

Not Heroic, but Theoretic. Thoughts on Tibor Debreczeni and a Forgotten Genre of Student Acting

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Abstract: The article explores a single, yet generative question within the framework of applied theatre studies: what genre-theoretical, dispositif-critical, and reception-historical insights emerge when the relationship between the platform theatre model theorised by Tibor Debreczeni and Antal Rencz, and the Zöld Szamár Theatre is examined through a single *Philther* reconstruction. The analysis considers whether the two formations share key characteristics: (i) the capacity to continuously theorise their own practice; (ii) an understanding of theatre-making as both a pedagogical workshop and a form of social activism; and (iii) an ability to synthesise agitational genres of working-class culture, the emergent art of movement, and the visual arts that had become integral to scenographic language. The case study of the lyrical oratorio *Perlő ének* (1971) serves as the central site of this inquiry.

It is common knowledge that “there is barely another nation in Europe with a theatre history so closely tied to student acting as ours is.”¹ Hence, it is worthy of our attention to ask why the written history of Hungarian theatre has failed to canonise the lifework of Tibor Debreczeni, who passed away in 2024. Why

has neither the Castle District’s Literary Stage [Vári Irodalmi Színpad] (1967–1980) nor the cellar-space continuation of the aesthetic program developed there, the Word Theatre [Szószínház] (1980–1985), become part of alternative theatre history? Could it be connected to the fact that “Debreczeni-style” theatre-making is not only linked to an institute of higher education (the dormitory of the electrical engineering faculty of Budapest’s Technical University), but the Institute of People’s Education [Népművelési Intézet] on the one hand and the Hungarian Society of Drama Pedagogy [Magyar Drámapedagógiai Társaság] on the other?² Does the richness of Debreczeni’s heritage aid or hinder this historiographical work? Indeed, we must not forget it, especially as it concerns perhaps the most enthusiastic documentation of Hungarian art pedagogy itself. After all, he recognised in the 1960s that youth and student acting could only become an experimental aesthetic workshop if theoretical (theatrical) reflection were an integral part of the work undertaken there. In this sense, his figure is also inescapable, because, together with Antal Rencz, he theorised this performance format not as a literary, but as a theatrical genre in need of a monograph,³ and according to whose thesis,

the dramaturgy of podium acting, initiated a number of national festivals, and, concurrently, wrote the country’s first workshop lessons for drama pedagogy. Founder of the Drama Pedagogy Society of Hungary, he is its first and permanent honorary president.

³ DEBRECZENI Tibor and RENCZ Antal, *A pódiumi színjátéktípusok dramaturgiája* (Budapest: Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1971).

¹ NÁRAY István, “Színház és diákszínház – vázlatos történeti visszatekintés”, in *Dráma – pedagógia – színház – nevelés*, edited by ECK Júlia, KAPOSÍ József and TRENCSENYI László, 217–222 (Budapest: OFI, 2016), 217.

² Tibor Debreczeni (1928–2024) was a faculty teacher of Hungarian history and a drama pedagogue who, as a fellow worker at the Institute of People’s Education, spearheaded its cultural movement, 1966–1989. He developed

Socialist Realist acting was a product of scarcity.⁴ In 1967, Tibor Debreczeni's article "Complexity and Art Appreciation" appeared in the columns of *Népművelés* [People's Education], stressing this very point: that the student acting director "dares to apply to text-based plays other arts [such as] stage movement, music and other acoustic elements, sets, costumes, and everything that was previously uncommon on literary stages."⁵ That is, inspired by one of the time's most significant theatre scholars, György Székely, he viewed podium plays as an especially "dynamic and complex [stage] picture,"⁶ wherein its main characteristics (the performance occurring at the "podium," as well as the "vocal or visual dramaturgy") are reactions to the 1960s and 1970s variations on prose- and

⁴ "For ten years, the literary stage – a genre born from performance art and a scarcity of acting – has proceeded (and still proceeds) along two paths. The first path terminates in the oratorio genre, a form that favors static staging, but is built upon active intellect. By stretching the framework of the classic oratory, just as many new formal variations on content have been born. As a genre, I myself date it back to the commemorative programs which also served to spread information, as a variant of document writing for the podium. (It is no accident that it was the year we compiled the first catalogue of the oratorio genre.)" DEBRECZENI Tibor, "Komplexitás és műkedvelés", *Népművelés* 14, No. 3. (1967): 31–33., 32.

⁵ DEBRECZENI Tibor, *Történet pedig. Egy Corvintéri népművelő a puha diktatúrában 1966–1989* (Budapest: Játszó Ember Alapítvány, 2019), 31.

