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# HIS/STORY, HER/STORY, THEATRE HISTORIES

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His/story, Her/story,  
Theatre Histories

edited by

Erzsébet Bob Fülöp  
Magdolna Jákfalvi  
Árpád Kékesi Kun

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## FOREWORD

Our volume *His/story, Her/story, Theatre Histories* plays with words, genders, stories, and above all, theatre as it incorporates ‘play’ into the possibilities of historiography as an analytical technique. We play with the reader’s attention guided by the interpreting historian and his or her position, and we play with the idea that the shared insights of theatre practitioners and theatre researchers (the fundamentals of performance studies) are simultaneously embodied in *doing, showing doing, and explaining showing doing*. We play with theatrical genres, theatrical moments, languages of performance, and geographical distances, yet the rules of the game are strict, for we are writing theatre history. The studies in this volume employ a common methodology, known as the Philther (see Andreas Kotte’s introductory essay), which regards the performance as the object of theatre studies. We interpret its cultural context, directorial and dramaturgical characteristics, the actors’ performances, sight and sound exclusively from the perspective of the work of art, and we trace its impact from the perspective of the performance as a whole.

The Philther method—a portmanteau of the words ‘philology’ and ‘theatre’—was developed in the early 2010s by Hungarian theatre historians who founded the journal *Theatron* (see <https://theatron.hu>). The analytical methodology of Magdolna Jákfalvi, Árpád Kékesi Kun and Gabriella Kiss is based on simple observations: if art historians document the nature of aesthetic impact, and the history of art works traces the history of a genre or an artist’s oeuvre, then histories of the theatre must also focus on the works—which in this case are theatrical performances. Researchers have been confronted with the fact that a theatrical performance is ephemeral, unique, and unrepeatable; its description is impossible even in

the age of technical recording, since not even a multi-camera video recording can represent the work of art (the event) itself. The Philther method accepts this protocol of theatrical aesthetics, yet through its analytical steps and philological scrutiny, it is capable of interpreting any theatrical performance as a work of art rather than as a product of sociology, cultural anthropology, etc.

In this volume, readers will find analyses of theatrical works that, by examining productions from Transylvania, Vojvodina, and Hungary, trace a shared history of theatre: the history of Hungarian-language theatre. We will bring together the joint research of three theatre studies workshops and present the findings of three Philther Hubs, showcasing the diversity of approaches to writing theatre history, for which in most cases Philther provides the interpretive framework. You can read analyses of the first theatre of Târgu Mureş, a contemporary dance performance, 19th-century drama, the characteristics of Molière performances under state socialism, the avant-garde under control, and the performativity of political upheavals; yet what all these essays have in common is that they view and reveal the community's cultural customs, theatrical repertoire, and traditions of stage expression through the history of performances.

The introductory essay to the volume was written by Andreas Kotte, who recognizes the distinctive features of the historiography conveyed through the performances and thus situates the Philther method within the framework of contemporary theatre studies. Philther's systematic approach, consisting of six criteria, allows the work of art to be linked to events in literary history, the history of an institution, or an actor's career, while also permitting the analysis to highlight the potentially varying proportions among the six criteria. Using this approach, one can write, for example, about improvisational dramaturgical techniques, urban theatre as community theatre (The Community Building Department), and *The Habitus of Reality*.

The strength of this volume lies in the fact that it brings together the writings of researchers who have been shaped by diverse educational and academic traditions; while they conduct their official business in three different countries and in three languages—Hungarian, Romanian, and Serbian—theatre history is presented to us through performances staged in Hungarian or featuring Hungarian artists. This Hungarian, steeped in multilingualism, may even be discernible in the analyses translated into English. Our Philther-Hub network is strengthened by the ongoing work of three dozen theatre historians; our findings are available in Hungarian, English, and Romanian. Our research is supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and our researchers' institutions.

*Târgu Mureș, Pécs, Szolnok, March 21, 2026*

Erzsébet Bob Fülöp, Magdolna Jákfalvi,  
Árpád Kékesi Kun

### **Publications of the Philther-Hub**

MÁRIA ALBERT, KINGA BOROS, MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI, ÁRPÁD KÉKESI-KUN, eds. *Analize Philther asupra teatrului maghiar din România*. Târgu Mureș – Cluj-Napoca: Editura UArtPress, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024.

BOROS KINGA, JÁKFALVI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. *Nagyváradai Magyar színház-történet 1950–1990*. Kolozsvár – Marosvásárhely: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület – UArtPress, 2022.

JÁKFALVI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. *Nemzeti színház-történet 1948–1996*. Budapest: Arktisz – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2022.

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- JÁKFAI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. *SzocOper. Az operett újjáépítése 1949–1956 között*. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi Kiadó – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2021.
- JÁKFAI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. „Hát újra itt...”. *Operettkánon és -műfaj*. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi Kiadó – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2021.
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Andreas Kotte

WRITING THEATRE HISTORY.  
THE MAINSTREAM APPROACH AND ALTERNATIVES

Abstract: How do we deal with theatre in history? This was the subject of my lecture at the University of Arts, Târgu-Mureş on 9 November 2024, where I discussed the concept and contexts of my 2013 book on theatre history. This article explores how the predominantly philological research of theatre and the idea of progress have produced the logic of the theatre-historiographical mainstream. Theatre is equated with drama and thus researched from antiquity onwards only. This develops the notion of a theatre vacuum in the early Middle Ages and promotes bourgeois theatre. However, shifts and changes in theatre forms produce alternative perspectives. Provoked by the twentieth-century theatre avant-garde, and later performance art and postdramatic theatre, a wider understanding arises of theatre that existed before the narrowing to drama. This consequently undermines the grand narratives of theatre historiography.

My book, *Theaterwissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, was published in 2005. Known as *Studying Theatre. Phenomena, Structures and Functions* in English, the book is also available in Czech and Hungarian translation. The book was widely well received with good reviews. Then, in 2006, the publisher asked me to write another book, an introduction to European theatre history. This subject was to be dealt with in 400 pages.

I looked at the European theatre histories on my bookshelf. Some of them were extensive and included many details and contexts. Lucien Dubech moves from Aeschylus to his

present in more than 1,500 pages, although he concentrates heavily on France. Heinz Kindermann's ten volumes of 6,950 pages were extended to the end of the twentieth century by Manfred Brauneck. This took an extra 4,630 pages. As you can see, there is no shortage of facts about the history of European theatre.

Other European theatre histories flow smoothly into histories of world theatre. Oskar G. Brockett, for example, begins with his *History of the Theatre*, cited as a few ceremonies and rituals. He then follows with European theatre and finishes by extending his theatre history to other parts of the world. Cesare Molinari also precedes Greek tragedy with some rituals and shaman performances of the 'primitive peoples'. John Russell Brown's Oxford theatre history, which is also translated into Hungarian, begins with theatre in Greece. While rituals and representations of shamans or mysteries in Egypt often form the beginning of the art form, for the mainstream, the 'real theatre' or 'the theatre' begins in ancient Greece. When people write about the origins, they usually mean something like theatre, something that can become theatre when it grows up.

Most theatre histories come from countries that once held a leading position in the history of theatre. They are written in the scheme of 'grand narratives' (Jean-François Lyotard). Most researchers of each period or subject have agreed on the grand narratives. The authors do a lot of research and write a story based on their wealth of experience; a sort of novel that claims to be better than the previous ones. These narratives become part of the knowledge learnt through education; they steadily improve in detail and variation. The differences between these histories can be observed in the year of publication, the country of the author, and in textual verbosity – note the number of pages, but the content seems to remain similar. And yet, isn't plurality a basic tenet of research?

*In Search of Alternatives*

A few years ago, a colleague gave me a Dutch theatre history edited by Robert L. Erenstein. Only now do I realise that this history is not a grand narrative. Over 873 pages, this theatre history contains 120 descriptions of single performances typical of time and genre between the years 1130 and 1993. The gaps are filled by the readers' cultural and historical knowledge. The book is richly illustrated. The authors adhere to several basic criteria that determine how a performance and its context are described. The Dutch book is something like the Philther method developed later in the 2010s. "The acronym "Philther" comes from two words, "philology" and "theatre" (Kékesi Kun 2021, p. 7). The Philther is radically limited to important dramas in significant productions. It is a method that has many advantages. The space for written and pictorial representation is uniformly restricted and so creates comparability and practicability online. The method is largely removed from ideology, and the examples can always be expanded. The Dutch theatre history and the later Philther method show that well-written fragments of theatre history can improve the shortcomings of mainstream historiography.

Such thoughts in 2006 led me to the book *Theatre Histories*, edited by Gary Jay Williams. The title alone states its programme: *Theatre Histories*, in the plural. Various authors present their approach to different epochs. There is no need to standardise; disparate views on sources and times are acceptable. This puts aside the grand or master narrative. The book also breaks from a Eurocentric view, including sections on theatre from other parts of the world. The contributions interrupt an accepted order. For example, Roman comedy is followed by Indian Sanskrit theatre. The authors borrow the term cultural performance from ethnology, a term also used in research on theatricality and performativity. Cultural performances are interwoven with everyday life and include all theatre performances, whether tied to scripts, texts, dramas, or not. To avoid

theatre theory arguments, the authors use the joint term 'cultural performances, theatre and drama'.

*Theatre Histories* opens with a bang. Instead of Greek theatre, the book begins with 'Performance and theatre in oral and written cultures before 1600'. This includes a wide range of rituals, festivals, and ceremonies as a natural part of theatre before the turn of oral and written culture. Part 2 deals with theatre under the conditions of print culture up to 1900, and Part 3 describes 'theatre forms' under media conditions from 1850 to 1970. Global communication from 1950 to the present forms the final part. This is a cultural studies periodisation used for theatre history, thus eliminating the dispute between national cultures over the best theatre that is so typical of the mainstream. Each chapter ends with case studies and interpretive approaches, impossible in a grand narrative.

Alongside the question of the origins of theatre, the notion of periodisation is also decisive. According to Thomas Postlewait (1988), at least 22 different periodisation criteria have so far been used, including political periods and economic characteristics as well as sequences of monarchies, languages, art epochs, literary movements or periods of the history of drama. All these look at theatre from the outside and arrange history according to external criteria. The same events, such as Greek tragedy or Shakespeare's theatre, can always be included. Theatre items may simply be grouped differently. The significant advantage of *Theatre Histories'* cultural studies periodisation is that it allows space for the diversity of theatre forms. On this level, the book is a profound alternative to the mainstream approach. Yet its breakthrough is only achieved by effecting change from the current point of time onwards. This approach contains no reflection. There is barely any discussion of the history of theatre historiography. Could this be why the publication of *Theatre Histories* has not displaced the mainstream approach?

*How Did the Mainstream Come About?*

To dislodge the mainstream perspective from what is taught as knowledge, one must understand both mainstream and alternative perspectives of previous theatre histories, as well as the history of theatre historiography itself. How did theatre historiography come about in the first place? The most discerning and convincing answer to this question comes from theatre historian Stefan Hulfeld, who suggests that theatre historiography arose from various discourses on theatre (2007, pp. 17–85). He examines the following aspects:

1. Philosophical-aesthetic discourses. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics*.
2. Religious anti-theatre discourses. For example, *De spectaculis* (On the Games) by Tertullian, the first theologian to write in Latin, who demanded that Christians should abstain from the theatre and the amphitheatre.
3. Reports by travelling professional actors. For example, the *Commedia dell'arte* actor Francesco Andreini's book about his character Capitan Spavento.
4. Reports by travelling spectators. For example, the philosopher Michel de Montaigne's diaries on his travels through Europe discuss numerous theatre performances.
5. The countless attempts to reform some existing genres and theatre forms had to endure. The actor Luigi Riccoboni, for example, advocated for the literarisation of theatre in his two theatre histories from 1728 and 1738. In doing so, he created the earliest narratives of the mainstream. He was convinced that the Italian improvisational comedy should become a more moral literary comedy. He also considered performed tragedies. His was considered a path of theatre from the morally lower to the morally higher (Hulfeld 2007, p. 59).

Pietro Napoli-Signorelli wrote another early history of theatre, which I will briefly discuss as an example because, as a historian, he was a rather neutral observer. He wrote his universal theatre history from a literary-dramatic point of view. For Napoli-Signorelli, theatre begins before Greece as the anthropological common property of people from all parts of the world. Many of the later theatre histories of the mainstream narrowed this clear thought to cults or rituals that are only remotely comparable to theatre. He used 24 pages for his introduction, half for his theoretical concept, and half for non-European cultures. He looked to the Orient and Asia as well as to 'America' to report from Mexico and Peru in particular. This was followed by 146 pages on Greek and Latin dramatic theatre, as this corresponded to his objectives and was where he had the most material.

In this way, he filled one third of his book. He then devoted nine pages to the 'Emptiness of theatre history' (*Vuoto della Storia Teatrale*), the so-called theatrical vacuum, a time supposedly without theatre. He speaks of dramatic poetry and states that no Roman writer or playwright since the second century is worth mentioning. Dramatic poetry, he argues, did not rise again until the thirteenth century (Napoli-Signorelli 1777, pp. 174, 186). For him, the vacuum lasted one thousand years, twice as long as that discussed by the mainstream today. Napoli-Signorelli gives the Renaissance 29 pages, the sixteenth century 59 pages, and the seventeenth century 48 pages. He assigns to the eighteenth century as many pages as the two previous centuries combined. Although this prototype of theatre history was modified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it has continued to shape the axioms of theatre historiography.

*Two Hundred Years of Narrowing Theatre Discourse,  
1750–1950*

Several things bother me about the grand narratives of Napoli-Signorelli and those through to the present day. First is the imperturbability of beginning theatre with Greek tragedy and comedy. Second is the notion of a theatrical vacuum in the early Middle Ages, which leads to the third, where theatre is equated with drama. From this perspective, theatre historiography supports Enlightenment's restriction of theatre to dramatic role-playing in fixed theatre venues, which was also passed off as progress. Yet theatre is something different from drama. It is a game played by actors in front of spectators, where the game proportionately resonates between actors and spectators. People like to make use of the role, script, text, and drama; these are significant elements that have lasting effects on the history of theatre, but they are not essential to our understanding of theatre. The types and structural figures of *commedia dell'arte* make this clear, as does performance art or postdramatic theatre. Explanations of these objections to the mainstream can be found in my *Studying Theatre*. For example, Chapter Six, Questions about Origins, considers the beginnings of theatre (Kotte 2010, pp. 187–197). I will briefly cover the contentions here. Anthropology and archaeology offer considerations for the early emergence of theatre. Physical artefacts up to 40,000 years old exist for other artforms: musical instruments such as a swan bone flute in Germany, sculptures of people and mammoths in Germany, or cave paintings such as the lions in the Chauvet cave in France. What have not yet been found are physical artefacts of storytelling and representation. However, these are ephemeral arts. Furthermore, one can ask if it is logical to think that someone who can make music, work with stone and ivory, paint and draw magnificently is incapable of narration and representation. Is it not more likely that such expression was possible? Such a conclusion may be drawn through analogy, yet it appears to be more prob-

able than not. These assumptions can be made about early times. A shaman with a mask in the cave of Les Trois Frères (France; Clotte 1996, p. 69) is a precursor to early theatrical representations. Dancers and artists were often depicted in the early period. Yosef Garfinkel (2003) alone has made over 400 dance scenes accessible. The Dramatic Ramesseum Papyrus describes a ritual for the anniversaries of a king's reign. It contains 46 scenes in speech and counter-speech as well as scene instructions under its vertical columns, scene instructions as in a drama (Kotte 2013, pp. 29–31), 1,300 years before Thespis and Aeschylus. Greek theatre is not the beginning. But Greek theatre is undoubtedly something special. It offered a very high degree of institutionalisation. There were theatre organisers, subsidies, tragedy and comedy competitions, actor training and directors, a grandiose theatre building and impressive technology. The spectators were even compensated for a loss of earnings if they participated in the performances. The only question is whether institutionalised professional theatre should be valued more highly than non-institutionalised theatre. Is this worth more than the rhapsodes of Homer's time, Mimus, the Dorian farce, the Atellanes, street and improvisational theatre? I do not think so.

The mainstream follows the notion that theatre evolves from a lower to a higher state. Since this was no longer true in the early Middle Ages, a theatre vacuum had to be concocted so that theatre could be reinvented in the Renaissance. When Napoli-Signorelli equates theatre with drama, theatre disappears for over one thousand years. In a recent history of theatre, the chapter on the Middle Ages begins with the sentence: 'The decline of the Roman stage system was followed by a period without theatre that spans half a millennium' (Simhandl 2001, p. 54). Other theatre histories of the twentieth century reduce the vacuum to four hundred years, between the theatre ban by Justinian I in 529 and the dramas of the German nun Hrotsvit von Gandersheim after 930 (Beck 2008, pp. 13, 16). Napoli-Signorelli was familiar with the nun's six

dramas. However, he rejected them as worthless due to their 'barbaric Latin' (Napoli-Signorelli 1777, p. 175). Hrotsvit von Gandersheim's dramas were based on the Roman comedies of Plautus and especially Terence, from which the monastery students learned Latin. They occurred in the so-called theatrical vacuum, which was at most a 'drama vacuum' limited to new drama. William Tydeman, Hermann Reich and others identify reports of mimes, jocolators and histrions, and also of artists, dancers, knife throwers, bear handlers, singers and storytellers, that is, of the entire *Giulleria*. The Italian term *Giulleria* summarises all travelling people who represent something (Faral 1958). Even if dramas were missing, there were performers. And if there were performers, there were also spectators. That is enough for theatre.

