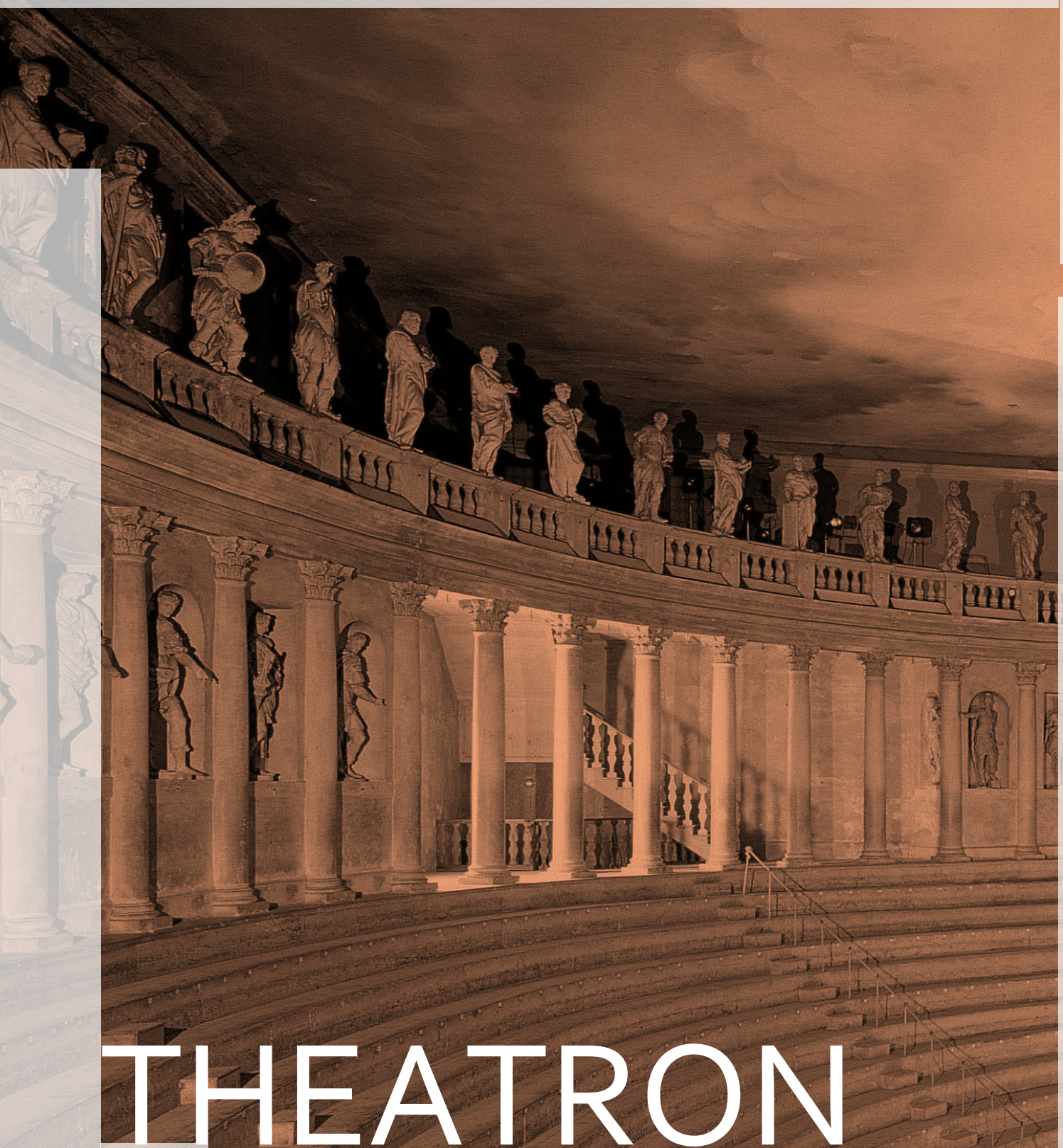
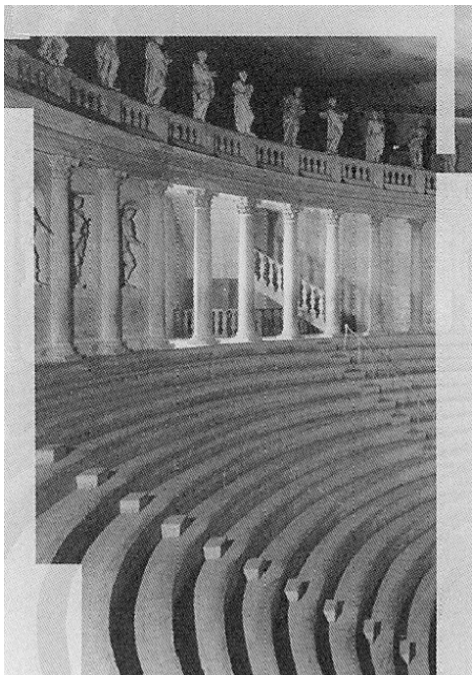


THEATRON

Vol. 19. No. 4.
Winter 2025.

Föld Szamár 100 = Green Donkey 100



THEATRON

Zöld Szamár 100 = Green Donkey 100

Journal in Performance Studies
Volume 19. No. 4.
Winter 2025.

Publisher:
Theatron Műhely Alapítvány
H-1041 Budapest
Kiss János utca 4/A.
E-mail: info@theatron.hu

Responsible for publishing: Magdolna Jákfalvi
Chief Editor: Árpád Kékesi Kun

This issue was edited by Magdolna Jákfalvi
Proofreading: Anna Sasvári

Associate Editors:
Gabriella Kiss, Vincze Muntag, Tamás Oláh,
Dorka Porogi, Gabriella Schuller

This issue was published with the support of
Nemzeti Kulturális Alap, Magyar Tudományos
Akadémia and Studium Prospero Alapítvány.

ISSN14189941

Table of Contents

Zöld Szamár 100 = Green Donkey 100

Book reviews

Editorial Foreword

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI

The Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey) Theatre in Budapest was founded and staged its first performance in 1925. Alongside the periodicals edited by Lajos Kassák, it became one of the most significant hubs of avant-garde artistic activity in Hungary, and later a site of cultural remembrance. Dadaist and Surrealist performative practices, the use of found spaces, modern dance, and creative improvisation sustained the collaborative work of Sándor Bortnyik, Iván Hevesy, Sándor Jemnitz, Alice Madzsar, Farkas Molnár, Ödön Palasovszky, and Magda Róna over an extended period. Through theatrical experimentation, these avant-garde artists engaged with the multilingual and culturally diverse Budapest audience of the interwar era, and while speaking Hungarian, challenged the primacy of realistic illusion, stable linguistic meaning, and of rule-bound concepts of beauty. One hundred years ago, on Csengery Street—as announced by a poster designed by Farkas Molnár—they presented, for the first time, a gramophone pantomime, a jazz ensemble, and a typewriter orchestra.

In commemoration of the Green Donkey Theatre, the editors of *Theatron*, in collaboration with the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs, organised a conference in 2025 to mark the centenary of its founding. Our aim was to explore whether theatrical expressivity and Dadaist and Surrealist visual strategies remain discernible today, and whether the linguistic fragmentation characteristic of the early twentieth century continues to be perceptible alongside contemporary forms of media mediation.

Theatron 2025/4 commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Green Donkey Theatre by offering a platform for scholars researching the events and aftermath of the Hungarian avant-garde and neo-avant-garde to present their most recent findings. In examining some manifestations of the avant-garde and its ongoing influence, this issue seeks to convey the intellectual vibrancy of interdisciplinary scholarly exchange, whether addressing artistic practices associated with the Green Donkey in the fields of modern dance, music, applied and fine arts, dramaturgy, film, or theatre. By publishing six selected studies, this commemorative issue both pays tribute to and reaffirms its commitment to the role of avant-garde forms within theatre history. Magdolna Jákfalvi analyses the forbidden and hidden status that was the backdrop to avant-garde events and their existence through an examination of the performance spaces of both an interwar troupe and a group active in the 1970s. Árpád Kékesi Kun discusses avant-garde performances staged in provincial Hungarian theatres through the analysis of two productions of *Ubu*. Gabriella Kiss situates the avant-garde techniques and performative situations employed in student theatre within the framework of the cultural canon. Rozália Székely conceptualises the experimental character of avant-garde theatre around questions of presence, introducing one of the performances at the Szentkirályi Basement. Dániel Fenyő investigates the influence of the Hungarian avant-garde poet Károly Tamkó Sirató on the work of younger avant-garde artists, interpreting this influence as a form of rediscovery. Bettina Simon revisits a debate, identifying within it a renewed opportunity for understanding the avant-garde event.

Taken as a whole, the issue foregrounds the everyday practice of avant-garde insights and the shifts in perspective that led avant-garde artists in so many directions: toward free spaces, free creative techniques, and free communities. This is the freedom we commemorate.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.4 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 4–11.

Hidden or Forbidden. Spatial Occupation as an Avant-Garde Gesture

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI

Abstract: In 2025, it was one hundred years since the Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey) Theatre held its first performance in Budapest, marking a century since avant-garde theatre became part of Hungarian theatrical culture. Despite this, it is still widely assumed that in Soviet and Soviet-occupied states, following the death of Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1938, experimental theatre became a forbidden theatrical practice. According to this assumption, prohibition itself functioned as the primary determinant of aesthetic decision-making, and avant-garde events emerged chiefly as communal political gestures defying censorship, with resistance serving as both catalyst and inspiration. This study seeks to complicate this view by examining two Hungarian avant-garde theatre formations: the Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey) Theatre in 1925 and the Kassák House Studio in 1973. Through an analysis of their spatial practices and the social responses they provoked, the article explores the mechanisms of cultural control operating before and during Sovietisation. The comparative presentation of these two cases makes it possible to identify avant-garde form not merely as a reaction to prohibition, but as a mode of thinking inherent in the practices of theatre-makers themselves.

In theatre historiography, the avant-garde and the experimental are often treated as interdependent categories.[1] In what follows, however, I deliberately set aside both this interdependence as well as questions of theatrical aesthetics and dramaturgical structure in order to gain a clearer understanding of the context of these experiments. The analysis proceeds along two complementary paths: first, by examining narratives related to naming, freedom, and adaptation; and second, by circumnavigating the spaces occupied by the two theatre groups, demonstrating that prohibition and obstruction consistently function as tools of state power.

Terminology and Conceptual Frameworks

Before turning to the Hungarian examples, it is necessary to review the terminology used to describe non-canonical theatrical practices. Avant-garde theatre has been characterised by a wide range of adjectives—countercultural, underground, avant-garde, amateur, and independent—terms that appear most frequently in retrospective historical narratives. At the beginning of the Soviet-occupied era, in the 1950s, the dominant adjective preceding the noun "theatre" in Hungarian usage was *amateur*. This term referred both to an activity conceived as learnable rather than professional, and to an untrained yet instinctive mode of creation. In the 1970s, the adjective *alternative* gained prominence, designating aesthetic forms that diverged from authorised styles and employed artistic languages distinct from those of institutional theatre. The closest English-language equivalent to this phenomenon is *anti-art*, a concept famously mobilised by Hans Richter in the title of his 1965 book *Dada: Art and Anti-*

[1] J. L. STYAN, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, I-III. (Cambridge: CUP. 1981).

Art,[2] where art and anti-art are understood as simultaneous and interdependent.

In the 1980s, the term *independent* was added to the word "theatre," referring not to aesthetic differences but to financial and organisational independence from formal institutions. In the early phase of the independent theatre movement, the term *underground* was used to describe the literal occupation of space rather than a metaphorical cultural position. When the official cultural public sphere is controlled, a new public sphere—a new space of expression—must be sought. This space opens up underground, both conceptually and physically. It is precisely this underground existence that allows theatrical events to dispense with established conventions: from institutions, companies, fixed texts, theatre buildings, conventional speech, linear logic, and audiences accustomed to normative forms: becoming free.

It is important to emphasise that in Hungarian usage the term *amateur* focuses on the creator's training, *alternative* on the aesthetics of production, and *independent* on the mode of operation. Experimentation, however, can characterise all of these categories, which are often used interchangeably. For this reason, it is worth stressing that the multiplicity of avant-garde theatrical events is created not against something, but for something, even if historiography tends to position them in opposition to the canon. While dominant Anglophone historical narratives reserve the term *experimental* for movements emerging in the 1960s, in Hungarian discourse the term is most frequently applied to Anglophone and Western European practices.[3]

Activism, Presence, and the Politics of Space

In Soviet-type states, non-official theatrical practice signified freedom of both creation and existence. In narratives of freedom, the merging of cultural and political fields appears as a common strategy. Consequently, discussions of the avant-garde often prioritise the social dimensions of activism over the aesthetic dimensions of artistic production. This emphasis is reinforced by the fact that avant-garde theatrical events frequently articulate themselves through manifestos and proclamations. The manifesto functions as a tool for groups operating without institutions and may be interpreted as part of the ritual vocabulary of revolution. It is therefore hardly surprising that the practice of activism and the ethos of creation merge.[4] As Ödön Palasovszky, one of the founders of the Green Donkey Theatre, recalled: "the poet was pushed into the background by the performer."[5] In this formulation, the performer emerges as a creative agent and, by extension, as an activist.

Avant-garde activism[6] is far removed from the Romantic model of theatrical revolution based on mass movements. Instead, it seeks to heighten awareness of social presence.[7] In

[2] Hans RICHTER, *Dada. Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson. 1965).

[3] Günter BERGHAUS, *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[4] SZOLLÁTH Dávid, *A kommunista aszkétizmus esztétikája* (Budapest: Balassi, 2011).

[5] MOLNÁR Ágnes, "Palasovszky Ödön színháza", *Színháztudományi Szemle* 17. (1985): 155–188. 158.

[6] Matthias WARSTAT, "Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy", *Peripeti* 20, 38. (2003): 66–75.

[7] Hannah ARENDT, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution", *The Journal of Politics*. 20, 1. (1958): 5–43. És ERDÉLY Miklós, *Pénz az utcán. 1956-os performance.* (2025.december 1.) https://artpool.hu/Erdely/kreativitas/gyakorlatok.html

producing this presence,[8] avant-garde theatre renders social and artistic rules visible and dynamises its environment by introducing irregularities. Examining such events, it becomes evident how difficult it is to abandon the regular form dictated by theatrical space and how challenging it is to find a functional space that is free and irregular. Many avant-garde artists recognise that they operate as irregulars within regulated spaces, and that only by stepping outside these frameworks can they discover spaces with their own irregular coordinates.[9] In state socialist cultures, such practices of spatial occupation inevitably provoked prohibition.

Prohibition affects theatrical events that fail to comply with regulations, while simultaneously forcing cultural authorities to explicitly define the parameters of those regulations. In theatre, this control focuses on a limited set of characteristics. Archived reports by secret police informants on avant-garde theatre events[10] reveal that censors were primarily concerned with four factors: the venue of the performance, the composition of the audience, the number of performances, and the script being performed. To avoid prohibition, avant-garde artists seeking and public and community visibility employed various strategies of adaptation. They performed in recognised theatre spaces, in front of students or workers, sometimes only once, and sometimes without a fixed script. In each case, practices of *mutual compromise*[11] within specific communities enabled the avant-garde to articulate not only opposition to dominant discourses of power, not only elitism, but also forms of freedom cultivated within prohibition itself.

Spatial Patterns of Avant-Garde Theatre

Using the histories of two avant-garde theatre companies, this study identifies the spatial patterns enabling the creation of free, independent theatre in the 1920s and again, fifty years later, in the 1970s. Workers' social clubs, university stages, private apartments, and urban spaces hosted the artists who had abandoned the officially sanctioned performance spaces.

1. Houses of Culture and Workers' Social Clubs

In 1925, one hundred years ago, the Green Donkey Theatre, led by Ödön Palasovszky, performed for the first time in empty spaces and cultural clubs.[12] The apparent neutrality of workers' social clubs was animated by the contemporary paraphernalia of the labour movement. The company worked with experimental recitation choirs, whose members also constituted part of the audience; for this reason, these events may retrospectively be described as an early form of participatory theatre. The ethos of workers' self-education circles permeated their performances.[13] An examination of the company's repertoire at the time reveals that they presented different works on "experimental stages" and different works in workers' social clubs.[14] On experi-

8 Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: SUP, 2003).

9 FORGÁCS Péter, "Epizódok MF tanár úr életéből", *Filmvilág* 30, 10. (1988): 13–16.

10 JÁKFALVI Magdolna, "Antigone's Brothers. The Soviet Reburial", *Theatron* 18. 4. (2024). https://theatron.hu/theatron_cikkek/antigones-brothers-the-soviet-reburial/

11 KAPPANYOS Ilona, "Zománc fürdőkád és fateknő. Csecsemőfürdetési tanácsok a 20. század eleji magyar gyermekápolási irodalomban", *Korall* 83. (2021): 59–83.

12 Georges BAAL, "Hungarian Avant-Garde Theatre in the Twenties and Three Unknown Surrealist Plays by Tibor Déry", *Theatre Research International*, 9, 1. (1984): 7–16.

13 MOLNÁR, "Palasovszky…", 161.

14 PALASOVSZKY Ödön, *Lényegretörő színház* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980), 184.

mental stages, they recited texts by Honegger, Tzara, Apollinaire, and Goll, while in performances addressed to workers they recited Ady, Bartók, and Mayakovsky.

It is well documented that Social Democratic organisations arranged performance venues in workers' clubs, which explains why this theatre company had the largest part of its audience in the industrial suburbs: in Újpest, on the northern outskirts of Budapest, in District IX, and in Csepel, all predominantly working-class areas. Given this context, it is understandable that Ödön Palasovszky, the founder of Hungary's first avant-garde theatre, was only able to hold public performances from 1930 onward through the framework of the Workers' Athletic Association. There are several explanations for this situation. Memoirs indicate that the group became too visible in downtown Budapest, where police repeatedly disrupted their performances in inner-city theatre spaces. Palasovszky notes that they were forced to terminate performances "because of the threatening behaviour of the police." In the 1920s, several avant-garde experimental groups were active simultaneously; "four left-wing squads," as Palasovszky describes them. These included members of the Workers' Athletic Association, Aladár Tamás's group known as *100%*, the Esperanto movement, and Alice Madzsar's movement and modern dance school. Although Palasovszky's recollections from later in life often constitute our primary source, they nonetheless suggest that conflicts arose not only between avant-garde groups and authorities, but also among the groups themselves. According to Palasovszky, even Lajos Kassák at times disrupted their activities. He writes that the Green Donkey Theatre ultimately withdrew from the city centre because "Kassák and his followers, who were in conflict with *100%* and with Tamás, protested loudly."[15]

The number of venues available for rent in the city centre was limited, and rental fees were higher than in the industrial suburbs, where costs were lower or, in the case of premises owned by supportive political parties (Christian Democrats or Communists), almost negligible. In addition, the working-class audience targeted by these performances was more readily accessible in those suburban districts.

In 1971, fifty-five years ago, the group led by Péter Halász likewise performed for the first time in empty spaces and cultural clubs.[16] In order to secure opportunities for public performance, Halász "signed a contract with the Lajos Kassák House of Culture to organise and lead an amateur theatre group."[17] The House of Culture, notably, bears the name of Lajos Kassák, who half a century earlier, as one of Europe's most prominent activist artists, had published the works of Tzara and Yvan Goll in his journal *MA*. A crucial element of this mutual compromise was that Halász could obtain a performance license only if he accepted employment as an "amateur theatre group instructor" at the State-run Popular Education Institute, with an income of 750 forints, considered average at the time.[18]

The Kassák House of Culture still exists today: a strikingly small, prefabricated concrete block surrounded by tall large-panel-system apartment buildings in the industrial suburbs, "in the middle of the District XIV housing estate … consisting of an entrance hall, a small office, two bathrooms, and a low-ceilinged, empty hall."[19] Halász's company presented their first performance within the institutional framework of Kassák at the Youth Club

[15] PALASOVSZKY, *Lényegretörő…*, 187.
[16] Eva BUCHMÜLLER, Anna KOÓS, *Squat Theatre* (New York: Artist Space. 1996).
[17] PÉCSI Zoltán, secret police informant, on 10. january 1974. https://www.c3.hu/collection/tilos/238.html.
[18] KOÓS Anna, *Színházi történetek szobában, kirakatban* (Budapest: Akadémiai. 2009), 58.
[19] KOÓS, *Színházi…*, 58.

of the Dési Huber House of Culture on Toronyház Street, located in a neighbouring working-class district. They rehearsed and performed at the Kassák House of Culture, built their community there, and—perhaps most importantly—subsisted on the salary provided by the Popular Education Institute. Their official relationship with Kassák, however, was severed following the Wilson-inspired performance *Rapid Changes II*, which premiered on January 23, 1972. The dress rehearsal was previewed by the head of the Popular Education Department of the District XIV Council, who annotated the production with the statement: "I do not authorise the performance of this play." In addition, he terminated both the company's contract and Halász's personal contract, thereby "terminating the legal basis for the ensemble's operation."[20] Apart from charges of obscenity and violations of public morality, only one concrete reason for the termination is documented, and this involved a serious breach of the law. Péter Halász and his troupe produced the promotional materials for the performance using the House of Culture's mimeograph, without authorisation. Under the state socialist system, printing, reproduction, and the dissemination of information were subject to strict monopoly, which Halász and his associates—perhaps unintentionally—violated. The advertisement for the performance, bearing the slogan "We are not frogs," was produced illegally on the House of Culture's photocopier. The ban was thus not justified on ideological or aesthetic grounds, but on the basis of unauthorised use of printing technology. On May 9, 1972, Péter Halász received a formal police warning[21] in connection with *Skanzen*, marking the definitive end of the group's activities within houses of culture.

2. University Exam Halls. (The Small Hall of the Academy of Music and the University Stage)

Avant-garde theatres have traditionally regarded universities as their natural milieu, since many of their members were students and a receptive audience was largely guaranteed. In 1925, Ödön Palasovszky performed at the Academy of Music in Budapest, which at the time rented out its examination hall for Sunday matinees. In a similar gesture, Alfred Jarry had earlier rented the stage of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre for the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. At the same time, the architectural aesthetics of university buildings often constrained avant-garde experimentation. The avant-garde of the 1920s appeared softened and somewhat dissonant within the delicate Art Nouveau space of the Academy of Music, which was considered contemporary and progressive at the time. With its Art Nouveau framework, excellent acoustics (the overall architectural effect having been slightly altered by the removal of two large chandeliers), and predominantly bourgeois audience, the space seemed to hover around the performance as a foreign body rather than merging with it.

The avant-garde of the 1970s found a site in the former Piarist chapel located within the building of the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. On this legendary University Stage, however, performers had to contend with the physical and spiritual authority of the space itself, which actively resisted avant-garde expression. At the time, the university also operated its own drama group, Universitas, in the same chapel.

Péter Halász began his career as an actor with Universitas on the University Stage. Consequently, when his later group began to "explore the possibilities of legal, public performance,"[22] they initially investigated performance opportunities within university-

[20] PÉCSI, on 10. January 1974. 6.
[21] KÖBEL Szilvia, "Aktív ateista propaganda", *Beszélő* 7. 9–10. (2002): 67–75.
[22] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

affiliated clubs. In Budapest, they were able to perform at the Kinizsi Street dormitory of the Karl Marx University of Economics, while the Communist Youth League Club of the College of Theatre and the Ferenc Münnich dormitory of the Budapest University of Technology also provided space for occasional performances. Because Halász's group had no officially registered place of operation[23] and did not even have a name, it proved difficult for contemporary informers of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as for later historians, to identify members of the ensemble other than Halász himself.

A troupe performing in university spaces is not necessarily a university troupe, despite the fact that Péter Halász was able to participate in European university theatre meetings with Universitas during the 1970s. It is striking how university spaces facilitated a form of international visibility for the group. They travelled, for example, to the Nancy University Festival, where they performed in bare lecture halls with bad acoustics, relying on spectacular gestures rather than speech. In these spaces, they encountered leading figures of European and American avant-garde theatre, including Tadeusz Kantor and the Bread and Puppet Theater.

3. Private Spaces

During the 1920s and 1930s, Ödön Palasovszky and his constantly changing ensemble performed almost exclusively in private venues. It should be emphasised, however, that private ownership of theatres and performance spaces was common practice at the time. Theatres, concert halls, dance schools, and similar venues were predominantly privately owned. Palasovszky's avant-garde theatre formations were able to secure relatively stable performance locations in privately owned spaces and apartments. The Madzsar School of Movement Arts, the most prominent dance school of the first half of the twentieth century, operated in a large apartment in a villa, and this space also hosted Palasovszky's theatrical evenings. The avant-garde performances took place there, at 8 Ménesi Road, Budapest, and until 1945, the milieu of gymnastics and dance was where avant-garde theatrical projects were free to experiment.

After losing access to the Kassák House of Culture in 1972, Halász's troupe was left with no alternative but to perform in their own private space: their apartment at 20 Dohány Street in Budapest, located on the fourth floor and consisting of two adjoining rooms. Most of their performances were conceived and staged here, although occasionally they were able to perform in other private spaces, as private individuals offered them hospitality. The painter Endre Bálint made his studio on Budafoki Road available; the writer György Konrád hosted performances in his apartment on Szilágyi Dezső Square; the painter Júlia Vajda welcomed the group into her home on Rottenbiller Street; and, as Halász recalled, "we were also able to take advantage of the hospitality of Itala Békés,"[24] an actor. In these private settings, the troupe repeatedly performed the banned production *Skanzen* for audiences of ten to twenty invited guests. It would nevertheless be misleading to conclude that private spaces were immune to prohibition under state socialism. Halász and his circle ultimately left Hungary in 1973 precisely because of the constant and increasingly unbearable harassment by the police.

4. Spaces Outside the City

The history of avant-garde performances also demonstrates how a theatrical event can acquire a media-like character. In 1931, Ödön Palasovszky wrote a monumental open-air choral work entitled *Zrí-punaluá*. He conceived the piece as a city-wide performance to be realised throughout Budapest, spanning the

[23] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

[24] KOÓS, *Színházi…*, 91.

entire urban space and giving "voice to children's yearning for freedom." *Zrí*[25] could not be performed in the city, however, because they planned to articulate the malcontent of the younger generation by marches and parades involving tens, thousands. A short excerpt was eventually presented on a conventional stage, but the envisioned artistic occupation of Budapest never took place. The plot of the choral work is as follows:

> "Zrí's sons and daughters rise up against the elders. They gather to leave the city. They set off for a new, young homeland. Zrí's songs ring out, on the streets of Budapest, on both banks of the Danube, on the bridges, and Zrí's games begin. The rebels march cheering through the city. Their steps are accompanied by the sound of drums, whistles, shouts, and the echo of radio mouths. The Zrí rebel anthem thunders from the mouths of the crowds flooding toward the Danube."[26]

The detailed plans for *Zrí-punalua* have survived, but the event itself could not be realised, as the police refused to grant permission for the occupation of the streets.

In July 1971, Péter Halász returned from Nancy to Hungary, and was granted two evenings to perform at the Rózsavölgyi Park Stage. He and his troupe began advertising their performance *Rapid Changes* in Budapest. As part of this promotional activity, Halász and the others walked through the streets of the city accompanied by the seven-headed dragon from Hungarian folk tales. A secret police informant reported on these actions in considerable detail.

According to the report, "although the action served no purpose other than publicity and ticket sales, it nevertheless caused unrest and completely unnecessary confusion, which the members of the group must have anticipated in advance. The dragon that frightened passers-by foreshadowed the violent and brutal elements that repeatedly appeared in the group's productions in 1972–73 and were employed with increasing irresponsibility."[27]

The city thus represents free spaces, free play, free audiences, and yet remains a site of constant threat in the form of police intervention and violence.[28] Spaces beyond the city—remote retreats such as the chapel in Balatonboglár and the nearby private locations used by Halász and his group in 1973[29]—temporarily concealed avant-garde artists from control and oversight, but at the same time removed them from the public sphere.

Hidden or forbidden, this dilemma accompanies avant-garde theatrical events as well as their historical narratives. The various performance spaces—houses of culture, universities, private spaces, and the occupation of urban space—reveal that theatre, as a mode of constructing reality, becomes necessarily radical in avant-garde practice. This radicality emerges because the theatre building as an institution normally provides a sense of familiarity and safety that renders events legible to the spectator. When the audience knows that the buffet is on the right and the cloakroom on the left, they observe experimentation from within the reassuring order prescribed by space. When this spatial security ceases to exist, the participants in the avant-garde theatrical event are enfolded in a new construction of reality.

---

[25] Zrí is a slang term meaning quarrel, racket, riot, chaotic upheaval.

[26] PALASOVSZKY Ödön, *Opál himnuszok* (Budapest: Magvető, 1977)

[27] PÉCSI, on 10. january 1974. 1.

[28] Matthias WARSTAT, "Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy", *Peripeti* 20, 38. (2003): 66–75.

[29] KLANICZAY Júlia, SASVÁRI Edit (szerk.), *Törvénytelen avantgárd* (Budapest: Balassi–Artpool, 2003).

In the history of Hungarian theatre, both Palasovszky and Halász worked freely in open spaces for extended periods; or, to put it differently, they developed creative techniques that could be applied almost anywhere, with the will to direct and stage life itself. From this perspective, the inevitable rupture with institutions, the exodus from institutional frameworks, is freedom itself. Nonetheless, these nearly invisible practices far outside institutional frameworks often appear fragmented due to their lack of documentation, just as much as they had been forbidden.

Bibliography

ARENDT, Hannah. „Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution", *The Journal of Politics*. 20, 1. (1958): 5–43.

BAAL, Georges. „Hungarian Avant-Garde Theatre in the Twenties and Three Unknown Surrealist Plays by Tibor Déry". *Theatre Research International*, 9, 1. (1984): 7–16.

BERGHAUS, Günter. *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

BUCHMÜLLER, Eva, Anna KOÓS. *Squat Theatre*. New York: Artist Space. 1996.

ERDÉLY Miklós. *Pénz az utcán. 1956-os performance.* https://artpool.hu/Erdely/kreativitas/gyakorlatok.html (2025.december 1.)

FORGÁCS Péter. „Epizódok MF tanár úr életéből". *Filmvilág* 30, 10. (1988): 13–16.

GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: SUP, 2003.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. „Antigone's Brothers. The Soviet Reburial". *Theatron* 18. 4. (2024). https://theatron.hu/theatron_cikkek/antigones-brothers-the-soviet-reburial/

KAPPANYOS Ilona. „Zománc fürdőkád és fateknő. Csecsemőfürdetési tanácsok a 20. század eleji magyar gyermekápolási irodalomban". *Korall* 83. (2021): 59–83.

KLANICZAY Júlia, SASVÁRI Edit (szerk.). *Törvénytelen avantgárd*. Budapest: Balassi–Artpool, 2003.

KOÓS Anna. *Színházi történetek szobában, kirakatban*. Budapest: Akadémiai. 2009.