⁶ György Székely (1918–2012) was a director, theatre manager, drama theory writer, and theatre historian. He was a founding member of the Hungarian Theatre Institute (its deputy head from 1960 to 1980), as well as the Hungarian Technical Academy's Theatre and Film Committee (its president from 1990 to 1998). His most important theoretical work was *The*

poetry-based performance art on one hand, and, on the other, created a programmed, montage-style genre built upon *études*.⁷ The point of departure for this process of the "re-theatricalisation" of student acting was a forgotten genre: the lyric oratorio, the ideal example of which, *Song of Plea* [Perlő ének] (1970), shaped the Castle District's Literary Stage into a creative community.⁸

Context of the performance in theatre culture

It is commonly known that (self-)censorship at established theatres, marked by pragmatic professionalism, only offered free readings and associations through the choice of play and the manner in which they distinguished spoken (audible) and visual text.⁹ In the spirit

Dramaturgy of Types of Plays (1965), in which he developed a methodology of theatre description that was complex and performance-centered.

⁷ Cf. GOLDEN Dániel and KERTÉSZ Luca, *A színház pedagógiája* (Budapest: Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2019), 27.

⁸ *Title*: Song of Plea; *Date of premiere*: 28 April 1970; *Venue*: Department of Electrical Engineers' Dormitory at Budapest's Technical University; *Director*: Tibor Debreczeni (assistant choreographer: János Karsai); *Authors*: comprised of works by Sebestyén Tinódi-Lantos, Péter Bornemisza, János Rimay, Péter Pázmány, Miklós Zrínyi, Ivan Goran Kovačević, Ferenc Juhász, Sándor Weöres, and István Nemeskürty, as well as prisoners' letters, Hungarian folk songs, a Hebrew dirge, a psalm, and an African-American spiritual; *Dramaturg*: Tibor Debreczeni; *Company*: Castle District's Literary Stage; *Actors*: Gyula Elek, Gyöngyi Szűcs, István Paál, Péter Szintai, István Kőhegyi, József Bezdán, Katalin Tomcsányi, Mária Torma, Csaba Cserna, Erika Borköles, and László Lévai.

⁹ Cf. JÁKFALVI Magdolna, "Kettős beszéd – egyenes értés", in *Művészet és hatalom. A Kádár-korszak művészete*, ed. by KISANTAL Tamás

of this so-called “dual speech,” Gábor Székely established a workshop in Szolnok in 1971, as did Gábor Zsámbéki in Kaposvár in 1975, while Tamás Ascher and János Szikora began their directing careers. In other words, these were Tibor Debreczeni’s contemporaries. We may classify Tamás Ascher’s productions of *State Department Store* [Állami Áruház] (1976) as “battlefields of world theatre”, an “updated” *Heavy Barbara*, and *Marat/Sade* (1981), the latter of which became a manifesto.¹⁰ Yet, as a harbinger of this conspiratorial winking at the audience, we may also view the independent production of 1965, which proclaimed to builders of the Socialist Workers’ State, “Deliver us from evil!”¹¹ Intended for the Madách Studio Theatre [Madách Kamaraszínház] under the direction of László Mensáros, but only allowed on the University Stage [Egyetemi Színpad], it was later performed 150 times nationwide as *The Twentieth Century* [A XX. század].

The staging of this text assembly, spanning Alfred Nobel’s will to the final monologue of Fellini’s film *8½*, was a legendary performance of the time, although it did not become part of theatre history canon for three reasons. First of all, because poetry interpretation and cabaret (more specifically, performance art) have been underrepresented

and MENYHÉRT Anna, 94–108 (Budapest: L’Harmattan – JAK, 2005), 97.

¹⁰ EÖRSI István, “Megbombáztuk Kaposvárt”. *A kaposvári Csiky Gergely Színház és a kultúrpolitika* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó – 1956-os Intézet Alapítvány, 2013), 36., 58., 63.

¹¹ MENSÁROS László, *A XX. század* (Budapest: MMA Kiadó, 2019), 5. Cf. NAGY Gabriella, “Szabadíts meg a gonosztól! – Mensáros XX. százada”, Accessed 20 April 2025. <https://litera.hu/magazin/tudositas/szabadits-meg-a-gonosztol-mensaros-xx-szazada.html>.

¹² Cf. KISS Gabriella, *A magyar színházi hagyomány nevető arca. Pillanatfelvételek* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2011), 9–18.