To gain a rough overview, two hundred years of narrow theatre discourse may be summarised using two formulas. To do this, the role, indispensable for drama, needs to be problematised. Before the eighteenth century, there was a broad understanding of theatre that did not necessarily need the role; *Spectacula*, *Theatrum* and Playing were enough (Kirchner 1985). It was sufficient to have people such as mimes or jocolators who showed their actions to others. It was acting for the purpose of showing, acting for the purpose of watching. Expressed in a formula, this is: *A is playing while S is watching*. A is the actor, and S is the spectator. Also possible in the plural.

For French classicist theatre and Enlightenment national theatre concepts, the theatre was regarded as a moral institution (Schiller) that had to be created through drama. The aesthetic discourse shifted radically to drama and thus to the role: *A impersonates R while S looks on*. R is the role in drama. The two formulations are modified from: 'A impersonates B while C looks on' (Bentley 1964, p. 150).

The most influential work that emphasised this perspective was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Volume 2. Hegel accepted acting as an art, but it was insignificant and inferior compared to drama. Even so, there were just as many

forms of theatre practice as before in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There were courtly festival theatres, travelling stages, Jesuit theatres, puppet theatres, opera, ballet, as well as attempts at bourgeois national theatre. There were also debates about drama and disputes over the improvisations of travelling troupes; all theatrical forms except for dramatic theatre were devalued with the literalisation of theatre. In addition, the national character was viewed as theatre's significant characteristic. These aspects left a mark on mainstream theatre historiography. However, as time went on, movements such as the theatre avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, performance art of the 1950s and especially postdramatic theatre from the 1990s onwards could not be interpreted through this lens. Neither the role nor drama could be applied here. Thus, the other formula, *A is playing while S is watching*, is becoming useful again. However, it is yet to be applied in mainstream theatre historiography.

Throughout the history of theatre, many forms have existed with specific advantages. The advantage of dramatic theatre lies in its demanding texts, the advantage of dance in physical expression, opera in artful singing, street theatre in improvisation, amateur theatre in its consolidation of social cohesion, and so on. Theatre of many forms emerged at the same time as the other arts. In the early Middle Ages, theatre probably existed outside of drama. Theatre does not develop from a lower to a higher state. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain temporal highlights such as ancient tragedy or Shakespeare's theatre. Theatre changes its forms. Again and again, other forms come to the fore. After the historically short phase of the Enlightenment and its long aftermath, an understanding of theatre once again approaches that of the time before: *A is playing while S is watching*. Such a perspective is an alternative approach to the mainstream of theatre historiography.

*A Brief History of European Theatre Forms*

So, my German publisher wanted to publish a new European theatre history comprised of a mere 400 pages. From 2006 until the publication of the book in 2013, I was concerned that 400 pages were not enough to even explain the dramatic theatre! Clearly, incorporating other forms of theatre from everyday life and art meant failure. I needed to find an alternative way of representation in both form and content. Pragmatism helped with the form. Each of the first six chapters of my *Theatre History* is given 50 pages. The seventh chapter on contemporary theatre is only half of this, as there is plentiful research on the present that is easily accessible for those interested. As for content, I had to refrain from any attempt to achieve completeness. The selection had to be exemplary, as demonstrated by the Dutch theatre history. The Philther method also works using examples that stand for similar events. A minimum of facts and context is needed to present situations concretely, vividly. It is more effective to reduce the number of events than to name-drop. The method for *Theatre History* is described in the prologue and evaluated in the epilogue. It is applied in the same way for each historical period.

The return to a broad understanding of theatre before the Enlightenment is widely associated with the keywords theatricality and performativity. In my case, the concept of theatricality. For this reason, the first section of each chapter of *Theatre History* contains representations of everyday life, such as rituals, ceremonies or games. As one of the many forms of theatre in each epoch, these representations are a transitional field that has been included in concepts of theatre by some and excluded by others. You could call this component of theatricality 'life theatre' or something similar. For example, the first section of the chapter *Christianity and Theatre from the 5th to the 16th Century* discusses scenes of public penance. This chapter also serves as a reference for what follows, briefly indicating

the concept of theatricality that organises the content while at the same time not anticipating the reading.

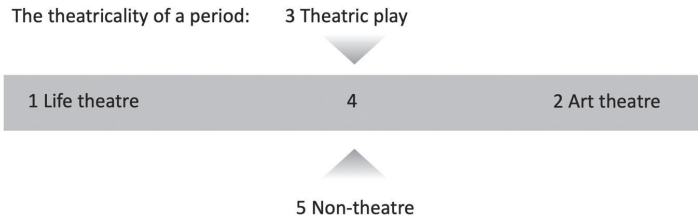
The second section of each chapter considers the art of theatre. For the Middle Ages, this is the Easter tropes, Passion plays and Easter plays. These belong to a wide range of genres, including mystery plays, morality plays, farces and masques. You could call this component 'art theatre' or something similar. The third section of each chapter describes particularly strong playful impulses that are directed against the performances of everyday life, against the 'life theatre', and also against the 'art theatre'. These parody or invert such forms. In the Middle Ages, this is done in festivals such as the Feast of Misrule or with a fool's ability to upturn conditions during Carnival and other times. You could call this 'theatrical play' or 'theatric play'. This is an artificial and a theoretical term; you may find a better expression. The decisive factor is this play's function, which is to disrupt the continuum between 'life theatre' and 'art theatre'.

The fourth section generally deals with the coexistence of several theatre forms in the given period that can be located on the continuum. In the section on the early Middle Ages, the theatre vacuum is discussed. At this time, the resurrection of Christ was performed in elaborate ceremonies in front of entire populations of towns and villages. The students in monastery schools performed plays, including Herod plays, in the three days after Christmas. There were also performances by actors, singers and artists, as is evidenced by the existence of prohibitive bans.

Each fifth section contains an excerpt from the so-called context. And what is the most important context? That of societal attitudes towards theatre. What forms of theatre are excluded? Why? What will be banned? What is being reformed? What is funded? Chapter Two examines the marginalisation of the *Giulleria* and the devaluation of all travelling people who represent, the vagantes, minstrels, singers and actors, most of whom were discriminated against socially. The continuum

from 'life theatre' to 'art theatre', or the 'theatric play', is linked to cultural performances, yet the attitudes towards theatre come from society, not from the performances. You could call this section 'non-theatre' as it contains many restrictions and prohibitions.

The sixth section then forms the background for the theatrical structure. This is the only place where there is demonstrable development. This is about theatre construction, the buildings, the stages, the scenery, lighting and the technology. Chapter Two clarifies the differences between simultaneous stages and succession stages. On simultaneous stages, the spectators can watch all venues at the same time, with the various venues set up in the space and played one after another. On a succession stage, such as Shakespeare's stage, the action takes place in sequence, one scene after the other.



*The theatricality of the period; Graphic: Kaspar Manx*

Essentially, the interplay between the sections is important. The theatre forms in sections 1 and 2 constitute a continuum, which is called into question by phenomena from sections 3 and 5. Section 4 expands the material base, and section 6 clarifies the performance conditions. If you are particularly interested in staging, you can read all of the sections 6 to gain an overview of European theatre construction. The same applies to the other topics. The strict sequence of each chapter emphasises the exemplary approach. The reader establishes the relationships between the sections. At the end of the chapter, the theatricality of the period is described in under half a

page. This method is called 'Theatralitätsgefüge' in German, 'Interlacing Theatricalities' in English and Hungarian 'teatralitászervezet', and was designed by Rudolf Münz in 1989 and later modified (Kotte 2010, pp. 229–263). What effect does this have on theatre historiography? Life theatre, art theatre, theatric play and non-theatre are types of social structures. When they are described as a network of relationships, theatre history is presented as a process of contradictions.

The material for theatre histories is not only extensive but also inexhaustible. All theatre histories can be evaluated according to the time, place and thematic restrictions the authors impose. Drama was central to previous theatre histories, where ceremonies and rituals were included to emphasise dramatic theatre as the real and genuine theatre. 'The' theatre began with the tragedies of Thespis and Aeschylus in the sixth century BC, disappeared from the sixth to the ninth century AD, and was reborn in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. This theatre developed and appeared to reach its greatest diversity in the present. This can be seen in the volume of theatre historical text on each century, which usually increases, except perhaps for the particular case of antiquity. One such theatre history covered the past in 216 pages and the twentieth century in 280 pages (Simhandl 2001).

However, a different picture emerges if the broader understanding of theatre that existed before the Enlightenment continues to be at play. An increasingly wide-ranging theatre practice demands this perspective. From the time humans have organised socially, many theatre forms have existed side by side. Diachronically, some theatrical forms emerged and some faded, passed away or overlapped, alternating with each other. For example, in the middle of the sixteenth century, the first troupes of the *commedia dell'arte* were formed, yet before the French Revolution, *commedia* died out. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, opera emerged from courtly intermezzi and still exists today. Theatre histories can consist of many fragments and monads and leave gaps to provoke thought.

Historical research today is increasingly driven by theoretical research. Árpád Kékesi Kun observes this in the preface to *Ambiguous Topicality* (2021, p. 9), and perhaps this article illustrates this drive. Instead of repeatedly stringing together the same highlights, theatre histories could describe gains and losses. For example, the humanist theatre gained Latin language skills in the fifteenth century yet lost its playfulness. Political theatre gained in effect but can lose entertainment value. What performance art or reenactments gain in authenticity, they may lose in acting quality. When opera gains singing perfection and visual value, it can lose touch with reality. The functions of theatre are so various, and therefore, audiences must be able to choose from many forms of theatre.

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## Árpád Kékesi Kun

### TWO STORIES ON MOLIÈRE FROM THE 1970s

Abstract: Molière functions as a point of connection between the two most influential Hungarian theatre directors of the 1970s: Gábor Székely, who was prepared to enter the official theatre structure, and István Paál, who was compelled to grow into it. Their first collaboration took place in early 1972 on a Szeged production of István Örkény's *Cat's Play*. Shortly after the premiere, Székely assumed the management of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok, where he invited Paál first as a guest director and later as a permanent member of the company. As director-general of the Szigligeti Theatre, Székely made a decisive artistic statement with his double bill of Molière's *The Impromptu at Versailles* and *George Dandin*. Paál's Szolnok debut similarly occurred through Molière: in the spring of 1977 he achieved success with Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Cabal of Hypocrites*. The essay examines how Székely and Paál shaped the Hungarian stage image of the French playwright and comedian during the 1970s, and what common features can be identified beneath the differing artistic approaches of the state-socialist theatre's rising star and the amateur theatre movement's cult director.

From 1972 onwards, when he became managing director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok, Gábor Székely had already long been conceiving his work in terms of the National Theatre, well before he was elevated from the Szigligeti Theatre to head the National Theatre in 1978. It is scarcely an exaggeration to state that, during the 1970s, the country's foremost theatre nominally operated in the Hungarian capital, but in re-

ality in the theatrical workshops of Szolnok, Kaposvár, and Kecskemét. Székely had been directing in Szolnok since 1968, and from the spring of 1971 he supervised the work carried out there as artistic director, from 1972 as managing and artistic director. The one-evening premiere of *The Impromptu at Versailles* and *George Dandin* took place in January 1973, in the first full season of the managing and artistic director, as a distillation of Székely's artistic ideal. István Paál was likewise invited to Szolnok by Székely, and the director who had gained national recognition with the amateur productions he created at the University Stage of Szeged made his debut at the Szigligeti Theatre in April 1977 with Bulgakov's play about Molière, *The Cabal of Hypocrites*. At that time, Paál had only two years of experience in the professional theatre and was, in national terms, the sole director working in the field who had not graduated from the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest. When he staged his first production in Szolnok, he was still a member of the Pécs company, then in the summer of 1977 he transferred to Szolnok, where he worked until 1985, serving as chief director from 1980 onwards. My study examines how Székely and Paál fashioned the figure of Molière in Hungary in the 1970s, and what shared characteristics can be identified in the background of the two directors' divergent artistic approaches.

### *Gábor Székely's Molière*

The premiere of *The Impromptu at Versailles* and *George Dandin* took place on the 300th anniversary of Molière's death (and only a few weeks after the 350th anniversary of his birth). What made the event truly celebratory, however, was that, 'instead of a pious presentation of a classical author, it introduced a mischievously contemporary writer' (Koltai 1973, p. 7), that is, it 'placed the spirit of the comedian–playwright on stage – and not only two of his plays' (M.G.P. 1973, p. 16). Those who situated the Szolnok premiere within a broader context

rightly emphasised the uniqueness of Székely's production and the loss of ground suffered by the French author in Hungarian theatre culture after the Molière renaissance at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. When, in the aftermath of the Second World War, during the rise of the politically favoured genre of satire, Molière became 'one of the most frequently performed authors in our theatres' (Mihályi 1973, p. 448), a performance tradition took shape – largely manifest in externals and in extreme caricatural exaggeration – that soon became untenable. This widespread performance style became the subject of serious criticism, and Molière played a key role in the 1954 debate on theatrical stridency.

This debate contributed significantly to the fact that, by the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, Molière performance in Hungary was marked more by uncertainty and a search for style, and a decade later many reviews opened by probing the question of whether Molière's time had passed. Gábor Székely's 1973 Molière productions in Szolnok sought nothing less than to make it evident that (as the creators formulated it in the programme booklet) 'the great French writer has a deeper and more complex message that can be translated into the language of the present age' (cited in Mihályi 1973, p. 449). The Szigligeti Theatre presumably sought to facilitate the establishment of a shared register with its audiences already through its choice of plays: *George Dandin* appeared particularly well suited to spectators arriving from the country's most significant agricultural cooperative county, as well as to the large number of secondary-school pupils filling the auditorium. The specialist literature indeed observed that the Szolnok ensemble 'undertook the "youthful" Molière in a surprisingly forthright manner, knowing that they were performing for an audience composed predominantly of young people, or at least of spectators possessing a naively "childlike" outlook' (Mihályi 1973, p. 449). This, however, did not entail superficiality or a lowering of standards, but rather the presentation with utmost seriousness of dramatic events explored in their full depth and complexity,

and the resulting ‘cruelty’ of the perspective. It meant that, on stage, ‘living people who command both our sympathy and our antipathy collide with one another, pursuing each other’s annihilation with almost monomaniacal consistency’ (ibid., p. 450). This was what made a production created under the severely constrained conditions of a provincial theatre ‘justifiably capable of standing up to Budapest standards’, and indeed the elaboration of its conception and the actors’ talent raised it above many of its counterparts in the capital (Gábor 1973, p. 13). According to the director, Molière’s contemporary theatrical neglect was likewise attributable to superficial analysis and a shallow acquaintance with the works, a situation that had arisen under the influence of numerous undemanding productions (displaying standardised roles and conceived in a standardised performance style). Gábor Székely’s realist attitude is prefigured in his recognition that Molière was ‘a deeply reflective, ruthlessly clear-sighted, passionately disputatious, bitterly wise writer’ who offered ‘horrors light as froth’ to audiences seeking entertainment (Sz. J. 1973, p. 10). This, however, had scarcely manifested itself in staging practice thus far, including in those productions that older Szolnok spectators might still have remembered. In his statements, Gábor Székely consistently made clear that he sought to create a ‘political, lyrical theatre’ (Valkó 1977, p. 44), which requires the re-reading of the classics and their scenic rearticulation in the light of the present’s human and communal relations. Both the staging of *The Impromptu at Versailles* and that of *George Dandin* were shaped by his contemporary theatrical–social perspective.

In staging the two Molière plays read as self-confession and as tragicomedy, Gábor Székely shaped into theatre the questions, problems, and aesthetic principles that concerned the Szolnok ensemble. He continued the tradition in which *The Impromptu at Versailles*, seldom performed on its own, was attached as a prologue to a Molière comedy. Székely envisaged a specific Molière pairing and had *The Impromptu at Versailles* per-

formed together with a play that had hitherto appeared mostly on stage by itself.

*The Impromptu at Versailles* offers a witty persiflage through the excitement of an open rehearsal, ridiculing the mannerisms of the rival theatre, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which in Szolnok created an opportunity to parody several actors who, thanks to television, enjoyed nationwide recognition. At the same time, concealed within the play – as in the players' scene in *Hamlet* – lies 'a gripping apotheosis of the arts' (Gábor 1973, p. 13), expressed with a concreteness that makes it possible to explore what it means to create theatre today and thereby to articulate what a group of theatre-makers think about the current social function of theatrical performance. Székely's production foregrounded this latter dimension (rather than the persiflage), so *The Impromptu at Versailles* appeared a logical choice after *The Seagull*, staged in December 1971 as a kind of artistic-directorial ars poetica (cf. Kékesi Kun 2024). Székely held that *The Impromptu* 'in amusing form exposes the impossibly constrained conditions under which the artist is compelled to create and the absurd obstacles that stand in his way. It is an indictment that also provokes laughter. One could also say that in Molière's plays the hopeless fate of the characters is itself a source of humour. Their situation is so desperate, they are so incapable of doing anything, that one can only laugh at them' (Sz. J. 1973, p. 10). On the basis of this statement – with its emphasis on the 'impossible conditions' and 'absurd obstacles' that are inherent in the act of creation – *The Impromptu*, staged in the first season of Székely's directorship, may also be regarded as an artistic-directorial ars poetica. At the same time – given 'the hopeless fate of the characters' as a source of humour, the degree of despair that provokes laughter – it also demonstrates Székely's interest in absurd and grotesque theatre (cf. Kékesi Kun 2021).