KÖBEL Szilvia. „Aktív ateista propaganda". *Beszélő* 7. 9–10. (2002): 67–75.

MOLNÁR Ágnes. „Palasovszky Ödön színháza". *Színháztudományi Szemle* 17. (1985): 155–188.

PALASOVSZKY Ödön. *Lényegretörő színház*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980.

PALASOVSZKY Ödön. *Opál himnuszok*. Budapest: Magvető, 1977.

PÉCSI Zoltán. secret police informant, on 10. january 1974. https://www.c3.hu/collection/tilos/238.html.

RICHTER, Hans. *Dada. Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1965.

STYAN J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, I-III. Cambridge: CUP, 1981.

SZOLLÁTH Dávid. *A kommunista aszkétizmus esztétikája.* Budapest: Balassi, 2011.

WARSTAT, Matthias. "Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy", *Peripeti* 20, 38. (2003): 66–75.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.12 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 12–18.

Experimental Theatre in the Hungarian Countryside During the 1970s.István Paál's Productions of Jarry's Ubu Plays in Pécs and Szolnok

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN

Abstract: While at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s the traditions of the avant-garde could only prevail in amateur (or alternative) theatre in Hungary, by the second half of the 1970s, the conception of theatre as an experiment began to permeate some of the performances of the official theatre as well. However, this only affected the provincial theatres, and the theatres in Budapest did not show any movement away from the canon. The essay analyses two such experiments: the 1977 premiere of *King Ubu* in Pécs and the 1979 premiere of *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok. Both are linked to the name of István Paál: he is the only Hungarian director who staged two *Ubu* dramas in two places. I am looking for an answer to the question of what political overtones the two productions were saturated with in the theatre culture of state socialism, and how they employed the dramaturgical procedures of the classical avant-garde.

The most famous Hungarian production of Alfred Jarry's notorious *King Ubu* during state socialism was staged by Gábor Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theatre in 1984 and ran for 191 performances in Budapest and 39 abroad over ten years. Its outstanding success somewhat obscures István Paál's productions of *King Ubu* and *Ubu Enchained*, created a few years earlier, whose significance I address in this essay.

Paál staged *King Ubu* in Pécs in February 1977, and its "sequel", *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok in December 1979. Although the programme announced both as Hungarian premieres, *King Ubu* had already been staged at the College of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest in 1968, and also by the Miners' Theatre, an amateur company in Tatabánya. However, the play was performed by a professional theatre for the first time in Pécs. The production of *Ubu Enchained,* on the other hand, was indeed a Hungarian premiere, and in fact the first performance of the play outside France.[1] It was also extraordinary that Paál directed *Ubu Enchained* separately, since it is usually staged together with the preceding play (*King Ubu*)—as did Peter Brook, for example, who presented the two plays under the title *Ubu aux Bouffes* in his Paris theatre in November 1977, and the Hungarian Television showed excerpts from it at the time. Perhaps this is what drew Paál's attention to *Ubu Enchained*, but even if not, it is rare to find such consistent thinking on theatre as Paál's, who completed something he had started in another production in another city two and a half years earlier. And let us emphasise: in two provincial cities. According to my thesis, in the second half of the 1970s, provincial theatres became a testing ground for experiments that had previously been characteristic of amateur and alternative theatre collectives, and that professional theatres in Budapest avoided. A major trend in provincial

[1] The information comes from BAJOMI LÁZÁR Endre, "Übüvölet Szolnokon", *Színház* 13, No. 2. (1980): 25–28., 27. based on the latest edition of Henri Béhar's *Le Théâtre Dada et surréaliste*, published by Gallimard in 1979.

theatre-making in the 1970s and 1980s resonated strongly with the neo-avant-garde, because artists who had started their careers outside professional theatre were increasingly becoming involved in institutional theatre-making. István Paál was such an artist: he was the first director in professional theatre who did not gain a degree at the College of Theatre and Film Arts. *King Ubu* was Paál's fifth and last work in the National Theatre of Pécs, and together with his production of *Kőműves Kelemen (Clement Mason)* in Szeged (1973), *Caligula* (1976) in Pécs, and Mrożek's *Tango* in Szolnok (1978), it was mentioned three decades later as one of the highlights of his oeuvre.[2]

Paál linked Jarry's "horror comedy", as the playbill called it, to the performance of Camus's drama when Pa Ubu introduced himself in a stentorian voice with Caligula's last words in Pécs: "I am still alive." (Immediately afterwards, the sound of a toilet flushing could be heard.) *King Ubu* thus continued where *Caligula* left off and (in Paál's words) started "a counter-revolution against mediocrity, lack of talent and corruption."[3] It is worth noting that in this definition, Paál uses the term "counter-revolution" differently from the political discourse of the time, which used it for the October events of 1956. In fact, according to Paál's logic, it is the state-socialist power that is waging a counter-revolution against the people. The production of *King Ubu* sought to portray this by oscillating between the specific and the general, avoiding depicting a recognisable figure of Ubu, and exploring the nature of "Ubuism, the ever-possible social contagion" instead.[4] In his "free verse" written in the programme, Paál described Ubu as "the hero of our time" and referred not only to those who usurped power and those who served them, but to all subjects—"Are *you* Ubu? / Or is *he*?... / Perhaps even *me*?..." —thus interpreting "Ubuism" as the situation after the revolution (of 1956) and discovering it in the prevalence of "hissing lust for power, boundless stupidity and characterlessness, unbridled selfishness and greed, lack of principles, routine betrayal and ruthless indifference".[5] The metaphor for this situation in the performance was rat life: the characters appeared as rats, and the stage design was also created on a rat scale. The set formed a huge street corner, with large rainwater and sewage pipes, a metre-high pavement in front of them, huge cigarette butts and chewed apple cores, and two sewer openings at the front of the stage-road. The actors' hairy, lumpy costumes also evoked canal creatures, so the external aspects of the performance were entirely defined by "sewer aesthetics".[6] Accordingly, the plot was presented as "a skirmish between a rabble reduced to rats,"[7] with countless allusions to symbols of power and historical events familiar to the audience. When Ubu encouraged the Polish soldiers, who were terrified of the Russian army, by raising his body baton (*baton-à-physique*) and phynance hook (*croc à phynances*) above his head, they were recognisable as symbols of proletarian solidarity: the hammer and sickle.[8] Protests against Ubu's actions were started in the auditorium, where the lights came on, Ubu and his soldiers left the stage and intimidated the spectators with loud noises, singling out the dis-

[2] Cf. DURÓ Győző, "Az életmű csúcsai", *Színház* 36, No. 8. (2003): 6–10.

[3] MAGYAR Fruzsina and DURÓ Győző, "Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal", *Színház* 11, No. 10. (1978): 32–35., 34.

[4] MÉSZÁROS Tamás, "Magyarországi bemutató Pécsett. *Übü király*", *Magyar Hírlap*, March 15, 1977, 6.

[5] PAÁL István, "Korunk hőse: Übü", in *Alfred Jarry: Übü király (King Ubu)*, programme of the production at the National Theatre of Pécs in 1977, n.p.

[6] MÉSZÁROS, "Magyarországi bemutató Pécsett...", 6.

[7] NÁNAY István, "Külföldi kortársaink itthon", *Nagyvilág* 22, No. 9. (1977): 1394–1397., 1395.

[8] DURÓ, "Az életmű csúcsai", 9.

contented and executing them. Ubu and his henchmen then left through the doors of the auditorium to take away all the peasants' possessions.[9] Experiencing this, the older members of the audience could hardly think of anything other than the deportations, the reprisals after 1956, the attic sweeps during the Rákosi Regime, and the violent collectivisation. Those who disliked the performance objected to these "jokes" and the historical and political references, claiming that "the pamphlet, peppered with many absurdities, offered a poor lesson."[10] Others emphasised those characteristics of Jarry's play that stem from its interpretation as a parody of Shakespeare, linking Paál's work to such taboo-breaking contemporary productions as Yuri Lyubimov's *Hamlet* (Moscow, 1971) and Peter Zadek's *Othello* (Hamburg, 1976). Indeed, it was thanks to these characteristics that the criticism of Ubuism, formulated from the ethical point of view consistently underlined by Paál, could not be translated entirely into the language of political cabaret, and the analysis of rat-like behaviour had the power of forcing the spectators to confront themselves. This was encouraged by both *The Song of Brainwashing*, included as a prologue, set to music and performed by Tamás Cseh,[11] and by the unique behaviour of the actors when the audience was applauding them. While the actors did not come out to take their bows at the end of *Caligula*, at the end of *King Ubu* the actors dressed as rats knelt down in front of the audience, began to applaud, and left the stage one by one as the spectators filed out of the auditorium—as some "distorted reflections" of the audience.[12]

All five of Paál's productions at the National Theatre of Pécs took the form of highly intellectual yet extremely sensual performances, which were based on the duality of tangible elements developed in the spirit of realism and surrealistic moments. *Caligula* and *King Ubu* continued the "train of thought" begun in Szeged with *Kőműves Kelemen (Clement Mason)*, while also completing a trilogy.[13] Despite all their resignation, doubts and tragic undertones, they were conceived in the belief in the "permanence of revolution", assuming that "some kind of honest, self-confronting society could be created" in 1970s Hungary and that theatre could offer a starting point for this, helping people to "challenge the status quo".[14] This is why Paál began to explore the manipulability of individuals in Szolnok as well, forming a new trilogy with his productions of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit of the Old Lady* and Yordan Radichkov's *January*.

Ubu Enchained also fit into this series of theatrical studies, and a phrase from a newspaper article about it offers a clue to its reconstruction: "the comedy of consolidation". (It is worth mentioning that the first 5–15 years after János Kádár's coming to power at the end of the 1956 revolution are known as the consolidation of the Kádár Regime.) Not emphatically, and posed as a question, this phrase appeared in a coordinate structure in the criticism of József Vinkó, arguing that "the production in Szolnok is sparklingly witty, displaying the familiar characteristics of Ubuism, and it is difficult to decide whether it was intended as a farce or a comedy of consolidation? Or both, and the horror comedy hides a

[9] MIHÁLYI Gábor, "*Übü király*, az avantgarde klasszikusa?", *Színház* 10, No. 5. (1977): 24–28., 27.

[10] FUTAKY Hajna, "Pécsi színházi esték", *Jelenkor* 20, No. 5. (1977): 449–454., 451.

[11] Tamás Cseh (1943–2009) was a Hungarian composer, singer and performer, famous for his poignant, often critical songs with poet Géza Bereményi, and his role as a chronicler of his era.

[12] NÁNAY, "Külföldi kortársaink itthon", 1395.

[13] Paál's own words, in MAGYAR and DURÓ, "Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal", 34.

[14] BÓTA Gábor, "Be kell épülni a falba? Találkozás Paál Istvánnal", *Magyar Hírlap*, February 11, 1995, 4.

bloody joke?"[15] Vinkó doubles the question, making the possessive structure—which occurs *en passant*, far from being accusatory, but quite explanatory for us—even less striking. Let us examine how *Ubu Enchained* in Szolnok referred to Hungary in the 1970s, while not updating the play, at least not in terms of the external aspects of the performance. In fact, it was as if "the constraints of space and time had disappeared" and "the floodgates of history had been opened",[16] revealing a kind of historical chaos on the stage designed by István Szlávik. Updating would have required relatively specific correspondences, but Paál (in the spirit of Jarry's pataphysics) obscured clarity and suspended meaning, making it difficult to read anything into the production. At the same time, Paál kept in mind what "can be used from a drama that castigates and caricatures bourgeois democracy and all kinds of militaristic attitudes".[17] So he looked for the "timely content" of the play, which "should be noticed by all means".[18] Knowing Paál's habits, values, previous productions and thinking on theatre, he could not have drawn a caricature of bourgeois democracy, but rather that of existing socialism. Therefore, what characterised the "primitive welfare state" on stage, "where everyone strives for general security and material goods, and where freedom is compulsory, whether you like it or not",[19] was more reminiscent of 1970s Hungary than either Jarry's France or the France of the director's own era. (The play is, in short, about Pa Ubu now wanting to be a slave and rule as a slave, so *Ubu Enchained* serves as a mirror drama to his prequel, *King Ubu*.)

The performance in Szolnok did not focus on a person who turned sadistic tyrannical desires into a masochistic servile spirit, but rather on someone who "strives to thrive *within the limits* of freedom".[20] In other words, a person living in a world where "even obedience is permitted" and where the servant becomes the master[21]—which, in the shadow of proletarian dictatorship, is full of irony. "Ubu, who is usually referred to as a type of bourgeois stupidity", wrote a reviewer, "has this time become a model of petty bourgeois cunning and gumption. Does the world belong to Ubu enchained? asks István Paál's production with threatening despair."[22] Another review also noted that in the earlier production of *King Ubu* in Pécs, the title character "became a nightmare of petty bourgeois existence, forcing the philistine to flee".[23] Let us highlight the adjective *petty bourgeois* in these two quotations, bearing in mind that it does not refer to the Kleinbürger (or Spießbürger) who was presented as the opposite of the socialist man, nor to the philistine existence that the socialist man wanted to leave behind. (If that were the case, Paál would have reduced Jarry's play to a piece of state-socialist propaganda.) Paál's Ubu resembled the petty bourgeoisie that the Hungarian version of socialism had produced during its thirty years, and their caricature was put on stage.

Paál was analysing the "Ubu of our time" again, who seemed to be an "almost disillusioned, world-weary figure" in Szolnok,[24] and whose astonishing narrow-mindedness ele-

---

[15] Vinkó József, "*A láncra vert Übü*. Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház", *Új Tükör* 16, No. 50. (1979): 3.

[16] Bérczes László, "Láncra verve és megszelídítve. Magyarországi bemutató a Szigligeti Színházban", *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, December 21, 1979, 5.

[17] Paál's own words, in V.M., "Ősbemutató Szolnokon. *A láncra vert Übü*", *Pesti Műsor* 28, No. 51. (1979): 52.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Vinkó, "*A láncra vert Übü*...", 3.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Lőcsei Gabriella, "*A láncra vert Übü*. Jarry rémbohózata a szolnoki színházban", *Magyar Nemzet*, January 4, 1980, 4.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Vinkó, "*A láncra vert Übü*...", 3.

[24] Ibid.

vated him above the others. István Fonyó's everyday Ubu appeared without a mercilessly large belly and pear-shaped head, so he could easily become a "personal acquaintance" of the audience.[25] The actor shouted that "my belly is bigger than the whole world", but he did not evoke a supernatural monster at all—he sang Katalin Karádi's songs, danced, and charmed the audience; he cheerfully slapped Ma Ubu on the bottom and (thanks to Zoltán Jékely) spoke in cheap Hungarian.

The Ubu of Szolnok was therefore not from the eras evoked in the production zigzagging through history: it was not the past, but the present, and in this way the *mise-en-scène* shaped "the grotesque play about freedom into a desperate farce about the ideal of freedom depraved by the petty bourgeoisie".[26] So Paál's petty bourgeois was not the communist enemy, not the philistine of Western democracies, but the Hungarian citizen who had come to accept the People's Republic as unshakeable and resigned himself to the loss of his freedom—an everyday survivor of the state-socialist regime.

Even though the Ubu of Szolnok seemed completely different from the Ubu of Pécs, he was essentially the same. In the programme for the production in Pécs, Paál identified Ubu as "the embodiment of the filthy and stinking rat-like existence of all sewers",[27] and this creature had not become friendlier in two and a half years, but merely refined his methods. In Jarry's play, Ubu himself claims that he has "grown wiser"[28] and has learned that if he were to kill everyone, who would pull the oars. "I still remain Ubu enchained, Ubu slave, and I'm not giving any orders ever again. That way people will obey me all the more promptly", he proclaims at the end.[29] Pa Ubu's realisation became the lesson of *Ubu Enchained*: "You have to violate people's minds, you have to make them voluntarily accept, even desire and fight for slavery".[30] The stage representation of this gave the events of the performance just as ironic a tone as the grandiose announcement, made in the context of seemingly non-existent unemployment, that even a Pa Ubu wants to be useful to society, that he wants to work.

Most critics praised *Ubu Enchained* as a production full of amazing ideas and excellent humour, which relies on the audience's mental activity throughout. According to Paál, Jarry's play is "written in a much more sketchy manner than *King Ubu*, so [we] have to inflate it with incredible inventiveness in order to give it a stage presence".[31] There was certainly no lack of inventiveness in Szolnok, with a critic suggesting a "Niagara-like torrent of ideas".[32] If we summarise the moments mentioned in the reviews—for example, a groom using a bicycle bell like a clock, a cannonball caught in a butterfly net, flowers with nails as stems, a court operating with perfect mechanical precision and spring-loaded judges, pious women transforming into voluptuous bayadères, a rag doll-like Grand Vizier, galley slaves rowing with wooden spoons that also serve as masks—we can conclude that Paál turned Jarry's "student prank" into a "student prank" of his own, as a kind of homage to his past in amateur theatre. In this way, *Ubu Enchained* became a continuation (albeit in a different medium and years later) of what Paál had begun at the Szeged University Stage about ten years earlier. In terms of the spirit of the production and the way of staging, a straight line can be drawn from *The Giant Baby* (the stage version of Tibor Déry's play, one of the most important works of the Hungarian avant-garde),

[25] Lőcsei, "*A láncra vert Übü*...", 4.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Paál, "Korunk hőse: Übü", n.p.
[28] Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Enchained*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor, 219–312 (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 247. (Ebook edition)
[29] Ibid., 312.
[30] Bérczes, "Láncra verve...", 5.
[31] Bajomi Lázár, "Übüvölet Szolnokon", 27.
[32] Ibid.

produced in Szeged, all the way through *Caligula* and *King Ubu* staged in Pécs, *Tango* and *End Game*, staged in Szolnok, to *Ubu Enchained* and even *The Tragedy of Man*, produced at the beginning of the following season, as Paál's debut as chief director at the Szigligeti Theatre.

Since *Ubu Enchained* consistently revealed the entire mechanism of creating theatre and involved everyone in the performance from the prop master to the prompter, from the actors to the spectators, it built a bridge from the amateur theatre at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s to the "new theatricality" of the 1990s. From his first productions, Paál was interested in connecting the audience and the stage, which he achieved with techniques that can be traced back to the classical avant-garde, confusing the spectators and blurring the boundaries between theatre and life. As Paál liked to start and finish his productions with powerful images, these techniques were applied at the beginning and end of *Ubu Enchained* as well. Before the lights went out in the auditorium, armed men dressed in civilian clothes stormed the audience, roughly grabbed a spectator and dragged her away without a word. This action is as subversive as those suggested by the Futurist manifestos: putting glue on the spectators' seats, selling them tickets for the wrong seats (so that they would fight over them), etc.

The opening of *Ubu Enchained*—with an unexpected action, happening among the spectators here and now, characteristic of the genre of performance—aimed to make the audience feel unsafe, to feel no distance between their own world and the events on stage. Moreover, it alluded to the fear of being taken away by force by the current representatives of power. In 1979, the Kádár Regime no longer made people disappear in this way, but exercised violence in other ways. However, Paál evoked a not-too-distant era, the terror of the Rákosi Regime (i.e., the prehistory of the Kádár Regime), when this could happen.

The end of the performance featured a similarly powerful breaking of the "fourth wall", and even a kind of offending the audience, when Soliman, Sultan of the Turks, remained on stage alone, spitting sunflower seed hulls on the spectators with indifference until they realised that the performance was over and began to applaud. Another perplexing moment that challenged the separation of theatre and life came at the beginning of the second act, when the choice between the slogans *Long live freedom!* and *Long live slavery!* was discussed on stage, and then all the actors turned to the audience and began to silently scrutinise them. The journalist (a critic of the guest performance in Salgótarján) who recorded this, immediately followed his description with a question: "Do they really want us to take a stand verbally as well? But this is extremely strange and unusual. The official theatre has never demanded this of us, the audience. And now that it has done so, our confusion is complete, and the actor—in an equally unusual situation—may experience it the same way."[33] There is something historically and socially curious and penetrating about this moment. On the one hand, it was one of the rare moments during state socialism, when in the production of an official theatre the audience was directly addressed, looked in the eye, and forced to take a stand. Amateur theatre had established this relationship before, but professional or institutional theatre had not. Gábor Székely's productions in Szolnok had already done away with the closure of representation, but they had not "provoked" the audience in a way Paál did. On the other hand, in a social environment where there was one leader, one camp, and one slogan, where it was always obvious who to vote for, this division, this duality was unexpected and shocking, and the article I cited also states that the performance

[33] SULYOK László, "Színházi esték. *A láncra vert Übü*", *Nógrád*, December 15, 1979, 4.

in fact divided the audience in Salgótarján. However, Paál's staging was presumably aimed at this: not unity, but division, and according to two reviews, the audience in the countryside received this with greater reservations than the more select and largely professional audience at the guest performance in Budapest. The critic of the local daily in Szolnok, for example, mentions that after the first night, which elicited lively audience reactions and loud laughter, he saw another performance where the audience did not take advantage of the opportunity to participate, which undermined the performance.[34] The audience outside the capital did not prove to be the best partner for Paál's experiment: due to their socialisation in the theatre, they did not know what to make of situations such as the one I mentioned, with the student theatre jokes, and did not really go along with the performance. However, if the regional theatre and the regional audience hadn't existed, Paál's production would probably never have been born. Even at the National Theatre, led by Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki between 1978 and 1982, or in any other theatres in the capital at that time, it is impossible to imagine a performance that combines amateur and professional theatre like Paál's *Ubu Enchained*. Nevertheless, it slotted seamlessly into the varied programme in Szolnok, taking its place proudly three months after the season's sensation, Yuri Lyubimov's staging of Yuri Trifonov's *The Exchange*, and between the premieres of *Man of La Mancha* and *Ball at the Savoy*.

Bibliography

BAJOMI LÁZÁR Endre. "Übüvölet Szolnokon". *Színház* 13, No. 2. (1980): 25–28.

BÉRCZES László. "Láncra verve és megszelídítve. Magyarországi bemutató a Szigligeti Színházban". *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, December 21, 1979, 5.

BÓTA Gábor. "Be kell épülni a falba? Találkozás Paál Istvánnal". *Magyar Hírlap*, February 11, 1995, 4.

DURÓ Győző. "Az életmű csúcsai". *Színház* 36, No. 8. (2003): 6–10.

FUTAKY Hajna. "Pécsi színházi esték". *Jelenkor* 20, No. 5. (1977): 449–454.

JARRY, Alfred. *Ubu Enchained*, translated by Simon WATSON TAYLOR, 219–312. New York: Grove Press, 1968. (Ebook edition)

LŐCSEI Gabriella. "*A láncra vert Übü*. Jarry rémbohózata a szolnoki színházban". *Magyar Nemzet*, January 4, 1980, 4.

MAGYAR Fruzsina and DURÓ Győző. "Beszélgetés Paál Istvánnal". *Színház* 11, No. 10. (1978): 32–35.

MÉSZÁROS Tamás. "Magyarországi bemutató Pécsett. *Übü király*". *Magyar Hírlap*, March 15, 1977, 6.

MIHÁLYI Gábor. "*Übü király*, az avantgarde klasszikusa?". *Színház* 10, No. 5. (1977): 24–28.

NÁNAY István. "Külföldi kortársaink itthon". *Nagyvilág* 22, No. 9. (1977): 1394–1397.

PAÁL István. "Korunk hőse: Übü". In *Alfred Jarry: Übü király*, programme of the production at the National Theatre of Pécs in 1977.

SULYOK László. "Színházi esték. *A láncra vert Übü*". *Nógrád*, December 15, 1979, 4.

VINKÓ József. "*A láncra vert Übü*. Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház". *Új Tükör* 16, No. 50. (1979): 3.

V.M. "Ősbemutató Szolnokon. *A láncra vert Übü*". *Pesti Műsor* 28, No. 51. (1979): 52.

[34] Cf. BÉRCZES, "Láncra verve...", 5.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.19 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 19–30.

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

GABRIELLA KISS

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,

[1] NÁNAY István, "Színház és diákszínjátszás – vázlatos történeti visszatekintés", in, *Dráma – pedagógia – színház – nevelés*, edited by ECK Júlia, KAPOSI József and TRENCSÉNYI 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 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).

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 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

[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, *Történt pedig. Egy Corvin téri 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 from1960 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 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 színjáték 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 Kovacsics, Ference 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 Barbora*, 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 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

---

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. századа*", 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 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 reflection[17]—either as a György Székely-type of performance[18] 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 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

[16] Ibid., 22.

[17] DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjáték-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 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, 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 "directorial-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 színjáték-típusok…*, 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. 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,

---

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 színjátéktípusok…*, 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 színjátéktípusok…*, 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 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 színjátéktípusok…*, 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 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

[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] 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*:

> "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]

---

[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 színjátéktípusok...*, 22.

[44] Ibid., 52.

[45] Ibid., 22.

[46] Klaus-Dieter KRABIEL, "Spieltypus Lehrstück. Zum Stand der aktuellen Diskussion", in *TEXT+KRITIK. Sonderband Bertolt Brecht*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig ARNOLD, 41–52 (München: Text und Kritik, 2006), 41.

[47] DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjátéktípusok...*, 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

[50] DEBRECZENI Tibor. "»Perlő ének« – lírai oratórium", in *"Perlő ének". Debreczeni Tibor színjátékai, rendezései*, ed. by TORMA Mária and FERKE György, n.p. (Budapest: Felsőmagyar-

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 fact[55] 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 színjátéktípusok…*, 18., 34–41.

[52] Ibid., 35.

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

[54] DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjátéktípusok…*, 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]

Bibliography

BÖHM Edit. "Az előadóművészet". In *Magyar színháztörténet 1920–1949*, edited by BÉCSY Tamás and SZÉKELY György, 966–986. Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2005.

BRECHT, Bertolt. *Színházi tanulmányok.* Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1969.

BRECHT, Bertolt. "A »Koldusopera«-per", translated by SÓS Endre. In BRECHT, Bertolt. *Irodalomról és művészetről*, 94–148. Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1970.

CZIBOLY Ádám, ed. *Színházi nevelési és színházpedagógiai kézikönyv.* Budapest: InSite Drama, 2017.

DEBRECZENI Tibor. "A »Perlő ének« születése. Műhelytanulmány". In *"Perlő ének". Debreczeni Tibor színjátékai, rendezései*, edited by TORMA Mária and FERKE György, n.p. Budapest: Felsőmagyarország Könyvkiadó, 1994.

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

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

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

DEBRECZENI Tibor. "Komplexitás és műkedvelés". *Népművelés* 14, No. 3. (1967): 31–33.

DEBRECZENI Tibor. *Történt pedig. Egy Corvin téri népművelő a puha diktatúrában 1966–1989*. Budapest: Játszó Ember Alapítvány, 2019.

EÖRSI István. *"Megbombáztuk Kaposvárt". A kaposvári Csiky Gergely Színház és a kultúrpolitika*. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó – 1956-os Intézet Alapítvány, 2013.

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

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

[58] DEBRECZENI and RENCZ, *A pódiumi színjátéktípusok...*, 50.

[59] Cf. SCHULLER Gabriella, "Dokumentumszínházi előadások az amatőrszínházak repertoárján, 1962–1972", in *Színház és archívum*, ed. by IMRE Zoltán, KALMÁR, Balázs, P. MÜLLER Péter, SÁNDOR 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.

GOLDEN Dániel and KERTÉSZ Luca. *A színjáték pedagógiája*. Budapest: Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2019.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. *Alak – figura – perszonázs.* Budapest: OSZMI, 2001.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. *Avantgárd – színház – politika.* Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. "Kettős beszéd – egyenes értés". In *Művészet és hatalom. A Kádár-korszak művészete*, edited by KISANTAL Tamás and MENYHÉRT Anna, 94–108. Budapest: L' Harmattan – JAK, 2005.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. *A valóság szenvedélye. A realista színház emlékezete Magyarországon*. Budapest: Arktisz Kiadó – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2023.

KISS Gabriella. *A magyar színházi hagyomány nevető arca. Pillanatfelvételek*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2011.

KOTTE, Andreas. *Bevezetés a színháztudományba*, translated by Edit KOTTE. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2015.

KÖRÖMI Gábor and SOMFAI Barbara. "Ünnep az iskolában – közösségi élmény és alkotás". In *A színjáték pedagógiája*, edited by GOLDEN Dániel, 88–171. Budapest: SZFE, 2019, 88–140.

KRABIEL, Klaus-Dieter. "Spieltypus Lehrstück. Zum Stand der aktuellen Diskussion". In *TEXT+KRITIK. Sonderband Bertolt Brecht*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig ARNOLD, 41–52. München: Text und Kritik, 2006.

KRICSFALUSI Beatrix. "»Csinálni jobb, mint érezni«. A Lehrstück és a brechti mediaarchívum". In *A hermeneutika vonzásában. Kulcsár Szabó Ernő 60. születésnapjára*, edited by BÓNUS Tibor, EISEMANN György, LŐRINCZ Csongor, SZIRÁK Péter, 535–549. Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2010.

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

MENSÁROS László. *A XX. század*. Budapest: MMA Kiadó, 2019.

NAGY Gabriella. "Szabadíts meg a gonosztól! – Mensáros *XX. századа*". Accessed 20 April 2025. https://litera.hu/magazin/tudositas/szabadits-meg-a-gonosztol-mensaros-xx-szazada.html.

NÁNAY István. *Ruszt József*. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2014.

NÁNAY István. "Színház és diákszínjátszás – vázlatos történeti visszatekintés". In *Dráma – pedagógia – színház – nevelés*, edited by ECK Júlia, KAPOSI József and TRENCSÉNYI László, 217–222. Budapest: OFI, 2016.

PAÁL István. "Néhány tartalmi és formai szempont a »saját színház« modell kialakításához". In "Dokumentumok a Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad történetéből", edited by HIDI Boglárka, IMRE Zoltán and KALMÁR Balázs, *Betekintő* 16, No. 3. (2022): 191–217., 208. DOI: 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

RAU, Milo. "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/

SCHULLER Gabriella. "Dokumentumszínházi előadások az amatőrszínházak repertoárján, 1962–1972". In *Színház és archívum*, edited by IMRE Zoltán, KALMÁR, Balázs, P. MÜLLER Péter, SÁNDOR Anna Flóra and SCHULLER, Gabriella, 279–292. Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2024.

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

WIHSTUTZ, Benjamin and HOESCH, Benjamin, eds. *Neue Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft.* Bielefeld: transcript, 2020.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.31 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 31–40.

Acting Presence as an Avant-Garde Experiment in Selected Performances of the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop

ROZÁLIA SZÉKELY

Abstract: The article examines selected performances of the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop through the concepts of acting presence and stage present time. The analysis focuses on performances built from real family relationships, personal biographical material, and shared presence, involving professional actors, amateurs, civilians, children, and animals. The intertwining of theatrical and performative elements, together with fragmented dramaturgy and indeterminacy, creates a mode of spectatorship in which presence functions as the primary medium of transmission. Drawing on John Keats's concept of "negative capability," as well as theories of autobiography and autofiction, the study interprets these performances as open, non-linear structures that foreground lived presence over narrative coherence.