¹³ “At Budapest’s Vigadó and the Music Academy’s chamber hall, during the 1941/1942

in the nation’s theatre history discourse to this day, which automatically leads to a lack of theoretical, historical, and analytical reflection upon this literary form.¹² Secondly, the theatre avant-garde, in which lyrical genres (in the form of recital choruses and synthesised choral dramas) are incorporated as elements of theatre language,¹³ has mainly existed in Hungary solely as a theoretical construction.¹⁴ Further, up until the evening by László Mensáros, the program and structuring of poetic works were not shaped by a single theme or issue, but by the chosen poet and their times, or the taste of the actor interpreting the works. In this sense, it is understandable why this fact did not manage to be canonised in the historiography of alternative theatre, according to which *The Twentieth Century* “broke with the accustomed themes of the time, which covered the given writer’s lifework; in other words, the sequence of the selected works was not determined by a structure that was chronological or centred around a common theme, but by connections that were free and associative.”¹⁵

The Mensáros evening “established a school”, because it brought about a type of literary stage, “from which a mimetic oratorio developed, as well as podium plays and documentary plays post-1968. The role of poetry

season, within the framework of two performance series entitled *Our Poets and Their Times* and *A Millenium of Suffering*, Ferenc Hont tried out assemblies of polyphonic poetry programs, arranged in thematic or tonal units and recited either in chorus or in pairs.” BÖHM Edit, “Az előadóművészet”, in *Magyar színháztörténet 1920–1949*, ed. by BÉCSY Tamás and SZÉKELY György, 966–986 (Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2005), 979.

¹⁴ Cf. JÁKFALVI Magdolna, *Avantgárd – színház – politika* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006), 42–73.

¹⁵ NÁNAY István, *Ruszt József* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2014), 25.

grew astoundingly in the 1960s. Indeed, with poems, it was easier to express what was not allowed to be spoken otherwise. This demand birthed thematically-structured programmes, performed by communities and literary stages, whose techniques grew richer with time [...].¹⁶ What is more, in conjunction with the theatrical demand, it became a subject of theoretical and analytic reflection¹⁷—either as a György Székely-type of performance¹⁸ or as inspiration drawn from Brechtian aims and dramaturgy.

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

In the “amateur acting (including literary stage groups)” of the 1960s, “podium-style performances” signified a paradigmatic shift, representing “forms of adult education,” which owed their creation to the fact that they dissociated themselves from or at least “did not

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színháték-típusok...*, 11.

¹⁸ “Naturally, the still valid results of theatre scholarship form the main supports of our work. From the recent past, the most valuable heritage aiding our efforts has been primarily a few studies by Sándor Hevesi, the piece entitled ‘The World of Drama’ written by Ferenc Hont in 1940, as well as the professional literature written in our times: the three volumes of work describing types of plays by Dr. György Székely and finally Miklós Almási’s works on theatre dramaturgy. For the aesthetic foundation of our endeavors, we turn to the works of György Lukács and János Barta.” Ibid., pp 4–5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10., 11.

²⁰ Bertolt BRECHT, “A »Koldusopera«-per”, translated by SÓS Endre, in Bertolt BRECHT, *Irodalomról és művészetről*, 94–148 (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1970), 107.

²¹ “An independent entity built upon self-selection with a defined number of positions (staff) that, with the financial support of a maintaining body and the theoretical guidance

copy the repertoire or acting style of official theatres.”¹⁹ It is important to recognise that an integral element of its self-definition, formulated in 1971, was dispositive critique, like that of Brecht’s article “The *Threepenny Opera* Case” from 1931,²⁰ or the University Stage of Szeged’s model of “one’s own theatre” from 1975.²¹ Regarding themselves as not only artists, but also pedagogues, they commonly acknowledged that, due to the forms of their activity, they could only be politicians if they positioned themselves outside the bourgeois institution of illusory theatre, and if their theatre-making was viewed not as an entertainment product, but as a societal forum.²² This is accomplished by a type of acting identified by the word *podium*, which refers to both the acting space (the smallest and most modest venue, not at all a grand stage, but by all means an “emphatic space”²³) and a “tool of agitation” equally as valid as

of a supervisory body, pursues creative theatre activity in a factory, but not a business-like manner while functioning in the sphere of public education raises professionals who are well qualified both theatrically and culturally.” Paál, István. “Néhány tartalmi és formai szempont a »saját színház« modell kialakításához”, in “Dokumentumok a Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad történetéből”, ed. by HIDI Boglárka, IMRE Zoltán and KALMÁR Balázs, *Betekintő* 16, No. 3. (2022): 191–217., 208. DOI: [10.25834/BET.2022.3.9](https://doi.org/10.25834/BET.2022.3.9), Accessed 5 August 2024. https://www.betekinto.hu/sites/default/files/betekinto-szamok/2022_03_hidi_imre_kalmar.pdf

²² Cf. Beatrix Kricsfalusi’s introduction to Milo RAU, “Hogyan álljunk ellen?”, translated by KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, szinhaz.net, 20.12.2024, accessed 7 July 2025.