The Szolnok production not only omitted the subtitle of *George Dandin* (i.e., *The Abashed Husband*), although it had generally been performed with it previously, but also abandoned

the farce tradition implied by that subtitle. Székely's reading was grounded in the recognition that the play presents a world in which 'wealth, power, career – everything is more important than fundamental human emotions and relationships', and the action begins from the premise that every character has already 'irreparably ruined his or her life' (Sz. J. 1973, p. 10). Accordingly, the director asked his actors (like the Molière of *The Impromptu*) not to exploit gags, comic inventions, and the sparkling elements of situation comedy, but rather to 'experience the characters in their full completeness' (ibid.). While the production thus followed yet also reframed the text of *George Dandin*, it did not conceal its humour; rather, it refrained from restricting the object of laughter to the title character or to the Sottenville couple. The Szolnok ensemble did not present *George Dandin* as a simple comedy of chastisement: although entertaining, its comic elements were, as the critics rightly perceived, re-dimensioned into tragicomic ones. In rehearsal the creators primarily sought the motivations that (in Székely's words) 'justify the infernal tragedy of George Dandin, that shocking moment when, at the end of the play, he remains on stage utterly humiliated and sets out towards suicide' (Molière 1973, n.p.). Székely did not approach the play's inherent social critique in a narrow, farce-based manner either. Earlier it had 'either been lost or accorded such weight that it suppressed everything else' (Leskó 1973, p. 5). Although cheerful on the surface and employing the means of comedy, Molière's plays appeared surprisingly extreme to Székely. He therefore sought to reveal with great nuance the 'worldview' that underlies every situation and character, and which is 'chillingly tragic' (Molière 1973, n.p.). In the programme booklet Székely cites two Molière plays as examples: the 'gloomy *Don Juan*' and the 'grimly philosophical *The Misanthrope*' – precisely the two works that he would render visible in productions of unparalleled force in the decades that followed.

The production carried *The Impromptu at Versailles* far beyond the possibilities inherent in the play, and it unfolded the

social dimensions of *George Dandin* in a manner wholly different from earlier Hungarian stagings of the comedy. Yet the achievement of the Szolnok production appears most clearly against the background painted by the many writings of the preceding decade on the increasingly anachronistic state of Hungarian Molière performance. For example, the actor-director József Szendrő traced the prevailing style of Molière productions to the problem that ‘our directors have, broadly and consistently, kneaded these tragicomic works into farces’, which ‘is ultimately a falsification of genre, a form of “fooling around”’ (Szendrő 1963, p. 203). Although not without antecedents, the Szolnok production constituted one of the earliest and most important steps towards a new Molière style. The staging bore none of the marks of antiquation, yet neither did it resort to overt updating; nevertheless, its critics regarded it as ‘rich in fresh ideas and bold modernisations’ (Barna 1973, p. 4). Székely stripped the production of the totality of illusion, ‘initiated the audience into the secret that they were sitting in a theatre’, and created an intimate relationship between stage and auditorium (P.A. 1975, p. 13). *The Impromptu at Versailles* became a distinctive instance of ‘theatre within the theatre’ because the staging identified the royal court with the auditorium: initially the performers took no notice of the world beyond the stage, yet the gentlemen and the king who arrive at the end of *The Impromptu* drew the auditorium into the play, which thereafter assumed a role. But the production was linked to *The Seagull* not only through its ‘theatre about theatre’ thematic, but also through its emphasis on the tragedies inscribed within the comedies – a feature that made ‘bitterness the key to Molière’s two works’ just as much as to Chekhov’s play (Leskó 1973, p. 5).

The production seized with fine instinct the theatrical pamphlet embedded in *The Impromptu at Versailles*, and at a time when parody enjoyed great popularity in television and radio cabaret shows, the Szolnok stage imitated contemporary Hungarian actors instead of Molière-era performers, while in-

stead of a parody of Horace it mocked the staging of the National Theatre's *Romeo and Juliet*. In the figure of Molière, Gyula Szombathy gave voice to the convictions of a contemporary theatre director, and his fellow actors presented to the audience the daily struggle involved in attaining a mode of performance that can be articulated in principles yet is fraught with practical difficulties. The production amplified the amusement inherent in this and the excitement of allowing the spectator to enjoy an open rehearsal, following not only the presumably simulated spontaneities of the piece being rehearsed, but also the banter and teasing among members of the ensemble. Yet the staging embedded within this a 'heartrending self-confession' concerning the artistic and human difficulties of the actor's existence, both in general and specifically in Szolnok, charged with 'the suppressed tension lurking behind each half-swallowed remark, each strange grimace or gesture', with 'the fears arising from vulnerability', with the struggles of the semi-talented and the unrealised ambitions of the talented, and with 'the flashing sparks of justified and unjustified jealousies between them' (Mihályi 1973, p. 449).

Furthermore, Székely's production introduced a twist into the seemingly harmless drama unfolding within the confines of the aesthetic dimension, and, starting from Molière's position in the play as an artist who attacks out of forced self-defence yet is, in effect, compelled to attack, it revealed the inseparability of the aesthetic and the political. From this Molière – who appears confident in his views on theatrical art, but who, as a court actor and the ruler's favourite, becomes uncertain regarding his own ambivalent role – the production set out. 'He knows that the king allows him defensive attack only up to a certain limit': as long as he performs it as the king's man (Koltai 1973, p. 7). Although Molière is dissatisfied with this role, he does not – indeed cannot – slip out of it: he becomes accommodating, and 'manufactures an ideology for his cowardice, for having written this harmless pamphlet now being rehearsed instead of the truly responsive play' (ibid.).

The explicit or implicit stake of the disputes among the members of the company thus becomes who considers Molière cowardly for this, and who agrees with him – that is, who is willing to secure or, conversely, to endanger his or her own existence by accepting or rejecting the power-conditioned circumstances of theatre-making. The implicit conflict between Louis XIV and Molière within the play was rendered explicit in the Szolnok production, not least through the appearance of the monarch on stage. At the end of *The Impromptu at Versailles*, not only did the importunate marquis representing the king now display impatient restlessness (combining in himself all the self-important meddlers), but the king himself appeared on stage. At the front of the stage, a figure half puppet, half human, who grew to one-and-a-half times human height as he stood on a chair in his purple mantle, graciously granted permission for the play to be performed, while Molière, in his final line,<sup>1</sup> affirmed his vocation with an almost ‘Bulgakovian visionariness’, as an equivocal resolution of the comic action turning into ‘the tragedy of human vulnerability’ (Rideg 1973, p. 2). By concretising the grotesque and irrational image of power looming above Molière, Székely’s production implanted into *The Impromptu at Versailles* the very conflict that *The Cabal of Hypocrites* first unfolded with considerable allegorical force: ‘how far an artist may go in criticising a power on which he depends and which he wishes to serve’ (Koltai 1973, p. 7). In this way, it not only deepened and unsettled the self-reflexivity and self-irony of *The Impromptu at Versailles*, but, by momentarily revealing the political dimension within the metatheatrical play, it virtually served as a prelude to István Paál’s Bulgakov production in Szolnok four years later, with Paál having been invited by Székely to work in Szolnok and offered *The Cabal of Hypocrites*.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The King has done us the greatest favour in the world in giving us time for what he wished (...)’ (Molière, 1907, p. 249).

The half-hour *Impromptu* was followed without an interval by *George Dandin*, after the actors themselves, to Lully's music, had changed the set, transforming the rehearsal room of the Versailles palace into Dandin's house, and, at the three knocks signalling the beginning, the performance recommenced. The comic elements of the production directed the spectator's sympathy towards Angelica, who preferred emotional freedom to an arranged marriage, and towards Claudine and Colin (Angelica's and Dandin's servants in love), who supported her and helped her reach her lover, while the sharply accentuated pain and bitterness of Dandin, justly wronged, appealed to the audience's compassion. In this comedy without resolution, especially in its hopeless final situation, the production also made visible that Dandin is less the victim of his own ambition as a character flaw than of social hierarchy and relations of dependence. The staging rendered the reasons for Dandin's humiliation multifaceted and – like Roger Planchon's famous production – 'tore the veil from a morally disintegrating social structure and from reciprocal hypocrisy' (Tarján 1988, p. 24), without relating the alien world in which Dandin is ultimately left alone solely to the absolutist rule of Louis XIV. In the closing moments of the production, Dandin appeared anything but disagreeable or ridiculous: the repeatedly humiliated husband, while the giggling of his wife was heard from her room, accidentally stepped on the petticoat that he himself had angrily thrown out of the window earlier. Resignedly he picked it up, then crept sorrowfully up the ladder to the attic. This image lent an explicitly tragic resonance to the play's final line spoken by Dandin: 'Once you've married an evil wife, like mine, the only way out is to throw yourself head-first into deep water' (Molière 1987, p. 43). However, the production appended to this image a brief epilogue that revealed to the audience who is in fact disagreeable and ridiculous in *George Dandin*. The insouciant and self-assured Clitandre, Angelica's seducer, appeared on stage and glanced up at the curtain behind which the woman's ticklish laughter filtered through. Then, after the

whistled motif with which Clitandre had summoned Angelica to their rendezvous sounded from the loudspeakers, he sat on the edge of the stage and 'with immeasurable cheek and aggressive impudence stared into the faces of those seated below' (M.G.P. 1973, p. 16). In the Szolnok *George Dandin* it was not the title character, nor even Angelica's parents, who proved most repellent, but rather 'the empty-headed and handsome Clitandre, the "anti-hero" of our age, an adventurer who exploits everyone and believes in nothing' (Bátki 1973, p. 6). This bitter twist at the close of the production intensified the tragedy of *George Dandin* and positioned Molière's protagonist among Gábor Székely's later heroes: the Timons of Athens, the Alcestes, the Coriolani, and the Ivanovs. Yet this did not weigh down the comedy, which proceeded from exposition to denouement without a single lull, accompanied by the audience's frequently erupting laughter. Several reviews noted the unity of intellectual and sensuous effect: the spectators surrendered themselves to the performance with abandon, and the theatre had seldom witnessed such 'ecstatic participation' by the audience as on that evening (Koltai 1973, p. 7).

The distinctive reading of *The Impromptu at Versailles* and *George Dandin* placed the production among those works which, during Gábor Székely's six years as director, presented to the audience 'disquieting images of human coexistence', 'filled with passion and pressing impatience' (Valkó 1975, p. 46). The 1973 premiere was therefore a significant event in a theatre implementing a coherent programme whose openly declared aim – namely to contribute to resolving the moral problems that had come to the fore in the years of consolidation – could be interpreted just as readily from the perspective of the presumed tasks of 'a society building socialism' (ibid.) as from that of undermining the foundations of that society. After all, the moral and other dimensions of the problematic implied, for example, by the informer-like figure of the importunate marquis could in no way be integrated into the debates taking place in the public sphere. On the other hand, István Paál's

1977 production of *The Cabal of Hypocrites* may also be understood as the intellectual preparation for this production, for with Bulgakov's help it dug even deeper into the examination of the relation between arbitrary power and artistic freedom than the interpretation of *The Impromptu at Versailles* in this direction had made possible for Székely.

*István Paál's Molière*

Although István Paál's debut at the Szigligeti Theatre marked the outset of an eight-year period, he was not yet employed there full-time. Paál was invited to the Pécs National Theatre for a guest production – and subsequently offered a post – on the basis of his work in amateur theatre, at a time when his work in Szeged was being made impossible, and between March 1975 and February 1977 he again attracted attention in Pécs with five outstanding productions. Gábor Székely thus invited István Paál to Szolnok already as a professional theatre director and member of the Pécs theatre, and commissioned him with a specific task, the staging of *The Cabal of Hypocrites*, which proved an astonishing bull's-eye. Of their telephone conversation Paál recounted that 'when I heard the title of the play, I immediately cut in and said yes. I have known this work of Bulgakov's since my university years. It was once a radio experience for me; it was broadcast from the Katona József Theatre. It affected me with tremendous force' (L.L. 1977, p. 26). It appears today heavily laden with irony that the 4 April premiere (a national holiday during state-socialism, marking Hungary's liberation from Nazi rule) was directed in 1977 in Szolnok by István Paál. On this occasion, in a far from formulaic Soviet drama examining the relation between the artist and power, a director only just emerging from a professional–existential crisis caused by the obstruction of state organs seized upon the conflict generated by the medium standing between creator and personified power, distorting

intentions and turning them into their opposite – a conflict admitting of no resolution.

In the 1970s, criticism generally sought to present *The Cabal of Hypocrites* as Bulgakov's autobiographical drama, yet István Paál's production did not content itself with the work's narrowly framed interpretation that conflated the reigns of the Sun King and Stalin. At the time of the play's Hungarian première in 1970, reviews understood *The Cabal of Hypocrites* as parallel biographies of Molière and Bulgakov, in which 'every scene and turn of events is charged with a doubly valid significance', and in which 'the interaction of overlapping resonances' creates depth (Ungvári 1970, p. 4). The specialist literature emphasised that although the situations and characters of the play cannot be translated into the Soviet reality of the 1930s and do not correspond to historical figures, the repeated bans on his works, which forced Bulgakov into internal exile, nonetheless etched the Molière analogy into his mind through 'the conflict between the artist who wishes to serve power and the power that rejects such service' (Sarkadi 1971, p. 14). The critics thus forced the analogy between Molière and Bulgakov, and, even when they excluded a direct correspondence, they nonetheless juxtaposed the age of Louis XIV with the period of Stalin's personality cult. Seven years later, in connection with the Szolnok première, the press likewise made the fundamental conflict of the work explicit: the tension between power and the artist; and it likewise distanced itself from this by rendering it personal, mapping it onto the relationship between Stalin and Bulgakov. Those who spoke of Jean-Baptiste Bulgakov and Mikhail Afanasyevich Molière, those who kept insisting that 'if I exchange the periods, I can put Bulgakov in Molière's place' (Leskó 1977, p. 5), those who presented as self-evident that the conflict between Stalin and the writer is the basic situation of the play, in fact sought to attenuate the problematic of *The Cabal of Hypocrites* by concretising it and pushing it into distant space and time, thereby dispelling the supposition that the production probes questions concerning the relation between

the artist and power that *remain valid today*. After all, if we regard the work as a parable – a critique of a given era and of the decades, fortunately now past, refracted through another age – then we can scarcely have any connection to it today. István Paál's production, however, kept the contemporary implications firmly in view, and although his reading did not disregard the biographical correspondences, it placed the emphasis on something that had hitherto lain outside the interest of those who staged the play. Paál saw the cause of the conflict between the artist who supports power and the power that seeks to support the artist in the fact that 'the artist is not in direct contact with the highest-level personifications of power, but comes into contact with them only through the transmission of force – that is, through the hierarchy of power' (–ti.– 1977, p. 5), a circumstance that fills such contact with pitfalls, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations. For this reason, the Szolnok production placed at its centre not the loss of royal favour but the cabal of hypocrites, the machinations of the dissemblers, and thus the scenes of the Company of the Holy Sacrament acquired the 'excessive mysticism' (Rajk 1977, p. 8) that some had found superfluous. Paál was therefore concerned with the milieu, and his theatrical diagnosis did not show that the artist's life hinges on an individual's decision and is exposed to that person's whims – whether to raise him up or to consign him to the trapdoor in the apron of the stage – but rather that an entire mechanism operates, determining the choices of the person at the apex of power, choices independent of that person's individual preferences. Paál's contemporary analogy can thus be discerned between the hypocrites embodying ideology and influencing worldly power, and the representatives and bodies of the Party (the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) inseparably intertwined with, and exerting influence upon, the state apparatus. The reviews of the production could, of course, make not even the faintest allusion to this, and only one raised as a question – shielding itself with Peter Brook's words, 'there is no greater recognition of the theatre's latent

power than that which censorship accords it' – that while we know Bulgakov had elemental experience of censorship, 'what experience can István Paál, the young director, have had of it?' (A.M. 1977, p. 6). Miklós Almási's question – posed by someone within the intellectual orbit of the Budapest School, several of whose members had been harassed and expelled from the Party in the 'philosophers' trial' four years earlier – acquires its sharpness particularly in light of the fact that, just as the Bulgakov phenomenon, so too the István Paál phenomenon was widely known to be overshadowed by the problem of censorship. After all, even if the productions of the University Stage of Szeged had not been formally banned, the harassment by official bodies, amid the hostility of the professional theatrical establishment, had worn down the work of Paál and his colleagues by the mid-1970s. Almási believed the answer to his question could be read from the Szolnok production and, in accordance with the director's statement, made clear that 'István Paál is not arguing with the Sun King but with the Company of the Holy Sacrament' (ibid.). The harassment exercised by bureaucracy, the coercive institutions, and officialdom – all experienced in his own person and articulated into performance – shaped Paál's reading of the drama, in response to which Almási declared: 'the enemy is not the Sun King, but the alliance of petty kings who treat power as their patrimony, their interwoven and mutually entangled fraternity. Few "contemporary" plays could be more topical than this' (ibid.).