In the performances of the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop, acting presence and stage present time became perceptible within a liminal space that emerged through the symbiosis of autobiography, theatre, and performance, including the presence of the spectator. The Workshop was founded by Lili Monori and Miklós Székely B. The permanent creators of the performances were members of a single family: in addition to Monori and Székely B., their son, Sándor Farkas Horváth, and their daughter, Rozália Székely, the author of the present study, also participated. Civil performers (Ernő Tihanyi, Lajos Greff, Béla Újlaki) and the family's domestic animals played an important role in the creative process, and on several occasions, friends also joined the work (Gyula Francia, Natasa Stork, and András Antal). Between 1990 and 2004, the creators presented their performances in a basement system on Szentkirályi Street; between 2004 and 2014, the performances took place at the Kultiplex, the MU Theatre, in private apartments, and in classrooms of the DOVER Language School.

Contexts of Presence

The theatrical avant-garde can be approached from multiple perspectives: spirit and ethos, historical context, stylistic features, methodologies of experimentation, the role of the spectator, mechanisms of impact, and the often restrained receptivity of both audiences and the professional field. The Dadaist formal experiments of the Zöld Szamár (Green Donkey)Theatre in 1925 resulted in only two performances.[1] In the same year, Géza Blattner left the country and later founded a successful experimental puppet theatre in Paris.[2] Under the Soviet system, neo-avant-garde art found its space primarily underground, organising itself as a counterculture.[3] Following Grotowski, the

[1] JÁKFALVI Magdolna, *Avantgárd – színház – politika* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006), 49.

[2] N.N., "Blattner Géza", *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-eletrajzi-lexikon-7428D/b-74700/blattner-geza-74C41/.

[3] SCHULLER Gabriella, "MŰ/EMLÉK/MŰ. Halász Péter: *Mű emlék* (Hatalom Pénz Hírnév Szépség Szeretet), Kamra, 1994", *Theatron* 13, No. 1. (2014): 33–36.

Universitas Ensemble pursued experiments in physical theatre; however, two members who later separated from the group, Péter Halász and Tamás Fodor, came to represent markedly different directions[4]: Fodor developed a politically engaged partisan theatre through the method of *création collective*, which gradually became integrated into Hungarian theatrical culture, while Halász's company, which pushed the boundaries of intimacy, was forced into emigration due to its mode of existence.

The happenings of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the events of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio, operated at the boundary between visual art and theatre.[5] These are most often classified as part of neo-avant-garde visual art, in contrast to Halász's company, which articulated its radicalism within theatrical frameworks.

In examining the avant-garde character of the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop, I do not approach the question primarily from the perspective of formal language or historical classification, but rather through personal involvement, acting presence, and stage present time. Within avant-garde theatrical experimentation, particularly in the neo-avant-garde context of the 1960s and 1970s, performance emerged as a distinct genre, with antecedents already present in early avant-garde actions.[6] Alongside formal experimenttation, emphasis increasingly shifted away from text and narrativity toward presence, the human body appearing on stage, and the subject. The experience of the human being present on stage—or, at times, an animal—became the medium of transmission itself. This experiential quality of performance did not disappear over time.

In 2019, during the theatrical roundtable discussion *Halász Péter: hol vagy?* (*Peter Halász: where are you?*), participants reflected on Halász's legacy by considering the possibilities of personal involvement and intimacy, identifying these categories as central elements of the avant-garde inheritance. According to Veronika Szabó, what matters is that "performers do not play roles, or only partially play roles, but also undertake themselves on stage," while Zsuzsa Berecz emphasises that "intimacy is something that must always be created, because it can very easily turn into spectacle… Personal involvement has become a dominant tool today; we build from personal involvement and produce value through it. What is it that connects us beyond personal involvement?"[7] This question can also be posed in relation to the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop. A family performs genre-indeterminate productions for a narrow audience, drawing heavily on personal stories and on the real relational network among the performers. But what does the spectator perceive? What is the present time in Szentkirályi performances?

In these productions, performative and theatrical elements intertwine. Theatrical elements include, for example, the extended rehearsal process, the elaborated quality of

[4] "But they set off in a different direction, and they kept fucking with my life, asking why we were dealing with politics when we should be speaking much more harshly, and not on a political basis." *Szabadságszigetek. Fodor Tamás és a Stúdió K Színház*, ed. by SÁNDOR L. István (Budapest: Selinunte, 2007), 225.

[5] Artpool Art Research Centre, "Kápolnatárlatok 1973 – Chronology," accessed September 28, 2025, https://artpool.hu/boglar/1973/kronologia73.html.

[6] JÁKFALVI, *Avantgárd…*, 9–10.

[7] In the discussion moderated by Gabriella SCHULLER, the participants were Ádám FEKETE, Ármin SZABÓ-SZÉKELY, Klára CSERNE, Veronika SZABÓ, Zsuzsa BERECZ, Martin BOROSS, Kristóf KELEMEN, and Vilmos VAJDAI. *Halász Péter: hol vagy?*, *Színház.net*, July 28, 2019, accessed September 28, 2025, https://szinhaz.net/2019/07/28/halasz-peter-hol-vagy/.

acting presence, and the maintenance of a repertoire. Performative elements, by contrast, include personal involvement, the quality of presence, non-linear dramaturgy, improvisational components, and singularity. When seeking to distinguish between performance and theatre, in the case of Szentkirályi, I draw on the observation of Magdolna Jákfalvi, according to whom theatre produces a form of virtual doubling: two bodies are present—the performer and the spectator—while a virtual mode of existence is imposed upon the performer's body.[8] When this virtual doubling does not occur, we speak of performance. In Szentkirályi productions, virtual doubling was only partially realised, in the form of role fragments. The personal self became intertwined with these fragments.

The Scope of Personal Space

At the centre of the work stood Lili Monori's artistic personality and the stories of her life, around which the family also organised itself—simultaneously as lived reality and as the group of individuals appearing in the theatrical performances. Autobiographical elements permeated the structure of the productions, yet they generally did not appear in an explicit form. They were inter-woven with literary elements and with thematic materials that differed from lived personal experience. Political and social reflections—also important layers of the performances—were present, but only secondarily. At times, real documents were incorporated as well. For example, in the 1996 performance *Matiné*, a letter written by Lídia Szujó, Monori's mother, was read aloud.[9] In 2001, in the performance *A levél* (*The Letter*), which thematised a screenplay, an aborted film production, and the memory of a former husband, excerpts from the screenplay were used—not for the purpose of adaptation, but as acts of recollection.[10]

In the first performance, *Műtét* (*Surgery*), premiered in 1990, scenes built on strongly symbolic gestures thematised phases of human–animal transformation and transformations of human relationships through images of courtship, wedding, and consummation.[11] In later productions, the use of dramatic texts became intertwined with performative elements and with multimedia: sound effects, visual components, projections, and even solutions in which one performer (Lili Monori) participated in the performance via Skype.[12] Certain decisive life events in Monori's life played a role both in the emergence of Szentkirályi and in the themes of the performances, scenes, and motifs. The fatal train accident of Lídia Szujó in 1974 was recalled in *Matiné* (*Matinee*). A one-day shoot of Dezső Magyar's unrealised film *A levél* became a source of inspiration for three performances. The figure of Albert Monori, Monori's father, served as a source for many of the male characters represented or evoked across the performances. Her relationship with Gábor Bódy, their joint work, the performance *Cselédek* (*The Maids*) by Jean Genet, and her experiences at the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts—especially when contrasted with the period focused on poetry recitation—were

[8] JÁKFALVI Magdolna, „A nézés öröme", in *Átvilágítás. A magyar színház európai kontextusban*, ed. by IMRE Zoltán (Budapest: Áron Kiadó, 2005), 99.

[9] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *Matiné (Matinee)*, directed by Lili MONORI and Miklós SZÉKELY B., Budapest: Szentkirályi utca 4, basement, 1996.

[10] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *A levél (The Letter)*, directed by Lili MONORI and Miklós SZÉKELY B., Budapest: Szentkirályi utca 4, basement, 2001.

[11] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *Műtét (Surgery)*, directed by Lili MONORI and Miklós SZÉKELY B., Budapest: Szentkirályi utca 4, basement, 1990.

[12] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *Egy szívvel két hazában (In Two Homelands with One Heart)*, directed by Monori Lili. 1122 Budapest, Maros utca 11, private flat, 2010.

all decisive factors in shaping Szentkirályi's mode of operation and working methodology.

Alongside these foundational narratives, lived reality was also palpable in the shared presence of the family within the performances, as a layer that was at once conscious and unconscious in the staging. Although the existence of Szentkirályi and its performances was grounded in autobiographical events and in real relational experiences among the creators, these materials were transformed into a play of identity through postdramatic dramaturgy, non-causal sequences of events, and role fragments.[13] This play affected the spectator's perception more strongly than it guided the audience toward any predetermined interpretive framework. Personal experiences and stories constituted important elements of the performances, yet text, linearity, and causality were no more central organising principles than the existence or coherence of a stable stage role.

In the 1990 performance *Műtét* (*Surgery*) and the 1992 *Orlandó*, the male figure appeared simultaneously as actor, as Miklós Székely B., as father, as partner, as the owner of a dog, and as a bird-headed creature. In a similar manner, every performer who ever appeared in Szentkirályi—women, children, civilians, amateurs, professionals, dogs, cats, ducks, sheep, hens, and roosters—was at once themselves, then a role, then themselves again, becoming identical with all living and non-living entities present within the space of play. The family spoke partly about Monori's life and partly lived their own lives on stage, yet the scenes fractured the act of writing life onto the stage: they did not close into an interpretive framework, but evoked fragments of past or present lived realities.

The unpremeditated nature of the working method, the use of one's own life material, the fragmented dramaturgy of the performances, and the consistent rejection of linearity can be related to John Keats's concept of "negative capability". This capability compels both spectator and performer to coexist with uncertainty and indeterminacy. As Keats formulates it: "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[14] Both the scenes and the stage meanings of the human and animal performers remain continuously ambiguous: motifs can be identified, yet it is palpable that the emphasis does not lie on symbolic meanings. As soon as the spectator might begin to articulate what they see or perceive, the narrative shifts.

Although the rehearsal processes were preceded by research, the formulation of a specific artistic concept, and at times even the drafting of a plot outline, the meaning and structure of the performances were not precomposed forms, but open frameworks—at times modifiable in the course of play itself. The creators made use of presence and the immediacy of the situation. Lived reality unfolding in the present time of the performance was perceptible and constituted a distinct layer, yet it was minimally contextualised; directorial gestures typically did not emphasise it.

Despite the mixture of theatrical and performative elements, the Szentkirályi performances cannot be considered happenings. Nevertheless, it is worth introducing into the

[13] "We stumble in the half-light, our shadow sways together with the shadows of the performers on the cave-like wall of the basement; it is impossible to know exactly who they are, just as it is no longer clear who we ourselves are." HORVÁTH, Péter, "Érintő", *Színházi Élet* 1, No. 7, (1990): 11.

[14] John KEATS, *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, ed. by Sidney COLVIN (London: Macmillan, 1925), quoted passage on "negative capability," accessed via Project Gutenberg, https://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Keats-NegativeCapability.html.

discussion the Kirby–Cage debate surrounding the happening, as it sheds light on a quality that also defined the Szentkirályi working method and can be connected to Keats's notion of negative capability. Marvin Carlson juxtaposes the opposing positions of Kirby and Cage: Kirby argues that the happening is organised by the creator's individual conception and that "traditional theatre provides the spectator with a comprehensible 'information system'," whereas Cage warned that regardless of individual intention, any form of intentionality ultimately leads back to conventional message transmission. "According to Cage, the only certain way to avoid this problem is to replace intention (even individual intention) with improvisation and chance".[15] In Szentkirályi, artistic intention manifested precisely in the avoidance of intentionality, though not exclusively in the form of improvisation and randomness articulated by Cage. The performances, created over rehearsal processes lasting several months—sometimes several years—did not target the spectator's inclination toward interpretation; indeterminacy governed not only the performances, but also the presence of the performers themselves.

The first two productions, *Műtét* (*Surgery*) and *Műtét/Analízis/Orlandó* (*Surgery, Analysis, Orlando*), used little or no text; explicit autobiographical references appeared only sporadically and were not clearly identifyable.[16] Contemporary reviews expressed interest and acceptance alongside incomprehension. "Our categories are insufficient for it." wrote Péter Horváth after *Műtét* (*Surgery*) in 1990,[17] while Péter Esterházy formulated after seeing *Orlandó* in 1992: "There is no answer, because we cannot ask a question".[18] In his writings following the first premiere in 1990, Péter Molnár Gál emphasised the relationship between the performers as a defining aspect of the acting: "Two people stand barely twenty centimetres apart. Yet the abyss between them is unbridgeable. They are close to one another, but separated by an insurmountable distance."[19] Molnár Gál's texts repeatedly reveal that, in the present time of the performance, the personal relationship between the performers exerted a stronger effect than autobiographical reference alone—this relationship being not merely professional in nature, but a product of their lived lives.

In the performance *A levél* (*The Letter*), it is stated with regard to Székely B.'s stage identity that he "plays" Dr. Dezső Magyar. This name refers to a real person: Monori's former husband and the author of the screenplay *A levél*. Based on audience responses, it can be assumed that spectators were able to follow—if not from other sources, then certainly from the programme booklet—that Dezső Magyar was a film director and the screenwriter of *A levél*, and that the performance involved an act of remembrance. However, not all spectators could have been familiar with the biographical aspects of the life story involved.[20] Until that

[15] Marvin CARLSON, "A szemiotikai értelmezhetőség és hiánya az előadásban," trans. by NYISZTOR Miklós, in *A színpadtól a színpadig. Válogatás Marvin Carlson színházi írásaiból*, ed. by KURDI Mária and CSIKAI Zsuzsa (Szeged: AMERICANA eBooks, 2014).

[16] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *Műtét/Analízis/Orlandó (Surgery, Analysis, Orlando)*, directed by Miklós SZÉKELY B. and Lili MONORI. Budapest, Szentkirályi Street 4, basement, 1992.

[17] HORVÁTH, "Érintő", 11.

[18] ESTERHÁZY Péter, "Egy kékharisnya följegyzéseiből – Monori, Székely B.", *Élet és Irodalom*, July 3, 1992, 3.

[19] MOLNÁR GÁL Péter, „Szentkirályi utca 4", *Népszabadság*, March 10, 1990, 9.

[20] "On the 2nd, *A levél* (*The Letter*), the premiere of the theatre operating in the basement at 4 Szentkirályi Street, District VIII, was created in memory of Dezső Magyar's screenplay *A levél*. A remembrance of an old scene from an unmade film, of a single day of shooting from 1972. The basic idea was the short

point, the lives of the performers had primarily been known to spectators as the biographies of creative artists, given that both had already achieved considerable professional success. In this context, one may think, among other things, of Székely B.'s performance in the title role of the Stúdió K production of *Woyzeck*,[21] and of Monori's film *Kilenc hónap* (*Nine Months)*[22], in which she gave birth on camera to her son, Sándor Farkas Horváth.

In analysing the spectator–creator relationship, it is worth turning to the concepts of autobiography and autofiction derived from literary theory. Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiographical pact as a dual contract based on the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist, a pact that either exists or does not exist.[23] Presenting Manuel Alberca's theory of autofiction, Dóra Faix introduces the concept of the "ambivalent pact," which, according to Alberca, occupies a position between the autobiographical and the novelistic pact, "on no one's land," and is based on the constant, undecidable co-movement of autobiographical and fictional readings.[24]

In Szentkirályi, real life history, reality, and fiction are interwoven, and the real male–female relationship between the Monori–Székely B. pair became perceptible in the performances, a fact also registered by contemporary criticism. Spectators—generally acquaintances—knew whom they were watching: the family members living together wrote and staged the performances, drawing on their own life material and stories, appearing together with their own children and domestic animals. At the same time, the arc of the performances did not follow classical dramaturgy; they did not narrate a life story or an event through linear narration. In his writings, Péter Molnár Gál repeatedly emphasised the present-time quality of the relationship between the two founding members on stage, recording primarily its atmosphere and tonal register. In one of his characteristic descriptions, Molnár Gál writes:

> "In their work, dramatic action does not consist of attractive confrontations: they present the routine of coexistence, the bored familiarity with one another's deeply guarded secrets. They do not expend energy even on indignation, let alone on outbursts. They love one another to the point of boredom. They understand one another's virtues with hatred. 'I'm going to the post office' or 'I'm going to buy milk!'—these everyday routine actions are of the same value as scenes in which a husband gives birth to a horse or a letter recounting a life filled with tragic turns is read aloud. Nothing happens to them. Everything happens with them."[25]

---

story *A levél* from the Soviet short story collection *Kemény szerelem* (*Hard Love*), which had been published shortly before and then suddenly placed on the index. The director of the unrealised film was Dezső Magyar, the cinematographer Elemér Ragályi, the writers Péter Dobai and Dezső Magyar, and the leading actors Lili Monori, Gábor Bódy, and György Cserhalmi. The creators and performers of the production were: Lili Monori, Miklós Székely B., Sándor Farkas Horváth, Gina — now a dog, Totyi the duck." *Pesti Műsor*, May 10, 2001, 42.

[21] Stúdió K Theatre: *Woyzeck*, directed by Tamás FODOR and the ensemble, 1977.

[22] *Nine Months*, directed by Márta MÉSZÁROS, 1975.

[23] Philippe LEJEUNE, "Az önéletírói paktum", trans. by VARGA Róbert, in *Önéletírás, élettörténet, napló*, ed. by Z. VARGA Zoltán (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2003), 17–76.

[24] FAIX Dóra, "Az autofikció Spanyolországban", *Filológiai Közlöny* 66, No. 2 (2020): 26–44.

[25] Péter Molnár Gál on the performance of *A levél*, premiered in 2001. Péter MOLNÁR GÁL

With regard to the 2007 performance *Argosz földje, én hazám* (*Land of Argos, My Homeland*), Molnár Gál once again confirms the reality-based quality of acting presence:

> "Now the texts of Aeschylus and the material of the Pasolini murder form the subject of the performance. On the literary plane, the inner sediment moves. A private mythology. A murky preliminary confession of suffocating memories. At the lowest level, like lava, personal passion. A psycho-play analysis of hatred accumulated within a lasting, exemplary marriage."[26]

In the Lejeunean sense, the autobiographical space—that is, the authorial–receptive horizon in which the stage figures and real life history are projected onto one another—opens up most distinctly after the 1996 performance *Matiné* (Matinee).[27] From that point on, an increasing number of long interviews were conducted with the creators, in which they recounted in detail the personal references of the performances, including autobiographical events and the fact that they appeared on stage as a family, together with their own children. As Tibor Legát wrote in 1997: "A few minutes after seven o'clock, the rusty cellar door of the building at 4 Szentkirályi Street opened, and to the sound of the DIVSZ march, the forty or fifty curious spectators who had come to see *Matiné* could march down the steep staircase. Five years later, Lili Monori and Miklós Székely B. are presenting a premiere again. In pioneer uniforms, with their daughter and a legless duck, Totyi, they evoke the 1960s."[28] In the same interview, Monori states: "But here everything is about personal matters; *Matiné*, for example, was created in memory of my mother."[29]

From this point onward, based on the published reviews and interviews, spectators could know that this was a theatre inspired by the creators' own lives, and that, as a family theatre, the living representatives of these sources of inspiration were present on stage. It can therefore be assumed that, for the small stable audience as well as for occasional spectators, the autobiographical potential of the performances constituted shared knowledge even when explicit, identifiable autobiographical references did not appear clearly within the textual or motivic structures.

In the 2011 performance *Rókatánc* (*Fox Dance)*[30], multiple narratives of personal involvement were interwoven in a manner characteristic of Szentkirályi; however, the decades-long creative constellation was disrupted, and the personal relationships among the performers shifted to a different level. The premiere of *Rókatánc* took place in a classroom of a language school, as the Workshop had not performed in the Szentkirályi Street basement for seven years by that time. The performers were Natasa Stork, a professional actress and family friend; Béla Újlaki, a resident of Kisoroszi and a civilian performer; Lili Monori; and Rozália Székely, Monori's daughter, who had been involved in Szentkirályi productions since childhood.

The video recording of the performance was made by Miklós Székely B., who positioned himself on the threshold of the classroom, at

---

Péter, "A levél", *Népszabadság*, June 5, 2001, 9.

[26] Péter MOLNÁR GÁL, "Monori meg a telefonkönyv", *Mozgó Világ* 33, No. 7. (2007): 103–106.

[27] LEJEUNE, *Önéletírás…*, 17–76.

[28] LEGÁT Tibor, "Egyszerűen ez lett a sorsunk", *Magyar Narancs*, February 13, 1997, accessed September 28, 2025, https://magyarnarancs.hu/film2/egyszeruen_ez_lett_a_sorsunk_monori_lili_es_szekely_b_miklos_szinmuveszek-56482.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop: *Rókatánc (Fox Dance)*, directed by Lili MONORI, Budapest: Dover Language Centre, Király Street 9, 2011.

the edge of the playing area, yet in front of the audience and within their field of vision. By that time, he was no longer collaborating with Monori, and they had separated in their private lives as well. Although he did not participate in the rehearsal process, and there was no prior agreement among the creators regarding how he, as the camera operator—beyond this task—would take part in the event, his presence contributed to the performance's mechanism of effect. The production was created in memory of Totyi the duck, an important animal performer of the Szentkirályi basement period; this theme appeared openly, and the performance was autobiographical in the sense that it addressed significant elements of the shared real-life history of the three people on stage—Lili Monori, Miklós Székely B., and Rozália Székely.

Within the performance, Monori articulates remembrance in the first person singular. She delivers the following monologue facing the audience in a room of approximately fifteen square meters:

> "I thought that about this—about this building and Szentkirályi—I would somehow say something. Something would come to mind, somehow, and I submitted a grant application to the National Cultural Fund. In the meantime, every three or four months I am in an operating room, so not… afterwards it takes two months for my brain to recover. And the other thing is that I cannot remember. That is, memory is as if it were a copy. Some kind of copy. And I think that we are what we have lost. So it will be about Totyi. The memoirs of a little duck. A legless duckling. It had legs at first, it even ran, then while running it lost its leg."[31]

Monori delivered this monologue turned toward the audience, while the other performers participated in the outer circle of the first-person narrative. As far as I recall, such utterances were hardly rehearsed collectively. Monori knew that this monologue would be part of the performance and prepared for it alone.[32] In the video recording, one can observe that at various dramaturgical points Monori looks into the camera for extended moments, her gaze marked by sadness. On the other side of the lens stood Székely B. Given the small size of the room and Monori's central position within the playing area, neither the direction nor the depth of her gaze could escape the spectators' attention. These human gestures directed toward Székely B. were improvised, born of the moment; they were not tested in multiple variations during rehearsals. The staging therefore did not make a prior decision regarding their use, but allowed them to occur.

Monori situates Székely B. within the performance with a single sentence: "And that is why I asked my colleague, Miklós Székely B., to record this—what I cannot, what I cannot." She then looks into the camera again, quietly and sorrowfully. Székely B.'s presence—half outside, half inside—hovers in the uncertainty and randomness characteristic of "negative capability." The staging does not emphasise this plane; the focus remains on Monori's solitary act of remembrance.

The spectators of the performance—Erzsi Sándor, Eszter Novák, Péter Kárpáti, Júlia Ungár, Orsolya Kővári, and Lajos Verasztó—were long-time acquaintances of the family and of Szentkirályi. The interpretability of personal involvement was therefore tied, in part, to specific persons. In the video recording, one can see and hear how, at the beginning of the event, an image of the iron cellar door of the Szentkirályi basement was passed around on the screen of a prop laptop.

[31] Text spoken in the performance *Rókatánc*. Transcribed from the performance recording.

[32] The framing of my use of personal memories is still in progress.

Someone from the audience identifies it aloud: "Szentkirályi." The person had been there; they recognised the entrance from a small image, and the emotional involvement was audible in their voice. Another layer of personal involvement was generated by a network of motifs rehearsed during the process. The creators incorporated the thesis of Sándor Farkas Horváth both verbally and as an object. In Újlaki's scene, he refers to it as his own writing, holding the document in his hands, its white cover bearing the name "Sándor Farkas Horváth" in large black letters. Natasa Stork laughs and says: "That's not your thesis, it's Sanyika's." Through the diminutive and the naming of ownership, Stork defines herself as personally involved in the act of remembrance and in her relationship with the family.

At the same time, the mode of communal identification or desire for community that appeared in the performances of Újlaki and Stork was almost entirely absent from the arranged or unarranged presence of Miklós Székely B. and Rozália Székely. They did not reflect on their own involvement or on one another within the shared history. On one occasion, Rozália Székely named Székely B. when a fragment of an earlier performance, *Matiné* (*Matinee*), was projected: "Miklós Székely B. is my father; he played the bird-headed creature in *Orlandó*." The direction of *Rókatánc* (*Fox Dance*) placed Monori's past and present relational networks at its centre. While the inclusion of family members constituted a crucial source of inspiration, they did not enact their own lives on stage. In her study published in *Theatron*, Dorka Porogi describes the Szentkirályi performances as follows:

> "This play is diary-like and confessional: the performers present their own lives, their real bodily and emotional relationships, and their connections to the spectators, using them within the framework, world, and language of literary material, placing them in the space of the basement for a form of social thinking together and for acting associations. The bodies existing on stage do not start the play from zero; they know one another".[33]

At the same time, Porogi points to a double absence. On the one hand, from the creators' side, there is a lack of a key to interpretability; on the other hand, contemporary critical writing does not sufficiently reveal the associative structures and conceptual foundations of the performances. As she notes: "Almost every spectator perceives the effect of strong acting presence, yet the relationships among the elements of the performances, the associative structures, and the theoretical and conceptual bases are not uncovered by reviews and analyses".[34]

In the case of a dramatic theatre production, where actors perform roles written by a playwright and identified by character names, it is easier to unravel the internal relational system of the work. In the case of Szentkirályi, however, the difficulty of interpretation may have been caused precisely by the complexity of genre classification—by the unique mixture of theatrical and performative elements, autobiography, and autofiction. The question then arises of how one can speak about the personal register of an artistic work when it unfolds live before the spectator's eyes: not as quotation, not in objectified form, not symbolically, but as bare reality. Stage life reality was not contextualised by direction; *it simply occurred*. This experience thus became a significant register of the performances' mechanism of effect, yet for the spectator it remained only partially verbalisable.

---

[33] Dorka Porogi, "Színészet, mint önálló formanyelvű művészet. A Monori–Székely B.-játékról és a Szentkirályi Műhely három előadásáról," *Theatron* 15, No. 2 (2021): 21–41., 37.

[34] Ibid.

Bibliography

Artpool Art Research Centre. "Kápolnatárlatok 1973 – Kronológia". Accessed September 28, 2025, https://artpool.hu/boglar/1973/kronologia73.html.

CARLSON, Marvin. *From Stage to Stage. Selected Writings on Theatre by Marvin Carlson.* Translated by NYISZTOR Miklós. Edited by KURDI Mária and CSIKAI Zsuzsa. Szeged: AMERICANA eBooks, 2014.

ESTERHÁZY Péter. "Egy kékharisnya följegyzéseiből – Monori, Székely B.". *Élet és Irodalom*, July 3, 1992.

FAIX Dóra. "Az autofikció Spanyolországban". *Filológiai Közlöny* 66, No. 2 (2020): 26–44.

Halász Péter: hol vagy?. Színház.net, July 28, 2019. Accessed September 28, 2025, https://szinhaz.net/2019/07/28/halasz-peter-hol-vagy/.

HORVÁTH Péter. "Érintő". *Színházi Élet* 1, No. 7 (1990): 11.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. *Avantgárd – színház – politika*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006.

JÁKFALVI Magdolna. „A nézés öröme". In *Átvilágítás. A magyar színház európai kontextusban.* Edited by IMRE Zoltán, 99–112. Budapest: Áron Kiadó, 2005.

KEATS, John. *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*. Edited by Sidney COLVIN. London: Macmillan, 1925. Online edition: Project Gutenberg. https://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Keats-NegativeCapability.html.

LEGÁT Tibor. "Egyszerűen ez lett a sorsunk". *Magyar Narancs*, February 13, 1997. Accessed September 28, 2025, https://magyarnarancs.hu/film2/egyszeruen_ez_lett_a_sorsunk_monori_lili_es_szekely_b_miklos_szinmuveszek-56482.

LEJEUNE, Philippe. *Önéletírás, élettörténet, napló*, translated by VARGA Róbert. Edited by Z. VARGA Zoltán, 17–76. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2003.

MOLNÁR GÁL Péter. "Szentkirályi utca 4.". *Népszabadság*, March 10, 1990. 9.

MOLNÁR GÁL Péter. "A levél". *Népszabadság*, June 5, 2001. 9.

MOLNÁR GÁL Péter. "Monori és a telefonkönyv". *Mozgó Világ* 33, No. 7. (2007): 103–106.

N.N. "Blattner Géza". *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*. Accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyar-eletrajzi-lexikon-7428D/b-74700/blattner-geza-74C41/.

POROGI Dorka. "Színészet, mint önálló formanyelvű művészet. A Monori–Székely B.-játékról és a Szentkirályi Műhely három előadásáról". *Theatron* 15, No. 2 (2021): 21–41.

SÁNDOR L. István, ed. *Szabadságszigetek. Fodor Tamás és a Stúdió K Színház*. Budapest: Selinunte, 2007.

SCHULLER Gabriella. "MŰ/EMLÉK/MŰ. Halász Péter: *Mű emlék (Hatalom Pénz Hírnév Szépség Szeretet)*, Kamra, 1994.". *Theatron* 13, No. 1 (2014): 33–36.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.41 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 41–52.

Károly Tamkó Sirató and His Rediscovery by the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde

DÁNIEL FENYŐ

Abstract: The continuity between the Hungarian historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde in terms of poetical and habitual similarities is also a conscious labour on tradition. At the time of the emergence of the neo-avant-garde, artists of the historical avant-garde—despite of the adverse circumstances during Hungarian state socialism, but due to their international recognition—possessed a symbolic authority and historical relevance that could not be ignored by those who proclaimed themselves as an artist of the neo-avant-garde. However, the transformation of the historical avant-garde into a tradition by the neo-avant-garde involves processes of sorting: neo-avant-garde artists selected and chose particular elements of the historical avant-garde that seemed relevant to them, based on their own interests and the surrounding context. Nevertheless, the historical avant-garde artists were still alive at the time of the emergence of the neo-avant-garde, thus they experienced their oeuvre becoming tradition. Consequently, they had the opportunity to intervene in this process through their statements and reflections. This paper discusses the example of Károly Tamkó Sirató, whose *Dimensionist Manifesto* was elaborated in the 1930s and became a point of reference for certain circles of the neo-avant-garde in the 1970s. The peculiarity of this case is that while his earlier work became more valuable, Károly Tamkó Sirató did not consider dimensionism to be directly continuable during this period; instead, he proposed a different method to revive the tradition of the historical avant-garde.