<https://szinhaz.net/2024/12/20/milo-rau-hogyan-alljunk-ellen/>.

²³ “The scenographic process is playful in nature, evoked by its special manner of emphasis (Hervorhebung), resulting in a reduction of consequences (Konsequenzverminderung).” Andreas KOTTE, *Bevezetés a színháztudomány-*

“contemporary experimentation.”²⁴ It is also described as serving “a unique, important, and absolutely irreplaceable” function in both adult education and the theatre arts:²⁵

“1. It brings the live theatrical arts where it could not reach otherwise; to small communities and novice viewers being introduced to art.

2. It is capable of producing plays at venues—such as podiums, clubs, markets, etc.—where official art cannot thrive due to its reliance on a theatre building.

3. It accomplishes communication with an array of languages and forms—programmed texts, podium plays, literary oratorios—which is uniquely its own, thus departing from established, mainstream theatre.

4. It can lay claim to a performance function intended to educate, whose aim—beyond that of general adult education—is to develop a contemporary theatre vision, thereby assisting modern professional theatre.

5. The artistic communication is accomplished by people who, while affecting others, also develop and refine themselves.

6. It creates a collaborative play which makes it possible, given a small audience, for the work to come to fruition within each participant according to their own artistic reception; not just in the aesthetic experience of the viewer, but in both the practice of the art and the development of the creator.”²⁶

Thus, this legitimizing self-definition applies to its social use (pedagogy), as well as its manner of creation and reception (aestheticism). In other words, it regards theatre-making as a functionally-defined practice which, thanks to its unique aesthetic, is capable of effecting a change in the lives or theatre tastes of the group, the individual and/or the audience.²⁷ Moreover, since the theatrical situation is conceived in this case for the sake of worlds “sight unseen” (Rancière), it is a collective gesture wherein the main field of limitation (i.e., participation in the play) alters “with the means of representing truths [officially, Socialist Realism].”²⁸

With the aid of these tools, dubbed “directional-dramaturgical” by Tibor Debreczeni, we arrive at the two structural modes in terms of the oratorical play type: performance-dramaturgy with an associative plot (lyrical) or an associative-eventful plot (epic).²⁹ Their

ba, translated by Edit KOTTE (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2015), 15.

²⁴ DEBRECZENI Tibor, *Egy amatőr emlékezése 1966–1978* (Budapest: Országos Közművelődési Központ, 1989), 102.

²⁵ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színhájtéktípusok...*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ For the definition of *applied theatre*, see CZIBOLY Ádám, ed., *Színházi nevelési és színházpedagógiai kézikönyv* (Budapest: InSite Drama, 2017), 154.

²⁸ Alain BADIOU, *A század* (2010), quoted in JÁKFALVI Magdolna, *A valóság szenvedélye. A realista színház emlékezete Magyarországon* (Budapest: Arktisz Kiadó – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2023), 15.

²⁹ “The oratorio with an *associative* (intellectual) structure: 1. It offers an opportunity for the ‘plot’ of an oratorical type of play. It can be dissected into sounds (acoustics) or into roles. Whether it is an independent work (e.g., a literary oratorio) or an edited work, it is an assembled program. 2. The category indicates that this type of play has no dramatic plot. Instead, there is a lyrically dramatic structure where emotional and intellectual units build upon one another. It is also associative, as it is built upon the conflict (juxtaposition and development) of certain feelings and thoughts. This is suited to its conscious associative capabilities – its dialectic of thought and fluctuation of emotions. That is why we may call its structure lyrical – that is,

common name is the resulting site-specific “imaginative realism,” in which “very little of the play’s reality can be shown at the podium. Thus, its main goal and task are to arouse the viewers’ fantasy, so their imaginations supplement the drama’s signals.”³⁰ In this sense, we may label the podium acting style as “indicative” on the one hand and “realistic” on the other; after all, “the imagined reality lends it authenticity.”³¹ However, also common to them is the structural method applied to the selected literature and musical material, which does not regard “theatre” as the interpretation of “a plot that unfolds an established story with a beginning, middle, and end,”³² but as a “publicizing entity.”³³ The transmission’s declarative character is ruled by “the editor’s creative intention” whereby, with the arrangement of works in a certain distinct order, it seeks to achieve an associative, thought-provoking effect in the viewer. Therefore, this [associative] activity is guided by an intellectual intention to comprehend, and precisely because of this, in the course of the work, a structure is created wherein the parts—and the dramatic elements—do not overpower the intellectual aim.”³⁴ Within this dynamic, concentrated on the question of focus, what is exciting is the rehearsal process, as well as the loose rhythm of diverse sequences, heedless of connections or transitions.