István Paál's production offered a profound human drama that neither blurred nor diminished its contemporary relevance, through the equally forceful elaboration of both the political and the psychological dimensions underlying the text. The Szolnok *Cabal of Hypocrites* engaged in a cunning historicisation: the costumes and wigs evoked a French world three centuries earlier, yet their largely black-and-white palette directed the visual effect towards stylisation, as did the contour set constructed from modern materials. Thus, while the staging quoted the period, it also loosened the bond to it and ab-

strated the events from concreteness, shaping them through conventions of theatrical realism and a degree of theatricality that detached itself somewhat from those conventions, with ideas and stage inventions not appended to the action ‘from outside’ (Valkó 1977, p. 5). The production ‘precisely delineated the three poles of dramatic tension’: one pole was formed by the ruler held aloft by the set, Louis XIV, living in ‘forced compromise’ with the Company of the Holy Sacrament; another by the ‘fallible Human Being’, Molière – depicted in moving simplicity – and his closest companions (Armande Béjart, Bouton); and the third by the hypocrites and their helpers, ‘the usurpers of the force that directs events, kindles intrigue, and poses a danger to both the king and the artist’ (Nánay 1977, p. 1396). Between these poles the production unfolded the problematic of the artist and power, emphasising, on the one hand, Molière’s status as subject, his abasement in order to secure royal favour, his glorification of the occupant of the throne, and, on the other, highlighting the (not moral but) tactical error committed by Molière. His downfall is caused by his failure to perceive that ‘the king is not the only power’, and that the art-supporting Louis XIV can at once offer the artist official backing and give free rein to ‘the semi-official mafia (the De Charron archbishops and the D’Orsigni marquises) to destroy him’ (Koltai 1977, p. 29). The emphasis placed on this duality made the cross-resonances particularly forceful – not with Stalin’s Soviet Union, but with the Kádár regime and its double-dealing cultural policy. A song by Tamás Cseh<sup>2</sup> also played a role in this heightened emphasis: at the beginning of the second part Molière’s fellow actors intoned a mock-praising hymn to the king’s bust, and into the song the principal motif of the *Marseillaise* furtively crept. The production directed attention to the mechanism of undoing, which in the play unfolds

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

in a manner familiar not only to Paál but presumably to part of the audience as well (through denunciation, through prying into private life), and thus rendered far more significant than the suspicion of incest the intrigue that instantly leaps upon suspicion. In this way it did not seek to present the protagonist as morally superior, for it concealed neither Molière's frailties nor the vulnerability of his artistic integrity; yet it conveyed that, despite all his faults, Molière – as the implacable moral judge of his age (the 'ethical human being' that Paál had in mind) – exposed to ridicule a whole series of human and social narrownesses.

The nuance of the production is shown by the fact that it developed the political drama – in particular the confrontation between secular and ecclesiastical power – just as emphatically as the human dimension: the personal aspect of Molière's humiliation, including in relation to those close to him, even if the text did not in every case provide adequate support for this. The production did not stress that the subject concerns a fate specific to the artist; it focused rather on the human being, yet Paál and his collaborators elaborated the 'theatre within the theatre' scenes and extended the play's representational framework. The audience saw details of Molière and his company's performances now from behind, now from the front, for at times the actors played towards the back of the stage to an imaginary audience, and at times the actual auditorium was transformed into the auditorium within the play, with the actors declaiming towards the real spectators as though performing for the illustrious public of the Palais Royal. In this way the actual spectator was alternately distanced from the ruler – who sat in invisible remoteness somewhere opposite (evidently only in imagination), his presence indicated solely by a small bust – and brought into immediate proximity with him, since (again only in imagination) he or she occupied the same space as the monarch. In this way the production, fictively of course, yet in an experientially palpable manner, made the dual sensation of approaching and receding from power perceptible, and

thereby rendered the tragedy a personal matter. All the more so because, before the ominous scene from *The Imaginary Invalid* and Molière's death, the performance that had until then unfolded with its back to the audience suddenly, as if by magic, turned around and came 'within touching distance'. Here the estrangement operative during the 'theatre within the theatre' scenes also ceased, effected not only by the broader, more theatrical movements but by the mechanical voice accompanying the characters' gesticulation, so that the ending would descend upon the spectators with its full weight.

The production's relatively slow start, its more static first part that unfolded the conflict in meticulous detail, was followed by a distinctly dramatic second part of mounting tension and, finally, by a closing of staggering force, which once again confronted the spectator with the principal virtue of Paál's productions: clear and effective visual articulation. In the final image *La Grange*, the Chronicler, recorded the fact of Molière's death and its cause: the loss of royal favour and the cabal of hypocrites. Yet *La Grange*'s figure did not fade into the darkness, as in the stage direction of the dramatic text, for to the sound of clanking chains the 'representatives of the organs of force' in the production appeared menacingly on stage: a soldier, a man dressed as a nun, and members of the Company of the Holy Sacrament (Nánay 1977, p. 1397). The Chronicler tore the final page from his notebook, lit it at the flame of the lamp, and, holding in his hand the message blazing as 'the torch of truth' in its burning, annulled form, set off towards the depths of the stage (A.M. 1977, p. 6). At that moment, with a tremendous crash, the iron curtain of the stage within the play fell, blocking the exit, and before the stage was plunged into complete darkness, the embers of the last page's torch-glow flared once more.

Paál's epilogue, confronting Bulgakov's intended ending, asserted the unrecordability of the true cause of death as truth, and with the shocking image of the 'no exit' made the spectator aware that, together with the Chronicler, he/she too remained

in the unsayable, in compromise. Seven years earlier, the play's première at the National Theatre had likewise appended a new element to the stage action: the actors steal Molière's corpse out of the theatre, which by order of the archbishop ought to be buried in a pauper's trench, thereby saving him from 'the persecution that power had intended for him after death' (Sarkadi 1971, p. 15). The ending of that production offered reverence to the artist and steered towards the 'legend' of the great creator, in contrast to Paál, who directed attention towards the present – the very present that Gábor Székely had been the first to make the object of theatrical analysis through Molière's plays and the figure of Molière.

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Magdolna Jákfalvi

*HOVÁMÉSZ?*: AVANT-GARDE  
PERFORMANCE IN SZOLNOK  
(TIBOR CSIZMADIA: *HOVÁMÉSZ*, 1983)

Abstract: The phenomena of state-socialist theatre in Hungary enriched the repertoires of the repertory theatres. From this history there emerges a Sunday matinée in a repertory theatre which, although created in a provincial venue and intended for children on a Sunday morning, constituted a work of theatre art produced with members and creative means of the contemporary avant-garde community. In 1983, at the Szolnok Theatre, Tibor Csizmadia began a process of collective creation with members of the company who were then little known – Zoltán Mucsi, József Tóth, Éva Szoboszlai – together with experimental makers of the alternative theatre scene. They improvised to Miklós Mészöly's tale in the hidden recesses of the theatre building: in the boxes, the cleaning cupboards, and the stalls. In this study I trace the path along which the costumes of El Kazovszkij and the spatial conception of Zoltán Lában, invoking the formal idiom of the classical avant-garde, enter into play-improvisation with the text of Miklós Mészöly. My analysis is guided by the relationship between the memory of the written text and the memory of the performed text.

In 1983, at the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok, Tibor Csizmadia and several then little-known members of the company – Zoltán Mucsi, József Tóth and Éva Szoboszlai – together with experimental creators from the alternative theatre scene, produced a children's theatre performance through a process of collective creation. In the concealed recesses of the

theatre building – in the boxes, the cleaning closets and the stalls – they improvised everywhere on the tales of Miklós Mészöly. In this study I trace the way in which the costumes of El Kazovszkij and the spatial concept of Zoltán Lábás, invoking the formal language of the classical avant-garde, entered into playful improvisation with Mészöly's text; accordingly, the relationship between the memory of the written text and the memory of the performed text guides my analysis.

This event is so small that the Mészöly reception may scarcely register it; yet, when magnified through a theatrical perspective, this happening is saturated with several layers of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. First, it renders operative and actualises the Mészöly universe, which lends itself to multiple modes of reading. Second, it inscribes in theatrical lore the emergence of a performance within the confines of a repertory-based state theatre. Third, within the formal language of children's theatre, it opens up a particularly free pedagogical possibility. I analyse the *Hová-mész*-performance according to the Philther method ([www.philther.hu](http://www.philther.hu)).

### *The Context of the Production in Theatre Culture*

In 1983, as a playwright, Mészöly was becoming increasingly invisible on the theatrical landscape. The premières of *Az ablakmosó* (The Window Cleaner) and *A bunker* (The Bunker) had not been followed by further interpretations. Theatrical practice operates on a principle of precedent: only the singular illumination of the possibilities latent in a text can carry forward a potential theatrical form. This did not occur with Mészöly's classical dramas. His tales and puppet plays more readily occupy the domain of children's theatre, and Mészöly himself observed, in connection with the production brought to Budapest for the National Theatre Meeting, that:

‘to be honest, I was surprised by the adventurous spirit of the Szolnok theatre in deciding to stage a

piece of mine, and even to present it before the Budapest audience. I last wrote a play twenty or twenty-five years ago, two in fact, but somehow they chose an unfavourable constellation. My burlesque tragedy *Az ablakmosó* – I do not even know, fifteen years ago? – was granted barely three performances. [...] Now there evidently seemed to be some hope that at least, as a writer of tales, they would not have to be ashamed of me' (Mészöly 1983, p. 69).

Mészöly's plays owe much of their dissemination to the earliest, precedent-setting creators – to the puppet designers László Bod and Sándor Lévai, and to one of his earliest directors, Ildikó Kovács – for once the text had been shaped into a puppet-theatre narrative, it travelled easily from stage to stage. From 1951 onwards, beginning with *Terülj táskám* (Spread, My Bag), Mészöly appeared on the repertoire of the State Puppet Theatre every three or four years with a new fairy-tale play, such as *Három kis gida* (Three Little Kid Goats) and *Árgyélus királyfi* (Prince Árgyélus), followed sixteen years later by the premiere of *A csodálatos kalucsni* (The Wonderful Galoshes). It seems, then, that as a playwright Mészöly was most at home as an author for puppet theatres, for the absurd–surreal mode of representation achievable through puppets can fully accommodate his associations and situations. Mészöly's entire dramatic oeuvre, when examined in its entirety, may illuminate the divergence between his authorial language and the practices of theatrical play: realist theatre working with live actors tends to mute grotesque and burlesque modes of expression. It is known that 'Dezső Szilágyi, his schoolmate from Szekszárd, stood by him at this time; Szilágyi was then the director of the Budapest Bábszínház, where he employed Mészöly for several years as a dramaturg, and the Bábszínház also staged several of Mészöly's puppet plays written for the theatre. During this period Miklós Mészöly also willingly engaged with the theoretical questions of puppetry.' (P. Müller 2020, p. 633). Sev-

eral commentators have reached the insight (Tüskés 2011) that the distinctive features of the Hungarian puppetry tradition – the exploratory and wandering curiosity embedded in puppet characters, which differentiates Hungarian puppetry from both the Soviet and the celebrated Polish cultures of puppetry – owe much to the qualities of Mészöly's sentences.

Miklós Mészöly's plays are recorded as possibilities, as potentialities, in literary history; Zsuzsa Radnóti, the legendary dramaturg active since the 1970s, stated at the 2019 Mészöly conference, in her paper *Mészöly-műegész és a színház* (The Complete Mészöly Oeuvre and the Theatre), that Mészöly represents an 'opportunity missed' (Radnóti 2020). Following Péter P. Müller, several analysts emphasise that Mészöly's plays constitute modes of utterance inscribed upon the surface of absurd theatre. Yet it is precisely this label of the absurd that halts Mészöly's career as a playwright and renders impossible the discovery of his own stage idiom. As Dávid Szolláth also draws our attention to, Mészöly wrote *Az ablakmosó* and *A bunker* contemporaneously with the works of Ionesco and Beckett (Szolláth 2020), and although thematic affinities and shared interpretative positions are naturally discernible, the dramatic form of Mészöly's texts remains that of the conversational play. Mészöly does not lead his dramas towards the linguistic absurd of *The Bald Soprano*, but rather guides readers onto the metaphorical interpretative field of the historical parable; *Az ablakmosó* reveals the dramaturgical pattern of Ferenc Molnár's play *Doktor úr* (*Doctor Sir*).

The recurrent question in the Mészöly reception, therefore, is why Mészöly did not become a successful playwright, and in exploring the spectrum of success (and lack thereof), the divergence between the everyday and the dramatic expectations attached to the label 'absurd' appears as only one factor. Another concerns the practice and compulsion of allegorical reading. Mészöly perceived with great clarity the workings of the 'complicit acoustics' (Mészöly 1969, p. 28) in theatrical communication, yet neither he nor anyone else recognised the

allegorical mode of reading as something given in advance. El Kazovszkij articulated that audiences initially interpreted these events as political allegories, that is, they could understand them only through the mechanisms of theatrical double-speech. 'For instance, the motif of tying someone down was interpreted by most as an allusion to the lack of political freedom' (Rényi 2004, p. 12). A third factor in this non-success lies in theatrical routine. In the 1950s, when Mészöly would have needed to find the artists capable of giving theatrical form to his plays, the stage was struggling with the homogenised realist idiom produced by Sovietisation. There was no public theatrical platform, nor any functioning alternative group, that might have experimented with a form of its own for Mészöly's texts.

'I cannot emphasise enough what an extraordinary experience each issue of the journal *Nagyvilág* offered: an encounter with recent and contemporary trends in world literature and with the revitalisation of book publishing. Intellectual movements previously deemed "forbidden" became accessible, such as existentialism, the absurd, the grotesque, the *nouveau roman*, and the new Italian and French cinematic tendencies, as well as the once-sealed off creators and currents of Soviet, Polish, and Czechoslovak artistic life. Yet the professional theatre, operating under central ideological and censorial control, was unable – or able only with great delay – to keep pace with this intellectual opening' (Nánay 2023, p. 75).

And when, by the early 1980s, some form of theatre group was operating in every major university town, it was the newly written dramas of Péter Nádas that posed the challenge. This recognition is borne out by the *Hovámész?* (Where Are You Going?) production premiered in 1983.

The playability inherent in Miklós Mészöly's dramas is presented in a summarising manner by *Hovámész?*. In 1983 in

Szolnok, a creative community discovered Mészöly's sentences for itself whose members produced works in the domain of neo-avant-garde formations and happenings, and who, in the subsequent years, created significant works within the theatrical practice of the 'second public sphere'. In 1983 this community was attached to the county–municipal theatre in Szolnok, working – under the protective umbrella of children's performances – on what Tamás Fodor termed an 'island of creative freedom' (Sándor L. 2020). The structure of this playing community was so unusual even in the late Kádár era that it is worth examining where a theatrical event could emerge from Mészöly's sentences.

Every municipal theatre's repertoire includes a children's matinée as a mandatory element. From Tibor Csizmadia's recollection (Csizmadia 2021) we know that the theatre provided every material resource for this task, and the director was free to bring both the actors, the creative team, and the text to the production. Thus Mészöly's tale found itself among distinguished creators of the neo-avant-garde artistic scene, who were already entirely at home in the genres of experiment, happening, and performance.

How could all this come into being within an environment operated by central dramaturgies and cultural party governance? In Szolnok, the chairman of the Municipal Council was József Fenyvesi (1980–1985), and there was no separate department for cultural affairs. At this time, the theatre's chief director was István Paál, who ten years earlier in Szeged, with his work *Petőfi Rock '73* at the Egyetemi Színpad (University Stage), not only provoked prohibition but demonstrated the potential force inherent in the theatrical situation and in addressing the spectator. Paál led the audience out into the street to make revolution with Petőfi, and consequently he was removed from Szeged. Years later (having also spent a period in Pécs) he found his way to Szolnok, and although he never again created that rebellious, communal university experience, he consistently opened space everywhere for collective thea-

tre-making. It was Paál who staged Déry's *Óriássecsemő* (The Giant Infant) at the Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad in 1970, Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in Pécs in 1977, and Beckett's *Endgame* in Szolnok in 1979; he is known as one of the major experimenters of the absurd theatrical idiom (Nánay 2023). With Paál's support, the children's happening came into being.

### *Dramatic Text, Dramaturgy*

Zsuzsa Radnóti and Péter P. Müller both analyse the fact that Miklós Mészöly's theatrical presence is sporadic: between 1951 and 1963 five puppet productions were created from his various tales; in 1963 *Az ablakmosó* was staged in Miskolc under the direction of Ottó Ruttkai, but it escaped critical attention. Between 1965 and 1981 – until the Békéscsaba premiere of *A bunker*, directed by Mátyás Giritz – a further seven tales and/or fragments reached the stage. Thus, in 1983 the *Hovámész* team approached Mészöly not as the author of overplayed or overinterpreted works.

The dramatic text of the production is compiled from the tales of Miklós Mészöly published in 1980. Tibor Csizmadia bought the storybook *Az elvarázsolt tűzoltózenekar* (The Enchanted Fire Brigade Band) for his daughter (Csizmadia 2021), and thus encountered Mészöly's surreal (not absurd) world of tales. The production titled *Hovámész? Jelentés egy sosemvolt cirkuszról* (Where Are You Going? Report on a Circus That Never Existed) appears to be a compilation of two tales, *Hovámész?* and *Jelentés...* Yet the production, on the one hand, disassembles and imperceptibly reassembles the entire storybook and its dozen tales, and, on the other, sets aside allegorical modes of reading in order to use a little boy's recurring, inquisitive question as its dramaturgical score. Wandering through the space, experienced physically, performs the divergent interpretative positions, so that the philosophical–conceptual plane of *Hovámész?* appears in the theatre as a concrete spatial element. In the basic dramatic situation of *Hovámész?*, we see

the direct, allusion-free mode of communication characteristic of the formal language of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde theatre. All possibilities of allegorical reading are eliminated, and the shared time that arises within the lived space renders the linguistic and physical situations unequivocal. The otherwise multiply layered, allegorising narrative fabric of Mészöly's tale is stripped down, in the space of the Szolnok theatre, to a single active theatrical form: '*hovámész?*' is heard as an address, and the response arrives in a kinesic form – the performers set off up the stairs to the costume storage, together with the spectators.

The sequence of dramatic decisions is built upon this interpretative simplicity: between scenes the spectators wander through the various 'found' locations, making decisions about where to go and what to watch. István Nánay's immediate review formulates it thus:

'It would not be inappropriate to call the Szolnok production based on the tales of Miklós Mészöly an experiment, which the director Tibor Csizmadia assembled under the title *Hovámész*. Unconventional indeed is the manner in which the performance is conducted: the children wander through the theatre building, each of the tales is played in a different location – on the upper-storey balcony, in the foyer, in the stairwell landings, in the rehearsal room, in the balcony boxes, and of course on the stage as well. The performance offers not so much the experience of a continuously traceable, single-stranded plot as, rather, the wonder of the theatre itself' (Nánay 1983, p. 13).