The Possibilities of Avant-Garde Continuity

In Hungarian literary discourse, the possibility of continuity between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde has received less attention than in international neo-avant-garde studies. For instance, rupture is a frequently used notion to describe the history of Hungarian avant-garde literature. It suggests that the continuity of the avant-garde diminished as a result of the two world wars.[1] Answering the question of continuity was further complicated by how state socialism treated the historical avant-garde. Due to the cultural policy of state socialism, art that was endorsed and had a regular presence in museums and exhibition spaces in Western Europe and the United States after World War II was obstructed and mostly remained hidden from the broader public in Hungary; for instance, a representative collection of neo-avant-garde art and theory published in 1981 did not dwell on Hungarian neo-avant-garde movements.[2] At the same time, Hungarian avant-garde practices that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s were not admitted by

The paper is a reorganised and reconsidered version one of my articles. FENYŐ Dániel, "»Ki vágtatott még a holnapba így? – Senki!«: A történeti avantgárd és a neoavantgárd folytonosságának kérdése Kassák Lajos és Tamkó Sirató Károly példáján keresztül", *Helikon* 71, 2. sz. (2025): 712–742.

[1] KÁLMÁN C. György, *Élharcok és arcélek: A korai magyar avantgárd költészet és kánon* (Budapest: Balassi, 2008).

[2] KRÉN Katalin and MARX József, eds., *A neo-avantgarde* (Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 1981).

contemporaries as a continuation of the historical avant-garde, but rather as derivatives of international artistic movements, such as Fluxus, Pop Art, Op art, concrete poetry, and visual poetry. In the cultural atmosphere of state socialism, these tendencies were condemned as imported Western fashions that embarrassed and provoked socialist lifestyle and aesthetic norms; this perception contributed to the marginalisation of the movement and forced the Hungarian neo-avant-garde into the second public sphere.[3]

After the Hungarian regime change in 1989, rupture continued to function as a constitutive term in discussions of avant-garde continuity. By this time, the growing interest in neo-avant-garde literature was partially based on the recognition of the historical avant-garde, but to a greater extent on the canonisation of postmodern literature. Consequently, the neo-avant-garde was placed in a teleological narrative of literary history that considers it a precursor to postmodern literature.[4] Nevertheless, in recent years, research on the continuity of Hungarian avant-garde has gained momentum. In alignment with international avant-garde studies, Dadaism has been identified as a link between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde through its subversive, incoherent, and capricious attitudes, which remain alive in neo-avant-garde practices.[5] Recent studies on avant-garde continuity have focused on structural and poetic congeniality, emphasising parallels and similarities.[6]

Nevertheless, the avant-garde tradition could not be conceived merely as an abstract construct. The well-known debate between Peter Bürger and Hal Foster on the status and value of the neo-avant-garde offers an example of this in a particular way. From Bürger's perspective, regarding the concept of the avant-garde as a realisation of modernity, the neo-avant-garde may indeed appear as a theoretical scandal.[7] From this viewpoint, the neo-avant-garde represents an inauthentic repetition of the historical avant-garde that undermines its subversiveness. As Bürger argued, "Neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life".[8] Hal Foster challenged Bürger's argument. He argued that it was precisely the neo-avant-garde that accomplished the project of the avant-garde, insofar as it critically reflected on the tension between the boundaries of everyday life, art, and institutionalisation.[9] Thus, Foster reversed the relation between the two avant-gardes: he did not consider the neo-avant-

[3] Katalin CSEH-VARGA, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: The Art of the Second Public Sphere* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023).
[4] DÁNÉL Mónika, *Nyelv-karnevál: Magyar neo-avantgárd alkotások poétikája* (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2016), 90–97.
[5] KAPPANYOS András, "Másodszorra elvész az első?: A »klasszikus« avantgárd és a neo-avantgárd közötti kontinuitás kérdéséhez", *Palócföld* 55, No. 3. (2009): 68–74.
[6] Éva FORGÁCS, "Revolt and Authority: From Kassák to Erdély: Dada in the Hungarian Avan-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde", in *Cannibalizing the Canon: Dada Techniques in East-Central-Europe*, ed. by Oliver A. I. BOTAR, Irina M. DENISCHENKO, Gábor DOBÓ and Merse Pál SZEREDI, 353–371 (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2024).
[7] Peter BÜRGER, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael SHAW (Minneapolis: Manchester University Press – University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[8] BÜRGER, *Theory…*, 58.
[9] "*This is to advance three claims: (1) that the institution of art is grasped as such not with the historical avant-garde but with the neo-avant-garde; (2) that the neo-avant-garde at its best adresses this institution with a creative analyis az once specific and deconstructive […]; and (3) that, rather than cancel the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time – a first time that, again, is theoretically endless.*" Hal FOSTER, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", *October* 70 (1994): 5–32., 20. [emphasis in the original]

garde to be an unsuccessful imitation, but, based on the Freudian–Lacanian notion of deferred action *(Nachträglichkeit)* he conceptualised it as a traumatic return capable of revising the internal contradictions that led to the failure of the historical avant-garde.

Although these positions aim to establish a widely applicable theoretical framework for the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, they also raise important questions about where the two authors derived their assessments from. Bürger's critique of the neo-avant-garde was influenced by the representatives of the historical avant-garde, especially former Dadaists, whose publications from the 1960s and 1970s targeted the so-called Neo-Dada.[10] On the other hand, Foster's theory does not project expectations attributed to the historical avant-garde onto the neo-avant-garde; rather, he examines the succession of the former from the perspective of the latter. These theoretical standpoints were thus strongly shaped by how the avant-gardist and neo-avant-gardist actors understood their own historical position and their relation to each other. All this draws attention to a possible approach, which examines continuity not through abstract interpretative models of the avant-garde, but through the canonisation and self-canonisation strategies maintained by both the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde actors.

The relationship between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde in terms of poetical and habitual similarities is also a conscious labour on tradition. At the time of the emergence of the neo-avant-garde, artists of historical avant-garde, such as Lajos Kassák, despite the adverse circumstances of Hungarian state socialism, but due to their international recognition, possessed a symbolic authority and historical relevance that could not be ignored by those who proclaimed themselves artists of the neo-avant-garde. However, the transformation of the historical avant-garde into a tradition by the neo-avant-garde involves processes of sorting: neo-avant-garde artists selected particular elements of the historical avant-garde that seemed relevant to them, based on their own interests and the surrounding context. Nevertheless, the historical avant-garde artists were still alive at the time of the emergence of the neo-avant-garde, thus they experienced their oeuvre becoming tradition. Consequently, they had the opportunity to intervene in this process through their statements and reflections.

This paper discusses the example of Károly Tamkó Sirató, whose *Dimensionist Manifesto* was elaborated in the 1930s, and became a point of reference for certain circles of the neo-avant-garde in the 1970s. The peculiarity of this case is that while his earlier work became more valuable, Károly Tamkó Sirató did not consider dimensionism to be directly continuable during this period, instead, he proposed a different method to revive the tradition of the historical avant-garde.

Károly Tamkó Sirató and the Currentness of Dimensionism

Károly Tamkó Sirató is a distinguished figure of the Hungarian historical avant-garde, who is also relevant when speaking on the continuity with the neo-avant-garde. Especially his experiments in visual poetry have found resonance in the neo-avant-garde, as András Kappanyos argued, for example, the so-called neo-avant-garde anthology entitled *Ver(s)ziók* (1982) contains numerous works engaged with his oeuvre.[11] Tamkó Sirató did not solely witness the emergence of the neo-avant-

[10] Hubert VAN DEN BERG, "On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde", in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. by Dietrich SCHUENEMANN, 63–74 (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2005), 68.

[11] KAPPANYOS András, "A magyar avantgárd poétikai spektruma – és két későn érkezett ajánlat", *Híd* 83, No. 7. (2019): 74–84., 81.

garde, but was also able to follow its most active period until his death in 1980. All this also means that, while he witnessed his own work becoming part of the tradition appropriated by the neo-avant-garde, he had the opportunity to accompany this process with substantive reflections, and to confront the emerging tradition with his own renewed late artistic aspirations of the 1970s.

The author is best known for his *Dimensionist Manifesto*, which he published in 1936 while living in Paris. This manifesto, unlike any previous avant-garde manifesto, does not proclaim a distinct aesthetic programme. Tamkó Sirató regarded it as summary of the theory of art development.[12] According to his concept, the various art forms are continuously enriched by a new dimension; thus, development of art can be described by the formula N+1. According to this model, poetry steps out of the line and enters the plane; painting moves into the spatial dimension from the plane; sculpture conquers the fourth dimension; and at the end of the process there is the utopian Cosmic Art: "The human being, rather than regarding the art object from the exterior, becomes the centre and five-sensed subject of the artwork, which operates within a closed and completely controlled cosmic space."[13] At the time of its publication, the manifesto did not stand out for its originality. Its main observations and aims were already circulating within the avant-garde artistic thought of the period; nevertheless, it successfully synthesised aspirations that had previously run in parallel.[14] The project's later recognition grew through the fact that the signatures of the most prominent avant-garde artists of the time, including Arp, Duchamp, Picabia, Picasso, Kandinsky, Miró, and Moholy-Nagy, came to be attached to the manifesto.

Tamkó Sirató's tragedy lies in the fact that before his initiative could develop into a movement under his leadership—indeed, only a few days after the manifesto was released—he was forced to move back to Hungary due to a serious illness. As a consequence of his decades-long medical treatment, the development of World War II, and later the rigorous cultural policy of state socialism, his previous French network ceased, and, with the exception of the 1937/2 special issue of the Parisian *Plastique* published despite Tamkó Sirató's absence, dimensionism was interrupted. Although Tamkó Sirató produced only a limited number of works that can be considered dimensionist in the 1930s, his manifesto remained important to him in later years as well: he regarded it as his contribution to the international avant-garde movement, and on his postcards referred to himself as "the author of the *Manifeste Dimensioniste.*"[15]

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, he deemed dimensionism primarily as an object of historical significance rather than as a living artistic movement. Hence, in an interview he did in 1977, he explained why the influence of dimensionism is lacking in his later works: "Dimensionism does not concern me today […] I would only be interested if I could be in Paris again. However, at the age of sixty-eight, I have hardly any possibility of that."[16] Perhaps

[12] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly, *A Dimenzionista manifesztum története: A dimenzionizmus (nemeuklideszi művészetek) I. albuma* (Budapest: Artpool–Magyar Műhely Kiadó, 2010).

[13] Károly TAMKÓ SIRATÓ, "The Dimensionist Manifesto", trans. by Oliver BOTAR, *Artpool Art Research Centre*, accessed: 20.01.2026., https://artpool.hu/TamkoSirato/manifest.html.

[14] LENGYEL Imre Zsolt, "Prokruszthész vagy Prométheusz?", *Jelenkor* 54, No. 10. (2010): 1099–1103.

[15] Károly Tamkó Sirató to Endre Bajomi Lázár, Budapest, 12nd December 1958 – 9th October 1978. Estate of Endre Bajomi Lázár, MNMKK PIM Manuscript Collection, call number: V 3509/3

[16] SZOMBATHY Bálint, "Kérdések Tamkó Sirató Károlyhoz", *Híd* 41, No. 3. (1977): 378–382., 381.

because of the concurrence of the avant-garde re-evaluation in the West and the anticipated but unrealised success of dimensionism in the 1930s, Tamkó Sirató was commissioned by the Hungarian General Publishing Directorate in 1959 to recollect the history of the *Dimensionist Manifesto*.[17] The monograph titled *A dimenzionizmus I. albuma* [First Album of Dimensionism] was most likely completed by 1966, but remained unpublished during Tamkó Sirató's lifetime, appearing only in 2010.

Despite Tamkó Sirató's assessment of the contemporary relevance of dimensionism in the 1960s and 1970s, neo-avant-garde artists nevertheless found utilisable and appropriate elements within it, which were inscribed into their sense of avant-garde tradition. The following chapters examine three distinct ways of adopting Tamkó Sirató's works from the 1930s: the first concerns the approach of *Magyar Műhely* in the 1960s, which emphasised the Dadaist and Surrealist aspects of his oeuvre; the second focuses on how other neo-avant-garde artists reinvented dimensionism in the 1970s; and the third concerns Tamkó Sirató's self-interpretation and his proposal for how his dimensionist works might be applied by the neo-avant-garde in a proper way with regard to their contemporary relevance.

Károly Tamkó Sirató in the View of Magyar Műhely

The journal *Magyar Műhely* [Atelier Hongrois] was founded in 1962 by young adult writers who emigrated to Paris after 1956. It provided a publishing platform for progressive artists who had previously been marginalised by the cultural policy of state socialism and became one of the few Hungarian periodicals committed to neo-avant-garde art and literature. In 1963, the editors of the journal—Pál Nagy, Tibor Papp, and János Parancs—together with István Kormos and Béla Pomogáts, planned a comprehensive anthology titled *Magyar Orpheus* [Hungarian Orpheus], containing works by thirty contemporary authors. The project "intended to restore the true values of Hungarian poetry, which had been distorted by both the Rákosi and the Kádár regimes".[18] The anthology was never published; however, the list compiled by the five selectors was preserved in Pál Nagy's memoirs. Although the finalised list did not include it, Tibor Papp and Pál Nagy also proposed Károly Tamkó Sirató's poem *Igen* [Yes]. Despite the fact that the editors of *Magyar Műhely* were familiar with Tamkó Sirató's dimensionist works, and even though this poem uses unconventional typographical layout, for the editors the relevance of the poem lay not in this feature, but rather in its Dadaist, ironic, and disseminative poetics. The observation is notable insofar as it suggests that, despite acknowledging the historical significance of other distinguished dimensionist poems such as *Budapest/Paris* (1927), the editors selected the more conventional *Igen* as corresponding to "the true value of Hungarian poetry." As is obvious from a review by Tibor Papp of Tamkó Sirató's poetry collection,[19] what the editors of *Magyar Műhely* primarily considered as an honourable feature of his poetry was the use of Dadaist and Surrealist language characterised by unusual compound words and unexpected connotations, as well as the incorporation of vocabulary drawn from the hard sciences, which contributed to semantic openness and dissolved the ethos of "committed poetry" that dominated Hungarian literature under state socialism.

Károly Tamkó Sirató himself actively sought contact with neo-avant-garde artists as well. Around 1962, he reached out to the

[17] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ, *A Dimenzionista manifesztum…*, 106.

[18] NAGY Pál, *Journal in-time: Él(e)tem 2* (Budapest: Phoenix Könyvek, 2002), 200.

[19] PAPP Tibor, "Szavak hatásfoka", *Magyar Műhely* 35 (1969): 60–64.

editors of the *Magyar Műhely*,[20] in whom he later recognised the new wave of the avant-garde. This is evidenced by his enthusiastic letter from 1969 to the journal's editorial board:

> "It is a fact that you are riding at the forefront of Hungarian intellectual life, and I have to nail this with great appreciation. And with great joy as well. Because there is finally progress and moving forward!! I, who had been waiting patiently for years, 'until the time for miracles comes,' see this with great enthusiasm and exult."[21]

In the continuation of the letter, Tamkó Sirató recommends to the editors of *Magyar Műhely* his collection of Surrealist poetry translations, which had been published in the Hungarian journal *Híd* [Bridge] in Novi Sad:

> "I would like to shift Hungarian literature a little out of this painful stagnation. That is why I also translated the peaks of French Surrealist poetry [...] In this way [published in Novi Sad, not in Hungary – D. F.] my goal is to get the translations in front of the Hungarian readership, which was precisely what could not be achieved. Because here at home they don't know what Surrealism is."[22]

Although Tamkó Sirató published the *Dimensionist Manifesto* in *Híd* in 1966, it is crucial that in 1969 he published translations of French surrealist poetry, and in his translator's note marked Surrealism as the "most artistically modern" movement of world literature.[23] Thus, Tamkó Sirató was not concerned with the revival of dimensionism; instead, he regarded his role as maintaining and broadcasting the achievements of the historical avant-garde for the contemporary Hungarian literary and artistic scene. Such knowledge, as he conceived it, was essential to the renewal of contemporary Hungarian literature. In the 1960s, it was precisely this programme that he found an intellectual partner in the editorial boards of *Magyar Műhely* and *Híd* alike.

An Attempt to Revive Dimensionism

The canonisation of Tamkó Sirató's dimensionism can be traced not primarily to *Magyar Műhely*, which later became known for visual poetry, but rather to the next generation of Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists, born in the 1950s, especially András Petőcz, Gábor Tóth, and Bálint Szombathy. All of them were engaged in maintaining Károly Tamkó Sirató's dimensionism. The rediscovery of dimensionism by the neo-avant-garde artists may also be understood as a process through which they identified it as a powerful tool for dismantling rigid boundaries during the Cold War.[24] This statement is pertinent, but the present study proposes a different approach. In this context, it is also productive to speak of a nominalist treatment of tradition—a mode of canonisation that unsettles established assumptions about the avant-garde's genuine drive toward innovation. Hungarian neo-

[20] Károly Tamkó Sirató to the editors of *Magyar Műhely*, Budapest, [1962–63] – 4th November 1970. *Magyar Műhely*'s Repository, MNMKK PIM Manuscript Collection, call number: V. 6000/718/1 (around 1962–1963).
[21] Károly Tamkó Sirató to the editors of *Magyar Műhely*, Budapest, [1962–63] – 4th November 1970. *Magyar Műhely*'s Repository, MNMKK PIM Manuscript Collection, call number: V. 6000/718/8 (21st April 1969).
[22] Károly Tamkó Sirató to the editors of *Magyar Műhely*...
[23] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly, trans., "A francia szürrealista líra csúcsai", *Híd* 33, No. 1. (1969), appendix.
[24] Katalin CSEH-VARGA, "The plus one dimension", in *Anti-Atlas: Critical Area Studies from the East to the West*, ed. by Tim BEASLEY-MURRAY, Wendy BRACEWELL and Michał MURAWSKI, 137–145 (London: UCL Press, 2025).

avant-gardists regarded Károly Tamkó Sirató as an artist ahead of his time, whose lack of success was attributed not only to adverse historical circumstances but also to the fact that, as a pioneer and a precursor of intermedial art, he lacked the technical conditions required to fully accomplish dimensionism. In the 1970s, because of the development of technology, these neo-avant-garde artists saw dimensionism as something that could be revived and completed. They did not engage with this project's utopian traits, however; instead, they treated it as an intermedial theory and retrospectively supplemented it with further artworks.

An example of the nominalist treatment of tradition is Gábor Tóth's dimensionist album from 1972.[25] In the early 1970s, Tóth was a follower of and informal secretary to Tamkó Sirató.[26] Tóth has a concealed but extensive oeuvre, including conceptual works, sound poetry, Fluxus, and mail art; dimensionism therefore represents only a brief period of his career.[27] Nevertheless, his dimensionist works display a strong resemblance to Tamkó Sirató's pieces, and any inquirer can hardly perceive them as anything other than an extension of Tamkó Sirató's dimensionist art. In his article *A konkrét költészet útjai I.* [The Paths of Concrete Poetry I.] from 1977, Szombathy described Tóth's role in exactly the same way: "The early recognition and objective of dimensionism to involve disciplines, linguistics, and information theory was accomplished in Gábor Tóth's early works, thereby proving anew the pertinence and viability of the dimensionist concept of art".[28] Nevertheless, all this was perceptible only from the perspective of the neo-avant-garde.

In the perception of the neo-avant-garde, the utopian character and the urge for the new inherent in dimensionism was transformed into intermedial art practices. A comparison between Tamkó Sirató's *Budapest/Paris*[29] and the eighth piece of Gábor Tóth's dimensionist album is illustrative.[30] The former was created in 1927, the latter in 1972, there is a forty-five-year difference between them. Despite the gap, the two works are strikingly similar in form. In both cases, the direction of reading is guided by arrows that lead toward keywords; hence, they function as illustrative diagrams. The significant difference concerns the object of illustration. *Budapest* aimed to illustrate the exploitation of workers in industrialised metropolitan areas. Tamkó Sirató described the work as "presenting the social structure of a capitalist metropolis, with the dynamic depiction of proletarian counterforces ready at any moment to blow up the capitalist 'superstructure'."[31] In the case of Gábor Tóth, this kind of direct political utopianism is absent; rather, he is concerned primarily with semiotics and communication theory. In the upper section of his diagram stand individual letters, which are transformed into syllables and words, driven by arrows. This process depicts how the elements of conventional vocabulary and thought are destabilised by the so-called "thought reflex", resulting in unusual Surrealist-Dadaist word montages.

András Petőcz suggests that Tamkó Sirató's dimensionism appeared as a precursor

[25] TÓTH Gábor, "Dimenzionista album '72", *Artpool Art Research Center*, accessed 20.01. 2026., https://artpool.hu/Poetry/Toth/album1.html#01.

[26] SZOMBATHY Bálint, *Art Tot(h)al: Tóth Gábor munkásságának megközelítése 1968–2003* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2004), 47–49.

[27] Ibid., 50–72.

[28] SZOMBATHY Bálint, "A konkrét költészet útjai I", *Új Symposion* 146 (1977): appendix, 9.

[29] Online: TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly, "Paris", *Artpool Art Research Center*, accessed 20.01. 2026., https://artpool.hu/TamkoSirato/Paris.html

[30] TÓTH, "Dimenzionista album...", https://artpool.hu/Poetry/Toth/album1.html#08.

[31] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ, *A Dimenzionista manifesztum...*, 26.

to Hungarian visual poetry of the late 1980s.[32] According to him, the value of dimensionism lies in its heightened attention to visual and linguistic signs, which is in sharp contrast to Kassák's committed art: "Tamkó is an exemplary artist. I find what is most important and characteristic in his work is the concentration on the material and the turning away from social issues: by that I mean an introspective workshop practice, which is an essential requirement of experimental art."[33] Nevertheless, all this reveals more about the way in which the search for tradition was pursued at the time than about the aims of Tamkó Sirató's dimensionism. What neo-avant-garde artists approached as politically unconcerned communication and media theory, had, in its own context of the 1930s, clear political-social aspects. Tamkó Sirató did not regard dimensionism as "introspective workshop practice". Derived from constructivist principles, rather, he conceived that a new form of mass art could be sustained by dimensionism—art capable of making information easily accessible and circulate quickly. While dimensionism became outdated for Tamkó Sirató under Hungarian state socialism, for the neo-avant-garde artists dimensionism became a tool for resisting the politicised public sphere and was regarded as a relevant practice consistant with the international emergence of intermedia art and theory.

Memory of Dimensionism in Károly Tamkó Sirató's Late Poetry

The revival of dimensionism within the Hungarian neo-avant-garde affected Tamkó Sirató's late poetry. By the 1970s, Tamkó Sirató had developed a new poetic programme engaged with esoteric, techno-optimistic, futuristic-cosmic space myths, which he regarded as a continuation of dimensionism.[34] In the poems of *Kozmogrammok* [Cosmograms, 1975] dimensionism came forth as the recollection of the historical avant-garde, and also as a rhetorical figure of the author's self-mythologisation. The late poem's future-oriented romanticism – the celebration of the forthcoming new cosmic world – is also known from the historical avant-garde.

Tamkó Sirató, in his late poetry, remained within the sphere of conventional poetic forms, and he was not interested in non-linear visual writing anymore. This stands in contrast to neo-avant-garde artists, who found in visual poetry the potential of ambiguity, openness, and intermediality. The discrepancy between the historical avant-garde's future-oriented attitude and the neo-avant-garde's engagement with communication and media theory is attested in three poems by Károly Tamkó Sirató published in *Új Symposion*, a Hungarian neo-avant-garde periodical from Novi Sad, in 1979.[35]

All three poems follow a similar structure: they recall Tamkó Sirató's early dimensionist career and have the ambition to reconcile it with his late poetry's futuristic-cosmic manner. For instance, in the poem titled *csak egy* [Only One], Tamkó Sirató draws an analogy between the significance of dimensionism and Dmitri Mendeleev's periodic table: "there is only mess / mess / chaos and / tohuvabohu / in the world of avant-garde art / (just as it was among the atomic masses / before Mendeleev's table) // But my Law of Manifesto / created order / creates order / sets goals / and / explains everything!" ["csak zűr van / zűr / káosz és / tohuvabohu / az avantgárd-művészetek világában / (akárcsak az atomsúlyok közt volt / a Mendelejev táblázat előtt) // De az én Manifesztum-törvényem / rendet teremtett / rendet teremt / célokat tűz ki / és /

[32] PETŐCZ András, "Napjaink vizuális költészeti előfutára: Tamkó Sirató Károly" *Tisztatáj* 42, No. 4. (1988): 62–77.
[33] Ibid., 75–76.
[34] ACZÉL Géza, *Tamkó Sirató Károly* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981), 165.
[35] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly, "Poems [*csak egy*; *rengő töprengő*; *helyzetkép 70–90*]", *Új Symposion* 15, No. 168. (1979): 132–134.

megmagyaráz mindent!"][36] According to Tamkó Sirató, humanity's great future, the Space Age, can be realised by recent art occurring along the course assigned by dimensionism; therefore, he created the appearance of continuity between his artistic periods. Of the three poems, *rengő töprengő* [Quaking Thinking], addressed to Bálint Szombathy, reflects on the conditions of how the historical avant-garde is becoming the tradition of the neo-avantgarde:

"If the limitless run of the avant-garde
has become such an excellent art-principle
and such an excellent culture-trend
WORLD LEADERSHIP
– for France
and if its achievements
by our compatriots fled abroad
with their Hungarian works born on Hungarian soil:
Schöffer, Vasarely, Hajdu, Tóth and others…
– that we adopt, admire, propagate and
imitate… – with 10, 20, 30 years of delay
hence become from cheerful world-firsts to sorrowful late-comers
hereat
quaking quaking thinking
(and ask quietly in private)
Why can't we allow
to our own compatriots fled back
with their Hungarian works born on Hungarian soil
gallop into
– t h e v a n g u a r d
and from here,
from Budapest Center set up
The avant-garde's clearer than daylight
purpose:
the bringing forth the new arts of
Space Age
Atomic Age
Aquarius Age
T h e a r t - r e v o l u t i o n ' s
hovering
S Y N T H E S I S !
My great life-purpose!"

[36] Ibid., 132–133.

"Ha az avantgarde korlátlan futama
oly kitűnő művészet-elv lett
és oly kitűnő kultúr-irány
VILÁGVEZÉRSÉG
– Franciaországnak
és ha eredményeit
külföldre szakadt magyar hazánkfiainak
magyar földből indult magyar munkáit:
Schöffer, Vasarely, Hajdu, Tóth és mások…
– átvesszük, megszeretjük, propagáljuk és
utánozzuk… – 10, 20, 30 éves késéssel
ekként víg világ-elsőkből fájdalmatos után-
ballagókká válunk
akkor
rengek rengek töprengek
(és kérdem négyszemközt halkan)
mért nem engedhetjük meg
saját visszaszakadt magyar hazánkfiainak
hogy magyar földből indult magyar munkáikkal
előre vágtassanak
– a z é l r e
és innen
Budapest-Központból szervezzék meg
az avantgarde most már napnál is világosabb
célját:
az Űrkor
Atomkor
Vízöntőkor
új művészeteinek létrehívását
a m ű v é s z e t - f o r r a d a l m a k
levegőben lebegő
S Z I N T É Z I S É T !
Az én nagy élet-célomat!"[37]

The poem expresses the suspense of how avant-garde artists may encounter the canonisation of avant-garde art by the neo-avant-garde in the 1970s. It clearly discerns two groups. On the one hand, there are the "compatriots who fled abroad"; the world-renowned Hungarian avant-garde artists who, although once stood at the vanguard of art, their belated "propagation" and "imitation" can render the followers of this tradition mere "latecomers". This statement alludes to the fact that by the 1970s the achievements of the historical avant-garde no longer represented advancement but had become part of the past, in accordance with Tamkó Sirató's view. Nevertheless, a second group is introduced: the "compatriots who fled back to Budapest Center", who could assume a leading role in setting up the new revolutionary avant-garde if given the opportunity. The identity of this figure is not difficult to discern from the poem's final section: the succeeding

[37] TAMKÓ SIRATÓ, "*rengő töprengő*…", 133–134.

art of the Space Age, Atomic Age, and Aquarius Age is defined as his own "great life purpose".

Tamkó Sirató thus does not designate the exemplary tradition of the avant-garde solely through dimensionism. Instead, he suggests that his late poetry be followed. Although it is apparently derived from dimensionism, it anticipates a utopian cosmic Space Age. Therefore, in contrast to the nominalist treatment of tradition, Tamkó Sirató proposes to the neo-avant-garde artists who seek to align themselves with his oeuvre, a form of contemporary art that surpasses dimensionism, preserving the utopian and anticipatory character of the historical avant-garde. The avant-garde's relation to history is fundamentally shaped by the desire to come forth and exceed the already existing. In this sense, the notion of following tradition did not primarily mean the adoption of specific poetic practices, but rather a commitment to be timely and current.

Bibliography

ACZÉL Géza. *Tamkó Sirató Károly*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981.

BERG, Hubert van den, "On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde". In *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, edited by Dietrich SCHUENEMANN, 63–74. Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2005.

BÜRGER, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael SHAW. Minneapolis: Manchester University Press – University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

CSEH-VARGA, Katalin. "The plus one dimension". In *Anti-Atlas: Critical Area Studies from the East to the West*, edited by Tim BEASLEY-MURRAY, Wendy BRACEWELL and Michał MURAWSKI, 137–145. London: UCL Press, 2025.

CSEH-VARGA, Katalin. *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: The Art of the Second Public Sphere.* Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023.

DÁNÉL Mónika. *Nyelv-karnevál: Magyar neo-avantgárd alkotások poétikája*. Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2016.

Éva FORGÁCS. "Revolt and Authority: From Kassák to Erdély: Dada in the Hungarian Avan-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde". In *Cannibalizing the Canon: Dada Techniques in East-Central-Europe*, edited by Oliver A. I. BOTAR, Irina M. DENISCHENKO, Gábor DOBÓ and Merse Pál SZEREDI, 353–371. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2024.

FOSTER, Hal. "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?". *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.

KÁLMÁN C. György. *Élharcok és arcélek: A korai magyar avantgárd költészet és kánon.* Budapest: Balassi, 2008.

KAPPANYOS András. "A magyar avantgárd poétikai spektruma – és két később érkezett ajánlat". *Híd* 83, No. 7. (2019): 74–84.

KAPPANYOS András. "Másodszorra elvész az első?: A »klasszikus« avantgárd és a neo-avantgárd közötti kontinuitás kérdéséhez". *Palócföld* 55, No. 3. (2009): 68–74

KRÉN Katalin and MARX József, eds. *A neo-avantgarde.* Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 1981.