both intellectual and emotional. [...] Eventful podium plays, structured upon events, give rise to documentary plays, report plays, novel adaptations, etc.” DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színháztípusok...*, 31. Cf. Documentation of the Castle District’s Literary Stage. Accessed 1 October 2024. <https://hiaszt.hu/vari-irodalmi-szinpad/>

³⁰ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színháztípusok...*, 100.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

³² KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, “»Csinálni jobb, mint érezni«. A Lehrstück és a brechti médiaarchívum”, in *A hermeneutika vonzásában*. Kulcsár Szabó Ernő 60. születésnapjára, ed. by BÓNUS Tibor, EISEMANN György, LŐRINCZ

In the course of his work with student acting, of equal significance to education, the basis of poetry recital became vital: interpretation of the work centered on a problem and the presentation of a contemporary field of inquiry. This goal shifted theatre-making closer to a “political seminar,”³⁵ which the creative process had to become according to the concept of Brecht’s learning-plays [*Lehrstück*], so often cited by Tibor Debreczeni. The process of conveying the expressed points and counterpoints brings about a performance dramaturgy,³⁶ which not only entertains, but finds opportunities in the interruptions and rebuttals, the fractured plots, and the presentation of an ideologically rich thesis.³⁷

Staging

Also characteristic of this risk-taking was establishing a relationship with the audience, as well as the reality construction that took place in the viewer’s imagination and the ability to create an “intellectual, associative effect,” which typified podium direction.³⁸ Indeed, in this case, the direction was linked to the performance’s question of focus, be it upon poetry recital, choral speech, or musical effects, which fundamentally correspond to three structural methods. Tibor Debreczeni distinguished these methods as “itemised,

Csongor, SZIRÁK Péter, 535–549 (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2010), 542.

³³ Bertolt BRECHT, *Színházi tanulmányok* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1969), 415.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p 65.

³⁵ Reiner STEINWEG, *Das Lehrstück. Brechts Theorie einer politisch-ästhetischen Erziehung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1972), 151.

³⁶ Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, “The Aesthetics of Disruption. German Theatre in the Age of Media”, *Theatre Survey* 34, No. 11. (1993): 7–27.

³⁷ KRICSFALUSI Beatrix, “»Csinálni jobb, mint...”, 542.

³⁸ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színháztípusok...*, 35.

linear, and contrapuntal," depending on whether one constructs the lyric oratorio's material in the interest of a lyrical situation, a series of thoughts that conjure an epic journey, or the goal happens to be the preservation of lyrical reflections upon the conflict.³⁹ If we examine the published text of *Song of Plea*, which may also be regarded as the director's copy, it is clear that these three types are not three distinct techniques of performance dramaturgy, but three fields of inquiry with which the director, in the strictest sense, wishes to "give voice" to the question of focus.⁴⁰

In theory, *Song of Plea* is an ideal example of itemised direction. After all, the choice of material, the arrangement of solo and choral speech, and the scenography are all shaped by a Type 3 individual [Enneagram Type 3 personality] who constitutes the lyrical subject of this "public complaint" (presented on fifteen occasions), as well as the tragic destiny of existence within the community:

"It illuminates the suffering of many thousands, about whom we know so little, referred to in history and the press only in quantities, who struggled with this or that and perished in such and such numbers. The communal quality is developed—both in the content and the circumstances it conjures—through the vocal numbers and the text of folk songs incorporated in the play. As proof, I will cite the song »Where are you, King Stephen?«, which became

³⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰ "Ever since I came to know, a quarter of a century ago, the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the plebian psalms and poetic jeremiads that conveyed the thoughts and matters of the community so naturally and self-evidently, the wailing prose and poetry works crying out for surcease – I have loved it. Its message emanates over the centuries. It has long excited me how to form plays [out of this material, in which]

practically a folk song in the eighteenth century, with its pentatonic melody of lament, an ancient dirge, semblances of which we find among Eastern peoples such as the *Uyghur* or *Chuvash*. The Protestant psalm »Plead my cause, O Lord!«, which originates from the Old Testament and becomes a Hungarian song of protest in Szenczi-Molnár's translation, or the Yiddish camp song and the African-American spiritual »We Shall Overcome«; all of them express mass sentiment."⁴¹

