaguely, “Székely and Zsámbéki made a break with the tradition of rhetorical theatre and created a more complex, [...] much more theatrical way of performance, in which ‘the interaction

of words, gestures, actions and sight’ was decisive”.⁵⁰ In fact, instead of the slow-motion ping-pong with replicas according to the conventions of what Hungarian theatre people bitingly call “acting with drilled legs,”⁵¹ Székely’s productions were determined by a verbal (and sometimes even physical) struggle from a heightened nervous state, with heightened expressivity, involving the actor’s physical and the stage’s visual means of expression with a force similar to words. However, we hardly know how acting took part in the mutual and combined effect of word, gesture, action, and sight, because although the critics evaluated the performance of the actors/actresses in *The Seagull*, they did not provide much information about the means of creating characters. In other words, they rarely gave such details as the one where Ágnes Hegedűs (Arkadina) organised a whole little extravaganza around lighting a cigarette in order to disrupt Treplev’s and Nina’s theatre performance with malice.⁵² Yet we know that the harmonisation of the actors’ habits and acting styles, as well as the “nuanced elaboration of the relationships between the characters,”⁵³ which are still determining factors of making theatre in Hungary, became essential components of the language of performance required by Székely from his actors and actresses. The seriousness with which ensemble acting was incorporated into the rural theatre of the 1970s can be deduced from the few statements in the reviews about performances that did not apply it at all or did so

⁴⁷ Csík István, “Sirály,” *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, December 10, 1971, 5.

⁴⁸ PÁLYI, „A két Sirály,” 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ SÁNDOR L., “Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...,” 9. The source of the phrase between the inner quotation marks: PÁLYI, “A két Sirály,” 13.

⁵¹ Cf. the recollection of the famous actor, György Cserhalmi: “[Székely] wanted to create in the actor a state of nerves that originated in the Central European condition of

the time, stemming from an attitude of lying in wait, on the alert, watching everywhere, defensive, rejecting, and repelling, but which in certain moments—when fate brings a woman and a man together in love—could expand into something like magical poetry.” NÁNAY, “Nánay István beszélgetése...,” 212.

⁵² Cf. KOLTAI, “Szárnyaló és szárnyaszegett sirályok...,” 777.

⁵³ SÁNDOR L., “Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...,” 10.

with little or no precision. For example, the description of a production staged in Szolnok six months before *The Seagull* states that “the sparkling dialogues often lacked the partner’s reaction: the actor or actress, having finished his or her own text, left the play and waited excitedly for the cue as a neutral observer and only then began to act again. In football terms, he/she was standing still, waiting for the ball...”⁵⁴ The critic described these shortcomings as disturbing because they highlighted that the actors “can only cope with the style of French salon-comedy and salon-farce as long as they have a concrete text.”⁵⁵ In the role of Puzsér, “the irresistibly cheeky, unadulterated, unscrupulous, and sentimental burglar” (in Ferenc Molnár’s play *The Lawyer*), József Varga D., the audience favourite in Szolnok, “does not build a character [...] on whom the humour of the play is based. He stays afloat, exploits only the opportunities of the moment, has some points, but fails to create individuality.”⁵⁶ This acting style, which was often criticised in other performances too, barely enforced the minimum of the realistic building up of a character and ensemble acting: those two components that formed the basis of acting in Gábor Székely’s stagings. His highly distinctive directorial vision “was not really matched by the whole ensemble” in *The Seagull*,⁵⁷ yet the performance was evaluated as an essential phase of a learning process.