Multiple accounts from spectators confirm that the free production of meaning – regarded as a hallmark of scenographic productions – is characteristic of this performance as well (Lehmann 1999, p. 54). The recognition, exploration, and traversing of space relativise the hermeneutic possibili-

ties offered by the fairy-tale text, and the experience of space becomes so dominant that the recurring circus clichés cannot orient the perceived phenomena either towards the circus genre or, above all, towards a conventional perception of theatre. The director of the production formulates it thus in his notes:

'In 1980 his volume *Az elvárásolt tűzoltózenekar és más mesék* was published. One of its stories, *Jelentés egy sosemvolt cirkuszról*, provided the basic idea for bringing its figures and situations to the stage. In the text in question, he presents the characters of a circus, and the members of our ensemble inhabit their skins, yet as individual acts they also embody some of the more exciting sentences from the other pieces in the volume. Since the fairy tales in the volume – although rich in dramatic turns – are not everywhere arranged in dialogue, we, the adapters, had to find a form through which we could present the action in an engaging manner without relinquishing its epic character, and render the stories comprehensible for as broad an age range as possible. [...] The seating capacity of the theatre is almost 600; in order for the audience to be able to move, on this occasion we can admit only half of that number' (Czizmadia private archive).

The dramatic text of the production, however, is marked by unresolved philological questions. Miklós Mészöly's name appears in pencil (presumably not in Mészöly's own hand) on an uncatalogued manuscript in the Puppet Collection of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in Budapest. This is the dramatic version of *Jelentés...*, which Tibor Csizmadia also used. It is now too distant in time for memory to preserve how the theatre's then dramaturg, Mihály Kornis, may have accessed the text. What appears certain is the compilation assembled from the fairy tales, which can also be found in the

private archive of the director, Tibor Csizmadia. From this we can trace how the director dismantled the 1980 edition of *Az elvarázsolt tűzoltózenekar* and reassembled its stories. He wanted to hear every story, and the method employed the creative unpredictability of separation and rearrangement as a dramaturgical device. The distribution of the stories among the actors reinforced the technique of fragmentation, since the rhetorical and syntactic fragmentation of the tales continues in the spatial structure and dramaturgical line of the performance. The gestures of distribution and wandering are inscribed across the entire theatre space, and the wandering and running of a hundred children animates the event, while at the same time 'it places considerable demands on the children's physical and psychological stamina' (Nánay 1983, p. 13).

### *Staging*

The staging had to focus on the spectators: the audience for this performance consisted of children who, at the end of the school year, simply play within the performance, in ways that are unpredictable and uncontrollable. 'At the same time, the fact that the children are not pinned to their seats, that they can move about freely, and, where necessary, choose which of the simultaneously unfolding scenes they would rather watch – although making such a choice is extremely difficult for children, since they are curious about everything – liberates the audience' (Nánay 1983, p. 13). Csizmadia Tibor, working with El Kazovszkij, Zoltán Lábás, and the young artists of the ensemble who created through improvisation (characteristically not trained as actors), presents the process of change and transformation through the dramaturgy of wandering. The performance-work itself is at once an act of sculpture and of spatial formation. It is a performance for children, yet the creative process of making it has left a stronger mark on theatre history than the approximately half-dozen actual occa-

sions on which it was performed. The process of sculptural construction is distinctly performative:

I. The construction and adornment of the fetishes. The establishment, within the exhibited objects, of the needs of the second nature dictated by the culturally normative system of roles. The creation of idols. II. A two- or three-minute tableau. The actual panopticon, the display of objects. The ideal appropriated and objectified by the human being as manifested spectacle. The festivity. III. Attempts to establish a relation with the object, and the failures thereof. Since the object as such is unapproachable (its absolute passivity renders it inaccessible), the idol can only be taken apart, damaged, destroyed: it is, in practical terms, unassimilable. IV. The making of the inventory – theoretical appropriation. The clearing away of the props into the appropriately numbered boxes (the collection). After each act of destruction and removal, the construction of the idol begins anew' (Kazovszkij 1978, p. 35).

The director is the master of the game in this 'happening' that unfolds differently each time, concentrating on the game as it is taking place; thus, from the perspective of the rehearsals and experiments, it becomes clear why the production had no long run, no poster, and no programme sheet.

### *Stage Design and Sound*

The space of the Mészöly production is the inner structure of the theatre – its organs and veins, the invisible organisms that, at the time of the performance, are laid bare. The space is arranged by the visual artist Zoltán Lábás, a member of the Indigó Group, in accordance with the architectural conditions of the Szolnok theatre, and the visual experience cre-

ated through these spatial configurations evokes in Szolnok the activity of the Indigó, which in these years received space only in the Postás Cultural Centre (Hornyik and Szőke 2008). It is impossible to overestimate this opportunity in Szolnok, for almost all of our knowledge concerning the operation and experience of the neo-avant-garde theatrical tradition is preserved in these children's matinées. Here one can observe, in a state of quasi-functioning, the collective creativity of the Indigo group initiated and led by Miklós Erdély. This community, which focused on interdisciplinary thinking, was a centre of creativity research (Hornyik and Szőke 2008, p. 349), yet in their daily work its routine or repertoire-like functioning could seldom be realised. Now, in Szolnok, within the arsenal of possibilities afforded by a large theatre, Zoltán Lábás – understanding the theatre as an organism – follows Mészöly.

Mészöly writes: 'More precisely, the unpredictable situations and fragments of action adapt themselves to the given features of the landscape; for we do not wish to bind the scene of continuous play to our stage space' (Mészöly 1994, p. 3). This non-binding creates the shared environmental freedom of Lábás and the performers. Lábás's working method, brought from Indigo (Erdély 1974), is grounded – under Csizmadia's direction – in collective brainstorming and group therapy; Mészöly's sentences resound amid installations and objects, yet owing to El Kazovszkij's costumes we see the world of the Kazovszkij-performances projected onto Mészöly's fairy-tale fabric, and thus the 'stages of still life' (Rényi 2004, p. 12) provide space for Gyigymóka, Kökénykiasszony, Kitrikoty, and the animals.

The other creator of the scenographic experience is the visual artist El Kazovszkij, who appears on the programme sheet as the costume designer of the production. Kazovszkij worked regularly in the theatre, and his performances were created within – and contemporaneously with – the sphere of neo-avant-garde theatrical events. The series of *Dzsán-panoptikum* performances, begun in 1977 (Kazovszkij 1977), were

realised at the Fiatal Művészek Klubja, the Dózsa György Művelődési Ház, the Fészek, and various university clubs, and their genre delineates the intersection of happening, performance, and neo-avant-garde theatrical production.

'Kazovszkij's work would certainly be closer to what Kaprow terms a 'theatrical performance' (Kaprow 2001, p. 58) – not only because of the large ensemble and the unusually monumental, aestheticised visual world, but also insofar as there is a stage and there are roles [...] moreover, there is even a "plot" that is performed from start to finish, without improvisation, on the basis of a precise script and directorial instructions, within a strictly measured playing time. In addition to the careful coordination of musical, verbal, and visual elements, and the abundance of sets, costumes, and stage props, it is above all the separation of the staged events from the audience – recalling the structure of the peep-box theatre – that contradicts the dominant poetics of performance art: as spectators, we can watch the "performance" undisturbed' (Rényi 2008).

In the visual world created by Lábás and Kazovszkij, Mészöly's text becomes detached from the constructed architecture of the Szolnok theatre: on the one hand, because every previously inaccessible room becomes freely traversable and every hidden staircase climbable; on the other hand, because every constructed (paper) wall becomes tearable and penetrable. In this way, the spectators – above all the children – are able to comprehend the stories through the freedom of discovery. Wandering, constant shifts of context, and the uncertainty inherent in free choice of position and location are, in any case, essential components of Mészöly's fairy tales. While the child audience typically made the decision with ease that what they were watching cohered into a story, an initiated

adult, schooled in theatrical convention, experiences a certain anxiety as to whether, within this unexpected freedom, they can see everything and whether they are seeing the fragment of the world placed before them correctly. Csizmadia Tibor formulates it thus:

“This form most closely resembles a funfair or wandering in an enchanted castle, because we would like our audience, between the moments of entering and leaving the theatre, to follow the events and the scenes by walking along a route. By the end of this “excursion”, one may hope that the story will have cohered, and thus the spectator “tells” the story to themselves, deciding at will where to linger longer or shorter, what interests them more or less.” (Csizmadia notes)

What we see during the performance is the Szolnok Theatre itself. The event, beginning in the foyer, directs attention to a centrally placed piste, and the sequence of segments drawn from Mészöly’s tales appears in the manner of a panopticon. Panopticons in the manner of El Kazovszkij always presuppose the viewer’s central position, for ‘the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad [...]’ (Foucault 1990, p. 275). In *Hovámesz?* the actions of looking around and walking around enabled the exploration of numerous possibilities within the framework of children’s theatre: for instance, Tibor Csizmadia processed through the space with hair dyed coal-black, accompanied by a mulatto girl, leading a pink piglet on a leash.

The fragmented semiosis of this scene leads participants not only towards Mészöly’s absurd world, but also towards the meaning-independent freedom of the scenographic experience.

### *Impact and Posterity*

According to Tibor Csizmadia, the contribution of the Mészöly production lies above all in the process of collective creation, the weeks of working with the selected artists, and the act of making itself. Mészöly attended one of the rehearsals, but he did not travel to Szolnok for the Sunday-morning premiere, and there is no indication that the neo-avant-garde, performance-inspired working method rekindled any renewed interest in his dramatist persona.

The creation was therefore a collective improvisation on Mészöly's texts, a form of training aimed at strengthening non-realist modes of thinking and encouraging non-allegorical articulation. It is most clearly traceable in the careers of the actors involved in the production, who, in the years that followed, became participants in the key events of alternative theatre. Parallel to developments in Szolnok, Arvisura at the Szkéné Színpad, and a few years later the Krétakör Theatre, created opportunities for such scenographic modes of articulation. In agreement with István Nánay – who, interpreting processes in children's theatre and alternative theatre together, writes that '[...] this production is a one-time opportunity, but its lessons will have repercussions for the entire development of children's theatre' (Nánay 1983, p. 13) – we can assert that its impact emerges distinctly in theatre pedagogy, in the theatre-in-education and drama-pedagogy movements that appeared from the late 1980s onwards.

### *Details of the Production*

*Title:* *Hovámész?* *Date of Premiere:* 29 May 1983. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* Tibor Csizmadia. *Playwright:* Miklós Mészöly. *Dramaturg:* Mihály Kornis. *Set designer:* Zoltán Lábás (resident designer). *Costume designer:* El Kazovszkij (guest artist). *Company:* Ensemble of the Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Music editor:* Ferenc Darvas. *Cast:* József Tóth, Zoltán Mucsi,

Károly Váry, László Angster, Gyula Takács, Sándor Kőmíves Jr., Károly Varga, László Árdeleán, Éva Szoboszlai, Margit Bárdos, Erika Hanga, Zsuzsa Roczkó, Zsuzsa Hullan, Éva Simó, Mária Dutkon, Irén Turza, László Attila Horváth.

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Dorka Porogi

MILÁN FÜST'S FIRST THEATRICAL SUCCESS  
PÁRTOS GÉZA: *NEGYEDIK HENRIK KIRÁLY*  
(KING HENRY IV), 1964.

Abstract: Milán Füst had achieved early recognition as a poet and prose writer, yet his plays were neither staged nor canonised at the time of their composition and publication. Four to five decades later, however, his dramas entered the Hungarian theatrical repertoire in an unexpected way, and, owing to the historical significance of their first productions, they have remained part of it ever since. Füst was first brought to the stage by Géza Pártos, who effectively made him a playwright by directing *Boldogtalanok* (The Unhappy Ones)<sup>1</sup> at the Madách Theatre in 1963, followed by *Negyedik Henrik király* (King Henry IV) in 1964 and *Catullus* in 1968. Although the production of *The Unhappy Ones* proved unsuccessful, it opened the way for the remarkable artistic and cultural reception of *King Henry IV*. This article examines the 1964 performance of *King Henry IV* through the analytical framework of the Philther method.

*The Context of the Production in Theatre Culture. Pártos Géza and the Madách Theatre*

One of the peak achievements of the great era of the Madách Theatre in Budapest is Géza Pártos's 1964 production.

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation by Patrick Mark Mullaney bears the title *The Unhappy* (Anon 2016), but the play is frequently referred to as *The Unhappy Ones*.

After completing his secondary school examinations, Pártos studied dance in Aurél Milloss's ballet studio and acting with Árpád Ódry at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, since there was still no regular director training in Hungary in the 1930s. He began directing at the Independent Stage led by Ferenc Hont; this left-wing theatre collective presented classics as well as old, rarely performed Hungarian plays. During the Second World War he spent more than a year at the front as a conscript soldier, after which he was placed in a labour camp and was also forced into hiding (Lengyel 2009, p. 49). After 1945 he began working at the country's leading theatre, the National Theatre, where he served first as assistant director and then as director alongside Tamás Major, Endre Gellért and Kálmán Nádasdy.

The Madách Theatre was the first among the theatres in Pest to be nationalised, in 1947. From 1949 Pártos was under contract there as chief director, initially under the leadership of the young and inexperienced Zsuzsa Barta, and subsequently – following the company's reorganisation and relocation in 1951 – under director István Horvai, who, like Barta, had studied in the Soviet Union, and with whom he worked in excellent collaboration. The background to the 1951 reorganisation was József Révai's intention, as Minister of Public Education, to make the Madách a competitor to the National Theatre. A key element of Horvai's leadership programme was that the theatre should develop its own circle of writers and work as closely as possible with contemporary authors, for instance with Imre Sarkadi. After the 1950s premieres of the plays *Út a tanyákról* (Road from the Farmsteads) and *Szeptember* (September),<sup>2</sup> a decade later Géza Pártos continued to stage Sarkadi's dramas: he was the first in the country to direct *Elveszett paradicsom* (The

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<sup>2</sup> *Út a tanyákról*, Sarkadi Imre, 1952. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by István Horvai and Géza Pártos.]

*Szeptember*, Sarkadi Imre, 1955. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by István Horvai.]

Lost Paradise)<sup>3</sup> and *Oszlopos Simeon* (Simeon the Stylite).<sup>4</sup> According to Horvai, Pártos had already been working on plans for staging *King Henry IV* before 1946 (Ablonczy 1985, p. 105).

The 1956 revolution drove Horvai from the head of the theatre, and the directorship was then taken over first by Zoltán Greguss (1956–57), followed by Ferenc Ladányi (1957–59), Béla Both (1959–64), and, at the beginning of 1964, Ottó Ruttkai. By this time Géza Pártos had already undergone two years of silencing (he was exiled to the Petőfi Theatre between 1959 and 1961), but apart from this he remained a director of the theatre until his defection in 1968. Alongside him, Ottó Ádám, László Vámos and György Lengyel worked as permanent directors in the company; among the four, Pártos is remembered within the profession as the director with the ‘most modern’ taste and aesthetic (*Kulisszatitkok* [Backstage Secrets] 2011, 8’ and 37’). He purposefully sought out and staged plays by forgotten or unknown Hungarian authors. In addition to struggling persistently for years to secure the staging of the dramas of Imre Sarkadi and Milán Füst, he also directed dramatic works by other Hungarian writers rarely performed in the theatre, such as Mór Jókai and Antal Szerb. He believed that high-quality literature on stage – when meeting the ‘spiritual richness’ of the director and the actors – would yield important productions ((devich) 1993, p. III), and as his career advanced he increasingly refrained from staging well-known, celebrated dramas. During the years of state socialism he endeavoured with all his strength to emphasise that the cause of Hungarian drama could not be independent of international theatrical aspirations. For good Hungarian plays to be written, as many international connections as possible would be required.

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<sup>3</sup> *Elvesztett paradicsom*, 1961. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by Géza Pártos.]

<sup>4</sup> *Oszlopos Simeon*, 1967. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by Géza Pártos.]

‘These works [the forgotten Hungarian plays – D. P.] connect Hungarian dramatic literature to world literature; through knowledge of them we can discern the continuity of Hungarian theatre, and this in itself already assists Hungarian writers engaged in playwriting. [...] The fact that the past season may be called a good one from the perspective of Hungarian dramas is related to our increasingly active involvement in the theatrical life of the world. Hungarian drama is inseparable from universal theatrical culture’ (Anon. 1967, p. 15).

At the time of the premiere of *King Henry IV*, in the autumn of 1964, the Madách Theatre – unlike the National Theatre or the Vígszínház – did not yet have a season-ticket system, yet its audience numbers were nonetheless comparable: in that year 314 performances were attended by 206,309 spectators (Ekés 1965, pp. 2–40). The theatre played runs of one hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty performances of Shakespeare or Shaw, it was the second in the country to stage Brecht (in a production directed precisely by Pártos),<sup>5</sup> and, after twenty-two years, it rediscovered Ernő Szép as a playwright.<sup>6</sup> The leading actors of the company were Miklós Gábor, Ferenc Bessenyei, István Avar, Sándor Pécsi, László Márkus, László Mensáros, Klári Tolnay, Éva Vass, Irén Psota, Manyi Kiss and Edit Domján. Of the eleven premieres in the 1964–65 season, six were by Hungarian creators. The repertoire also reveals a clear aspiration to stage contemporary works.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Courage mama*, Bertolt Brecht, 1958. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by Géza Pártos.]