Communal literature expresses communal thought, although the "collective" mode of thought or action does not become uniform in any dimension of theatre-making. The expressed theme belongs to a national community, and those expressing it form a creative community. The acting style benefits from the opportunity for interaction between the actors and the audience (i.e., the community of viewers). At the same time, in all his reflections, Tibor Debreczeni emphasised that "in order to express a thought," we wage an actual battle "with ourselves in the preparatory phase and then in the course of performances;" similar to that which takes place at first singly among the viewers, and that which the performer stepping to the podium wages with the spoken word, which then exists in the space as a "herd" mentality, and is finally represented by the actors as they exit through

communal literature expresses communal thought." DEBRECZENI Tibor, "A »Perlő ének« születése. Műhelytanulmány", in "Perlő ének". *Debreczeni Tibor színjátékai, rendezései*, ed. by TORMA Mária and FERKE György, n.p. (Budapest: Felsőmagyarország Könyvkiadó, 1994). Accessed 20 April 2025. https://hiaszt.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/PERLO-ENEK_konyv-1-1.pdf

⁴¹ Ibid.

the audience.⁴² That is, in the case of *Song of Plea*, the basis of the directorial concept was “itemised.” However, the rehearsal period that brought it into existence and the performance/dramaturgy that developed it were “contrapuntal.” What is more, the resulting “fracturisation” expanded the spectators’ capacity for free association.

Stage design and sound

Breaking with the illusion of an overarching unity resulted in a sequence that concentrated “poetry recital, prose delivery, choral chanting, music,” and not least of all the choreography into blocks of audible and active tableaux.⁴³ As previously mentioned, Tibor Debreczeni, in the footsteps of György Székely, emphasised that every single unit of the lyric oratorio was “dynamic and complex,”⁴⁴ which refers to (i) the aural dramaturgy, down to its smallest constructive or deconstructive element (tone, rhythm, dynamics, modulation); (ii) the symbolic—in other words, geometrically abstract or virtually heightened—stage pictures; and (iii) the use of roles.⁴⁵ Thus arises a construction, indivisible from theatrical realism,⁴⁶ and Debreczeni draws an explicit connection between its “podium” characteristic and the “lesson drama” in his work entitled *The Dramaturgy of Podium-style Direction*:

⁴² This deepens the allusion to the poem *The Monster’s Coffin* by Sándor Weöres. In the finale, entitled “The Monster’s Mutilation,” the army, having vanquished the colossus, disposes of the body. The text of *Song of Plea* even incorporates the line “its flattened skull on the side of the walk...”

⁴³ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjáték-típusok...*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁶ Klaus-Dieter KRABIEL, “Spieltypus Lehrstück. Zum Stand der aktuellen Diskussion”, in

“Therefore, the podium shapes the play’s plot by strengthening the intellectual and associative structures, as well as by heightening the power of its epic nature and eventfulness. [...] Whereas expressionist dramas embodied the twentieth century’s aims of deconstruction, the podium framework embraces Brecht’s lesson dramas, whose plots are of such an associative-eventful nature that they are well enacted from our podiums.”⁴⁷

Just like the lesson plays, the “collective multimedia piece” existed “beside the musical and prose theatre as a third, autonomous genre,”⁴⁸ whose visual and acoustic principles Tibor Debreczeni described in a dialogue similar to Brecht’s *Messingkauf Dialogues*. The imaginary conversation between A and B has two matters at stake here. The first is the aim of an educator: to provide concrete, methodological lessons to his colleagues; be they student actors, directors, or group leaders. The other (identical to Brecht) is that of the experimental director: to destabilise standpoints, to bring goals into focus, and to make participants question “ingrained practices” of theatre-making; in other words, to view as strange certain elements of stagecraft (in this case, literary stages and drama classes) such as “the prayer, the monologue, the staff as an emblem, the psalm, and the still picture.”⁴⁹

TEXT+KRITIK. *Sonderband Bertolt Brecht*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig ARNOLD, 41–52 (München: Text und Kritik, 2006), 41.

⁴⁷ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjáték-típusok...*, 17. It is indicative how the work regards Brecht’s two short plays *He Who Says Yes* and *He Who Says No* as “intellectual podium plays” (53.).