LENGYEL Imre Zsolt, "Prokruszthész vagy Prométheusz?". *Jelenkor* 54, No. 10. (2010): 1099–1103

NAGY Pál. *Journal in-time: Él(e)tem 2.* Budapest: Phoenix Könyvek, 2002.

PAPP Tibor. "Szavak hatásfoka". *Magyar Műhely* 35 (1969): 60–64.

PETŐCZ András. "Napjaink vizuális költészeti előfutára: Tamkó Sirató Károly". *Tisztatáj* 42, No. 4. (1988): 62–77.

SZOMBATHY Bálint. "A konkrét költészet útjai I". *Új Symposion* 146 (1977): appendix, 9.

SZOMBATHY Bálint. "Kérdések Tamkó Sirató Károlyhoz". *Híd* 41, No. 3. (1977): 378–382.

SZOMBATHY Bálint. *Art Tot(h)al: Tóth Gábor munkásságának megközelítése 1968–2003.* Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2004.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly (translator). "A francia szürrealista líra csúcsai". *Híd* 33, No. 1. (1969), appendix.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly to Endre Bajomi Lázár, Budapest, 12nd December 1958 – 9th October 1978. Estate of Endre Bajomi Lázár, MNMKK PIM Manuscript Collection, call number: V 3509/3.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly to the editors of *Magyar Műhely*, Budapest, [1962–63] – 4th November 1970. *Magyar Műhely*'s Repository, MNMKK PIM Manuscript Collection, call number: V. 6000/718.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly. "Paris", *Artpool Art Research Center*, accessed 20.01.2026., https://artpool.hu/TamkoSirato/Paris.html.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly. "Poems [*csak egy*; *rengő töprengő*; *helyzetkép 70–90*]", *Új Symposion* 15, No. 168. (1979): 132–134.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ Károly. *A Dimenzionista manifesztum története: A dimenzionizmus (nemeuklideszi művészetek) I. albuma.* Budapest: Artpool–Magyar Műhely Kiadó, 2010.

TAMKÓ SIRATÓ, Károly. "The Dimensionist Manifesto", translated by Oliver BOTAR, *Artpool Art Research Centre*, accessed: 20.01.2026., https://artpool.hu/TamkoSirato/manifest.html.

TÓTH Gábor, "Dimenzionista album '72", *Artpool Art Research Center*, accessed 20.01.2026., https://artpool.hu/Poetry/Toth/album1.html#01.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.53 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 53–61.

Getting Around Lajos Németh. The Myth of "Ordering Unicum" in the Art Historical Discourse of the 1990s

BETTINA SIMON

Abstract: In his last book, published in 1992, Lajos Németh wrote that neo-avant-garde art posed an unresolved problem for Hungarian art history. In recent years, when evaluating research on the neo-avant-garde, art historians have recalled the tasks formulated by Németh as ones that have still not been accomplished. Although Lajos Németh assigned this task to the art historians of the future, his statement also conveys a critique of the present at the time, as well as of the period leading up to the political transition. In my study, I compare Lajos Németh's opinion with the criticism articulated by Éva Forgács in the early 1990s on the neo-avant-garde. I argue that, due to the similarity of their perspectives, the art criticism of the period helps to concretise Lajos Németh's general statements about the era. In other words, attempts to circumvent Lajos Németh contribute to substantiating his inevitability.

Methodological questions concerning the interpretation of Hungarian neo-avant-garde came to the forefront after the political transition.[1] In his posthumously published book, Lajos Németh described the crisis that neo-avant-garde art caused for Hungarian art history. By means of the problem formulation advanced in *Törvény és kétely (Law and Doubt)*, following Hans Belting,[2] Németh connects to the notion of the "death of art history" associated with the avant-garde.[3] Németh explored whether the art of the period had actually undergone, or might have undergone, changes significant enough to warrant a revision of interpretative practices. His suspicion stemmed from the fact that such a phenomenon was atypical in the history of art. He concluded that due to the emergence of conceptual artistic practices, both the concept of art and art interpretation must be reconsidered in order to prevent art history from becoming "merely a descriptive discipline".[4] By this, Németh meant that uncovering historical documents alone is insufficient for art history writing to function as a "value-based discipline".[5] Consequently, thinking about the interpretative possibilities of neo-avant-garde art also entails representing Lajos Németh's position.

Reconsidering the concepts of art interpretation and the artwork itself was not an unexpected theme in Németh's oeuvre. In the preface he wrote to Pierre Francastel's *Művészet és társadalom (Art and Society)*, a collection of selected essays originally published in 1965 and translated into Hungarian in 1972, he already reflected on the relationship between artwork and society in the context of interpretation.[6] In his volumes published in

[1] NÉMETH Lajos, *Törvény és kétely* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1992), 108.
[2] Hans BELTING, *A művészeti kommentár mint a művészettörténet problémája* [2002], in *A művészettörténet vége* (Budapest: Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, 2006), 43–48.
[3] NÉMETH, *Törvény és kétely*, 14.
[4] Ibid., 213.
[5] Ibid., 17.
[6] NÉMETH Lajos, „Pierre Francastel munkásságáról", in Pierre FRANCASTEL, *Művészet és társadalom. Válogatott tanulmányok* [1965], 5–23 (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1972), 5–23.

the 1970s,[7] as well as in the 1985 issue of *Ars Hungarica* devoted to art interpretation,[8] he addressed the same questions that he later examined in detail in his final book. In *Törvény és kétely (Law and Doubt)* he drew the following conclusions. 1. Due to the "polysemy" of artworks, multiple correct readings are possible.[9] 2. The meaning of an artwork changes over time, and these "changes in meaning also belong to the work".[10] 3. The hermeneutic approach, replacing the positivist outlook aligned with natural-scientific models, leads to the increasing significance of the interpreter's role.[11]

Lajos Németh primarily dealt monographically with modern artists who preceded or worked in parallel with the neo-avant-garde, as neo-avant-garde art was not at the center of his research. Nevertheless, through commentaries on artworks and speeches delivered at exhibition openings, he became involved in the life of neo-avant-garde visual art. His opening speech at the exhibition *A dada Magyarországon (The Dada in Hungary)*, published in the first issue (1983) of the samizdat journal *Aktuális Levél*—considered a key platform of neo-avant-garde self-definition—testifies to this involvement.[12] Although neo-avant-garde art did not occupy a central place in his analyses, Németh's role is not negligible when examining the discourse. I consider Lajos Németh important to the reception of the neo-avant-garde, as he pursued substantial interpretative work and, among his contemporaries, engaged with the relationship between art history as a discipline and theory in a particularly distinguished way.[13] According to Sándor Radnóti, among scholars pursuing academic careers at the time, Németh was considered "Unikum" due to his interest in contemporary art, and he also pointed out that Németh's role was unprecedented in that he was recognised both by official institutions and by progressive artists.[14]

The "Stolen Moment" of the Neo-Avant-Garde

In *Törvény és kétely (Law and Doubt)*, Németh formulated his critique in general terms when addressing the challenges posed by contemporary art and its interpretation, while simultaneously reproaching the critical discourse of the time. Although he did not mention specific examples, due to similarities in perspective, Németh's opinion appears valid when compared with the phenomena discussed in Éva Forgács's critical writings. In two articles written about exhibitions held in 1991,[15]

[7] NÉMETH Lajos, *A művészet sorsfordulója* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1970); NÉMETH Lajos, *Minerva baglya* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1973).

[8] NÉMETH Lajos, „A műinterpretáció kérdéseiről", *Ars Hungarica* 13, No. 1. (1985): 5–22.

[9] NÉMETH, *Törvény és kétely*, 225.

[10] Ibid., 213.

[11] Ibod., 233.

[12] NÉMETH Lajos, „Németh Lajos bevezetője *A dada Magyarországon* című kiállítás megnyitóján (ELTE Esztétika és Művészettörténet Tanszék, 1982. december 15.)", *Aktuális Levél* 1. (1983): 12.

[13] RADNÓTI Sándor, „A harcot, amelyet őseink vívtak (Németh Lajos: »Szigetet és mentőövet!« Életútinterjú 1986", ed. by BEKE László, NÉMETH Katalin, PATAKI Gábor, TÍMÁR Árpád. MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Művészettörténeti Intézete, MissionArt Galéria, Budapest, 2017.)", *MúzeumCafé* No. 61. (2017), accessed: 19.12.2025., https://muzeumcafe.hu/hu/harcot-amelyet-oseink-vivtak-2/.

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Hatvanas évek: Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben: Kiállítás a Magyar Nemzeti Galériában*, 1991. március 14 – június 30. Kurátorok: Beke László, Dévényi István, Horváth György. Hatvanas évek: Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben: Kiállítás a Magyar Nemzeti Galériában. Kiállítási katalógus. Szerk. Nagy Ildikó. Képzőművészeti Kiadó – Magyar Nemzeti Galéria – Ludwig Mú-

Forgács simultaneously summarised the interpretative difficulties surrounding Hungarian neo-avant-garde art.[16] One of these exhibitions was the Hungarian National Gallery's representative exhibition on the art of the 1960s, whose misguided nature was also addressed by Péter György.[17] The other exhibition, organised jointly by the István King Museum and the Csók István Gallery in Székesfehérvár, was the first to present Miklós Erdély's oeuvre to the public.

In the mid-1970s, László Beke identified a contradiction in the fact that "the recipient (interpreter) critic becomes identical with the artist, the interpretation becomes the artwork itself."[18] Nevertheless, he played a major role in both exhibitions mentioned above, and his role was criticised for precisely those issues he himself had regarded as problematic two and a half decades earlier. Another contradiction was articulated a few years after the turn of the millennium by Zoltán Csehy in relation to the death of the avant-garde: "It is natural nowadays to speak of the death of the avant-garde, since it has been suffering from a spectacular decline for two or three decades, yet internationally significant groups continue to embrace its legacy."[19] The question of continuity—both between the avant-garde and contemporary art, and between the historical and neo-avant-garde—further prompts a re-evaluation of avant-garde art and a reconsideration of the very definition of art.

Látlelet & prognózis (Diagnosis & Prognosis), published in 2016, brings together interviews conducted with artists and art historians in 1980 and 1984.[20] In the preface to the volume, Dóra Maurer recalls Lajos Németh's critical view that "artists and their friends" tend to write their own history, and she also classifies this book among such forms of "self-documentation".[21] The conversations focus on Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as on the future; on what art of the 1980s might be like. In his review of the book, József Mélyi wrote that even nearly two decades after the turn of the millennium, the basic concepts related to the art of the 1960s and 1970s remain unclear, and that this book should have been published at the time the interviews were carried out.[22] From the perspective of the present study, Mélyi's observation based on the interviews is also important: namely, that multiple concepts of the avant-garde were in use simultaneously,

zeum, Budapest., 1991.; *Erdély Miklós (1928–1986) kiállítása*. Rendezte Kovács Péter, Kovalovszky Márta, Ladányi József, Sasvári Edit. Csók István Képtár – István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár, 1991. október 26 – december 31. *Erdély Miklós (1928–1986). Kiállítási katalógus*. Az István Király Múzeum Közleményei, D. sorozat, No. 207, Székesfehérvár, 1991.

[16] FORGÁCS Éva, „Egy mítosz természetrajza. Erdély Miklós és a neoavantgárd magánya", *2000* 5, No. 10. (1993): 36–40.; FORGÁCS Éva, „Mától kezdve így volt? Hatvanas Évek. (A Magyar Nemzeti Galériában rendezett kiállítás katalógusáról)", *BUKSZ* 3, No. 2. (1991): 156–160.

[17] GYÖRGY Péter, „Mostantól fogva ez lesz a múlt: Hatvanas évek", *Holmi* 3, No. 6. (1991): 789–800.

[18] BEKE László, *Az alkotó interpretációtól az interpretáció tagadásáig*, in BEKE László, *Műleírás és műértelmezés* (Budapest: TIT, 1976), 49. Cited in NÉMETH, *Törvény és kétely*, 224.

[19] CSEHY Zoltán, *„»ha egyszer orgazmusom lehetne az irodalomtól«"*, in *Disputák között. Tanulmányok, esszék, kritikák a kortárs (szlovákiai) magyar irodalomról*, ed. by H. NAGY Péter, 187–189 (Somorja–Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet–Lilium Aarum Könyvkiadó, 2004).

[20] MAURER Dóra, BEKE László, *Látlelet & prognózis. Új magyar művészet a hatvanas és hetvenes években. Beszélgetések és interjúk* (Budapest: Sumus, 2016).

[21] Ibid., 7–10.

[22] MÉLYI József, „Nem így volt", *Jelenkor* 60, No. 4. (2017): 512–514., 512.

and that Lajos Németh and László Beke offer differing interpretations of the avant-garde.

A similar practice can be observed elsewhere as well: evaluations, conclusions, and questions concerning the processing of the neo-avant-garde are often articulated in reviews rather than in the art history publications themselves. Upon the publication of the first edition of *A neoavantgarde (The Neo-avant-garde)*, Miklós Szabolcsi received vehement reactions due to the omission of the Hungarian context and the lack of reflection on this omission.[23] In his review of József Havasréti's book, Pál Deréky offered a comprehensive assessment of the interpretation of the neo-avant-garde. While he praised Havasréti for his methodology, he reproached the entire art-historical discourse for the fact that partial studies focusing on individual oeuvres or artist groups are not connected to one another through a shared interpretative framework.[24]

From all this arises the question of whether, after the "melting" of criticism, its function was taken over by another genre, such as the review. One of the early—if not the very first—examples of criticism formulated within the genre of the review, yet extending beyond its generic boundaries and addressing the discourse of neo-avant-garde art in a deeper and more general way, can be found in the articles written by Éva Forgács in the years immediately preceding her emigration in 1993.

In my view, those writings by Éva Forgács that were published in the years following the political transition are worth treating as a coherent whole. Two of her texts are most closely related: those addressing the 1991 retrospective exhibition of Miklós Erdély's oeuvre and the exhibition *Hatvanas évek (The Sixties)* held in the same year.[25] I connect additional texts to these. Due to her characteristic interests in the period, her 1990 essay on the relationship between literature and visual art also belongs here.[26] Furthermore, her 2004 text on the continuity of the avant-garde is likewise relevant because of its subject matter.[27] On thematic grounds, I also include two further writings. In *Az ellopott pillanat (The Stolen Moment)*, Forgács argues that the artists of the European School did not receive, in due time, the reception that art requires in order to endure.[28] The lack of contemporary reception caused a rupture in art-historical continuity and in the interpretation of the works. She described a similar process in her 1990 essay *Töredék. Irodalom és képzőművészet kapcsolatáról (Fragment: On the Interplay between Literature and the Visual Arts)*, which addressed the progressive textile art of the period: while marginality initially facilitated the emergence and development of radical textile artists, it later rendered their activity impossible.[29]

Forgács described similar processes in her evaluations of the exhibitions of Miklós Erdély's oeuvre and the art of the 1960s. The expression "stolen moment originally used to describe the art of the Európai Iskola, is thus also applicable to neo-avant-garde art. This, in turn, raises the question of whether the void created by the neo-avant-garde's "stolen

[23] Cf. DERÉKY Pál, *A magyar neoavantgárd irodalom*, in DERÉKY Pál, MÜLLNER András, *Né/ma? Tanulmányok a magyar neoavantgárd köréből*, 15–38 (Budapest: Ráció, 2004), 29.

[24] DERÉKY Pál, „Akik a 20. század második felében újra el akarták törölni életvilág és művészet határait (Havasréti József: *Alternatív regiszterek*)", *Jelenkor* 51, No. 4. (2008): 489–492., 490.

[25] See FORGÁCS, „Egy mítosz…"; FORGÁCS, „Mától kezdve…"

[26] FORGÁCS Éva, „Töredék. Irodalom és képzőművészet kapcsolatáról", *Jelenkor* 33, No. 1. (1990): 17–24.

[27] FORGÁCS Éva, „Történeti jelenség-e az avantgárd?", *Laokoón*, No. 3. (2004): 15–23.

[28] FORGÁCS Éva, „Az ellopott pillanat. Jegyzetek az Európai Iskoláról", *Kortárs* 29, No. 7. (1985): 163–168.

[29] FORGÁCS, „Töredék…", 22.

moment" can be filled by posterity, as suggested by Lajos Németh.

The "Melting" of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The coherence of Éva Forgács's specific observations and proposals, as well as her views on the reception of the neo-avant-garde that have broader applicability, becomes particularly articulate when approached from the perspective of Lajos Németh's programme. In connection with the 1991 exhibition of Miklós Erdély's work, Forgács made a decisive statement regarding the reception of the neo-avant-garde when she asserted that by the early 1970s "art criticism had melted away".[30] She explained this development by the 1970 defection of Géza Perneczky, who had been among the most influential art critics, and those who remained of them—Éva Körner, László Beke, János Frank, Judit Szabadi, and Péter Sinkovits—"forgot their roles", "retuned themselves to the wavelength of the new art", and, instead of engaging in interpretation, produced "empathetic texts" in which they expressed "the same contents" that the artists themselves articulated "in their own forms".[31] In addition to such empathetic texts, art critics also supported the latest artistic practices through their participation in individual actions. According to Forgács, the phenomenon reflects the relative weakness and lack of established tradition in Hungarian art criticism, especially in comparison with the field of literary criticism.[32]

The "melting" of criticism may also be explained by what Péter György articulated in his review of the volume presenting the history and documents of the chapel exhibitions in Balatonboglár.[33] György emphasises that making sources and documents publicly available is a crucial and necessary step in the scholarly engagement with the neo-avant-garde. Moreover, this practice is not only essential from an art-historical perspective but also contributes to the study of the social history of the Kádár Regime. Since that time, art-historical approaches to the period and region have often prioritised the documentary significance of sources and the investigation of past events. Lajos Németh referred to this phenomenon as the challenge posed by its allied disciplines.[34] Representing Németh's position, György supplemented these observations with the remark that the documentation of sources cannot substitute for interpretation.[35] According to Németh, the conceptual turn in art opposed the mode of art interpretation upon which art history as a discipline had been founded. Consequently, he argued in favour of a combined approach to art history and art theory. In contrast, he observed that theoretical approaches had receded into the background of art-historical writing, and that what was lacking was "positive disturbance," "being in doubt," and "the act of asking questions".[36]

Lajos Németh himself put the strategy he advocated into practice when he raised the question of whether the difficult-to-access features of new artistic tendencies might also have appeared earlier, but were relegated to the background due to the rigor of the concept

[30] FORGÁCS, „Egy mítosz…", 38.
[31] Ibid.
[32] FORGÁCS, „Töredék…", 23.; FORGÁCS, „Mától kezdve…", 158.
[33] GYÖRGY Péter, „A hely szelleme", *BUKSZ* 16, No. 4. (2004): 328–335.
[34] NÉMETH Lajos, „A kortárs művészet és a társtudományok kihívása", in NÉMETH, *Törvény és kétely*, 86–164.
[35] Cf. HAVASRÉTI József, „Széteső dichotómiák. Klaniczay Júlia – Sasvári Edit *Törvénytelen avantgárd* című könyvéről", in HAVASRÉTI József, *Széteső dichotómiák. Színterek és diskurzusok a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Budapest–Pécs: Gondolat Kiadó–Artpool–PTE Kommunikáció- és Média-tudományi Tanszék, 2009), 77–95.
[36] NÉMETH, *Törvény és kétely*, 10.

of "autonomous art".[37] His argumentation culminated in the conclusion that "in the new paradigm, the artwork itself must occupy the central position".[38] For this reason, he attributed central importance to the development of a new strategy of art interpretation. Németh argues that the critic's responsibility lies in examining the "contemporary reception" of artworks, then the "various interpretative proposals based on the receptions of different periods," and finally in "confronting the artwork with the perspectives of the present."[39]

In an interview published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Hatvanas évek (The Sixties)*, held in 1991, Németh stated that "manipulative art criticism" had been dominant in the 1960s.[40] He neither defined the term nor provided examples. Nevertheless, the concrete referents of this expression may be inferred from Éva Forgács's writings. In her articles on the two exhibitions held in 1991, Forgács appears to have outlined the characteristics of what Németh termed "manipulative art criticism".

Forgács's principal objection to the exhibition catalogue presenting the art of the 1960s was the absence of artwork analyses and career overviews; similarly to Lajos Németh, she advocated a theoretical approach in order to prevent the works from being excluded from the discourse.[41] She likewise criticised the Miklós Erdély retrospective exhibition in Székesfehérvár for its lack of analyses focusing on the artworks themselves.[42] What particularly troubled Forgács was that interpreters "pushed aside the concrete works," since Erdély's works in fact "provoke the debate partner".[43] As in the practice of weekly newspapers and journals, the catalogue's interpreters, instead of entering into a debate with the artworks, focused primarily on the contexts of their production and on the artist. In doing so, they expanded the concept of the artwork "from retouching a picture in pyjamas to ordering Unicums".[44] Alongside the previously discussed "reconstructive" strategy—limited to the uncovering and presentation of facts—the process of "myth-making" likewise fails to bring interpretation closer to the artworks themselves.[45]

Éva Forgács writes critically about the role of László Beke in both of her articles. In relation to Miklós Erdély, he becomes ensnared in the "trap of myth-making," thereby reinforcing the interpretive framework perpetuated by the exhibition,[46] while his study on the interrelations of the art of the 1960s, he fails to address what is essential.[47] Forgács misses the consideration of the perspective of posterity in Beke's account of the 1960s. She also notes the absence of an interpretation of Hungarian art of the 1960s from the perspective of international movements.[48] This aspect appears elsewhere as well in the reception history of the neo-avant-garde, as discussed earlier.

The Afterlife of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The "questioning art historian" praised by Lajos Németh is most fully embodied by Éva Forgács in her essay *Történeti jelenség-e az avantgárd? (Is the Avant-Gard a Historical*

[37] Ibid., 107.
[38] Ibid., 241.
[39] Ibid., 238.
[40] Beke László, *„Beszélgetés Németh Lajossal. Kérdező: Beke László. (1990. október 18.)"* in *Hatvanas évek. Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben kiállítás a Magyar Nemzeti Galériában (1991. március 14 – június 30.)*, ed. by Beke László, Nagy Ildikó, Dévényi István and Horváth György, 67–73 (Budapest: Képző-művészeti Kiadó–Magyar Nemzeti Galéria–Ludwig Múzeum, 1991), 72.
[41] Forgács Éva, „Mától kezdve…", 158.
[42] Forgács Éva, „Egy mítosz…", 36.
[43] Ibid., 37.
[44] Ibid., 36.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 38.
[48] Ibid., 39.

Phenomenon?) In this article, published in 2004, Forgács reflects on the post-structuralist reading she applies in place of artist-centered interpretations of neo-avant-garde art, as well as on the interpretative difficulties specific to Hungarian neo-avant-garde art. According to Forgács, Western scholarly literature may not necessarily be applicable to the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. The topic was revisited by scholars two decades later, who explored it with greater depth and nuance.[49] The significance of Forgács's proposition is underscored by the fact that Peter Bürger's controversial *Az avantgárd elmélete (Theory of the Avant-Garde)*, originally published in 1975 and cited by Forgács in the aforementioned essay, appeared in Hungarian translation only in 2010, in a version translated by Tamás Seregi.[50] Further evidence of interest in the theoretical approaches referenced by Forgács is provided by András Müllner's 2001 dissertation entitled *Neoavantgárd szövegek posztstrukturalista olvasatai (Erdély Miklós) (Post-Structuralist Approaches to Neo-Avant-Garde Texts [Miklós Erdély])*,[51] Viktória Popovics's 2013 research on *A kritikai elméletek művészettörténeti recepciója (The Reception of Critical Theories in Art History)*,[52] as well as Katalin Timár's dissertation on the journal *October*,[53] completed in the same year. The latter was also mentioned by Forgács in her article due to the impact of French post-structuralist concepts on the American critical scene.

Drawing on this groundwork, Éva Forgács's 2004 essay heralds a new period in the reception of neo-avant-garde art. In the same year, the edited volume *Né/ma? Tanulmányok a magyar neoavantgárd köréből (Silent? Studies and perspectives on the Hungarian neo-avant-garde)* was published, bringing together neo-avant-garde interpretations that had emerged in the period following the political transition and were characterised by an interdisciplinary approach drawing on both literary and art-historical perspectives. What unites these interpretative approaches is that they emerged in opposition to earlier practices of "interrogating" the neo-avant-garde.[54] According to the editors, "interrogation" refers to the cultural-political environment of the time, and a shared feature of the essays in the volume is their break with the earlier mode of analysis, whose primary method had been the questioning or interrogation of the artist. However, giving voice to what was "silent" does not apply only to the artist, but also to the interpretative position that had remained silent for decades.

For his thesis on the Socialist Artists' Group, Lajos Németh conducted interviews with the artists and found that it was possible to "confront their prewar works with their later views and with the art that was contemporary at the time".[55] This reflects the theoretical principles he subsequently articulated concerning the role of the interpreter in his posthumously

[49] MÜLLNER András, „Állapotkommunikáció és montázs. (Erdély Miklós: Tavaszi kivégzés)", *Apertúra*, Spring 2023, accessed: 30.01.2026. https://www.apertura.hu/2023/tavasz/mullner-allapotkommunikacio-es-montazs-erdely-miklos-tavaszi-kivegzes/.

[50] BÜRGER, Peter, *Az avantgárd elmélete* [1974], translated by SEREGI Tamás (Szeged: Universitas Kiadó, 2010).

[51] MÜLLNER András, *Neoavantgárd szövegek posztstrukturalista olvasatai (Erdély Miklós)*. Doctoral dissertation (Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 2001).

[52] POPOVICS Viktória, *A kritikai elméletek művészettörténeti recepciója*, Kállai Ernő művészettörténészi-műkritikusi ösztöndíj beszámoló, 2013.

[53] TIMÁR Katalin, *October and Semiotics. Az October művészetelméleti folyóirat és a szemiotika*. Doctoral dissertation (Pécs: PTE BTK Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola Kommunikáció Program, 2016).

[54] DERÉKY and MÜLLNER, *Né/ma…*, 9.

[55] BEKE László, „Németh Lajos (1929–1991)", in *„Emberek és nem frakkok". A magyar művészettörténet-írás nagy alakjai. Tudománytörténeti esszégyűjtemény*, ed. by MARKÓJA Csilla,

published book. In the case of neo-avant-garde art, however, the use of interviews functioned differently; a matter discussed in detail by Éva Forgács. With regard to the neo-avant-garde, scholarly interest focused on what happened, where it happened, and who carried it out; as a result, the artist and the artist's opinion became the primary source. The issues discussed in this study raise the need for further research into the use of interviews as sources, along the following questions. Can interviews serve to highlight the functions of criticism that are otherwise absent or lacking; as they did, for example, in Lajos Németh's thesis? Do the methodologies of art criticism and literary criticism necessarily differ; as suggested by Zoltán Csehy?

Bibliography

BEKE László. „Az alkotó interpretációtól az interpretáció tagadásáig". In *Műleírás és műértelmezés*, 45–54. Budapest: TIT, 1976.

BEKE László. „Beszélgetés Németh Lajossal. (1990. október 18.)". In *Hatvanas évek. Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben kiállítás a Magyar Nemzeti Galériában (1991. március 14 – június 30.)*, edited by BEKE László, NAGY Ildikó, DÉVÉNYI István és HORVÁTH György, 67–73. Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó–Magyar Nemzeti Galéria–Ludwig Múzeum, 1991.

BEKE László. „Németh Lajos (1929–1991)." In *„Emberek és nem frakkok". A magyar művészettörténet-írás nagy alakjai. Tudománytörténeti esszégyűjtemény*, edited by MARKÓJA Csilla, BARDOLY István, 593–604. Budapest: Meridián Kiadó, 2007.

BELTING, Hans, *A művészeti kommentár mint a művészettörténet problémája* [2002], In *A művészettörténet vége*, 43–48. Budapest: Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, 2006.

BÜRGER, Peter. Az avantgárd elmélete [1974], trans. SEREGI Tamás. Szeged: Universitas Kiadó, 2010.

CSEHY Zoltán. *„»ha egyszer orgazmusom lehetne az irodalomtól«"*. In *Disputák között. Tanulmányok, esszék, kritikák a kortárs (szlovákiai) magyar irodalomról*, edited by H. NAGY Péter, 187–189. Somorja–Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet–Lilium Aarum Könyvkiadó, 2004.

DERÉKY Pál. *A magyar neoavantgárd irodalom*. In DERÉKY Pál, MÜLLNER András, *Né/ma? Tanulmányok a magyar neoavantgárd köréből*, 15–38. Budapest: Ráció, 2004.

DERÉKY Pál, MÜLLNER András eds. *Né/ma? Tanulmányok a magyar neoavantgárd köréből*. Budapest: Ráció, 2004.

DERÉKY Pál. „Akik a 20. század második felében újra el akarták törölni életvilág és művészet határait (Havasréti József: *Alternatív regiszterek*)". *Jelenkor* 51, No. 4. (2008): 489–492.

FORGÁCS Éva. „Az ellopott pillanat. Jegyzetek az Európai Iskoláról". *Kortárs* 29, No. 7. (1985): 163–168.

FORGÁCS Éva, „Töredék. Irodalom és képzőművészet kapcsolatáról". *Jelenkor* 33, No. 1. (1990): 17–24.

FORGÁCS Éva. „Mától kezdve így volt? Hatvanas Évek. (A Magyar Nemzeti Galériában rendezett kiállítás katalógusáról)", *BUKSZ* 3, No. 2. (1991): 156–160.

FORGÁCS Éva. „Egy mítosz természetrajza". *2000* 5, No. 10. (1993): 36–40.

FORGÁCS Éva. „Történeti jelenség-e az avantgárd?". *Laokoón*, No. 3. (2004): 15–23.

GYÖRGY Péter. „Mostantól fogva ez lesz a múlt: Hatvanas évek". *Holmi* 3, No. 6. (1991): 789–800.

GYÖRGY Péter. „A hely szelleme". *BUKSZ* 16, No. 4. (2004): 328–335.

HAVASRÉTI József. „Széteső dichotómiák. Klaniczay Júlia – Sasvári Edit *Törvénytelen avantgárd* című könyvéről". In HAVASRÉTI József, *Széteső dichotómiák. Színterek és diskurzusok a magyar neoavantgárdban*, 77–95. Budapest–Pécs: Gondolat Kiadó–

BARDOLY István, 593–604 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2007), 594.

Artpool–PTE Kommunikáció- és Médiatudományi Tanszék, 2009.

MAURER Dóra, BEKE László. *Látlelet & prognózis. Új magyar művészet a hatvanas és hetvenes években. Beszélgetések és interjúk*. Budapest: Sumus, 2016.

MÉLYI József. „Nem így volt". *Jelenkor* 60, No. 4. (2017): 512–514.

MÜLLNER András. *Neoavantgárd szövegek posztstrukturalista olvasatai (Erdély Miklós)*. Doctoral dissertation. Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 2001.