<sup>6</sup> *Vőlegény* (Bridegroom), Ernő Szép, 1960. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by László Vámos.]

<sup>7</sup> The other premieres of the season on the main stage were Maxim Gorky: *Kispolgárok* (The Philistines) (directed by Ottó Ádám); Lorca: *Yerma* (directed by László Vámos); Péter Müller: *Márta* (directed by László Vámos); Ferenc Molnár: *Olympia* (directed by György Lengyel). And in the

At the time of the premiere of *King Henry IV*, the repertoire still included successes from previous seasons in which Miklós Gábor, the actor portraying Henry, likewise often played leading roles: for example the most famous Hungarian *Hamlet* production of the century,<sup>8</sup> *As You Like It*,<sup>9</sup> and *Man and Superman*.<sup>10</sup>

### *Dramatic Text, Dramaturgy. The Forgotten Text*

Pártos's production was a world premiere: in the thirty-three years that had elapsed since its composition in 1931, not a single theatre had staged Milán Füst's drama *King Henry IV*. We know of Dániel Jób's 1936 letter in which he returned the script of *Henry*, submitted to the Vígszínház, to the author: 'unfortunately it is once again a work not of this world. With your splendid talent you ought to write plays before which the bourgeois intellect does not stand helpless' (quoted in Sándor 2003, p. 41). The rejection did not concern *Henry* alone: none of Füst's plays was staged at the time of its composition, which is why his monographer, György Somlyó, could call him 'the most unsuccessful playwright' (Somlyó 1993, p. 238). *The Unhappy Ones*, written in 1914 and published in *Nyugat* in 1915, was the only one to be performed, in 1923, by the Writers' Theatre, a small Budapest company, in a series of matinée per-

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studio theatre: Marcel Achard: *A bolond lány* (The Idiot Girl) (directed by István Egri); Miklós Hubay: *Késdobálók* (Knife-Throwers) (directed by Péter Makai); Norman Krasna: *Egy vasárnap New Yorkban* (Sunday in New York) (directed by László Vámos); Heinrich von Kleist: *Amphitryon* (directed by Géza Pártos); László Németh: *Mathiász panzió* (Mathiász Boarding House) (directed by Ottó Ádám); Antal Szerb: *Ex* (directed by Géza Pártos).

<sup>8</sup> *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, 1962. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by László Vámos. Hamlet – Miklós Gábor.]

<sup>9</sup> *Abogy tetszik*, William Shakespeare, 1964. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by László Vámos. Jacques – Miklós Gábor.]

<sup>10</sup> *Tanner John házassága*, G. B. Shaw, 1963. Budapest: Madách Színház. [Directed by Ottó Ádám. Tanner John – Miklós Gábor.]

formances directed by Kálmán Szőke; it was then revived by Rózsi Forgács's theatre in 1925, but thereafter no one touched it until Pártos's 1963 production.

Without any theatrical precedent, Pártos proceeded to stage Füst's works in sequence: *The Unhappy Ones* in 1963, *King Henry IV* in 1964, and finally *Catullus* in 1968, which the author had earlier repudiated but, partly at Pártos's request, nevertheless included in his 1966 volume of dramas and permitted to be performed. In 1963 *The Unhappy Ones* was still too modern for audiences (*Kulisszatitkok* 2011, 8'); it did not become a theatrical success, whereas a year later the press unequivocally celebrated *Henry*.

According to Milán Füst's *Napló*, the subject preoccupied him from the age of sixteen, but he wrote it only at forty because he did not consider it sufficiently a matter of public concern (Füst 1999, p. 348). At the absolute centre of the four-act work stands the protagonist, Henry – the eleventh-century German–Roman emperor on the Walk to Canossa – a figure of extreme contradiction and passion (there is scarcely a scene in which he does not appear), placed in situations of violently shifting world-political and private circumstance. According to the testimony of the *Napló*, its first readers reproached the drama for its lack of plot, its epic character and its psychological orientation (Füst 1999, p. 361). Fellow writers did praise it, and one review called it a 'perfect drama' (Bóka 1941, p. 172), yet assessments claiming that its foremost virtue lies precisely in this quality – its dissection of a complex personality in dramatic situations – emerged only decades later. Hungarian literary history noticed, registered and began to evaluate the existentialist and absurd-leaning fundamental traits of the dramas only as a result of, and following from, the productions of the 1970s by Géza Pártos and, subsequently, Gábor Székely, who also staged Füst's dramas. For example, it recognised that the works' figures are not characters or types but arbitrary, unfathomable personalities (cf. Schein 2006, pp. 217–219):

'Henry shows neither history nor personality any longer in that illusory stability and clarity characteristic of simplistically conceived „realisms". [...] Here everything appears more unstable, more unresolved, more open, more disconcerting, in a word more *absurd* [...] its protagonists elicit our sympathy and antipathy almost from minute to minute; they are neither right nor not-right. They have a *fate* – once again, as in the Greek tragedies, only here the forces in whose hands this fate rests are unknown' (Somlyó 1993, p. 238).

In the drama Füst seemingly abandons the framework of bourgeois drama. The subtitle – *királydráma* (royal drama) – evokes Shakespeare, yet the author himself already states that in the work the historical backdrop is merely a pretext (quoted in Dévény 1964, p. 167). He follows Shakespeare in the sense that his dialogues, broken into prose, have an iambic cadence, although the frequent conjunctions and truncated sentences bring the text close to everyday speech. The problem of *Henry* is explicitly a twentieth-century, 'bourgeois' dilemma, the problem of individual freedom: Henry is a sovereign, self-realising figure who loves life and – since his selfishness is like that of children – is himself lovable, yet he does not find happiness; he is lonely, he fails, and in the end his own son turns against him. Zsuzsa Radnóti draws attention to the life-affirming, triumphant, liberated fundamental tone of the drama, which is a rarity in Füst's oeuvre (Radnóti 1989, p. 62).

### *Staging. The Actor-Centred Director*

No video recording of the three-hour production has survived; with one exception, the recordings of Pártos's productions were most likely erased after his defection (Lengyel 2009, p. 58). Of *Henry* only an audio recording exists, but this is not

accessible for research.<sup>11</sup> Thus the reconstruction of the production can be attempted solely on the basis of the surviving written documents, data and photographs.

It is a certain and not insignificant circumstance that the play entered the Madách repertoire after the production of *Hamlet*, and that its title and absolute leading role were given to the same principal actor, who again portrayed a prince–king–player who is alternately elevated to power and cast down from it, only this time in a contemporary – though covertly historical – work by a Hungarian author.

Between 1949 and 1953 Miklós Gábor was not only a young star and popular actor of the National Theatre, but also its party secretary, the party's public face, a young and enthusiastic supporter of the left. In 1954, after political and artistic disillusionment and crisis, he broke with Tamás Major's theatre and signed with the Madách. Pártos thus entrusted the leading role to an actor who had once appeared before the entire country as a protégé of those in power – and the fact that he played the cynical but playful, intelligent yet illusionless, deceived and solitary Henry was in itself a matter of politics and topicality. *Hamlet* is killed, but *Henry* remains alive and grows old; he must live with his failures and his mistakes. In 1964, it was likely not only the tart humour and self-irony characteristic of Füst's texts that sounded in Miklós Gábor's voice in the final scene of the production, where Henry flirts with a nun ('Are you Christ's? Good for you'), but also the powerless disillusionment following the crushed revolution of 1956.

Colleagues remember Pártos as an actor-centred director for whom work with the actors was the most important element of directing. On the one hand, he himself had an acting background; on the other, by temperament he worked with empathy and – in contemporary terms – communicated non-violently. Through his instructions he did not prescribe but

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<sup>11</sup> In the possession of the National Theatre History Museum and Institute. Broadcast by Hungarian Radio on 17 and 23 July 1965.

sought to liberate the actor: he held that acting talent is a matter of courage, since the confrontation with oneself is not easy work for the actor, and the director's task is to create a favourable atmosphere for this (Zentai 1996, p. 9).

Discovery is likewise characteristic of his casting: he was the first to give Éva Ruttkai a leading role at the National Theatre; he cast Manyi Kiss as Mother Courage; and it was under his direction that Irén Psota broke through in the mute role of Kattrín. His oeuvre is also indispensable as that of an acting pedagogue: he trained five generations of actors and launched many outstanding talents. Among those in his class were, for example, Vera Venczel, Ilona Béres, Piroska Molnár and Gyula Piróth (later an actor under Gábor Székely). In *The Unhappy Ones*, a year earlier, he cast Ernő Szénási – who had never played leading roles – as Vilmos Húber. It was neither convenience nor the prospect of assured success that guided him when he assigned the role of Henry to the theatre's leading actor. Miklós Gábor, in any case, felt that:

'Géza Pártos is a director suited to me. He likes what I do and lets me work. We agree on something fundamental. In any case, I act better in his productions than either in Major's or in Gellért's' (Gábor 1995, p. 272).

Pártos, for his part, later stated the following about Gábor:

'Miklós [Gábor] has a particular talent for creating a stage composition out of the personal dramatic motifs of his life. In the course of rehearsals I sought to leave intact the interactions between his personality and the role he played' (Gyárfás 1992, pp. 18–19).

'Even his leg plays a leading role, to say nothing of his head, face and hand' – writes one review in praise of Miklós Gábor, offering a detailed micro-analysis of the actor's leg,

the very same *Hamlet* leg that, according to the custom of the period, the Madách audience had recently admired in tights (Bernáth 1964a, p. 2). This also makes it clear that the production sought to follow playfully and dynamically the psychological–poetic visions and situations of Füst’s text. Plotlessness (for which the play’s earliest critics reproached it) demands considerable stage action, and Pártos was drawn to movement. The very fact that extras, a choreographer and a composer were employed likewise suggests that the production made use of dynamically poetic, spectacular and theatrical images and transitions, and a reading of the reviews makes it strikingly clear that the drama’s poetic images and traits appeared not only in the artistic delivery of the text, but also in scenic innovations and in the compositional refinement of the stage pictures themselves. The image most frequently highlighted by the critics – and probably the most effective in the production – is the final scene of the first act, when the papal curse brings Henry’s revelry with Swabian girls to an end: here the hooded monks entering the stage move their downward-turned torches in rhythm, and Gábor collapses to the ground. One review reproaches Pártos for the theatricality of the scene, judging it insufficiently realistic (Vajda 1964, p. 49). It nevertheless considers appropriate the vivid, forceful crowd scene that depicts the young Henry’s ‘fascist’ seizure of power at the end of the second act.

*Acting. Miklós Gábor and the Company*

According to several observers – including Gábor himself – Henry was perhaps Miklós Gábor’s greatest performance (Gábor 2003, p. 112). Since he played it in repertory together with the previously premiered and revived *Hamlet*, from the perspective of reception history his *Hamlet* became the basis and continuation of his Henry, and the reviews indeed compare the two and recall *Hamlet* (Ungvári 1964, p. 4). According to the surviving photographs, the portrayal of Henry operates

with more extreme, playful gestures and grimaces, and with an unrestrained and daring acting arsenal. One reason may be that the figure is historically 'closer', less classical; another is that Henry is, by every indication, a more fallible, guilt-ridden and comic role than Hamlet, since he is not a hero but an unfathomable actor–player, a child–tyrant, at once attractive and repellent (Gyárfás 1964, p. 8).

And the director's presence also accounts for the freer, more expansive acting style: Géza Pártos allows room for actors' inventions, such as Henry's conspiratorial wink to his followers (and to the audience) at the moment of enforced humiliation (Gábor 2003, p. 112). Miklós Gábor receives the role of Henry after Hamlet and the melancholy Jacques, that is, after a Shakespearean hero and a Shakespearean fool, and Henry is the two combined (Radnóti 1989, p. 62). He begins the performance as a twenty-five-year-old prince and ends it as a fallen, fifty-year-old prisoner. He himself writes:

*'Henry.* It may have been the best thing I ever did on stage. It was a tremendous success. But there was something wrong with it too, a little trickery. It was not only I who was at my best then; the production (Géza Pártos) also far surpassed everything else at the time – the sets, the costumes, most of the performers, and so on. What faces, voices, figures: Pécsi, Gyenge, Szénási, Körmendi, each appearing only for a moment, yet each full of significance' (Gábor 2003, p. 112 / Gábor 2000, p. 1632).

Gábor's recollection indicates that although Henry is the protagonist of the play and all reviews deal primarily and at length with his performance, Pártos nevertheless succeeded in creating an ensemble performance; Henry did not become a solo tour de force (which is one of the risks inherent in dramas and productions of similar structure). This cannot, of course, be verified retrospectively, yet for two reasons it is highly prob-

able that this was the case. One reason is that Füst's unconventional, tense dialogues filled with ellipses – in which he often 'fuses pathos and humour, elevation and sarcasm, debasement and exaltation within a single sentence' (Radnóti 1989, p. 62) – demand rigorous and serious directorial analysis; without this they are simply not intelligible. There is no indication whatsoever that anything in the story remained incomprehensible to spectators or to the broader public. The second reason is that the reflections highlight the crowd scenes and designate them as memorable, which implies that in these moments the performers' cohesion may have surpassed the average standard of productions seen at the Madách.

Alongside Gábor, the critics also single out for praise the performances of Andor Ajtay as Archbishop Hanno and Sándor Pécsi as Hohenstaufen. They are unanimous in judging that the young actors – for example Ferenc B. Deák and Lajos Cs. Németh, who played Henry's sons – are unable to speak the verse-poetic text sufficiently well; the difference between them and the members of the older generation is clearly audible (e.g. Nagy 1964, p. 9). Almost every critic censures Edit Domján's performance in the role of Henry's wife, although they also hold the author responsible for this (e.g. Vajda 1964, p. 49).

### *Stage Design and Sound. Wood and Gemstone*

The photographs and reviews suggest that the production placed great emphasis on rendering the poetry of the text as vividly as possible on stage – on visuality, on atmosphere, and above all on its sudden and extreme shifts.

Pártos worked with designers who in Hungary belonged to the second generation of the profession. They had not yet learned stage design in a fully institutionalised manner, but from practising designer-masters, and they regarded theatrical design as an artistic vocation.

The principal material of the set designed by Lajos Jánosa is wood, which also alludes to the Shakespearean stage. The empty, puritanical space with a boarded floor – the ground is raised in the centre, a small stage upon the main stage – is bounded on all sides by walls or painted curtains. A wide balcony is visible at the back, centre. This empty stage creates the possibility for moving a large apparatus and for rapid changes, while at the same time signalling the confinement of a prison cell. And it provides the opportunity for the text, for speech, to create what the spectator must imagine as the world the audience must imagine behind the scenic frame (cf. Gyárfás 1964, p. 8).

Erzsébet Mialkovszky's costumes, although they clearly allude to early medieval painting, likewise follow the principle of the production in aiming not at historical reality or naturalism but at theatrical–sensual poetry. The surviving drawings and photographs are black and white, but according to the testimony of the reviews the production must have employed striking, colourful costumes – in darker, deeper tones – ‘from patinated green to glowing ruby red’ (Szombathelyi 1964, p. 2). There is a scene in the play in which gemstones are scattered, and the designer may have drawn inspiration from this when creating Henry's crown, enormous, angular and almost fairy-tale-like, covered with huge gemstones. Gábor wears a long, patterned robe as his king's costume, and a cowl in the scene of penance. The visual vividness of the production is also attested by a review praising Miklós Gábor's acting by comparing his performance to a gemstone (Nagy 1964, p. 7). The expressive use of lighting can also be discerned only indirectly, from the descriptions: several commentators single out the already mentioned end of the first act, one of the climaxes of the production. In the midst of merry revelry with the Swabian girls, the hooded monks, proclaiming the papal curse, arrive; the atmosphere of the scene changes abruptly and is transformed into its opposite, and in this transformation the role of the lighting design

is highly significant: at the end of the scene only the light of torches illuminates the stage.

The descriptions do not report on the music, and the playbill lists no musician, although it does list a chorus: a children's choir participated in the production. And King Henry himself broke into song in the carousel scene: he sang Milán Füst's poem *Katonák éneke* (Soldiers' Song) (Vajda 1964, p. 49).

### *Impact and Posterity. Gábor Székely and His Students*

Not only did the reviews report on the premiere, but collective memory also records the joy of the elderly Milán Füst in the theatre box as an event (Ungvári 1964, p. 4).

The critics and the audience unequivocally celebrated the production; it is unknown why it was withdrawn from the Madách Theatre's programme relatively soon, after fewer than fifty performances (Gábor 2000, p. 1177). The press spoke of 'tabloid success' and of foreign interest (Lukácsy 1966, p. 10), yet the theatre did not carry the production over into the following season.

Four years after *King Henry IV*, Pártos also staged the third Füst drama, *Catullus*, the reception of which was more mixed – the critics were startled, for instance, by the contemporary costumes, the jackets and miniskirts – but in the same year he defected, thereby effectively erasing himself from Hungarian theatrical memory. He lived first in London, and according to legend initially worked in a bar in Soho, where he directed Gorky's *Kispolgárok* (The Philistines) as a lunchtime performance (Lengyel 2009, p. 57). He soon found work in his profession, however, when the Royal Shakespeare Company's college, Guildhall, employed him as a teacher. He later moved to Israel, where he directed (including Hungarian works, such as István Örkény's *Tóték* [The Tót Family]), and from 1981 to 1995 he ran his own acting studio in Haifa. In 1985 he returned to Hungary at the invitation of the theatre in Kapos-

vár, and in the 1990s he returned permanently, held workshops and directed individual productions.