⁴⁸ KRABIEL, “Spieltypus Lehrstück...”, 41.

⁴⁹ DEBRECZENI Tibor, *Drámapedagógiai órák alsóban, felsőben és főiskolában* (Kecskemét: Magyar Drámapedagógiai Társaság – Kecskeméti Tanítóképző Főiskola, no year), 107.

The aural world of the lyric oratorio is built, on the one hand, upon clapping, rhythmic drumming, and striking the staff; and, on the other hand, upon compositions for the human voice, either solos or choral recitals. In *Song of Plea*, the title is justified by the variations upon the pentatonic melodies of cries and laments (psalm or jeremiad), when the chorus sometimes chants in a slow, pulsing, fragmented manner the first two lines of Albert Szenci-Molnár's psalm ("Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me / Fight against them that fight against me"), and sometimes begs with increasing volume ("Deliver us, O Lord, from war and subjugation / From hunger and cholera, deliver us, O Lord!"), only later to pray a text portion of András Batizi's world chronicle in verse entitled *In the Hands of Pagans*, spanning a dramatic arc from motivation to despair. The timeless soloist serves as a frame of reference, narrating and commenting on the realm of emotions and the constant, collective state in the aural and visual world of the performance. On the one hand, he provides an emotional counterpoint to the interpretation of text fragments originating from those who shaped historic events that led to community-wide destruction. On the other hand, he represents the position of the plaintiff who is ready for confrontation; in other words, to accuse. A textbook example of the podium play's aforementioned "imaginary realism" is the auditory interference which can be regarded as choral work signifying the fervor of István Magyari and Péter Pázmány's debate over faith. Yet, it also formulates an opinion of this, articulating how inconsequential the standpoint of the "little man" is, the essence of whose existence is sobbed out in the choral poem by Sebestyén Tinódi-Lantos: "While you debate each other, in your nation, how they are dying!"

Even more starkly abstract is the visual world in which stepping to the podium and

departing it, every manner of entering and filling the space, each change in proxemics, and the resulting geometric shapes made up of torsos, heads, and extremities; all function as societal gestures (Brecht). The thesis, distilled in *Song of Plea's* series of living tableaux, as well as the historical events/figures cited by the staged documents, can be pinpointed precisely on a coordinate system, where one axis represents individual interest versus communal will, and the other denotes high politics versus the fate of the common man. Thus, its focus is placed upon history's eternal sacrificial lambs, huddled in a tight herd. With their alarmed faces and hands raised in defense, they eventually turn round and round. Only sound is capable of breaking this unit, the embodiment of their shared oppression, when, statement by statement, the people deliver in solos a catalogue of crimes committed by Bálint Török and other lords, manifesting it as a series of charges or the multiplied pain of many individuals. Following this, the community—united in troubles and suffering, ultimately as plaintiffs—gives voice to Albert Szenci-Molnár's eponymous psalm; meanwhile, their hands raised in terror become clenched in prayer. This mass supplication and complaint gives them strength. The text is repeated, but the actors step out of the herd and stand facing the audience seated in silence. Ready now for confrontation, the group interprets these two twentieth-century texts as a "warlike stance." In chorus, the actors recite excerpts from Ferenc Juhász's *The Prodigal Nation* [subtitled *Chronicle of an Unknown Wandering Poet*], while "they step out, advancing forward together [...], singing the refrain of 'We Shall Overcome' and clapping the rhythm as they advance toward the audience. [Yet, at a certain point,] the actors freeze, their faith in victory broken."⁵⁰ As a result, the production's final assembly is broken down into a tableau of individual bodies that nonetheless vocalise in

játékai, rendezései, ed. by TORMA Mária and FERKE György, n.p. (Budapest: Felsőmagyar-

⁵⁰ DEBRECZENI Tibor. "»Perlő ének« – lírai oratórium", in *Perlő ének*. *Debreczeni Tibor szin-*

unison. The kinetic elements of this statuary group, dressed in white and black, exit through the auditorium while repeating in monotone a surmised or actual, imagined or experienced result of violence: "its flattened skull on the side of the walk..." (See Footnote 42).