The character of Nina clearly stood out from the production, not only because of the interpretation of the play but also because of Erika Bodnár’s exceptionally powerful acting. The director claimed that Nina’s fate serves

as a lesson that “there is no pain that life can cause—even in the form of love—for which meaningful, creative, human work cannot be a useful remedy”.⁵⁸ Although Nina is at the beginning of her life, “she is the only one in the play who lives a *real* life and dares to experience *everything* in its fullness. She is willing to go to hell, immerse herself in passion and suffering, and then rise above them.”⁵⁹ So Erika Bodnár played the “victorious” Nina, but she also shed light on the Pyrrhic nature of her victory: that “although fate reveals the possibility of ascension, she is in fact a victim too. A shot, bleeding seagull, like the other two young people.”⁶⁰ But Nina’s suffering never turned into sentimentalism, and the performance was given a special colour by the “few grotesque touches” and a subtle critical attitude with which Erika Bodnár indicated Nina’s overly naïve infatuation in the first two acts.⁶¹ Her acting remained “simple, unpretentious, and convincing,”⁶² even if some considered it rather uncharacteristic compared to the conventional approach to her figure.⁶³

In the case of Lajos Kránitz, who played Treplev, most critics mentioned the robustness of the actor’s physique as a hindrance. However, some stressed the young man “bursting with vitality”⁶⁴ and the rewards of departing from the usual soft, almost Hamlet-like figure: that the contrast between Treplev’s powerful physique and his fragile rebellion only enhanced the impact of Kránitz’s performance.⁶⁵

The adjectives “tough” and “tart” dominated the reviews of Ágnes Hegedűs,⁶⁶ and the characterisation of the “snappy” actress

⁵⁴ ISTVÁN CSÍK, “Doktor úr,” *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, April 10, 1971, 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ PÁLYI, “Három *Sirály*-előadás,” 7.

⁵⁸ N.N., “Céltalan élet...,” 6.

⁵⁹ KOLTAI, “Színházi esték...,” 7. (Emphasis in original.)

⁶⁰ PETERDI NAGY, “Csehovot játszani,” 34.

⁶¹ CSÍK, “*Sirály*,” 5.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ (barna), “Színházi esték: *Sirály* – szárnyak nélkül,” *Nógrád*, December 23, 1971, 4.

⁶⁴ PÁLYI, “A két *Sirály*,” 14.

⁶⁵ CSÍK, “*Sirály*,” 5.

⁶⁶ KOLTAI, “Színházi esték...,” 7; PÁLYI, “A két *Sirály*,” 14.

was clarified through the description of Arkadina as “capable only of mock-softness.”⁶⁷ The performance of Hegedűs, who played the last role of her life in Szolnok, was evaluated by most as “memorable,” “very good,” even “flawless,”⁶⁸ and knowing the perfectionism of the actress, it certainly was, and not a “casting misstep.”⁶⁹

Neither was László Huszár’s Trigorin, although the actor had to play a figure alien to his character, and he was accurate in his portrayal of the “willful, soft” writer, but less so in his “enervated intellectualism.”⁷⁰

In addition to the four actors and actresses mentioned, Gyöngyi Bürös’s sternly self-contained Masha, whose sudden, fragmentary movements revealed “feminine softness,” was described as an “excellent performance,” while Zoltán Papp’s Medvedenko as “a hit both in his despair and aggressive patheticness.”⁷¹ Although the others were not rendered invisible by the interpretation of the play, they were certainly relegated to the background, so in their case, beyond a few comments and brief evaluations, the reviews do not inform about the ways of character building at all.

Stage design and sound

The visual world of the performance was based on the director’s idea that “Chekhov’s theatre is the theatre of fantasy,” and “the expression of [its] intellectual essence” does not require a naturalistic milieu.⁷² According to Székely, “[Chekhov’s stage] is a stage without a curtain, an open stage of dramatic action and thought, a stage of reality free of formalities.”⁷³ In the stage history of the Russian dramatist’s plays in Hungary, it was in Szolnok