After Pártos, the next director to stage a drama by Füst was Gábor Székely, a representative of the subsequent generation of directors. Székely first directed *The Unhappy Ones* in 1978 in Szolnok, then a second time in 1982 at the Katona József Theatre,<sup>12</sup> and *Catullus* likewise there in 1987. (A television recording of *The Unhappy Ones* was also made in 1983.)<sup>13</sup> *The Unhappy Ones* in Szolnok made it indisputable that Milán Füst's drama belongs among the greatest works of Hungarian dramatic literature (Nánay 1982, p. 4), and thus also among the theatre's greatest possibilities. István Nánay characterises Gábor Székely's theatre as a consolatory theatre that is 'obstinately committed and profoundly humanist', precisely because of its confrontation with uncomfortable truths and its rigorous analysis (Nánay 1982, p. 5). Between 1990 and 2020, Székely taught directing classes at the Academy of Theatre and Film, and his students prepared for the profession by analysing *The Unhappy Ones*, which they continue to stage to this day in ever new interpretations: since then it has had a further sixteen premieres, the most recent in 2021, and Viktor Bodó – one of Székely's students – is preparing yet another for 2025. *Catullus* has been staged three more times in Hungarian-speaking regions since 1987, most recently in 2019.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, *King Henry IV* was not staged by Gábor Székely. This may be the reason why the drama has once again – for roughly twenty years – fallen out of the performance tradition. After Pártos's production, its next staging was by its former protagonist, Miklós Gábor, who staged *Henry* in 1979 at the Várszínház

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<sup>12</sup> Although it was originally directed at the National Theatre, at that time the Katona József Theatre separated from the National's company, and the production continued to be performed there.

<sup>13</sup> *Boldogtalanok*, 1984 television film. Directed by Gábor Székely. Hungary.

<sup>14</sup> The play was first staged with Tamás Fodor's amateur company, prior to Székely's production. Budapest: Aquincum, Cultural House of the Budapest Gas Works. [Director: Tamás Fodor.]

with Péter Andorai in the title role. In 1980 it was adapted into a television film directed by Károly Esztergályos, with László Gállfy as Henry. It was subsequently staged in Miskolc in 1985 by István Szőke with Péter Bregyán, then in 1994 by István Iglódi with András Kozák, and in 1998 by Géza Tordy with Attila Kaszás in the role of Henry. None of these productions, however, became particularly significant from the perspective of reception history, and after 1998 the drama was not performed again anywhere.

Gábor Székely, however, is the heir to the Pártos tradition of directing not only with respect to the author. Although there was no direct connection between them, Székely graduated in 1968 from the directing programme in Tamás Major's class: he could have seen Pártos's productions and heard how he taught. Oral accounts from students and colleagues who remember him indicate that in matters of directorial ethics Székely articulated views very similar to those of Pártos. He likewise regards it as the director's responsibility if an actor is not good in a production ('there are no untalented actors, only untalented directors', *Kulisszatitkok* 1993, 22), and he also professes that 'success is not a measure' (cf. Podrohányi 2002, p. 17). Faith in the production and in the actor's personality and personal presence can also be understood as a directorial principle that both upheld.

### *Details of the Production*

*Title: King Henry IV. Date of Premiere: 30 October 1964. Venue: Madách Theatre. Director: Géza Pártos. Playwright: Milán Füst. Incidental music: Rezső Sugár. Set designer: Lajos Jánosa. Costume designer: Erzsébet Mialkovszky. Choreography: Daisy Boschán. Cast: Miklós Gábor (Henry IV, King of Germany); Edit Domján (Bertha, Henry's wife); Ferenc B. Deák (Conrad, the king's son); Lajos Cs. Németh (Young Henry, the king's son); Andor Ajtay (Hanno, Archbishop of Cologne); Sándor Pécsi (Frederick of Hohenstaufen); István Avar (Matthew,*

later Count Drachenstein); Éva Kelemen (Theresa, nurse); László Ujlaky (David, physician); Katalin Gombos (Mathildis, a Swabian girl); Árpád Gyenge (Philip, father of Mathildis); János Bányai (Engelbert, uncle of Mathildis); Ernő Szénási, János Körmendi (Ulrich); Mária Rákosi (Anna, nun); Tibor Bodor (Siegfried, Archbishop of Mainz); Endre Tallós (Equerry); Gyula Bay (first officer to Young Henry); Árpád Gyenge (Pope Gregory the Great); János Árva (Otto of Nordheim); Sándor Kőmíves (Conrad of the Palatinate); Erzszi Simor (Adela); Lajos Bakay (Louis the Brave); Jenő Szirmai (Gotfried, the hunchback); Lajos Bányai (Engelbert the Soft-hearted); Annie Soltész (First Woman); Ildikó Pádua (Second Woman); Ágnes Lelkes (Third Woman); János Gaál (First Man); Jenő Szirmai (Second Man); László Joó (Third Man); József Vándor (First Reveller); Vilmos Andresz (Second Reveller); Péter Hendel [Huszti] (apprentice) (Third Reveller); Zsuzsa Balogh (apprentice) (Miss Himmeltraud); Jácint Juhász (apprentice) (A Bishop); and also: András Bálint (apprentice), Mária Csomós (apprentice), Sándor Csikós (apprentice), Virág Darab [Dőry] (apprentice), László Horváth (apprentice), János Harkányi (apprentice), Ilona Kormos (apprentice), András Kozák (apprentice), Lajos Kránitz (apprentice), Tihamér Lázár, István Máté, Éva Vadnai, Ferenc Szabó, Éva Szabó (apprentice), Gyula Szersén (apprentice), Tibor Szilágyi (apprentice). With the participation of the children's choir of the Lorántffy Zsuzsanna General Music School, conducted by Gábor Friss.

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Tamás Oláh

‘MY FATE BECAME THE FATE  
OF THE VILLAGE AND ITS PEOPLE’  
BÉLA GARAY: *MUSKÁTLI* (GERANIUM), 1940

Abstract: The authorities of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia did not permit the operation of professional minority-language theatre companies in the country between the two world wars. In 1924, Béla Garay – one of the most significant Hungarian actors and directors from Vojvodina in the twentieth century – was called home from Hungary to his native city, Subotica, to take over the leadership of the long-established amateur acting company of the local Népkör. In 1940, he directed the world premiere of Imre Cziráky Fetter’s folk play *Muskátlí* (Geranium), which is set in a contemporary environment in an unnamed Hungarian village in Vojvodina. With the amateurs of the Népkör, Béla Garay sought to create, through his own resources and on the basis of their own traditions, an authentic Hungarian theatrical language of Vojvodina that did not rely on the devices of the previously popular musical theatres of Budapest, but instead drew on motifs familiar to the rural communities depicted in folk plays. Abandoning the culturally alien worldview of operettas – influenced by the productions of the Moscow Art Theatre – he turned towards stage realism. Following its premiere, the play achieved remarkable success. The Subotica production reached fifty performances, and it was staged altogether approximately one hundred and forty times across Vojvodina by various amateur companies.

*The Context of the Production in Theatre Culture*

At the end of the First World War, the advancing Serbian army occupied the territory of present-day Vojvodina up to the demarcation lines.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the resolutions adopted at the Great National Assembly held in Novi Sad on 25 November 1918, the Slavic political forces henceforth regarded as a *fait accompli* that the influence of the Kingdom of Hungary had ceased in the province, which ultimately joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes established on 1 December (Gulyás 2018, p. 72).

The more than 360,000-strong Hungarian population remaining in Vojvodina consisted overwhelmingly of politically untrained small artisans and agricultural labourers. The majority of the latter were rendered existentially impossible when, as a consequence of the ‘social’ agrarian reform announced in February 1919, the lands of medium and large estate owners of non-Slavic nationality were confiscated by the state and redistributed only for one-year lease periods among applicants who could be exclusively of South Slavic nationality. As a result, the proportion of landless Hungarians rose above seventy per cent. The wages of day labourers, servants, and cotters did not reach even one third of the earnings of industrial workers, and they were entitled to no state-supported healthcare whatsoever (Mák 2013, p. 35).

If all this were not enough, the Hungarian minority of Vojvodina also became culturally detached from post-Trianon Hungary. Fleeing the Serbian troops, masses of Hungarian officials and intellectuals left their homes immediately before the end of the war. Béla Garay, one of the most significant Hungarian theatremakers of Vojvodina in the twentieth century – the director and leading actor of *Muskátlí*, discussed later

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this study, the author received support from National Research, Development and Innovation Office – NKFIH (PD 146626). Project number: 32044.

– records that thereafter in the province ‘not a single writer remaine[d], [...] virtually every professional actor le[ft], every musician le[ft], most of the teachers le[ft], and [...] there did not remain in large numbers a Hungarian population consecrated by traditions and ancient culture such as in Transylvania or Upper Hungary’ (Garay 1943, p. 233).

It is unsurprising that the first steps of communal self-organisation were taken precisely by the exceptionally small intellectual stratum of self-employed lawyers, physicians, teachers, and clerics, both in towns and in villages. Local cultural associations and acting groups were revived, and they played an invaluable role in the self-identification of the Hungarian minority, even assuming the functions of repertory theatre companies.

The authorities of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (from 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) did not permit the operation of professional minority-language theatres in the country after the Great War, despite repeated petitions, because they regarded them as dangerous for the integration of the Hungarian- and German-speaking population. Although the restriction was at times criticised even by representatives of the South Slavic nations, the prohibition remained in force for twenty-three years, until the next change of sovereignty (Dévavári 2020, p. 45).

However, it was precisely this situation that mobilised genuine masses in amateur theatricals. It became an intense experience and cultural practice binding together the Hungarian community of Vojvodina. *Bokrëta* (Bouquet), the almanac published privately in 1940 documenting the interwar period, records the work of nearly 300 amateur ensembles in more than 100 Vojvodinian localities and reports on approximately 1,200 premieres. From the volume, richly illustrated with group photographs and portraits, it emerges that during these two decades the most popular works remained the turn-of-the-century repertoire hits: musical farces, operettas, musical plays, and folk plays. Although high-quality texts of these genres that

have since become classics were regularly programmed – such as *Sárga csikó* (The Yellow Foal), *A falu rossza* (The Rogue of the Village), *A bőregér* (The Bat), *János vitéz* (John the Valiant), and *Marica grófnő* (Countess Maritza) – the stages of amateur groups were virtually inundated with productions that were feather-light and contained not even a trace of social reflection (Farkas Frigyesné Lichtneckert 1940).

In the first years of post-war self-organisation, Béla Garay was not in Vojvodina. Although he returned from the front to Subotica<sup>2</sup> for a brief period in 1917, he too emigrated to Hungary in the autumn of 1918 (Garay 1971, p. 142). Until 1921, he performed alternately with various companies in the Alföld theatre district, after which he assumed the leadership of the Transdanubian theatre district, where he directed a company of thirty members and also edited and published theatre periodicals in Dombóvár and Zalaegerszeg. From 1921 to 1924 he was a member of the National Theatre of Pécs, where he played Adam in *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man), the title role in *Bánk bán* (Bánk the Palatine), and Armand Duval in *The Lady of the Camellias*. At the beginning of 1924, however, ‘a delegation of the cultural leaders of Subotica’, Dr Dénes Strelitzky and Géza Nojcsek, president of the Subotica Népkör,<sup>3</sup> appeared unexpectedly at his flat in Pécs and informed him that the institution’s new great hall would soon be completed, where they intended to present productions performed by amateurs. It emerged that they had chosen Garay to lead ‘this unofficial theatre of the Hungarians of Vojvodina’, as a native of the city whose return the authorities could not object to.

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<sup>2</sup> Garay served for two years as an actor in the army of the Monarchy, first for a time in the Front Theatre, then in the theatre of the Office for Disabled Veterans.

<sup>3</sup> The Népkör (People’s Circle) of Subotica was temporarily renamed *Magyar Olvasókör* (Hungarian Reading Circle) owing to a contemporary law, and it still bore this name at the time of the premiere of *Muskátlí*. In my study, however, I consistently use the institution’s original designation, established in 1871 and still in use.

Together with his wife, the actress Sári Péntzes, Garay decided to return home (Garay 1970, p. 78). He was not yet twenty-seven years old.

As the cultural historian Katalin Káich writes, the actors of the interwar period ‘transplant[ed] the theatrical traditions of erstwhile genteel Hungary in order to shape the theatrical culture of the Hungarian national minority, extending them also to those strata (the working class and the rural population) whose theatrical taste was only [then in the process of] developing’ (Káich 1978, p. 96). However, this practice in many cases led to an unusual aesthetic tension. János Herceg, the writer, observes that he ‘cannot imagine a more pitiful sight than a simple, healthy Hungarian peasant girl dancing the tango on stage with the “baron”’ (Herceg 1939, p. 347). Many intellectuals of the period shared Herceg’s view. The returning Béla Garay likewise held that ‘it must not be permitted for all the music-hall indecencies of the great foreign cities’ theatres to gain citizenship on the Hungarian stages of Vojvodina’ (Garay 1935, p. 452).

From 1924 to 1941 Garay worked as director and actor of the Népkör. In these years they were at times able to stage plays with as many as fifty performers, and the amateurs placed great trust in the professional director, who quite literally mobilised masses.

### *Dramatic Text, Dramaturgy*

Thanks to the ‘stories drawn from folk life’ of Imre Cziráky Fetter, the cantorial teacher of Bečej, he had become by the late 1930s a popular, multi-volume short-story writer of the Hungarian community of Vojvodina, who also worked as a cultural organiser and amateur actor (Garay 2012, p. 99). At the end of 1939, the newspapers reported enthusiastically on the forthcoming Subotica world premiere of his first drama, the three-act folk play *Muskátli* (Geranium). A few years before the premiere, Garay went so far as to state that the amateur

stages ‘must be brought back to the right path and compelled to perform literary works that have no morally corrosive effect on the youth and through which our rural brethren can develop in taste and culture’ (Garay 1935, p. 453). Contemporaries regarded *Muskátli* as the first Hungarian play from Vojvodina that ‘deals in a profound manner with the inner, spiritual problems of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia’ (Frigyesné Lichtneckert 1940, p. 20).

The plot of Imre Cziráky Fetter’s drama unfolds around two parallel amateur theatre rehearsal processes.<sup>4</sup> Ninó Beregh, the pharmacist’s assistant, has been practising for three months in an unnamed Vojvodinian village. By her own admission she is a ‘modern girl’ for whom the village’s problems are of interest solely ‘as a social topic’, yet as a born gentlewoman she has ‘no emotional community’ with the peasantry and sees in them merely a ‘mass worth studying’ (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 2). When she learns that the local merchant and amateur director, István Kemény, is planning to stage the folk play *A betyár kendője* (The Outlaw’s Kerchief) with his amateur troupe, she resolves to oppose the ‘lying, geranium-scented romanticism’ which, in her view, ‘is tenderly nurtured in the countryside’ (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 11). She comes into open conflict with Kemény, who turns out himself to be of urban origin and originally trained as a lawyer, but whose career was broken by the First World War. Yet when ‘the town deceived [him]’, the peasant community accepted him, so that ‘the fate of the village and its people became [his] fate’ (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 11). Ninó’s aim is to ‘reshape’ every peasant according to urban models; to this end, she orders from the town the libretto of the ‘dance operetta’ *Cicimuci grófnő* (Countess Cicimuci) and recruits her own troupe. While Kemény’s rehearsals progress

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<sup>4</sup> The drama was never published in print. The author sent it personally to the interested acting companies. The prompter’s copy of the Bačka Topola production, likewise premiered in 1940, was discovered in 2004 by the local historian Gábor Virág.

excellently, since the village farmhands and poor peasants have to play roles essentially identical to their own lived reality, Ninó's amateurs are unable to embody credibly the margraves and baronesses who appear in the operetta, and the attempt soon ends in failure.

Naturally, in accordance with the generic requirements of the folk play, the story ends happily. It is revealed beyond any doubt that Ninó is of rural origin and is in fact the granddaughter of one of the drama's secondary characters, János Mejjes Turuc; her mother had fled from home in the turmoil of the First World War, in the heat of a family dispute. The girl symbolically puts on her mother's old clothes and recognises: 'We did not understand, indeed could not have understood each other from the great distance of mutual indifference! This was my tragedy and this is the tragedy of my people: Gentlefolk... and peasants... Yet how much more beautiful it would sound... Brothers...' (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 56). The denouement therefore not only 'celebrates the triumph of the morality of the world order proclaimed as firm' (Kolta 1991, p. 53), but also emphasises the possibility of cooperation among the social strata of the Hungarians of Vojvodina.

### *Staging*

Although no detailed description or video recording has survived of any of Béla Garay's productions – including the later works created with professional actors – it can be taken as certain that over the course of his long career, spanning nearly fifty years, his directorial idiom underwent numerous modifications.<sup>5</sup> In 1918 – five years after obtaining his performing licence – Garay took his directing examination in the Alföld theatre district. In the 1920s and 1930s he primarily directed musical productions with the amateurs of the Subotica Nép-

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<sup>5</sup> Béla Garay retired in 1954, but continued to undertake directing engagements until 1964.

kör. In these productions he presumably continued to cultivate the formal solutions of the travelling companies' pre-First World War performances. However, his volume *Színjátékosok kézikönyve* (Handbook for Actors), published in 1950, already opens with a Stanislavski motto, and the guidance articulated in its pages echoes the ideas of the Russian master. Garay saw with his own eyes the (psychological) realist acting of the Moscow Art Theatre (Hudojestvenny Teatr) actors, since an émigré formation of the company gave guest performances in Subotica and Novi Sad on four occasions between the two wars (1924, 1925, 1930, 1939) with their seminal productions, which they presented over several consecutive evenings in the Vojvodinian cities.