Acting

It is no accident that Tibor Debreczeni only spoke of "the actors' artistic task of performance" in the case of a "mimetic" acting style with an expressive-illustrative function, as opposed to the "oratory style," which is decidedly expressive in function.⁵¹ Moreover, in this case, the inner life of the "role" is not expressed in the linguistic manifestations of a fictive (e.g., dramatic) figure. "They must not only portray characters, but transcending that, they must handle the performance tasks at the podium. That is, they must own the direct gesture of turning toward the audience."⁵² Within the lyric oratorio, the "indicating acting" typical of this playing style does not (re)present a human being; instead, it creates a dramatic persona, which could not exist outside the production.⁵³ From this standpoint, the actor's body is endowed with such "characterisation" that it "not only conveys intellect, thoughts, and emotions, but it also provides a glimpse into the character of the written figure; i.e., the carrier of that intellect, those thoughts and emotions."⁵⁴ That is, it presents a textualised subject (be it King János or Bálint Török) in the form of a spoken text document, source, letter, autobiography, etc., so the spectator may focus on the

status of the figure and the status of the chorus in relation to it.

Impact and posterity

In the case of the lyric oratorio, we can only discuss its influence in terms of symbiotic artistic developments. (i) Thanks to the *oral history* interviews of the HIASZT [literally, Missing Theatre History] research, it is a demonstrable fact⁵⁵ that choral poetry as a form of performance popularised neglected works by certain poets (e.g., Ferenc Juhász or Sándor Weöres) where the texts are not spoken by a being that possesses an identity or a central self. Hence, the positioning of these poems and the appearance of the lyrical subject at the podium played a role in the canonisation of later Hungarian authors of lyric work. (ii) The "shaking up" of the previously "static" literary stage, through oratorical or purely active means, adapted poetry and prose recital into large choral numbers, thus elucidating how principles of performance and dramaturgy define the words' textuality, and how the parameters of metaphorical direction (cf. Hans-Thies Lehmann) shape theatricality.⁵⁶ (iii) Also, the lyric oratorio has had a definite influence on festivals of student and youth acting with an immeasurable effect upon traditional holiday programs at primary and secondary schools; which are not only designed to teach literature, but by virtue of their performative framework, allow viewers to participate in the commemoration of historical events (Hungarian uprisings or, under the former regime, Soviet occupation, and the

ország Könyvkiadó, 1994). Accessed 20 April 2025. https://hiaszt.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/PERLO-ENEK_konyv-1-1.pdf

⁵¹ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjárástípusok...*, 18., 34–41.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵³ Cf. JÁKFALVI Magdolna, *Alak – figura – perszonázs* (Budapest: OSZMI, 2001), 95–121.

⁵⁴ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjárástípusok...*, 32.

⁵⁵ For the interviews conducted with Csaba Cserna, László Lévai, and Mária Torma, see <https://hiaszt.hu/vari-irodalmi-szinpad/>, accessed 6 July 2025.

⁵⁶ Hans-Thies LEHMANN, "Az előadás: elemzésének problémái", translated by KISS Gabriella. *Theatron* 2, No. 1. (1999): 46–60.

October Revolution).⁵⁷ In this sense as well, it served as a catalyst for the SZESZ [University Stage of Szeged] production of *Day of Petőfi*, considered “a play with an associative and event-centred plot” by Tibor Debreczeni (who created at the Castle District’s Literary Stage [Vári Irodalmi Színpad] a “passion and mystery play” based on the poet and revolutionary Sándor Petőfi, entitled *The Chosen One*). In his description, he specifically highlights that “the acting style of the work, made up of Petőfi’s journal, poems, and contemporary documents, [...] is typified by the combined use of expression and illustration-expression; with expression referring to the oratorio and illustration to the podium acting.”⁵⁸ That is, with a modicum of exaggeration, it could be considered documentary theatre.⁵⁹ (iv) Last but not least, the development of lyric oratory in terms of acting-style theory and drama pedagogy methodology has initiated an interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars of literature, theatre, and education; whereas, previously, these disciplines had been occupied with justifying their own autonomy and independence.⁶⁰

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⁵⁷ Cf. KÖRÖMI Gábor and SOMFAI Barbara, “Ünnep az iskolában – közösségi élmény és alkotás”, in *A színháztörténet pedagógiája*, ed. by GOLDEN Dániel, 88–171 (Budapest: SZFE, 2019), 88–140.

⁵⁸ DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színháztípusok...*, 50.

⁵⁹ Cf. SCHULLER Gabriella, “Dokumentum-színházi előadások az amatőr-színházak re-

pertoárján, 1962–1972”, in *Színház és archívum*, ed. by IMRE Zoltán, KALMÁR, Balázs, P. MÜLLER Péter, SANDOR Anna Flóra and SCHULLER, Gabriella, 279–292 (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2024).

⁶⁰ Cf. Benjamin WIHSTUTZ and Benjamin HOESCH, eds, *Neue Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft* (Bielefeld, transcript, 2020), 7–24.

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