MÜLLNER András: „Állapotkommunikáció és montázs. (Erdély Miklós: *Tavaszi kivégzés*)". *Apertúra*, Spring 2023, accessed: 30.01.2026., https://www.apertura.hu/2023/tavasz/mullner-allapotkommunikacio-es-montazs-erdely-miklos-tavaszi-kivegzes/.

NÉMETH Lajos. *A művészet sorsfordulója*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1970.

NÉMETH Lajos. „Pierre Francastel munkásságáról" [1965]. In Pierre FRANCASTEL. *Művészet és társadalom. Válogatott tanulmányok*, 5–23. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1972.

NÉMETH Lajos. *Minerva baglya*. Budapest: Mag-vető Kiadó, 1973.

NÉMETH Lajos. „Németh Lajos bevezetője *A dada Magyarországon* című kiállítás megnyitóján (ELTE Esztétika és Művészettörténet Tanszék, 1982. december 15.)". *Aktuális Levél* 1, (1983): 12.

NÉMETH Lajos. „A műinterpretáció kérdéseiről". *Ars Hungarica* 13, No. 1. (1985): 5–22.

NÉMETH Lajos. „A kortárs művészet és a tarstudományok kihívása". In *Törvény és kétely*, 86–164. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1992.

NÉMETH Lajos. *Törvény és kétely*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1992.

POPOVICS Viktória. *A kritikai elméletek művészettörténeti recepciója. Kállai Ernő művészettörténészi-műkritikusi ösztöndíj*, 2013, accessed: 30.01.2026., http://87.229.102.27/docs/PopovicsViktoria-A_kritikai_elmeletek_muveszet-torteneti_recepcioja.pdf.

RADNÓTI Sándor. „A harcot, amelyet őseink vívtak (Németh Lajos: »Szigetet és mentőövet!« Életútinterjú 1986", edited by BEKE László, NÉMETH Katalin, PATAKI Gábor, TÍMÁR Árpád. MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Művészettörténeti Intézete, MissionArt Galéria, Budapest, 2017.)". *MúzeumCafé* 61. 2017, accessed: 19.12. 2025., https://muzeumcafe.hu/hu/harcot-amelyet-oseink-vivtak-2/.

TIMÁR Katalin. *October and Semiotics. Az October művészetelméleti folyóirat és a szemiotika* Doctoral dissertation. Pécs: PTE BTK Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola Kommunikáció Program, 2016.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.62 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 62–68.

"A gauntlet thrown at the reader's feet"

GABRIELLA REUSS

Otokar ZICH. *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy*. Prague: Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press, 2024. 476 p.

Introduction

Otakar Zich's bulky volume, the *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* was originally published in 1931, and finally appeared in English translation accompanied by a meticulous and erudite Introduction and Afterword at the end of 2024. At last, as the complete translation of Zich's paradigm-changing work practically crowns the efforts of a decade invested in making Zich's unusual and vastly inspiring writings accessible to a wider and international audience.

Now, simply resorting to celebratory clichés, calling Zich's book a cornerstone of theatre theory, a seminal work offering profound insights into the nature of dramatic art, or praising Pavel Drábek and Tomáš P. Kačer's meticulous English translation, or even calling David Drozd's *Introduction* a great service to the international community of theatre studies, would not exaggerate, yet, would hardly suffice. Let me explain why the roughly 500-page English edition of the *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* deserves attention and why we must appreciate the strategic vision and tireless work of the Czech theatre scholars from the 2010s who translated and managed to gradually integrate Zich's theatre-theoretical oeuvre into the international theatre studies scene.

What is now regarded as the foundation of Czech theatre theory, Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art*, was published in 1931. Just a few years earlier, some young ambitious cosmopolitan scholars founded the Prague Linguistic Circle and put forward their *Theses* to

> "elaborate a functional-structural approach, extend it from a purely linguistic to a broadly aesthetic system of thought and tackle art as a fact in its own right. At that point, a renowned peer academic of the previous generation publishes a volume entitled *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* in excess of 400 pages in length, in which he tackles many of the issues that have been, metaphorically, waiting on *their* desk."[1]

The slight irony of the situation is not lost on Drozd, the general editor of the English edition and the author of the Afterword; clearly, Zich's *Aesthetics* is apparently his and his team's lovechild. What we are reading now by the Czech aesthetician, logician, folklorist, composer, and musicologist Otakar Zich (1879–1934) is much more than an interesting or even unique theory of dramatic art, or one of the earliest contributions to the emergent field of future performance studies. What we must appreciate here is much more than Zich's book translated into English. To grasp the true significance of this volume, let us look at the efforts of the Czech scholars in the past decade.

[1] David DROZD, "Afterword", in Otakar ZICH, *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theaoretical Dramaturgy* (Gen. ed. David DROZD, trans. by Pavel DRÁBEK and Tomáš P. KAČER, 329–405 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2024), 380. [Emphasis mine – G. R.]

Introducing Zich's oeuvre to the Global Discourse

The first English translation of a text by Zich that I am aware of was published a decade ago, when an entire issue of *Theatralia* (2015/2**)** was dedicated to puppetry. Co-editor Pavel Drábek translated Zich's 1923 essay, "Puppet Theatre", and appears to have been (one of) the driving force(s) behind the Czechs' over-a-decade-long Zich-project. In "Puppet Theatre," Zich employs a phenomenological approach to illuminate the complex artistic and mental processes of stylisation and abstraction that take place as we watch puppetry. In the first decades of the twentieth century, several theatre practitioners in Europe, among them Craig, Reinhardt, Zich, and Hevesi, were searching for new, non-realist ways of dramatic, unified visual expression, experimenting in the fields of acting, puppetry, and scenography. Craig's way was to passionately present puppets in letters to Hevesi or in papers like "The Actor and the Übermarionette" (1907) published in the *Mask*. Hevesi provoked Craig's ideas; "Halten Sie die Marionetten für natürlich?" he famously asked Craig in a 1909 letter,[2] pondering about the realness of the puppet. In a decade's time, Zich came up with the fully rounded concept of the (dual) aesthetic perception of lifeless objects that represent humans, i.e., puppetry. It is in this 1923 essay that Zich calls puppetry a medium,[3] and at once recognises a demand for a particular puppet dramaturgy and scenography that the medium requires. In the last part of the paper, he considers the suitability of available dramas for the stylised or non-realist/non-naturalist stage. Drábek's English translation in 2015[4] illuminated Zich's original analytical potential and at once began to situate Zich's works beyond the Czech context within the European intellectual milieu of the 1920s and 1930s.

The next step in the process of integrating Zich was—wisely, not Zich's opus magnum, but—the publication of the *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (2016), edited by David Drozd, who also served as the general editor of Zich's *Aesthetics* in English. To produce the 2016 *Theatre Theory Reader*, Drozd collaborated with Drábek, Kačer, and Sparling; almost the same team with which he would later work on the *Aesthetics*.

The *Reader* provides thirty-eight key texts related to what is now known as theatre semiotics from the 1930s and early 1940s, the most active period of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and includes Zich's *Principles of Theoretical Dramaturgy*.[5] This essay was accompanied by an explanatory and contextualizing section, "The Prague School Theatre Theory and Otakar Zich",[6] in the Afterword. By foregrounding theatre theory, a field often underrepresented or entirely absent from other publications[7] about of the Prague School, the *Reader* stood as proof of the richness and

[2] György SZÉKELY, ed., *The Correspondence of Edward Gordon Craig and Sándor Hevesi (1908–1933)* (Budapest: OSZMI, 1991), 169.

[3] Otakar ZICH, "Puppet Theatre" [1923), trans. by Pavel DRÁBEK, *Theatralia* 18, No. 2. (2015): 505–513., 512.

[4] It emerged as part of a 2011–2015 research project titled „Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre" (grant no. GA409/11/1082) at Masaryk University, Brno.

[5] Otakar ZICH, "Principles of Theoretical Dramaturgy", transl. by Pavel DRÁBEK. In *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings*, ed. by David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLIN, 34–58 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016).

[6] Pavel DRÁBEK, with Martin BERNÁTEK, Andrea JOCHMANOVÁ and Eva ŠLAISOVÁ, "The Prague School Theatre Theory and Otakar Zich", in David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLING (eds.), *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings*, ed. by David DROZD, Tomáš KAČER and Don SPARLIN, 616–620 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016).

[7] E.g. F. W. Galan's monograph, *Historic Structures, The Prague School Project: 1928–46* (1984, 2014), Peter Steiner's essay collection,

intellectual momentum of Prague theatre studies. Published at the time when theatre and performance studies were in full bloom (Erika Fischer Lichte's *Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* came out in 2014, Katalin Trencsényi's *Dramaturgy in the Making* in 2015, and Christopher Balme's *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* in 2015, to mention a few from those addressed to students and a wider, general audience), the *Theatre Theory Reader* helped renew scholarly interest in the Prague School. As Marvin Carson remarked, it provided "contemporary theatre scholars with a clearer idea of where they have come from and an inspiration for where they may be going."[8] Erika Fischer-Lichte likewise praised the *Theatre Theory Reader*[9], particularly noting its structure—grouping the essays by theme rather than by author—and the inclusion of an extensive Afterword. This arrangement offers contemporary readers an insight into the thematic dialogues within the Prague School and allows the writings to speak in their own voice. The Afterword provided additional context without overshadowing or pre-digesting the essays themselves—a structure that Drozd would later continue when editing the *Aesthetics*.

The English edition

The *Reader's* organizing principle works well with Zich's *Aesthetics*, too, and deserves particular commendation: Zich's highly complex work is framed by substantial contemporary research by a roughly 40-page *Introduction* and a roughly 70-page *Afterword*. Both are indispensable, as even a brief reading of Zich's text will immediately demonstrate. The *Introduction* by David Drozd, with Pavel Drábek and Josh Overton, serves as a carefully constructed guidebook, preparing readers for a demanding but rewarding ascent toward unprecedented conceptual heights. It initiates its target audience, including theatre practitioners and students of theatre studies, into Zich's distinctive intellectual world, either by clarifying Zich's unconventional terminology or by highlighting notable landmarks, such as his polemics on the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his definition of dramatic art, which embraces sung and spoken drama but excludes dance. Drozd, Drábek, and Overton describe the Czech theorist's system as a synchronous, coherent theory, and they succeed in illuminating the internal logic of Zich's thought.

In contrast, the *Afterword* addresses the scholarly community of performance studies, offering a meticulous account of the translation histories of Zich's chapters and of his reception both in Czechia and abroad. It situates the author within his immediate intellectual context, tracing his sources and inspirations as well as the subsequent afterlife of his oeuvre. The back matter features a remarkable annotated *Glossary* of terms, as asterisks in the main text guide the reader to the corresponding entries in the *Glossary*. Here, each term, also provided in Czech, is defined by Zich and supplemented by an independent contemporary explanation. Among these are such essential notions as theatrical illusion, stylisation, mimetic and non-mimetic arts, sung drama, or transbodiment, among others.

The structure that was employed in the *Reader* and now in the English edition of the *Aesthetics* warrants attention for yet another reason: it actively supports a generously facilitated yet critical close reading of Zich's text. Drozd and Drábek's team facilitate reading without pre-digesting Zich's work, instead carefully establishing context and opening up interpretive perspectives. It is undeniable that without their Introduction we would be some-

The Prague School. Selected Writings 1929–46 (1982, 2012)

[8] Marvin CARSON's recommendation on the distributor's webpage of *The Reader.*

[9] Erika FISCHER-LICHTE's recommendation on the distributor's webpage of *The Reader.*

what lost, yet the researchers consistently keep the spotlight on Zich himself. Without this self-effacing and collaborative attitude, the rich treasure that is Zich's theatre-semiotic legacy might not have been shared, democratised, and made as widely accessible as it is today.

By 2020, the English translation of Zich's book was already underway, as Drozd and Kačer reported on its progress in the *Archive* section of an English-language issue of *Theatralia,* once again devoted to Prague Structuralism, though this time focusing entirely on Zich. In this issue, several Czech-speaking scholars were invited to engage with Zich's work, not only to showcase the breadth of his oeuvre but also to demonstrate the multiple ways in which his distinctive concepts could be interpreted. The essays in the first part of the issue illustrated what the translating team in the *Archive* section emphasised: that understanding and interpreting Zich's terminology constitutes a complex undertaking, not merely because of the dated nature of his language but because of its intrinsic conceptual intricacy. The challenges of translating Zich were further acknowledged in the issue's interview section by Emil Volek and Andrés Pérez-Simón, who had by then translated Zich's chapter *The Theatrical Illusion* into English. Their reflections corroborated Drozd and Kačer's observations concerning the linguistic and theoretical complexity of Zich's language.

Remarkably, the present editorial team both honoured and critiqued Kostomlatský and Osolsobě, the earlier translators of Zich's *Aesthetics*. In their 2020 *Theatralia* report, Drábek and Kačer included facsimiles of Kostomlatsky's 1975 typescript with annotations penned by Osolsobě, which they analysed and compared to their (Drábek and Kačer's) new translation. This comparison demonstrated why, in Drábek and Drozd's view, producing a complete, new translation, rather than making a series of minor corrections, was indispensable. Not merely the translation of "a terminologically crucial part"[10] in Chapter 3, *Analytic Theory* was at stake, but the need to establish Zich's terminology in its entirety. Given the complexity and the analytical rigour of Zich's thought, it was essential to provide a stable and coherent vantage point for scholars, a unified point of reference that earlier, isolated translations of individual chapters could not offer. Zich never intended his concepts or technical terms to align neatly with those of other theorists (hence "an almost complete absence of references"[11]); rather, he constructed his own system. He expected his readers to linger over his formulations, and discern his meanings through active engagement. This complete and terminologically coherent English text now enables the reader to revisit Zich's numerous terms and explore his arguments; an essential condition for understanding his theory.

Zich's Aesthetics – *The Book within the Book*

As Drozd and his team justifiably note, Zich's book may be a hard nut to crack, yet it ultimately opens up into a challenging but coherent and richly reasoned universe. Much like his early essay on puppetry, the *Aesthetics* approaches the dramatic and tributary arts from a distinctive vantage point, that of the spectator, and, as Drozd and his collaborators argue, articulates an ahistorical, synchronous theory. The justifications and findings gained from translating the essay on puppetry, the studies in the thematic blocks of *Theatralia*,[12] the 2020 comparative study of earlier trans-

[10] Tomas KAČER and Svitlana SHURMA, "Editorial", *Theatralia* 23, No. 1. (2020) 7–11., 11.

[11] David DROZD, with Pavel DRÁBEK and Josh OVERTON, "Otakar Zich and his *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art*: Introducing a Seminal Work After a Century", in Otakar ZICH, *The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, 12–46 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2024), 15.

[12] Issues 15 (2012), 17 (2014), 19 (2016), 23 (2020).

lations, and the knowledge and terminology consolidated in the *Reader* all directly inform the *Introduction* and the *Afterword*, which produce an accessible English edition of the *Aesthetics*, a book within the book, ensuring the clarity essential for navigating Zich's intricate theoretical terrain.

It is impossible to briefly summarise the topics and arguments unfolding in the more than 400-page *Aesthetics*; even the detailed *List of Contents* that Zich provides as a guide for lay readers cannot for a minute convey the extraordinary density of each thread of thought or chapter. It is valuable that Drozd's team chose to preserve the original *Contents*, *Foreword*, and *Introduction*, and even to reproduce the original typographical distinctions between the argumentative text printed in standard type, and the illustrative examples supporting Zich's claims, printed in smaller type. This layout proves advantageous for multiple reasons: it makes clear that Zich's ideas are firmly grounded in concrete evidence, and allows readers either to skip unfamiliar examples or, conversely, to immerse themselves in the abundance of his engaging small prints. Zich's conceptual thinking is clearly far from prescriptive; it is descriptive, inductive, and synthesised from minute observation, and yet it maintains a remarkable hold on the reader's attention.

Zich apparently enjoyed visualizing his ideas—perhaps he was even sketching them on the blackboard during his lectures. For instance, when he explains the so-called "French scenes"[13] as the basic units of performance, he employs charts to represent dramatic relations; he turns to vectors and diagrams, an academically rigorous yet highly unusual method of discussing theatrical performance. Zich's distinctive voice resonates both in his personal *Foreword* and in his university lectures, which served as the basis of the book's chapters. Addressed to the general public, the lectures/chapters combine mathematical precision with accessible, concrete examples, requiring of the reader only patience (and time) to fully grasp his ideas.

Across the ten chapters of its three parts, the book systematically addresses virtually every question that might arise in a discourse on theatre. With the same systematic logic that we already saw in Zich's essay on puppetry, the first part, *The Concept of Dramatic Art*, defines the key features of the dramatic work in three chapters. For instance, he clarifies why "dance does not belong to the dramatic art"[14]: because it is non-mimetic, and because dancers "do not represent a persona,"[15] whilst theatre, or more precisely, dramatic art, including spoken and sung drama, consists of the interaction of dramatic personas. As per his definition, "dual simultaneous perception,"[16] being a listener and a spectator at once, is necessary to perceive dramatic art; and he thinks dance does not fulfil this criterion either. Dramatic art, inclusive of opera, for instance, as well as prose theatre, implies the personas' tactile (inter)action and is directly available to the senses. He calls this dimension of dramatic art inner tactile perception, and through it refers to both the ostensive (distinct, demonstrative) images/ideas and the bodily sensations that arise in us while we watch and empathise with the actor's figure/persona during interaction. In this constellation, which involves all the senses, the text serves only as one of the components of the performance, which itself constitutes the true work of art. The fact that Zich challenges the traditional dominance of the dramatic text resonates with many contemporary efforts. His rejection of logocentric performances establishes him as remarkably ahead of his time and uniquely relevant to contemporary theatre practices. (This view positions Zich beside Lehmann's postdramatic theory, even closer to Erika Fischer-Lichte's idea that theatre/performance is an unrepeatable event, than to Eric Bentley,

[13] ZICH, *Aesthetics*..., 171.
[14] Ibid., 84.
[15] Ibid., 83.
[16] Ibid., 51.

whose 1964 concept famously defines theatre as "A impersonates B while C looks on.") Zich's performance theory thus acknowledges, respects, integrates, and through the introduction of the new concept, even focalises theatre's characteristically non-intellectual but physical-visceral impact on the spectator, an impact that has often been overlooked in other twentieth and twenty-first-century theories. As the *Introduction* remarks, "this is a gauntlet thrown at the reader's feet to pick up the debate of representation crisis and judge how present-day performative theories and postdramatic aesthetics interact with Zich's claims about the specifics of the dramatic art." (22)

And finally, the book illustrates Zich's systematic logic and the incredible depth of his analysis of the multiple functions of music in the opera as dramatic art; this time contrasted to a brilliant contemporary, a Hungarian librettist, dramatist, theatre and opera director, Sándor Hevesi, often called the Hungarian Reinhardt. In 1919, Hevesi, a great essayist himself, also theorised about the power and the several layers of musical expression in opera:

> "There are forces in music that only the stage can bring to life, so music must contain dramatic possibilities that do not exist in words and therefore cannot be expressed in ordinary written dialogue. And here lies the source of all the paradoxes of opera. Music has a dramatic potential that makes ordinary human speech seem poor in comparison. Ordinary human speech can only convey the drama of human actions, one after the other. The characters can only speak one after the other, and only acting and facial expressions add some simultaneity to this succession by silently expressing the actor's state of mind while their partner is speaking. And this is where music has a huge advantage over words. Music can voice two, three, four, or practically countless human souls at once, thus is able to express dramatic conflict simultaneously."[17]

Hevesi's (indeed pioneering) findings in the above passage bear resemblance to those of Zich; however, in Zich's 1931 *Aesthetics*, such findings about sung drama, including opera and melodrama, receive around 70 pages of profound, meticulous, and systematic elaboration in Chapter 8, *Dramatic Music: The Composer's Creative Work* (277–349). Zich begins with the mimetic qualities and the pictorial and expressive capacities of music in painting the situation, the context, or the persona's soul, mimics, and speech. He then considers the musical potential for expressing a character's motives, memories, and desires, through quotations and leitmotifs. When treating the vocal expression of a (type of) persona, he examines multi-vocal (ensemble) singing and even the national character of declamatory singing. He also discusses the dimensions the ensemble, chorus, and orchestra can add to sung drama. He argues that the dramatic composer's creative work lies not in setting the text to music, but in setting the music to situations. He elaborates on plot-turns, foreshadowing through music, and such ordinary functions as situational music, dramatic synthesis, scenic and entr'acte tasks, and so on. The list could, but should not, go on, as it stands here only to whet the reader's appetite: last, but not least, Zich's distinct flow—like the editors' passionate voice and lingering irony—is a true asset.

Conclusion

As of late 2025, Zich's oddly spelt name still does not appear in *Britannica* and barely

[17] HEVESI, Sándor, „Az opera paradoxonja" [1913], in *Az igazi Shakespeare*, 139–147 (Budapest: Táltos, 1919).

occupies half a page on Wikipedia—an omission that leaves future theatre studies students ample space to fill. Yet the new accessibility of his major work in English, through both the translation and the annotation, will undoubtedly inspire generations of theatre scholars to come. Zich's Czech oeuvre and theoretical insights once served as crucial points of departure for members of the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1920s and 1930s, and even Keir Elam gave Zich's *Aesthetics* "a place of almost symbolic significance" in his 1980 *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, but because "no one mustered the courage to translate the book as a whole [...] the book remained unknown and unassessed in its specifics and its detail."[18] A century later, the availability of Zich's thought in English—his inductive methodology, his analytical approach to spectatorship, and his insistence on theatre as a live, performative event—promises to invigorate contemporary theatre theory. Thanks to David Drozd's, Pavel Drábek's, and their collaborators' dedicated work over more than a decade, and at least two large projects funded by the Czech state, Zich's complex yet luminous vision of theatre, indeed one of the foundational treatises of modern theatre theory, can now enter the global discourse as a living presence rather than a historical footnote in a small Central European language. In this sense, the dream of theatre scholar and classical philologist Eva Stehlíková (1941–2019) has finally been realised: that "the 'family silver' of Czech theatre theory—that is, Prague School theory and Otakar Zich—should be made available to the wider world in translation." (9) The publication of this "self-standing integral theory" (15) thus represents not only a carefully built-up, and long-overdue act of recognition, positioning Zich beside other significant European contemporaries like Craig, Reinhardt, Appia, and Stanislavsky, but also a moment of renewal for the Anglophone reception—one well worth celebrating, in Czechia, Central Europe, and far beyond.

[18] ZICH, *Aesthetics*..., 386.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.69 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 69–73.

Dramaturgs on the Barricades

LÁSZLÓ HEVESI

Philippa KELLY, ed., *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 158 p.

I am an Eastern European cis-hetero white male who works as an actor. I considered this brief introduction important because the authors of the studies are representatives of minority groups or work for the equality of a minority group. As a member of the majority society, I act as an active ally. I support movements and efforts aimed at dismantling current systems based on inequality (heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy). My goal is to build a more inclusive environment for everyone.

And I work mainly as an actor, therefore I only have external knowledge of the work of dramaturgs. However, I find it very inspiring in my work to read about the experiences of practising theatre people. As an actor, I strive to regularly articulate my practical experiences in my work. As an actor-viewer, I strive to be able to describe the performance or working method that I see. So in this case, I read the book from the perspective of theatre practice.

In this review, I will first briefly introduce the concept of EDI in relation to the title of the volume. Then I will systematically describe the structure of the volume and the brief content, main ideas, and findings of the case studies. At the end of the review, I describe my personal experiences related to reading this book. I also examine from my own perspective, as a practising actor, how the knowledge accumulated in the volume can be applied in Hungarian theatre practice.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The title of the book is based on a conceptual framework that has been in use in the US since 2015. EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) as a conceptual framework promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, especially in the workplace, including populations who have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination because of their background, identity, disability, etc.[1] As we can see, the definition of the EDI also includes the expression "underrepresented." Just as the concept of representation appears in the title of the book. The book examines this ensemble through the lens of contemporary dramaturgy. In this review, I will not attempt to define what contemporary dramaturgy means. As we will see, the authors of the sixteen studies in this book have also sought to continually reframe and define it as an open concept with an ever-expanding range of meanings.

Diversity, Inclusion and Representation

The fact that dramaturgs formulate questions, insights, and experiences that arise during their own dramaturgical practice in case studies is nothing new in the US. As Mark Bly reveals to the reader in his study that *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy* was inspired by Bly's *Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process,* published in the 1990s, in which eight major dramaturgs in the US and Canada documented their work through a diary or casebook before and

[1] This concept was later supplemented in usage with the term „belongings" (EDIB).

throughout the rehearsal process as they worked on significant productions.[2]

Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy is divided into four sections: *Permission to speak; Taking up Positions – Playwright/Dramaturg; Who's "at the table"?; Cultural landscapes, Past, Present and Future.* The organisational principle behind the division of the studies into four sections is not entirely clear, nor is the connection between the studies and the section titles always obvious. In the Introduction, Philippa Kelly summarises and interprets the studies in chronological order. The selection process for the authors of the studies is unknown. But the volume's commitment to diversity is also reflected in the diversity of the race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability of the authors, and in the diversity of the dramaturgical approaches to the studies. I assume that the studies have been written directly for the volume, but there is no clear indication of this.

The sixteen authors of the volume reflect on their own dramaturgical practice and its role in the work in progress. They organise their artistic experiences into conceptual frameworks so that they can share them as artistic knowledge in the form of case studies. In these, the authors express their artistic experiences and knowledge with scientific precision, but they do so in an easily understandable, direct tone and language. This knowledge, in Julian Klein's words, "is sensual and physical, 'embodied knowledge'. The knowledge that artistic research strives for, is a felt knowledge."[3] And although this "felt knowledge" is personal, as theatre creators we can recognise similarities in it through the studies. Most of the studies are related to specific rehearsal processes or workshops. An exception to this is Annalisa Dias's study, which suggests strategies on how to disentangle the term EDI (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) from white supremacy, doing this through a scholarly register. Mark Bly's and Philippa Kelly's also differ from the other studies in that they take a more comprehensive approach to contemporary dramaturgy through various analogies.

In the first section, *Permission to speak,* two studies deal with the role of theatre in education. Awela Makera in her study, "The dramaturgy of the classroom", through her own dramaturgical practice offers opportunities to teach drama and theatre-making to students who are historically underserved and who have never seen professional theatre.

In "Dramaturgy as prophecy", Scott Horstein describes one form of community trauma processing implemented in educational practice through theatre. Understanding Horstein's study without knowledge of the crime, which was the subject of the performance they gave, is not easy.[4]

In Faedra Chatard Carpenter's study "Deconstructing our perspectives on casting", which is much more of an inter-article, Carpenter and Hana S. Sharif, who worked together on *Pride and Prejudice,* introduced us to a situation of "confused cultural approp-

[2] Mark BLY, *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process,* vols. I and II (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996).

[3] Julian KLEIN, „What is Artistic Research" in *Gegenworte 23* (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, 2010): 25–29. https://doi.org/10.22501/jarnet.0004

[4] The *Facing Our Truth: Ten-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege* was staged by Scott Horstein in 2015 at the Sonoma State student campus. The performance is based on a real crime. George Zimmerman became suspicious of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American, in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012 and called police. Martin then attacked Zimmerman and Zimmerman shot him with a pistol he was licensed to carry. In a widely reported trial, Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder for Martin's death. He was later acquitted by a jury after saying he acted in self defense.

riation". During a meeting with one of the donors, Sharif was confronted with a remark that essentially conveyed the message: "Stage what you know. Authentic Austin is not your history". All this happened because Sharif wanted to stage the play in an authentic setting with only white actors.

In the second section, *Taking up positions – playwright/dramaturg* two studies deal with the physical sensations and kinaesthetic experiences. In "The dramaturgy of Black culture", Martine Kei Green-Rogers examines the necessity and possibilities of breaking with traditional expectations of Black culture. Green-Rogers and the director Robert OJ Parson found a way to express the joy of the Black community through authentic songs and dances. It responds to the phenomenon that in one theatre season there are two performances in which Black men are killed (onstage or not) as part of the historical legacy.

"Embodied dramaturgy", written by Izumi Ashizawa with Ajuawak Kapashesit, offers an unconventional dramaturgical practice. In her study, Ashizawa proposes a creative method that she herself has experienced, "embodied dramaturgy," premised on the idea that the dramaturg's role is not limited to intellectual activity; rather, they also function as a physical dramaturg within the creative process.

In "The name (isn't a) game" Finn Lefevre, as a genderqueer person, shares how given names limit us and mark boundaries that seem impenetrable. As Lefevre describes, various theatre workshops, classes, or training sessions often begin with name games. They created their own practice based on the experiences of these games. Lefevre created a workshop where we can let go of the given names and have the opportunity to find, embrace, and accept our new personally chosen names.

In "Translation and form" Julie Felise Dubiner does not just explore why she feels that translation is an act of violence, she also argues that we have to accept plays in their own place without compulsively trying to make them fit our own image. Dubiner calls on us to give up judging a play for what it isn't and to meet what it is. Let's receive the play in its own words, images, and unique forms of communication.

In the third section, *Who's "at the table"?*, two studies deal with the accessibility of theatre for everyone. In "Crossing the Line", Jonathan Meth introduces an international project he constructed, featuring learning-disabled artists in partnership between Moomsteatern (Malmo, Sweden), Compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche (Roubaix, France), and Mind The Gap (Bradford, UK).

In the "Depth Perception", Tim Collingwood describes what thoughts and feelings drove him to write a play about his relationship with his own Asperger's syndrome, and how he came to the conclusion that he did not want a neurotypical actor to shape his character. This approach would alienate him further from the neurotypical standards of normalcy, and it would not expand "normal" at all.

In "Dramaturging revolution", Mei Ann Teo, through the creative process of *My Lingerie Play* (her collaboration with Diane Oh), explores the revolutionary tasks of dramaturgy. At the centre of the dramaturgy of revolution is the understanding and value of interconnectedness. Diane Oh, as Teo describes, was a "queer Korean American performance artist/writer/actor/singer-songwriter/theatre-maker".[5] In Diane Oh's works, a more accepting, non-white-centred, anti-rape culture played an important role. In Teo's case study, we can see examples of how a performance gives artists and audiences a way to play and to battle with social shaming and exclusion that still prevail in far too many places.

In the last section, *Cultural landscapes, past, present, and future* the first two studies

[5] Philippa KELLY, ed., *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 165.

describe the experiences of a rehearsal process in which different cultures encounter and enter into dialogue. In "The stakes of expanding a cultural landscape", Walter Byongsok Chon considers how Gao Xingjian's *The Other Shore* was staged for the Yale Cabaret, in a completely foreign cultural environment. *The Other Shore*'s originally scheduled premiere at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1986 was cancelled, fearing that the theme of the individual versus the collective might upset the Communist government and invite official sanctions. In 2015 Chon was the dramaturg of *The Other Shore* and also one of the performers of the play. As both an external and internal creator, he describes how a form of storytelling that was originally completely foreign to Western culture was successfully conveyed to the audience of Yale Cabaret.