(and Kaposvár) in 1971 that it became obvious that “the stage environment according to the Meiningen school is not at all an integral part of Chekhov’s world,” and that an object or piece of furniture can acquire an unusual dramatic charge if its function is “not to create an illusion, but to express the meaning and atmosphere of a given situation.”⁷⁴ This was beautifully realised in *The Seagull* in Szolnok, and the critics found its “magic of space” fascinating, its visuals exceptionally suggestive and even more expressive than the acting.⁷⁵ The bare stage lacked both a detailed interior and an elaborate *plain air*. In Kaposvár, Gábor Szinte used a white square in the background of the black stage to refer to the lake, but in Szolnok, Miklós Fehér removed any indication of the stage landscape.⁷⁶ At the beginning of the performance, Treplev’s makeshift stage (a simple wooden platform) and two white benches were set up by the technicians in front of the black backdrop in a working light that did not change later. The scene did little to suggest the milieu and twilight atmosphere of the garden; it did not conceal that it was only a bare stage, and its sombre brightness was provided by spotlights that were clearly visible: Brecht’s concept prevailed instead of Stanislavsky’s. For the scenes taking place inside, a table and some chairs were brought to the foreground, but the elements bordering the house, the furnishings of the rooms, were missing, and the makeshift stage in the background remained visible. Although this stage no longer had a function, it became almost a symbol: “a symbol of young and authentic theatre, a symbol of nascent art.”⁷⁷

The open stage, the open rearrangements, and the noise of working that started the

⁶⁷ BARTA, “*Sirály...*,” 4; KOLTAI, “Theatre evenings...,” 7.

⁶⁸ KOLTAI, “*Színházi esték...*,” 7; PÁLYI, “A két *Sirály*,” 14; CSÍK, “*Sirály*,” 5.

⁶⁹ (barna), “*Színházi esték*,” 4.

⁷⁰ KOLTAI, “*Színházi esték...*,” 7; CSÍK, “*Sirály*,” 5.

⁷¹ CSÍK, “*Sirály*,” 5.

⁷² N.N., “*Céltalan élet...*,” 6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ MAJOROS, “*Vitában Csehov-színházi játszásunkról*,” 29.

⁷⁵ PÁLYI, “A két *Sirály*,” 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁷ PÁLYI, “*Három Sirály-előadás*,” 7.

performance destroyed the atmosphere associated with *The Seagull* by the stage directions of the play and the productions of almost three-quarters of a century. However, the standard lighting shrouding the makeshift stage and the white benches in a foreboding, gloomy light created another, equally powerful atmosphere, highlighting Székely's own *ars poetica* of the theatre.⁷⁸ The space also linked the production to the newest ways of staging Chekhov by hinting at Josef Svoboda's set designed for Otomar Krejča's *Ivanov* (Prague, 1970),⁷⁹ which remained unchanged and did not separate the outside and the inside: the performance space was bordered by a fence made of unplanned boards; inside were sofas and armchairs covered with green plush, candlesticks, and some other elements that barely marked the interior.⁸⁰ There was less furniture on the stage of *The Seagull* in Szolnok, but the objects were placed in closeup more often than the actors, as they drew "dramatic lines of force."⁸¹ E.g., the seagull, with its wings unfolded, held and then left within the circle of a spotlight in front of a white bench; the white cushion thrown to Polina and left for minutes in closeup; and the oil lamp placed on the floor, around which Dorn and the others sat listening to Treplev's narration about the past two years of Nina. Some critics saw Nina's whiteness embodied "in the whiteness of the objects, in the shot seagull as well as in the exposure of the benches or in the accentuated presence of the white oil lamp", and claimed the symbolic nature of the components of the performance space beyond their everyday meaning.⁸² Nelly Vágó's costumes were also different from the 19th-century milieu, and although the characters were not dressed in modern clothes, they were closer to the second half of the 20th century than to

Chekhov's time. However, this can be mostly deduced from the few surviving photographs of the production, because the critics did not mention the costumes at all.