Michael M. Chemers, in his case study "Visit to a zoot planet", describes the historical context, staging, and reception of the *Zoot Suit*, which represents Pachuco culture on stage.[6] Wearing the zoot suit was a symbol of cultural transgression for pachucos. As Chemers explains in his study: "Pachuquismo complicates a notion of America as a homogenous society, with a single language and culture, and exposes that notion as fundamentally racist and exclusionary."[7]

In "The Dramaturgical Impulse", Mark Bly takes a broader view of the role of the dramaturg. Using analogies drawn from historical perspectives, he illustrates how one of the most fundamental tasks of dramaturgy, interpretation and the transfer of information, played a role in understanding how the world works. The author of the study calls on us to always be open-minded, receptive, and to dare to reframe our acquired knowledge. As indicated in the subtitle of his study, Mark Bly asks us the question based on the discoveries made by spacecraft Voyager 1 and Voyager 2: "How big is your theatrical world? How big is your universe?"[8]

In the last case study of this volume Philippa Kelly, the editor of the volume, uses the analogy of *King Lear* to illustrate why it is important to "dethrone ourselves from the centre." In order to change, to reconstruct the world and make it a more diverse, equal, and inclusive place, we need to surrender. And as Philippa Kelly puts it, "surrender doesn't have to be 'giving in' – it can also reflect the capacity to slough off what we've had, who we've assumed we were."[9]

Through experiences gained in their own artistic practice, the studies deal extensively with how reactions to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and other social situations influence the functioning and reception of contemporary theatre. Since the studies reflect on cultural and social issues from the period between 2010 and 2020, they address topics that are certainly familiar to readers. None of the studies in the volume address the social and cultural changes brought about by climate change and artificial intelligence and their relationship with contemporary theatre. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that these two phenomena have only become a pressing issue in recent years, after the volume was published. The authors strive for greater social awareness. Based on the studies, contemporary theatre has a role to play in changing the way the world works, moving towards a more diverse and inclusive world where everyone can represent themselves and their community equally. A dramaturg, as Stephen Greenblatt writes in his recommendation for the volume on the cover, alternately plays the roles of "innovator, instigator, cultural historian, interpreter, provocateur, and visionary" and "shapes

[6] The pachuco culture in Los Angeles originated among Mexican descendants living in El Paso, Texas, in which the zoot suit, with its long finger-tip jacket, wide lapels, high-waisted, full-cut trousers, elaborate vests, wide-collared shirt, and wide-brimmed hat was a symbol of cultural transgression.

[7] KELLY, ed., *Diversity…*, 123.

[8] Ibid., 210.

[9] Ibid., 215.

the lived experience of actors and audiences alike." Dramaturgy, which seeks to change the world by reframing outdated thinking about how the world works, is therefore a political act.

Dramaturgs Leading the People

In Delacroix's famous painting, the allegorical figure of Liberty leads the people to the barricades. Although the fundamental concepts of one of the most important events in intellectual history, the French Revolution, have been subject to much criticism and rethinking over the past 195 years, this volume proves that these principles (Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité) still serve as guidelines for humanity today. In this volume dramaturgs lead the people toward a more diverse, equal, and inclusive world.

The volume does not offer practical solutions to problems related to EDI, like a handbook or textbook. It addresses global social issues that may also be familiar locally. It also presents situations in which contemporary theatre responds to these global problems. One of the political acts of the studies is to point out the problems and introduce us to personal coping strategies that we don't have to adapt literally. The aim of the volume is rather to invite us to think together about what contemporary theatre can do for a more accepting, diverse, and equal world. And dramaturgs have an indispensable role to play in this mission.

The applicability of the knowledge gained from the case studies is not straightforward in all cases in the Hungarian theatre environment. The reasons for this are undoubtedly to be found in the different social structures, cultural differences, and various historical factors. From the perspective of Central-Eastern European cynicism, studies expressing the commitment of American optimism sometimes seem naive. At the same time, it cannot be said that the studies paint only a positive picture of the world; in fact, each study carries within it a difficult conflict. Diversity in the Hungarian theatre system is most evident in the independent performing arts scene. The main reason for this is that people of colour are very underrepresented in institutionalised actor education. As a result, Roma, Asians, Black and other ethnic minorities are underrepresented in Hungarian state theatre productions. There are attempts from state theatres to create community theatre performances or drama pedagogical projects whose main theme relates to EDI. But in most of the state theatres, social awareness is only reflected in one or two side projects in a season.

While reading, the book really excited me personally. As a practising actor, it inspired me to think about theatre projects that are not about social awareness, but are born in the spirit of social awareness. I began to think about the extent to which the expectations expressed by the concept of EDI apply in my work environment. I started researching which Hungarian theatre companies deal with underrepresented social groups, and who are the ones who don't get enough attention.

I recommend *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy* primarily to dramaturgs and all theatre creators who feel committed to approaching theatre through the filter of social awareness. I recommend it to those who enjoy reading about the artistic experiences of other artists. And finally, I recommend it to those who are keen to engage in dialogue about how contemporary theatre responds to global social phenomena and what role dramaturgs play in this.

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.74 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 74–81.

Reflections of Robert Scanlan's plot-bead theatre

SÁRA SAHIN-TÓTH

Robert SCANLAN. *Principles of Dramaturgy*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 132 p.

Everyone is a dramaturg

Robert Scanlan's collection of essays, *Principles of Dramaturgy*,[1] was published in 2020 by Routledge in New York as part of their *Focus on Dramaturgy* series[2]. Edited by Magda Romanska, the series, which discusses the theory of dramaturgy from various angles and aims to renew it, publishes writings by numerous experts in the field.[3]

Scanlan's book is primarily a practical guide for those involved in dramaturgy, which, according to the author's definition, includes everyone involved in theatre, from actors to set designers to sound technicians. In fact, he believes that everyone—including the audience—is a dramaturg, since the audience also perceives and shapes the success or failure of a given scene, and a good actor adapts to the changing dramaturgy within a scene. Scanlan therefore interprets the concept of dramaturgy broadly—in his view, dramaturgy is a kind of collective professional sensitivity, not privileged knowledge. The oft-repeated, unanswerable fundamental questions arise for him as well: why is there no precise definition of dramaturgy? What exactly does a dramaturg do? He considers the work of a director to be much more comprehensible to laypeople than that of a dramaturg, even though the boundaries of the director's role and activities have changed radically, moving away from conventional functions.

Principles of Dramaturgy comprehensively discusses the dramaturgical principles and mechanisms that are essential to theatrical thinking in three major chapters (Form, Action, and Production Dramaturgy).

About the Chapter on "Form"
(The Primacy of Form)

The first chapter clarifies how the concept of form can be discussed in relation to different artistic and audience demands. Scanlan repeatedly goes into detail about the misunderstandings surrounding what he calls conventional theatre and theatre that is labelled as postdramatic, abstract, or experimental. For example, we encounter difficulties when the term "postdramatic" becomes synonymous with the opposite of "traditional." According to Scanlan, this often leads to the misunderstanding that theatre "play" must be performed without rules and that a true artist must reject rules.[4] The chapter, which draws on Aristotelian aesthetic traditions and examines the relationship between form and dramatic action, encourages us to examine the dramaturgical structure of the performance. Its basic premise is that all dramatic works can be analysed and interpreted through an analysis of the relationship between content and form, regardless of whether they are classical dramatic or experimental in form. Scanlan attributes all mistakes made in theatre

[1] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[2] Magda ROMANSKA, ed., *Focus on Dramaturgy* series (New York: Routledge.) The book was published in collaboration with TheTheatreTimes.com.

[3] Information about all the pieces in the series: https://www.routledge.com/Focus-on-Dramaturgy/book-series/RFOD.

[4] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy*, *The shibboleth of "Realism," and the postulation of the "postdramatic"*.

to a lack of elaboration of these two principles and considers their precise knowledge and application to be the basis of creative knowledge, creativity, and spontaneity. The book aims to influence creative practice by illustrating specific methods based on exploring the interaction between form and plot.

According to Scanlan, a theatrical work of art is more visible if the story itself is missing or pushed into the background, as abstract formal language often reveals the essence more openly and clearly. At the same time, there is the paradoxical experience that the more reduced and abstract the form of a theatrical performance, the more difficult it is for the average audience to access it. American (and average European) audiences are most disturbed by cases where artistic expression takes precedence over the content that is intended to be conveyed directly. Scanlan uses this to explain the gap between public taste and experimental, extreme behaviour.

In the realistic, representational style, the formal elements of the plot are just as present and just as artificial as, say, in a Robert Wilson composition, but they are more difficult to distinguish in the blurred perception of "realism", which, according to Scanlan, is the audience's point of view, not that of the theatre artist. Throughout the chapter on form, the artistic (more open to abstract language) conception is contrasted with the "average" viewer's perspective. "American audiences are most baffled on those occasions of greatest artistic clarity, and this explains the rift that occurs between popular taste and an esoteric craving, among artists, for the 'pure' experience of formal construction and experimentation. We can gauge how deep-seated the popular American appetite for 'life-likeness' is when we notice that it is formal transparency that baffles the comprehension of the average theatergoer."[5] Scanlan thus writes about the clash between American audiences, who are less receptive to formal complexities, and artistic desires for experimentation and wild formal adventures. Scanlan's assertion presupposes a more unified artistic perspective. From an Eastern European theatre perspective, this may seem incomprehensible, simplistic, and crude, since from the inside this dichotomy is obviously inapplicable to a professional milieu that is at once diverse and polarised, yet also quite homogeneous. There can be no question of unity and aesthetic points of reference. Creators often do not understand each other at all; their attitudes are quite heterogeneous and incoherent. Taste has become an irrevocably diffuse and elusive category. Hungarian audiences who go to art theatres are hungry for more experimental, more exciting performances, but artists are unable to break out of their own frameworks and produce a series of self-contained, repetitive performances.

Scanlan uses Lessing's treatise *Laocoon*[6] to conceptualise the functioning and operation of stage forms. According to Lessing, the first principle of constructing a fictional world is that "signs that follow one another [in time] can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive"; furthermore, "objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions."[7] Thus, poetry—the art of "articulated sounds in time"—necessarily deals with actions. On stage, although bodies are present as images, they also exist in time, and at every moment of their existence they can take on a different appearance or be in a different combination. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations is the result of the previous one and can be the cause

[5] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy*, *The basic principles: Form: time and the plot-bead diagram.*

[6] Gotthold Ephraim LESSING, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, transl. by Edward Allen MCCORMICK (Dover Publications, 1984) in Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy*, *Form: Form in the theatre.*

[7] LESSING, *Laocoon…*

of the next, which means that it can be the focus of an action.[8]

When studying form, Scanlan believes that a balance must be struck between the attraction to realism and artistic demands. He believes that the first task of a person engaged in serious artistic work should be to understand form, and only then should they move on to analysing the unavoidable basics—the theme, the story, the characters, the setting, the historical context, and the style of speech. To facilitate a deeper exploration of form, Scanlan has created a system of diagrams that he believes is suitable for studying all dramatic texts, regardless of the genre and style of the play.

The Plot-Bead Diagram

Scanlan analyses dramatic texts using his own plot-bead technique. This diagram, like a musical score, visually represents the development of the basic coordinates of the performance, simultaneously marking and showing changes in space and time. The plot-bead is primarily intended to represent the arc of the plot, which, according to Scanlan, is usually difficult to see clearly even for experienced professionals. The plot-bead diagram thus aims to provide an easily comprehensible framework for all participants in the performance, serving as a common basis, starting point, and analytical tool for the director, dramaturg, or even the entire creative team.

(The term "plot-bead" is a neologism coined by Scanlan, referring to the fact that the plot of a play can be visualised as a pattern similar to that of a string of pearls.)

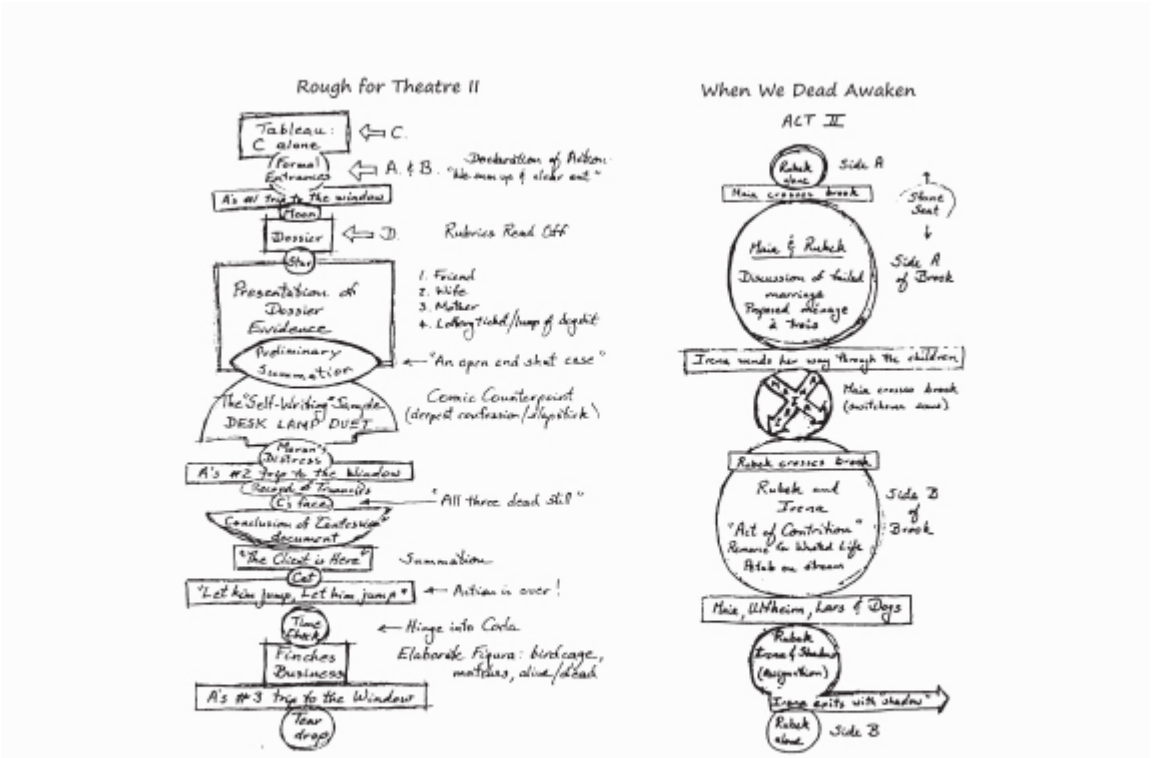


Figure I.1 Example plot-bead diagrams – Samuel Beckett's *Rough for Theatre II* and Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, Act II.

[8] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy*, *Form: Form in the theatre.*

The diagram clearly indicates the beginning, turning points, and end of the performance. To construct a plot-bead diagram, it is necessary to rethink where the boundaries and subunits of the scenes lie. (Scanlan emphasises that the drama must necessarily begin at a definable point in time, then inevitably continue, and end at a moment that is as concrete and recognisable as the previous ones). The plot-bead diagram depicts the play as a "string of events," with the timeline as the "thread" holding the string together and the beads as the units of time, or "events," whose sequence forms the formal composition of the play.

The question arises as to what can be called a unit of time to be marked, since dramatic material does not have a system that can be clearly divided according to a uniform system. Or, if it does, what criteria do we use to divide the texts, and where do we place the dramaturgical emphases? A significant part of the joy and freedom of creation comes from free, instinctive intuition and associative decisions, which is why most creators develop their unique formal solutions spontaneously, based on their own research and insights, sometimes only during the rehearsal process.

Doesn't Scanlan's beading seem anti-creative, a rigorous systematisation? The bead string can be a mould for experimentation, open to creators who are searching for free forms. What real benefits can it bring to practicing theatre-makers? And, in general, how should practising dramaturgs, directors, and actors approach reading the book? Reading specialised texts is a rare phenomenon, at least among Hungarian theatre creators. Few young theatre professionals can name a specialist book that has influenced or shaped their thinking about theatre, and few even consider reading specialist texts.

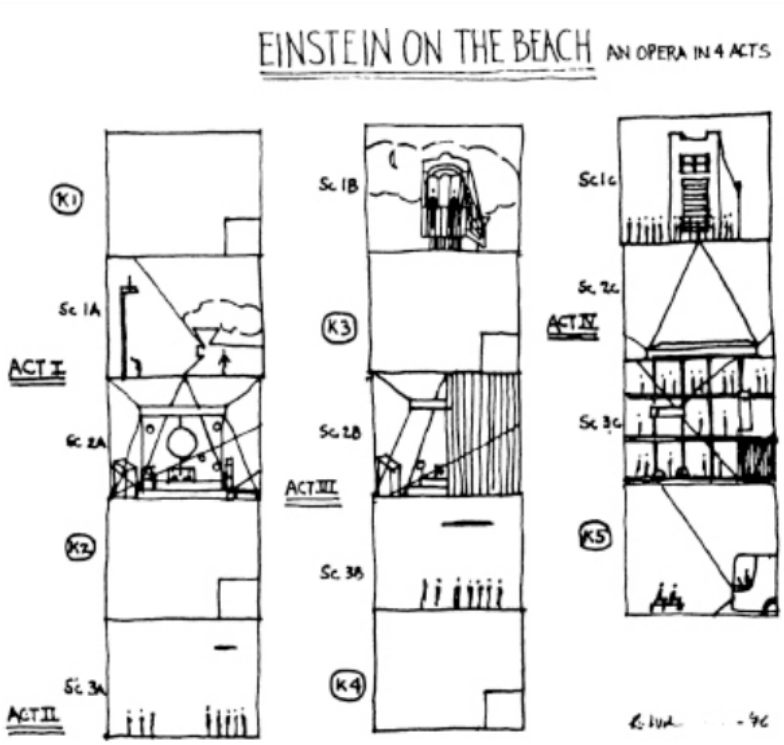
An interesting topic that could be added to the book is what advice Scanlan, outraged by collective professional incompetence, would give to young artists of the 21st century in his book, and in general, for reading professional texts. In terms of theatre, writing and written texts have a past tense. Scanlan expresses his anger and disappointment (sometimes as if he were already annoyed in advance, asserting that provocation alone does not create a new form), which stems from the many experiences of sloppiness and inaccuracy he has encountered during his career. He intends his study to be a cry, a call for action, but he does not discuss the difficult aspects of how to combine this kind of awareness—the organising awareness of the plot-bead diagram—with spontaneous, free, creative experimentation.

In any case, one of the most fruitful effects of Scanlan's technique could be that creators read the plays several times in succession and with genuine attention. What is still worth considering and exploring in Scanlan's method, and—especially from a Hungarian perspective—prompts an interesting assessment, is the communal nature of theatre-making. In Hungary, there is a well-established tradition, even a cult, of the aforementioned non-understanding, non-interpretation, lack of reflection, and the behaviour of directors and dramaturgs that forces actors into a position where they only have to worry about their own tasks and work out their own parts as best they can. This harmful attitude leads, not least, to the fact that many actors do not even feel the desire to think about the moral, political, and human messages conveyed by the performance they appear in. A disturbing number of actors do not care about the context in which the performance is created or the deeper levels of meaning at which it can be interpreted. The responsibility is mutual: the profession (directors) does not always expect this, does not always reward it, and indeed, the legitimisation of this attitude is based on historical traditions. In many cases, it is not true that actors do not care about their circumstances, but rather that they are powerless in their vulnerable position, playing for low pay, and do not know what to do. The undoubted advantage of Scanlan's plot-bead technique is that it fosters a community

spirit and high standards, as its aim is to ensure that actors also understand the formal driving forces behind the performance, rather than this knowledge being the sole privilege of the director.

Principles of Dramaturgy presents five dramaturgical case studies: an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act IV, scenes 2-3), Robert Wilson's script outline for *Einstein on the Beach*, Samuel Beckett's *Rough for Theatre II*, Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, and Gotthold Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (Act I). With these diverse examples, Scanlan demonstrates the applicability of the plot-bead diagram to performances of the most varied styles and forms, proving that there is no dramatic material, regardless of the era or style in which it was created, for which a plot-bead diagram cannot be constructed. Of course, this does not mean that the depicted plot lines cannot differ significantly from each other in terms of their formal coherence and the content inherent in their form.

Scanlan pays particular attention to Robert Wilson, whom he frequently refers to in the text. Wilson himself always works with plot diagrams he developed himself (perhaps this also played a role in Scanlan's plot-bead fantasy, which is another argument against the impracticality of the method), sketching out all his ideas, much like a graphomaniac feels compelled to constantly write things down. Wilson's characteristic drawings set up comic-like storyboard frames in which he visually illustrates the plot.



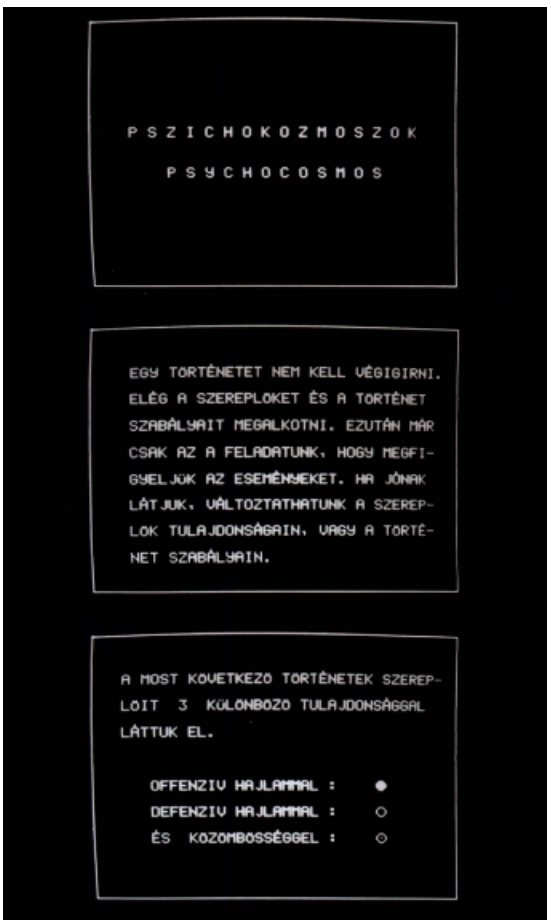
His images are proscenium-framed viewpoints of the dominant geometry of each scene, so their primary abbreviations are spatial rather than temporal in nature. Wilson arranges the spatial viewpoints in chronological order, the form and direction of which correspond to the plot-bead diagram; similarly to the diagram, the figure presents the form of the entire performance from a single viewpoint. Wilson's scene-framed storyboards summarise the entirety of the dramatic composition. Scanlan looks up to the formalist theatre director as a role model, who works in clear and transparent forms despite a stage language based on a different kind of sensuality, generally eschewing linearity and narrati-

vity, and whose managers, assistants, and dramaturgs work separately on the formal documentation of each production.

Fixations and Feelings of Lack

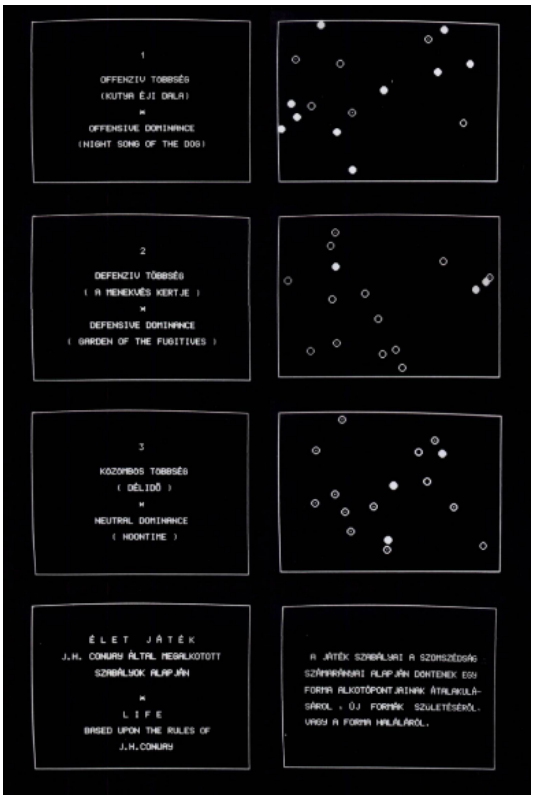
Although Scanlan emphasises that his plot-beads apply to a wide variety of radically different plays, his choices could be much bolder. It would have been interesting, for example, to bring out avant-garde works that have been pushed to the periphery, whose plot-bead diagram analysis could lead to surprising insights. In the absence of extreme examples, Scanlan's basic premise carries less weight, and the revelatory power of his arguments, at least for me, is lacking. Although Beckett's dramaturgy and stylised language take a bolder direction, Scanlan does not use truly performative or contemporary examples but sticks to the world-famous Wilson and the well-established classics (Ibsen, Shakespeare). It may be that he had no intention of illustrating his analytical structure with post-dramatic works, which he considers problematic anyway, but it would have been more authentic and exciting to illustrate his analytical structure through works in which linear-narrative understanding is less obvious and clear, and whose formal exploration is therefore more challenging. This would have allowed the book to appeal to a wider audience.[9]

Scanlan's method brings to mind the equally radical image-associating computer experiment illustrated by Gábor Bódy's[10] diagram technique, which places dramaturgical structure in a completely different perspective. Bódy, who developed his system in collaboration with a nuclear physicist, does not view it primarily from the perspective of rational understanding, and he has also shown himself to be open to the idea that the diagram of his own creation could take on a life of its own:



[9] Shifting these boundaries and taking a leap into the deep end could be achieved, for example, through Joseph Nadj's performances, which are based on strong visuality and physicality, or through one of Artaud's abstract Mexican theatrical fantasies, such as Séraphin's theatre, which is not even a sketch of a performance, but an offer of radical sensual liberation of the body, an imaginary plot-bead diagram, or András Jeles's plot-bead diagram analysis of one of his plays. (András Jeles [1945–) is a Hungarian film and theatre director and writer. His works defy predictability and are characterised by unexpected leaps of thought and a unique, catastrophic, and extremely ironic language.)

[10] Gábor Bódy (1946–1985) was a Hungarian film and theatre director and thinker. His work and creative personality combined technical expertise, a thorough knowledge of materials (celluloid, videotape) and tools (cameras and optics), theoretical knowledge, and the power of imagination.



"The program was calculated by theoretical nuclear physicist Sándor Szalay. When I asked him why, in all three cases, some of the balls stick together after colliding, then separate after a while, he replied that he hadn't expected this either and had no idea why."[11]

Scanlan does not get bogged down in theoretical debates, but offers straightforward, practical, usable principles and methods. He consciously positions himself both within and in opposition to contemporary critical discourse, acting as a kind of counterpoint; because of this dual position, Scanlan's scepticism and blunt phrasing should be treated with caution. The book engages in dialogue with 20th- and 21st-century critical theories (e.g., poststructuralism, deconstruction, postdramatic theory, performance studies), but does not join them, instead taking on a corrective, balancing role. Scanlan's monomania (this term has been the subject of passionate research in Hungarian theatre tradition since the end of the 20th century) sometimes leads to oversimplification. His thinking is often dogmatic and lacks any mention of creative methods and systems of association other than his own, thus appearing conservative in many respects within the horizon of contemporary theoretical discourse. He also states relatively uniformly in the book, without context, that the plot is inevitably the origin of theatrical activity, mentioning more abstract and postdramatic forms. However, plot development is not always and in all cases the driving force and main attraction of a theatrical work.[12]

He draws a parallel between dramatic construction and architecture.

"If one were building furniture (chairs and tables, for instance), a useful principle would be an appreciation of gravity, and its inevitable role in the craftsman's art. The concepts of 'level' and 'vertical' or 'square' are direct expressions of the single inescapable principle of gravity, and very specific tools – carpenter's levels and carpenter's squares – are basic tools that govern carpentry. Architecture has an identical foundational relation to gravity, and with it to strength of materials and principles of load bearing,

about the tension between postdramatic and conventional theatre. "A difficulty arises if 'postdramatic' has acquired the burden of meaning the polar opposite of 'conventional.' It then misleads by suggesting that the 'game' of theatre is now under an obligation to be played without rules. Every artist is supposed to hate rules, and 'principles' sounds like 'rules.'"

[11] BÓDY Gábor, *Egybegyűjtött filmművészeti írások 3. Pszichokozmoszok* (Budapest, MMA Kiadó, 2021). (My translation – S.S-T.)

[12] It can just as easily be a sound, colour, repetitive words, etc. An example of this is Beckett's monodrama *Not I#*, in which only a moving mouth is visible (the rest of the face is shrouded in darkness), dynamically propelling the speech. Scanlan writes simplistically

> and stability of structures. No one can practice either carpentry or architecture without a close compliance with principles of this kind (in this case, all founded on gravity)."[13]

However, theatre arts are not carpentry. The theatre person is allowed to cheat and lie. Associative, spontaneous, ill-considered decisions are relevant in theatre. While it is appropriate for an architect to be familiar with the laws of gravity, it is not necessarily to the advantage of theatre arts if every step is calculated and explainable.

Nevertheless, Scanlan defends theatre as a structured, time-unfolding action against purely conceptual or theoretical approaches, always on the condition that we see not only the elements of the "story," but also form and action as the cornerstones of dramaturgical work. His approach is classically conservative in the sense that he bases the craft of theatre on timeless principles of form and action, and sees creative freedom not in questioning or rejecting rules, but in consciously applying them. This position is more restrained than postdramatic, performative, or theory-centred contemporary theatre but it places creative work on a more stable and predictable foundation. Scanlan himself reflects on the conservative implications of the dramaturg's work: "The conservative implications of curatorial dramaturgy operate side by side with a countervailing obligation to renew the art form."[14] In other words, one of the dramaturg's tasks is "faithful cultural transmission," that is, preserving traditions and respecting the original intentions of the author. However, this must be balanced with innovation. This perspective does not reject innovation but interprets the task of the present from the perspective of the past, which is a classic conservative dramaturgical position.

Despite its shortcomings and questionable features, *Principles of Dramaturgy* is a thought-provoking work that does not limit dramaturgy to the boundaries of the profession but elevates it to the common language of theatre as a whole. Another topic for discussion could be the advantages and disadvantages of viewing dramaturgy in this way. Its pragmatic clarity can be useful for theatrical practice, as it offers both theoretical clarity and practical tools, while emphasising that dramaturgy is the shared, constantly evolving, and articulating knowledge of the theatrical community. This approach can be inspiring for all those who interpret theatre as a totally communal creation from the first step to the last. It is worth considering how Scanlan's principles and approach can fit into, or even be excluded from, our own theatrical work. *Principles of Dramaturgy* is a good companion for theatre thinkers and creators, whether as a guide or as a counterexample.

---

[13] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy, The shibboleth of "Realism," and the postulation of the "postdramatic"*.

[14] Robert SCANLAN, *Principles of Dramaturgy, Making difference.*

https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2025.4.82 *THEATRON*, VOL. 19. NO. 4. (2025): 82–91.