Impact and posterity

Few performances occupy such a strong position in theatre history, and few have such a far-reaching history of effect as *The Seagull* in Szolnok, which broke and created tradition at the same time. It was not played more than other productions and was not taken on tour to smaller settlements of Szolnok County. It had only one or two guest performances in major provincial towns of the region, but it was not a success there. It did not make it to Budapest, so the theatre people of the capital could only see it if they travelled to Szolnok during its short run. Of the nine reviews and essays published about the production, two were unfavourable and described it as a failure, reproaching its creators for ignoring the conventions of playing Chekhov. The others were decidedly positive, and two longer analyses, examining the relationship between *The Seagulls* in Szolnok, in Kaposvár, and in Budapest, contributed greatly to the fact that Gábor Székely's staging soon gained serious value. The prediction of the critic of *Színház*, who saw Székely and Zsámbéki's search for a new path as a far from isolated phenomenon, came true when he wrote that "they open a page in the history book of Hungarian theatre that will be worth looking back on from a wider perspective."⁸³ The great era of the two rural theatres (in Szolnok and Kaposvár) that soon became legendary began with these *Seagulls*, as they (and the theatre in Kecskemét, where József Ruszt became chief director in 1973) became "the training ground of the new Hungarian theatre."⁸⁴ The two

⁷⁸ PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 12.

⁷⁹ KOLTAI, "Színházi esték...", 7.

⁸⁰ Jarka BURIAN, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 42.

⁸¹ PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 14.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ PÁLYI, "A két *Sirály*," 12–13.

⁸⁴ Tamás KOLTAI, "Egy korszerűtlen maximalista," *168 óra* 13, no. 38 (2001): 39–41, 39.

productions “radically transformed the views on the ‘Chekhovian style’”⁸⁵ and replaced the tradition of staging Chekhov which had been marked by Endre Gellért, István Horvai, and Ottó Ádám since the end of WW2. However, *The Seagulls* of Székely and Zsámbéki gradually built up a new tradition of playing Chekhov, which eventually became a canon in the legendary productions of the Katona József Theatre.⁸⁶ Thus, they foreshadowed such paradigmatic productions as *The Wood Demon* (1982), “one of the style-defining productions of the Katona József Theatre” (directed by Gábor Zsámbéki), Tamás Ascher’s *Three Sisters* (1985), “the greatest (international) success of a theatre in its heyday, a synthesis-creating Chekhov performance,”⁸⁷ and *Platonov* (1990, also directed by Ascher), “the last ‘great’ performance of the Katona, which was facing a company reorganisation and artistic renewal.”⁸⁸ The two *Seagulls* were still regarded as an “inevitable point of reference” for Chekhov productions of the 1990s and early 2000s,⁸⁹ and the Krétakör Theatre’s highly successful *Siráj*⁹⁰ (directed by Árpád Schilling in 2003) was praised as a production fuelled by the same theatre-creating creed as the productions thirty-two years earlier. (Schilling graduated as director from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, in the class of Gábor Székely in 2000, and the program of his *Siráj* referred to the works of his former master and Gábor Zsámbéki.) At that time, there was already a consensus that “the latest era of Hungarian theatre can be counted from 1971,”⁹¹ and that the two young directors’ *Seagulls* “can be clearly marked as

possible starting points of a new epoch of theatre.”⁹² The politically motivated smear campaign launched against Székely and his most prominent colleagues after his departure from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (2020) tried to shake this consensus, without success.

The direct sequel to Gábor Székely’s first staging of Chekhov also premiered in Szolnok in 1974: *Three Sisters* amplified the partly generationally motivated restlessness and nervousness that had already strained *The Seagull* to the extreme. After that, Székely did not direct Chekhov for twenty-two years, but his last production in Hungary was also based on a (less frequently performed) play by the Russian dramatist. *Ivanov* (Új Theatre, Budapest, 1996) became the end point of a series starting with *Timon of Athens* (1976) in Szolnok and exploring the contempt for human behaviour and the way of the world, with the resulting self-destruction in several outstanding performances. In contrast to István Horvai’s last Chekhov (*Ivanov*, Pesti Theatre, 1995), which seemed to be a thing of the past, Székely’s *Ivanov* was able to make a still living and functioning tradition visible in a highly dynamic and deeply moving production full of first-rate acting.