Genre Boundary Struggles. The Conflictual Relationship Between Circus and Bourgeois Theatre in Berlin Around 1900

HEDVIG UJVÁRI

Mirjam HILDBRAND. *Theaterlobby attackiert Zirkus: Zur Wende im Kräfteverhältnis zweier Theaterformen zwischen 1869 und 1918 in Berlin* [*Theatre Lobby Attacks Circus: The Shift in the Balance of Power between Two Theatrical Forms in Berlin, 1869–1918*]. Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2023 (= Ästhetische Praxis, 4). 347 p.

Subject Matter and Theoretical Framework

The study opens with a personally inflected preface that frames the historical reappraisal of the relationship between modern circus and bourgeois theatre. Here, Mirjam Hildbrand reflects on how she came to focus on the circus and why the historical investigation of this form became a central concern of her research. Drawing on her own experience as a dramaturg and scholar, she observes a striking dissonance: while contemporary circus is a vibrant, inventive, and theatrically rich field of practice, within German-language academic discourse it has long failed to qualify as a "serious" object of theatre-historical inquiry. Her encounters with productions by *Zirkus Fahr AwaY*, as well as insights gained through an early theatre-analytical project, made this tension particularly visible. Within the professional field itself, the circus was widely taken to occupy a peripheral position, one that rarely invited sustained theoretical engagement.

Alongside this experiential point of departure, the preface also recounts the genesis of the research project. During archival work at the Berlin *Landesarchiv*, Hildbrand encountered the extensive records of the *Theaterpolizei* (theatre police), a source corpus of remarkable richness that had remained largely unexplored. The discovery of these materials proved decisive, providing the empirical foundation for an entire research programme and opening up new perspectives on the institutional regulation of theatrical forms.

At the heart of the study lies the observation that, within German-speaking cultural discourse, theatre and circus are organised according to categories that appear neutral but are in fact deeply political and ideological. Theatre—particularly bourgeois literary theatre (*Literaturtheater*)—is conventionally understood as art, that is, as high culture. Circus, by contrast, is typically classified as entertainment or industry (*Unterhaltung*, *Lustbarkeit*, or *Gewerbe*), and thus positioned outside the realm of art. This hierarchy, however, is not the result of a natural or self-evident development. Rather, it is the outcome of protracted discursive and legal processes that took shape over the course of the nineteenth century. The central research questions therefore address how this hierarchy of status between theatre and circus came into being, why one form came to be recognised as art while the other did not, and which institutional, social, and legal mechanisms contributed to rendering this distinction largely unquestionable by the end of the nineteenth century.

The introduction situates these questions within a broader historical framework. The "long nineteenth century" marks not only the institutional consolidation of the bourgeois ideal of theatre but also the emergence of the modern circus in its recognisable form. From the 1850s onwards, Berlin hosted several permanent circus buildings, and circus performances increasingly relied on dramaturgical structures comparable to those of the theatre. Pantomimes incorporated musical and choreographic elements, resulting in complex, staged narratives rather than mere sequences of attractions. A critical turning point

was the *Gewerbeordnung* of 1869, which liberalised theatrical enterprise and thereby positioned the circus as a direct competitor to literary theatre. This development was followed by a series of political and professional campaigns in which theatrical interest groups deliberately sought to relegate the circus to a legally and culturally "inferior" category.

This process necessitated conceptual clarification. Hildbrand distinguishes between *Theaterform*, a neutral category encompassing a wide range of performative practices, and *Theater*, understood in a normative sense as an institution with elevated artistic status. One of the book's central aims is to trace how this latter, restrictive usage emerged and gradually solidified.

The introduction also addresses the state of circus research. Within German-language theatre studies, the circus has long constituted a blind spot; most theatre-historical, cultural-historical, or legal-historical works have either ignored it altogether or mentioned it only in passing. By contrast, in Anglophone and Francophone scholarship, an autonomous field of Circus Studies has developed over the past four decades, complete with an established body of literature and its own archival practices. German-speaking researchers, however, have often been forced to rely on non-academic, anecdotal circus histories. While valuable in certain respects, these publications frequently reproduce unverified legends and rarely engage with primary sources. Against this background, Hildbrand's monograph positions itself as opening up a new field of inquiry and underscores the exceptional nature of a rigorously scholarly investigation into the history of the circus.

Hildbrand defines her source base and methodology with notable clarity. She draws on four principal groups of sources: (1) theatre-related legal texts and regulations, including amendments to the *Gewerbeordnung* and fiscal legislation; (2) parliamentary and administrative records, in particular the files of the Berlin *Theaterpolizei*; (3) documents produced by professional interest groups; and (4) press sources that testify to contemporary perceptions of the circus.

Methodologically, the study adopts a discourse-analytical approach. Rather than merely cataloguing practices and regulatory measures, Hildbrand investigates the formation of the categories and semantic networks through which theatre and circus were positioned within a cultural hierarchy. Discursive repetitions, value judgements, and normative assumptions articulated in the sources are treated as being as significant as institutional facts.

In discussing the historical background of the modern circus, the author emphasises that its emergence cannot be traced to a single point of origin, despite the persistent presence of 1768—Philip Astley's first London performance—in canonical narratives of circus history. Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatrical culture was far more permeable than such accounts suggest. Minor theatres, hippodramas, and equestrian theatres all functioned as early antecedents of the circus, operating as hybrid forms that combined music, narrative action, dance, and acrobatics. The modern institutionalisation of the circus grew out of this heterogeneous prehistory. At the same time, bourgeois literary theatre increasingly sought, throughout the nineteenth century, to distance itself from precisely this hybridity, producing ever narrower and more normative definitions of what constituted "theatre."

Following the delineation of these conceptual and historical premises, the study unfolds across three major sections. The first offers a detailed analysis of Berlin's circus culture, introducing key venues, selected representative pantomimes, and patterns of audience and press reception. The second examines the development of theatre law between 1869 and 1900, with particular attention to the ways in which representatives of literary theatre attempted to restrict the circus through legal means. The third traces developments from the turn of the century to the end of the

First World War, a period in which moral and civic campaigns, ecclesiastical opposition, fiscal policy, and the emergence of new competitors—most notably cinema—significantly weakened the position of the circus while further consolidating that of the theatre. Taken together, these sections reconstruct the process by which a cultural hierarchy became established and stabilised in the latter half of the nineteenth century, one in which theatre came to embody the norm of high art, while the circus was relegated to the margins as a form of entertainment.

Circus as Urban Modernity: Performance, Technology, and Cultural Experimentation in Fin-de-Siècle Berlin

The first major chapter of the study situates the historical rethinking of the relationship between modern circus and bourgeois theatre within the cultural landscape of fin-de-siècle Berlin, demonstrating how the circus emerged as one of the most dynamic and experimentally oriented forms of urban performance. Hildbrand takes as her starting point a deeply entrenched assumption in theatre historiography: that the circus occupied merely the margins of popular entertainment and remained aesthetically and institutionally distant from the world of bourgeois *Literaturtheater*. Her detailed reconstruction, however, shows that by the late nineteenth century the circus had long ceased to consist of temporary fairground booths. Instead, it had developed into a multilayered theatrical form organised around permanent buildings and complex technologies of spectacle.

The institutionalisation of the circus in the modern metropolis was not simply the result of economic success or market demand. Rather, the genre integrated dramaturgical, visual, and technical innovations that would later play a significant role in the development of both theatre and moving-image culture. In this sense, the circus functioned not at the periphery of theatrical history but as one of its most innovative sites.

In the opening section of the chapter, Hildbrand outlines how a distinctively Berlin-based performance practice of the modern circus took shape. A genre previously regarded as marginal entered, at the turn of the century, a social and cultural environment particularly conducive to large-scale, rapidly changing, attraction-based spectacles. The principle of programme organisation based on constant novelty—that is, the logic according to which audiences would return only if presented with new productions night after night—turned the circus into one of the most intensively innovative actors within the urban entertainment industry. Rapid repertoire changes, spectacular technical developments, specialised machinery, and advanced lighting techniques all contributed to transforming the circus into an experimental laboratory attuned to the rhythms of modernity. While bourgeois theatre tended to emphasise the stability of a classical dramatic repertoire, the circus embodied the pulse of urban life itself: an aesthetic of movement, renewal, and perpetual transformation.

The next major section provides a detailed account of the three most important circus buildings in Berlin at the time: the Markthallenzirkus, Circus Krembser, and Circus Busch. These venues not only surpassed many contemporary theatres in size and technical equipment but also reconfigured the organisation of spectatorship. The Markthallenzirkus, with its robust hall architecture and eclectic wood-and-iron construction adapted from a former market hall, created a space of democratic mass culture. Its wide, circular public areas were both inclusive and acoustically manageable, and although initially reliant on gas lighting, the venue adopted modern lighting technologies by the end of the century.

Circus Krembser, by contrast, explicitly addressed a bourgeois audience. Featuring decorated boxes, a differentiated auditorium, and an interior architecture approximating that of dramatic theatre, it occupied an intermediate position between circus and theatre. This

dual orientation—preserving traditional circus structures while simultaneously approaching theatrical norms of elegance—ultimately explains why the venue failed to fit fully into either narrative. Among the three, Circus Busch possessed the most advanced technological infrastructure. Its steel-and-glass construction, fully electric lighting, and hydraulic ring system made it a paradigmatic example of technicised spectacle at the turn of the century. Water scenes, rising and sinking platforms, and the movement of large-scale scenic units achieved here remained technically challenging even for contemporary theatres. These examples demonstrate that the circus operated not on the margins of theatrical development but at its technological forefront.

This technical and organisational modernisation, however, was not an end in itself. It served the demands of a remarkably multifaceted and dramaturgically complex performance form. Contemporary conceptions of circus pantomime encompassed a wide range of genres and iconographic layers, from fairy-tale fantasies and exotic narratives to historical and military tableaux depicting royal and courtly scenes. The three productions analysed in detail—*Diamantine* (1883), *Babel* (1903), and *Jagdfest am Hofe Ludwig XIV* (1911)—demonstrate that these performances possessed fully developed narrative structures. Music accompanied the action, visual elements fulfilled dramaturgical functions, and mass scenes, dance interludes, and gestural vocabularies combined to produce a complex aesthetic form. This form aligns more closely with the tradition of ballet-pantomime than with conceptions of the circus as a mere succession of attractions. Music functioned not as simple accompaniment but as a central dramaturgical element, shaping rhythm, scene transitions, and emotional tone, while choreography formed an integral part of the visual narrative.

The fourth major section addresses the ambivalence of the circus's social reception. From the perspective of contemporary audiences, the circus enjoyed overwhelming popularity. Sold-out performances, special trains, family attendance, and the strong presence of working-class spectators indicate a heterogeneous audience profile that bourgeois theatre struggled to attract. Through parades, processions, and posters, the circus occupied urban visual space, creating what might be described as an "expanded theatrical space" of the metropolis itself. At the same time, the rhetoric of bourgeois theatre criticism—branding the circus as "vulgar," "tasteless," or "alien to theatre"—reveals that this social expansion posed a direct threat to the dominant position of *Literaturtheater*. The negative critical reception was therefore less aesthetic than institutional and political in nature, functioning as a strategy through which the theatrical field sought to preserve its cultural primacy.

The concluding section of the chapter reconsiders the concept of "theatricalisation" in order to examine the discursive mechanisms that sustain genre hierarchies. Earlier historiography suggested that the circus moved closer to theatre around the turn of the century, becoming increasingly "theatricalised." Hildbrand demonstrates instead that the circus had long produced narrative, scenographically elaborate, and technologically sophisticated performances throughout much of the nineteenth century. Rather than moving towards theatre, it operated from the outset as part of a broad theatrical ecosystem—one that later, drama-centred definitions of theatre proved unable to accommodate. The concept of "theatricalisation," as used retrospectively, thus names a discursive operation through which the exclusive categories of bourgeois theatre were elevated to universal norms.

In this respect, the argument resonates implicitly with theoretical models from early film history. Tom Gunning's and André Gaudreault's concept of the *cinema of attractions* offers a precise parallel, illuminating how spectacle- and attraction-based forms are retrospectively devalued even as they played

a decisive technical and narrative role in the formation of a new medium.

The overarching conclusion of the chapter is that the Berlin circus at the turn of the century was not merely a phenomenon of the entertainment industry but one of the most vibrant, experimental, and socially inclusive forms of modern performance. Its subsequent marginalisation did not arise from aesthetic or historical necessity but from the normative self-canonisation of bourgeois theatre and the cultural institutions aligned with it. In this sense, the chapter constitutes not only a historical reconstruction but also a critical intervention into contemporary debates on the concept of theatre, genre hierarchies, and the selective operations of cultural memory.

Law, Lobbying, and the Codification of Cultural Hierarchies: The Institutional Marginalisation of the Circus

The book's second chapter uncovers the institutional-historical deep structure of the conflict between circus and bourgeois theatre. It reconstructs the multi-decade process of legislation and lobbying through which theatre, drawing on the instruments of cultural rank, genre hierarchy, and legal regulation, sought to exclude the circus institutionally from the category of "higher art." Hildbrand demonstrates with particular clarity that the marginalisation of the circus did not arise from aesthetic or qualitative differences but from political and cultural processes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, translated genre distinctions into legally sanctioned hierarchies.

The opening section examines the theatrical consequences of the 1869 Industrial Code (*Gewerbeordnung*). Initially, the new regulation brought about a liberalisation of theatrical activity. Parliamentary debates surrounding the *Theater im Reichstag* advocated a freer practice of performance, which temporarily afforded the circus a degree of institutional leeway. This brief phase of liberalisation, however, was marked from the outset by a profound cultural ambivalence. While the legal framework became formally more permissive, representatives of the bourgeois *Bildungstheater* increasingly organised themselves into interest groups. Hildbrand traces in detail the emergence of an institutional coalition dedicated to defending the interests of "serious theatre," a coalition that by the 1870s was already calling for the "regulation" of the circus.

Liberalisation and restriction thus unfolded in tandem. What legislation permitted, the theatre lobby sought to curtail rhetorically and institutionally. Commercial genres—most notably the circus, cabaret, and popular pantomime—were still able to operate with relative legal freedom during this period, yet the discursive foundations were already being laid for the restrictive language that would dominate the following decades.

The second major section analyses the political and ideological background of the legislative tightening after 1880. The 1880s marked a decisive turning point, as the *Literaturtheater* lobby emerged as a genuinely influential political force. Parliamentary debates between 1879 and 1883 increasingly revolved around the notion of "higher art," a concept through which theatrical forms were systematically differentiated. The 1883 amendment to the *Gewerbeordnung* introduced an explicitly genre-based distinction, separating performances deemed to possess *Kunstinteresse* (artistic interest) from those considered to lack it. This legal category automatically relegated the circus to the realm of "lower" forms allegedly devoid of artistic value, even though the circus's actual aesthetic practice often demanded a higher degree of technical and dramaturgical sophistication than contemporary bourgeois drama.

The decisive consequence of the 1883 amendment was that genre hierarchy was no longer sustained merely by cultural convention but became fixed in explicit legal categories. As a result, the circus was placed at a disadvantage not only symbolically but also in

practical terms. The economic and administrative conditions of its operation deteriorated through licensing procedures, programme restrictions, and content regulations that particularly affected pantomime. The circus thus became subject to a regulatory regime tacitly tailored to the needs and norms of the *Literaturtheater*.

The third major section focuses on the period between 1884 and 1900, when the tightening of theatre law manifested less through new legislation than through enforcement, interpretation, and the operation of disciplinary apparatus. This was the most difficult legal phase for the circus. At the same time, theatre itself entered a period of crisis. Hildbrand shows that audience numbers for bourgeois dramatic theatre declined, institutions accumulated debt, and the genre's social prestige eroded. Nevertheless—or perhaps precisely for this reason—the lobby intensified its opposition to any performative form perceived as competition. A statement issued by the *Reichsamt des Innern* in 1888, which deliberately left the genre classification of circus pantomimes "ambiguous," functioned as a tool of rhetorical delegitimation. Performances that could not be clearly categorised were more easily prohibited, restricted, or administratively curtailed.

An emblematic moment of this period was the 1896 revision, which reinforced rigid classifications of genres and repertoires. Circus pantomimes were now excluded from the "theatrical" category in almost every respect. They were not recognised as drama, yet neither were they treated as harmless spectacles; instead, they were relegated to a regulatory no-man's-land. The flexibility that had previously constituted one of the circus's greatest strengths thus became a liability within the legal framework.

The fourth section offers a theoretical confrontation with the underlying logic of these developments. Why, Hildbrand asks, did nineteenth-century legislation endow certain theatrical forms with "higher artistic interest" while denying it to others? This question exposes a fundamental schema of German aesthetic history: the legal codification of the dichotomy between "high" and "low" art. A brief cultural-historical overview makes clear that these boundaries were not drawn along aesthetic lines but emerged from social and ideological considerations. The discourse of high art functioned as a cultural instrument constructed in the interest of *Bildungstheater*, aimed not at the objective protection of artistic value but at preserving the bourgeois theatre's institutional monopoly.

One of the chapter's most compelling moments is its interrogation of whether dramatic theatre itself could be unambiguously defined as art, pointing to the intense debates surrounding the very nature of bourgeois drama. If dramatic theatre lacked a stable definition, then the exclusion of the circus from the realm of "higher art" can hardly be understood as an aesthetic judgement; it must instead be recognised as a question of power.

The chapter's concluding examples—the legal struggles of Circus Busch and Circus Schumann—illustrate how circus companies by the end of the nineteenth century were compelled to fight for their very genre identity using legal language and administrative strategies. The theatre lobby mobilised legal categories underpinned by clearly articulated cultural hierarchies: licensing systems, content control, and genre classification all served to weaken the circus institutionally.

The overarching conclusion of the chapter is that the conflict between circus and theatre in the second half of the nineteenth century was not resolved on aesthetic or generic grounds but within the hidden networks of legislation, institutional interest representation, and cultural discourse. The marginalisation of the circus thus stemmed not from the nature of the genre itself but from social processes that elevated the norms of bourgeois theatre to universal standards. In this sense, Hildbrand's research constitutes not only a historical reconstruction but also a critical intervention, exposing cultural hierarchies that

are often perceived as natural as the outcome of contingent power formations.

Moral Regulation, Fiscal Policy, and Media Change: Coalitions Against the Circus in Early Twentieth-Century Berlin

In the history of modern performance, there are few periods in which institutional and social actors of such different provenance joined forces against a single genre—as happened, in this case, with the circus and the variety theatre in the first decades of the twentieth century. The book's third chapter reconstructs this particularly dense and complex phase of anti-circus campaigning, when three previously largely separate fields of power—the bourgeois theatre lobby, the professional associations of artists, and urban movements of moral regulation—suddenly began to point in the same direction. Although their motivations differed, the combined effect was the emergence of a cultural-political apparatus that drastically reduced the institutional space available to the circus and contributed in the long term to its gradual marginalisation in the early twentieth century.

The chapter takes as its point of departure the political discourse surrounding the proposed Imperial Theatre Law (*Reichstheatergesetz*). Around the turn of the century, the anticipated introduction of a unified theatre law was widely perceived as a chance to reorder the legal and cultural hierarchies of performance. Theatrical circles hoped that the law would finally fix the notion of "artistic interest" in unambiguous terms and thereby, on a legal basis, separate "higher" theatrical forms from "lower" entertainment. For the theatre lobby, a unified national regulation promised the institutionalisation of distinctions that had hitherto been sustained primarily through rhetorical and critical discourse.

For artists—the "stepchildren" of this legislative framework—the situation was more complicated. The first artists' associations, founded in the 1890s, found themselves in a double position. On the one hand, they sought greater professional recognition, on the other, they were acutely aware that the genre's heterogeneous and partly informal structures threatened their reputation from within. Hildbrand shows with great subtlety how cultural distinctions emerged within these associations, separating "respectable," contract-holding professional artists from itinerant, precariously situated performers working in the *Tingeltangel*. In defending their own social prestige, the organisations thus acquired an interest in distancing themselves from the lower-status segments of their own field—above all by stigmatising the *Tingeltangel* as a "contaminating" element. From this perspective, it becomes understandable why the artists' associations emerged as natural allies of the theatre lobby: their common ground was not aesthetic but status-political.

The third pillar of the anti-circus coalition consisted of moral-regulatory movements with ecclesiastical backing. The urban modernity of the late nineteenth century generated a wide array of cultural anxieties: prostitution, alcoholism, and "urban degeneration" were perceived by clergy and church councils as signs of a broader breakdown in social order. Variety and circus—particularly when they involved female performers or acrobats—were frequently drawn into discourses on sexual deviance, "public immorality," and the "corruption" of youth. The term *Tingelbordell*, which appears even in synodal records, is telling. By rhetorically linking the *Tingeltangel* and the brothel, it suggested that variety theatres were, in spatial and functional terms alike, part of the city's "moral contamination." The aim of this rhetoric was not accurate description but the disciplining of audience behaviour: the reassertion of control over the entertainment sector at a historical moment when the Church was losing ground in the increasingly secularised urban environment.

One particularly characteristic dimension of the conflict between moral regulation and the circus concerned Sundays and religious

feast days. For part of the clergy, it was unacceptable that urban residents should spend Sundays or major holidays by going to the circus. Among the conditions they formulated was the demand that, if clowns were to perform at all on such days, they should appear "without make-up and in civilian dress." This seemingly minor detail points to a broader cultural mechanism in which humour, the grotesque body, and popular playfulness appeared fundamentally incompatible with the temporal and spatial norms of religious observance. What looks like a marginal issue thus in fact symbolises the larger conflict: a clash between two mutually exclusive cultural regimes of time.

In the subsequent sections, the chapter foregrounds the cultural and political history of the *Lustbarkeitssteuer*, the entertainment tax. This levy, which imposed additional financial burdens on new forms of popular amusement, targeted precisely those genres that had been discursively marked as "lower," while the theatre effectively exempted itself from such measures. Bourgeois theatre thereby simultaneously expanded its own economic room for manoeuvre and restricted that of its rivals. The issue of taxation sharply illuminates the extent to which the maintenance of genre hierarchies was institutionally embedded in legal and economic mechanisms. Hildbrand pays particular attention to the specific vulnerability of circuses to such regulatory measures. Owing to high operating costs, the expense of maintaining animals, and the price of technical apparatus, circuses were especially sensitive to changes in taxation. The temporary closure of Circus Busch thus signalled not merely a business difficulty but an event of symbolic significance: it indicated that the state had turned the category of "high culture" into an instrument of economic policy.

The final major section of the chapter reconstructs the multi-factorial history of the circus's cultural disappearance. The outbreak of war in August 1914 triggered an acute crisis of operation: artists were drafted, the feeding of animals became increasingly difficult, and the infrastructure of travelling troupes collapsed. The economic crisis restricted audience mobility, narrowed the possibilities of urban cultural consumption, and, in many places, emergency measures made large-scale performances practically impossible.

Yet this was not the most important reason for the circus's decline. During this period, film became the dominant medium of urban visual culture. Hildbrand argues that cinema did not merely introduce a new technological form; it also appropriated the visual and dramaturgical logics developed by the circus: attraction, spectacle, rapid transitions, exoticism, mass scenes, and visual illusion were all forms inherited from the circus. Drawing on early film theory, especially the work of Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, it becomes clear that there is a deep structural affinity between the "cinema of attractions" and the circus—except that cinema could adapt these aesthetic forms far more flexibly and economically. When cinemas began to open in rapid succession—often in former circus buildings—this signalled a radical reconfiguration of the cultural ecosystem. The circus was displaced by a new medium of modern mass culture.

The chapter's conclusion emphasises that, although the Imperial Theatre Law was never actually enacted, the legal and institutional practices sustaining cultural hierarchies changed very little. The earlier logic of theatre legislation, the legal category of "artistic interest," and the double standards of the entertainment tax all persisted. The circus and the variety theatre did not disappear in the early twentieth century because they had become aesthetically "obsolete," but because a complex configuration of power emerged that subjected them simultaneously to social, economic, ideological, and cultural pressures. The self-canonising strategies of bourgeois theatre, the internal hierarchies of the artists' associations, the moral discourses of ecclesiastical regulation, and the sudden rise of film together shaped a process that gradually

pushed the circus out of the centre of modern urban culture.

Conclusion

Hildbrand's volume offers a comprehensive reconstruction of the institutional and cultural reconfiguration of the modern circus at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one that extends far beyond the conventional boundaries of genre history. The book's central achievement lies in its refusal to treat the circus as an isolated form of popular entertainment. Instead, it conceptualises the circus as a strategic cultural field of modernity, a site in which the interests, anxieties, and discursive strategies of multiple social spheres intersect. The three major sections of the study—the reconstruction of Berlin's cultural environment, the analysis of struggles surrounding theatre legislation, and the examination of the anti-circus coalition after 1900—all converge on the same conclusion: the fate of the circus was not an aesthetic issue, but a question of cultural power.

At the turn of the century, Berlin's circus did not occupy the periphery of theatrical development; on the contrary, it stood at the forefront of technical and organisational innovation. The infrastructure of the modern metropolis, rapidly shifting repertoire strategies, advances in technologies of spectacle, and practices of mass reception transformed the circus into a dynamic cultural laboratory. Within this laboratory, fundamental forms of modern visual culture—attraction, montage, the dramaturgy of movement and rhythm—were articulated for the first time. One of Hildbrand's most compelling arguments is that the circus was not an "inferior" form of theatre, but rather a precursor of modern visual media, whose technical and aesthetic solutions were later taken up and adapted by cinema.

At the same time, the cumulative argument of the chapters demonstrates that artistic and technical innovation alone offered no guarantee of social recognition. In its effort to preserve genre hierarchies, the bourgeois *Literaturtheater* lobby developed legal and rhetorical instruments designed to displace the circus into a position "outside culture." Artists' associations joined this process partly out of self-protective motives and partly in pursuit of social status, while the moral discourse of urban regulatory movements portrayed the circus—especially variety theatre and female performers—as a threat to public morality. The combined effect of these three fields of interest was not merely the introduction of administrative restrictions or economic burdens, but the targeted devaluation of the circus's legitimate cultural status.

The introduction of entertainment taxation, the legal consolidation of the category of "artistic interest," the rhetoric that framed pantomime as inherently "lower," and the construction of the variety theatre as a "dangerous space" all pointed in the same direction. Modern urban culture was reorganised according to institutional logics that strengthened the position of bourgeois theatre at the expense of popular entertainment. This process did not respond to the aesthetic qualities of the circus but to the social role it played within the visual public sphere of modernity. The circus offered forms of movement, corporeality, spectacle, and exoticism that proved difficult to accommodate within the normative frameworks of bourgeois cultural ideology.

The book's final chapter makes clear that the disappearance of the circus cannot be explained solely by market forces or technological change. Although the economic crisis triggered by the First World War and the rapid expansion of cinema accelerated the process, the weakening of the circus's cultural position was driven primarily by mechanisms of institutional and discursive exclusion. Cinema did not become the successor to the circus because it was inherently "more advanced," but because it was more easily integrated into existing cultural hierarchies by the state and the bourgeois public sphere. The circus, by contrast, gradually lost the

social and cultural space in which it had previously operated.

Hildbrand's study is therefore not only a contribution to circus history but also a critical work of cultural history. It demonstrates how artistic hierarchies are produced and stabilised, which institutional instruments are used to maintain boundaries between "high" and "low" genres, and how aesthetic, moral, economic, and political interests converge in the delegitimation of a cultural form. The book's central insight is that the history of the modern circus is not a narrative of decline, but a paradigmatic example of the self-canonising mechanisms of modern European culture: the story of how an urban genre that was technologically and aesthetically forward-looking was gradually excluded from the official cultural sphere by multiple agents of cultural power.

For this reason, the conclusion should be read less as a closure than as an invitation to a broader rethinking of cultural history. Hildbrand's book reminds us that the history of modern culture is shaped not only by canonised genres, but also by those relegated to the periphery by institutional power. The disappearance of the circus is thus not evidence of the genre's weakness, but of a reconfiguration of cultural space—a process in which one of the most important forms of modern visual culture gradually gave way to cinema, even as it played a decisive role in preparing the ground for that very visual revolution.

The Authors in this Issue

DÁNIEL FENYŐ (1996), critic, literary historian, student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs, editor of the journal *Jelenkor*. His field of research is Hungarian neo-avant-garde literature.

LÁSZLÓ HEVESI is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs. His research examines the Hungarian-language portrayal of Shylock's role. As a practicing actor, he also examines his research through the experience he has gained during his own creative processes.

MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI is a professor of theatre history at the University of Pécs. She has published several books and articles on the topics of contemporary drama theory, both the Hungarian and the European Avant-garde, and the ways in which politics of memory interact with theatre. She is the co-founder of *Theatron* and the Philther Hub.

ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN is Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. He was chairman of the Committee of Theatre and Film Studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for twelve years and has been editor of *Theatron* since 1998. His research work and publications focus on 20th century and contemporary trends of director's theatre as well as the past and present of music theatre (mostly staging operas). He is the author and editor of twenty books and more than a hundred essays on various aspects of the performing arts. His most recent publications include the English-language monograph, *Ambiguous Topicality. A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre* (L'Harmattan, 2021).

GABRIELLA KISS is a theatre historian, translator, drama teacher, Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest and research teacher at Szent István High School, Budapest. Her focus is currently on the relationship of contemporary theatre and theatre in education.

GABRIELLA REUSS, is Assistant Professor at Pázmány Péter Catholic University and Associate Professor at Rózsahegyi Catholic University, researches the reception of Shakespeare in the 19th–21st centuries. She is particularly interested in W. C. Macready's so-called Shakespeare restorations, Sándor Hevesi's Shakespeare cycles, and Hungarian puppet Shakespeare productions. Recently, she has also been working with inclusive drama groups.

SÁRA SAHIN-TÓTH (2000) is a theatre director. Between 2019 and 2021, she studied at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, then at Freeszfe between 2021 and 2024. She is currently a student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs.

BETTINA SIMON is a poet and doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs. She has published two poetry books, *Strand* (*Beach*, 2018) and *Rengeteg állat a vonatból* (*Lots of Animals from the Train*, 2024). In 2025, she won the Attila Hazai Literary Prize for sovereign, innovative, experimental and risk-taking Hungarian literature.

ROZÁLIA SZÉKELY is an actress. She completed degrees in children's and young adult literature and theatre studies and currently works as a freelance artist. She

has worked as an actress in both theatre and film since childhood. Her first independent play, *Kálvária lakópark*, premiered at Trafó in 2018, directed by the author. The production participated in the 13th DESZKA Festival, and the play is available for download from the drama archive of Szinhaz.net. She is currently a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pécs.

HEDVIG UJVÁRI is a literary historian and Germanist, Associate Professor at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Budapest). Her main research interests include identity constructions and cultural mediation in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy—particularly feuilleton writers, translators, and musical theatre—as well as the history of the German-language press in nineteenth-century Hungary.