At the beginning of 2022, a new *Seagull* opened at the Szigligeti Theatre for the 50th anniversary of the first premiere of the play in Szolnok. The staging of Kriszta Székely, who graduated in the class of Gábor Székely and Viktor Bodó in 2015, was a revelation after the long period of management by Péter Balázs, who preferred entertainment over artistic

⁸⁵ PERÉNYI, “Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...” 3.

⁸⁶ SÁNDOR L., „Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...”, 8.

⁸⁷ Cf. ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN, “Remembrance of a Landmark in Theatre History: Tamás Ascher: *Three Sisters*, 1985,” in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 177–188 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church – Éditions L’Harmattan, 2021).

⁸⁸ PERÉNYI, “Lelőtték-e a Sirályt?...” 2.

⁸⁹ Judit CSÁKI, “A pucér Sirály,” *Magyar Narancs*, October 30, 2003, 22.

⁹⁰ The production had a deliberately distorted title (roughly as *The Seagull* in English), since ‘seagull’ is written as ‘sirály’ in Hungarian.

⁹¹ KOLTAI, “Egy korszerűtlen maximalista,” 39.

⁹² SÁNDOR L., “Színházteremtő fiatalok színháza...”, 4.

quality and tried to gain popularity by all means. The award-winning production differed in every aspect from the performances of the Szigligeti Theatre between 2007 and 2021, addressed the generational problem without any simplification, and linked it to the issue of artistic self-assertion, which was already in focus of the 1971 *Seagull*.⁹³ This was also manifested in the casting, as the roles of Nina and Treplev were played by two recent graduates of Freeszfe,⁹⁴ alongside older members of the Szigligeti Theatre. Gábor Székely's *Seagull*, which had prepared the rise of the theatre in Szolnok at the beginning of the 1970s, could hardly have received a more fitting tribute than Kriszta Székely's *Seagull*, which opened a new path for the Szigligeti Theatre fifty-one years after Gábor Székely's *Seagull*.

Details of the production

Title: The Seagull. *Date of Premiere:* 3 December, 1971. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* Gábor Székely. *Author:* A. P. Chekhov. *Translator:* Gyula Háty. *Composer:* Zoltán Jeney. *Set designer:* Miklós Fehér. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó. *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Ágnes Hegedűs (Arkadina, Irina Nikolayevna), Lajos Kránitz (Treplev, her son), József Máriáss (Sorin, Irina's brother), Erika Bodnár (Nina), István Kürtös (Sham-

rayev, the manager of Sorin's estate), Olga Koós (Polina, his wife), Gyöngyi Bürös (Masha, their daughter), László Huszár (Trigorin, writer), Endre Peczkay (Dorn, doctor), Zoltán Papp (Medvedenko, teacher), Rudolf Jantsek (Jakov, servant).

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⁹³ Cf. the director's words: "[The production] will talk about how the younger generation is hindered by the older one from breathing and learning at their expense. About the protective, apathetic attitude of the past generation and its artistic midlife crisis. The older generation is very difficult to move from their positions, not only in theatre but in many other areas of life." N.N., "*Sirály* – Székely Kriszta rendezése a szolnoki Színházban," *Színház Online*, 15 March, 2022, <https://szinhaz.online/siraly-zekely-kriszta-rendezese/>, accessed 24.06.2024.

⁹⁴ Cf. „The aim of the Freeszfe Society is to create an autonomous artistic space to guard

the 155-year-old tradition of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest (SZFE). We have built this community to provide an inspiring environment and opportunities for those who no longer tolerated the lack of dialogue and the crushing of artistic freedom. [In 2020] the privatisation of SZFE was accompanied by immense national and international protests and expressions of solidarity with the ousted academic staff. In our society, the former and current students, teachers, and employees of SZFE work together in the spirit of free creation."

https://www.freeszfe.hu/about_us/, accessed 24.06.2024.

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