It may be assumed that Garay staged Imre Cziráky Fetter's text, set in a contemporary rural environment, inspired by the directorial and acting solutions he had seen in the Stanislavski productions. In his view,

[t]he actor must never forget that his work is not a simple copying of life, but a task in which, by employing his artistic creative capacity, he selects those elements taken from life that are necessary for bringing to life the character conceived by the author. The actor achieves this only when the audience senses real, actual life in the actor's movements and speech. He must fill the character to be played with his own feelings, so that he can say: the character lives in me, and I live in the character' (Garay 1950, p. 23).

Garay regarded *Muskátlí* as a 'propagandistic play, but not an offensive one' (Garay 2012, p. 99). Although its story shows the achievements of urban culture suffering a humiliating failure in the countryside, on the basis of the contemporary social conditions it can nevertheless be stated that the real tension was not located between village and town. (Although Subotica was the third largest city of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and

the centre of Hungarian culture in Vojvodina, its peripheral position and the high proportion of its agrarian population make it unsurprising that even in 1953 the physician-writer Artúr Munk called it ‘the largest village in the world’) (Munk 1953, p. 1). The issue at stake was whether the Hungarians of Vojvodina would succeed in building and consolidating their own culture independently of Hungarian – above all Budapest – influences. Together with the amateurs of the Nép kör, Béla Garay sought, through his own resources and on the basis of their own traditions, to create an authentic Vojvodinian Hungarian theatrical language that did not employ the devices of the metropolitan musical theatres, but instead drew on motifs familiar to the rural communities represented in the folk plays. Thus not only Vojvodinian Hungarian culture, but also the choice of themes and the formal idiom of theatrical productions became a cardinal question of directing. Leaving behind the glitteringly false and contextually alien worldview of the operettas – under the influence of the Moscow Art Theatre’s productions – he turned towards realism. As he later described, a ‘play consists of innumerable interlinked internal (psychological) and external (physical) actions. [...] from the correct interconnection of the actions is born the illusion-generating, realistic representation’ (Garay 1950, p. 11). According to the critic reporting on the premiere of *Muskátli*, Garay’s ‘directorial work is perfect and exemplary’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11).

### *Acting*

In the handbook published ten years after the premiere, in which he summarised the lessons of his many years of directing practice, Béla Garay likewise urged amateur actors to strive for naturalness. For example, he pointed out that in everyday life ‘we employ our muscles only to the extent required for the realisation of our action’, and that the same principle should be followed on stage (Garay 1950, p. 19). Furthermore, in his

view the desirable state would be for the actor to ‘forget’ that he is performing before spectators (Garay 1950, p. 20).

Nevertheless, he emphasised that stage presence, which may appear everyday, is in fact the result of a series of precisely planned acting decisions. ‘From among the movements that serve to convey the internal actions externally, the actor must select those of greatest importance that are absolutely necessary for the correct realisation of the individual’s character and of the fundamental idea of the play’ (Garay 1950, p. 19). In addition, ‘casual, everyday speech must be avoided’ on stage (Garay 1950, p. 18). Yet despite this, ‘the emphases must be unobtrusive, almost natural’ (Garay 1950, p. 20). These aims presumably characterised the cast of *Muskátli* as well.

Garay listed several dozen gestures, poses, and emotional states in his book, for the precise and clearly legible execution of which he offered concrete advice (Garay 1950, p. 37–48). For example, the actor must ensure ‘that his head movements are always measured and calm. A raised head signifies courage and calmness, whereas a head inclined towards the ground signifies shame, fear, or reflection’ (Garay 1950, p. 20). On the basis of the volume, it appears readily reconstructible that when, in *Muskátli*, the assistant director Kornél Koczy kisses Ninó’s hand, ‘the man raises the woman’s hand to his own lips, bows his head, and kisses the woman’s hand at length, while constantly looking into the woman’s eyes’ (Garay 1950, p. 40). Garay, moreover, declared with regard to kisses that they must never be ‘indicated’ on stage: ‘Embraces and kisses must always appear lifelike. Anyone who is ashamed to embrace or kiss on stage, or who sees immorality or sin in it, would do better not to enter the acting profession, nor to engage in amateur theatre’ (Garay 1950, p. 43).

From the few-word assessments in the sole analytical review of the production, it is clear that in the early 1940s the contemporary critic expected everydayness and performance free of exaggeration even in the comic roles, instead of the more stylised, more extreme acting style characteristic of op-

erettas and farces. In the case of Béla Garay, who also played the male lead, ‘naturalness’ and ‘simplicity’ appear as virtues (h. k. 1940, p. 11). It was a significant creative gesture that Garay, returning from Pécs, assigned to himself the role of István Kemény, the urban intellectual who knows well the cultural needs of the rural people and finds reassurance among them. Ninó Beregh, the pharmacist’s assistant, was played by Mancí Kelemen, previously seen chiefly in soubrette roles. Her most noteworthy merit likewise is that she is ‘perfectly lifelike’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). The performance of Mihály Vincze, who played János Mejjes Turuc, is described as ‘human, true, and moving’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). Mancí B. Török, who had strengthened the company since 1925 and was known for her varied roles, and who played the widow Mrs Szabó, ‘allows the village to be felt in every word and every movement’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). Ferenc Jandek ‘does not overdo’ the role of Kornél Koczy, the chief accountant, a ‘declassé village gentleman’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). Certain acting choices of Pál Kőhalmi, who played the farmhand Mihály Ballangó, were, however, criticised by the reviewer of the daily *Napló*, precisely because instead of realistic characterisation he came ‘almost to the verge of caricature’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11).

The aspiration towards realistic acting can also be discerned in Imre Cziráky Fetter’s instructions. Concerning the scene that thematises the dance rehearsal of Ninó’s operetta, he states that it must be parodistic, but must not lapse into exaggeration (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 34). Accordingly, in the scenes depicting the vicissitudes of the operetta rehearsals, the Subotica amateurs playing the village amateur actors sing – indeed bellow – the songs with deliberate affectation. By contrast, the solo and duet numbers of Ninó and István Kemény, embedded within the plot, are performed at impeccable technical standards on Béla Garay’s stage.

According to the contemporary review, the performers dance a *palotás*, taught to them by Juliska Landau (h. k. 1940, p. 11). This is consistent with Cziráky Fetter’s instructions, which

state that István Kemény's troupe, rehearsing a folk play, performs a *palotás* in folk costume. Although in present-day usage *palotás* denotes the staged variant of a nineteenth-century ballroom dance, it is known that in certain regions the most familiar folk-style art dance, 'the slow couple *csárdás*', was often also called *palotás* (Ortutay 1981, p. 170). It is plausible that this is the case here as well. Both the *csárdás* performed by István Kemény's ensemble and the production's aforementioned 'modern dance caricature' achieved unreserved success (h. k. 1940, p. 11).

### *Stage Design and Sound*

According to Béla Garay's conception, the production must 'in addition to its verisimilitude, [conform] pictorially as well to the laws of the stage and to the realistic style of the play' (Garay 1950, p. 12). The *Subotica* premiere – in harmony with the drama – presents only two locations. The greater part of the action takes place in the room rented by Ninó, which, according to the author's description, is 'a simply and tastefully furnished room of a village peasant dwelling. [...] The furniture is simple, rustic, peasant-like, yet a certain touch of taste nevertheless reveals that an educated girl lives in the room. In the window, a geranium. In the corner, a washstand with toilet-ries. At the side, two small chairs with a flower-table' (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 1). According to the sole known photograph of the *Subotica* premiere staged at the Népkör, the creators followed the author's conception. The space is realistic in every respect. In front of the rear set wall, whitewashed, stands an elegantly decorated glass-fronted cupboard. On its shelves is a modest dinner service, and on its top a vase with a dried bouquet. Religious genre pictures hang on the wall. On the light-coloured wooden stage, rag-woven runners are spread out. On the right stands a square wooden table covered with a colourful cloth, accompanied by three sturdy wooden chairs whose backs are painted with lilies. On the right there is a sim-

ple wooden door leading to the street. Next to it is a window covered with a white lace curtain.

After the first scene of the second act – that is, strikingly not during the interval but behind a closed curtain – the production changed location so that the audience might gain an insight into the splendidly progressing rehearsal process of István Kemény's troupe. The setting of this scene is a 'village tavern room. At the back, a clumsy little stage. [...] In front of the platform sits Kemény, attentively watching those dancing on it. [...] When the curtain rises, the music is already playing and the dancers are performing some characteristic Hungarian dance, e.g. a *palotás*. The three couples are in Hungarian folk costume' (Cziráky Fetter 1939, pp. 37–38).

Costumes fulfil a particularly important function in the production, since the individual characters demonstrate their cultural identity through their attire. Part of Ninó's programme – namely, to elevate the peasants and 'gentrify' them – is that she persuades her landlord's daughter, Máríka, to exchange her Bácska village dress for urban clothing, to wear make-up, and to style her hair according to urban fashion. The girl's appearance, stepping on stage in garments alien to her and mismatched in poor taste, becomes a source of humour.

The situation is similar in the operetta rehearsals. The farmhand who, in Ninó's staging, plays the margrave appears on stage with enormous cuffs, a high collar around his neck, and an oversized bow tie. He wears a morning coat and spreads his fingers apart, otherwise the cuff would fall off his arm. One of the peasant girls wears 'some black dress suited to an elderly lady, but with a strikingly daring décolletage. She is grotesquely made up and powdered' (Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 30).

In the final part of the production there is another change of costume. When Ninó learns that she herself is of rural origin, she puts on her mother's former folk dress and appears before István Kemény, who declares his love for her.

In Garay's production, live music was presumably performed by the Nép kör's amateur orchestra. The drama con-

tains relatively few musical numbers, especially considering that contemporaries referred to it as a folk play. The lyrics and music of these pieces were likewise written by Imre Cziráky Fetter. The closing song of the production – constructed according to a typical Hungarian *nóta* structure – achieved unreversed success. So much so that shortly after the premiere the local newspaper *Alföld* published its text and score in order to ‘delight its readers’ (Virág 2004, p. 55). The contemporary critic observed that ‘this song, amid our modest circumstances, will perhaps become the song of the Hungarians of Yugoslavia. It won hearts and it won ears. At the first hearing the audience hummed it together with the singers, this song that is the final resonance of the entire play’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). Although the production ends with the failure of embedding ‘genteel’ culture in the countryside, the stanza sung by Béla Garay already urges acceptance and cooperation:

‘What are we, what are we, but a drop in the sea,  
A lonely, orphaned tree in the vast wilderness?  
Let us therefore bend together in fair accord,  
Gentlefolk and peasant: hand in hand,  
One fate, one heart, one soul...  
Let us love one another, brothers’  
(Cziráky Fetter 1939, p. 56)!

### *Impact and Posterity*

The premiere of Imre Cziráky Fetter’s drama was a theatre-historical event, for it was the first occasion on which a contemporary work by a Vojvodinian Hungarian author was programmed at the Nép Kör of Subotica (Garay 2012, p. 98). After every act the writer was ‘called before the curtain by enthusiastic applause’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11). Following its world premiere, the play embarked on a veritable triumphal march. The Subotica version reached fifty performances, and within three years it was staged approximately one hundred and forty times

across Vojvodina by various amateur companies (sz. n. 1943, p. 4). The productions – with a pronounced pedagogical intent, as the contemporary critic puts it, with ‘honest propaganda’ (h. k. 1940, p. 11) – proclaimed to the broadest social strata that, instead of the uncritical adoption of the achievements of urban culture – which in this case anachronistically means both the pre-Trianon and post-Trianon achievements of Hungarian culture – the formation of local and regional identity is the guarantee of the minority community’s survival, cooperation, and participation in society as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Before the Hungarian-speaking population of Vojvodina could make this conception of cultural identity its own – a conception that had been taking shape for a long time, practically since the end of the First World War – the Second World War broke out. In 1941 much of the province was reannexed to Hungary, and within the framework of the celebrations organised on this occasion not only did Miklós Horthy visit Subotica, but on 20 May the building of the Subotica Municipal Theatre also reopened its doors. (The overture to Mihály Eisemann’s operetta *Tokaji aszú* was conducted by the composer himself, and the leading role was played by Sári Fedák.) The national ideal propagated by the Horthy government – proclaiming the unity of universal Hungarianness and appearing in the productions staged in the region – briefly rearranged the self-identificatory structures of the Hungarians of Vojvodina, but with the arrival of the Yugoslav partisans and the Soviet troops in 1944 it quickly became clear that the community would once again be compelled to build its national minority

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that in his *Népkör* monograph, completed in 1971 but published only in 2012, Garay states that the lesson of Cziráky’s play is that ‘if townspeople wish to realise something in a village, the villagers should not look askance at them’. Yet the text of the drama asserts precisely the opposite (Garay 2012, p. 99). It is likely that the categories of town and village underwent a fundamental reinterpretation in the Vojvodinian Hungarian context in the decades following the premiere.

identity on new foundations. Imre Cziráky Fetter's drama was never performed again.

### *Details of the Production*

*Title: Muskátlí. Date of Premiere:* 6 January 1940. *Venue:* Nép-kör (Hungarian Reading Circle), Szabadka (Subotica). *Director:* Béla Garay. *Playwright:* Imre Cziráky Fetter. *Dance instruction:* Juliska Landau. *Company:* Ensemble of the Nép-kör (Hungarian Reading Circle). *Cast:* Mancsi Kelemen (Ninó Beregh), Béla Garay (István Kemény), Mihály Vincze (János Mejjes Turuc), Mancsi B. Török (Mrs Szabó, widow), Ferenc Jandek (Kornél Koczy), Pál Kőhalmi (Mihály Ballangó), Rózsi Bujdosó (Márika), Mihály Szőczy, Bella Boldis, Magda Weisz, Lili Garay, Dodi Linder, Cunci Mészáros, József Juhász, János Vidra, István Horváth.

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Gabriella Cselle

FORTUNE-TELLERS IN HUNGARIAN-LANGUAGE DRAMA:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF 'GYPSY' WOMEN FROM THE  
NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY

Abstract: The study of the representation of Romani people by the majority society in Hungarian-language drama is a relatively under-researched area. In this study, I will examine 'Gypsy' characters in Hungarian canonical dramas Mihály Vörösmarty's *Csongor és Tünde* and Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája*. I will also show how 'Gypsy' characters appeared in 19th-century dramas and provide context by examining contemporary newspaper articles. I will then examine how these characters are portrayed in different performances in terms of visuals.

The examination of the representation of 'Gypsies' by the majority society in Hungarian-language drama may be regarded as a relatively underexplored research area.<sup>1</sup> The topic is often discussed in conjunction with Roma self-representation. Studies addressing the subject are informative, yet their level of elaboration could still be expanded (see in Hungarian: Beck 2009; Hegedűs 1999; Hegedűs 2007; Szöllőssy 2002). We encounter comprehensive, comparative approaches far less frequently than analyses devoted solely to individual dramas or theatre performances (see in English: Matthews 2018; Retea

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<sup>1</sup> From 2024, the author has been a doctoral candidate at the University of Pécs and a recipient of the University Research Scholarship Programme, which is funded by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation and the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

2021). In the fields of lyric poetry, narrative prose, film, and the visual arts, the topic has already been examined in numerous studies and books, both in Hungarian and in English. For the purposes of my study, Jodie Matthews's 2018 monograph, *The Gypsy Woman: Representation in Literature and Visual Culture*, is of particular importance, as it presents the representations of 'Gypsy' women by the majority society within English culture. In general, however, a comprehensive examination of drama and the stage is still lacking. This absence is also observable in the case of Hungarian dramas that form part of the literary and theatrical canon. The representations of 'Gypsies' in these canonical works are often excluded from analysis: the canonical work is subjected to scholarly scrutiny, yet the 'Gypsies' appearing within it are not. Among the nineteenth-century Hungarian dramas that may be regarded as canonical, only two address the question of the representation of 'Gypsies'. In my analysis, I outline the representations of 'Gypsy' women – primarily fortune-tellers – in nineteenth-century dramas by presenting and briefly analysing works that are still known today alongside those that have since fallen into oblivion. My hypothesis is that, although the representations may be regarded as stereotypical, a nonetheless varied picture can be drawn of 'Gypsy' women as perceived by the majority society.

Three Hungarian-language works from the nineteenth century constitute part of the dramatic and theatrical canon. These are József Katona, *Bánk bán* (Bánk the Palatine, 1819), Mihály Vörösmarty, *Csongor és Tünde* (Csongor and Tünde, 1830), and Imre Madách, *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man, 1859–60). Of the three, only one contains no 'Gypsy' characters. This is *Bánk bán*, which is unsurprising, since it falls outside the sphere of 'Gypsy' representation. In Hungarian-language drama in general, it may be observed that historical plays, or texts approaching this genre, rarely include 'Gypsy' characters. If we proceed to the next drama and read the text, or watch a performance of *Csongor és Tünde*, we would probably assert that this work likewise contains no 'Gypsies'.

Indeed, there are none in the published version of *Csongor és Tünde*. However, according to the critical edition, Vörösmarty originally intended to depict three characters in the drama as 'Gypsies'. These are the figures known today as the sons of the devil. 'In the first listing of the characters they are still Kurrog, Berreg, Morog (...) Originally three **musician Gypsies** (...). As the plan developed, these became **Gypsy children**, then – already in the first listing of the characters – “orphan sprites or sprite-lads”.' (Vörösmarty 1989, p. 802.)

Stereotypical representations of 'Gypsies' in nineteenth-century Hungarian dramas include the frequent depiction of occupational types (for example, musicians), linguistic difference, the emphasis on skin colour, the use of comic effects, and theft. In addition to these, linguistic difference is common: in many instances in nineteenth-century Hungarian drama the speech of 'Gypsy' characters is placed in a linguistically marked position. This may appear in several forms:

1. non-'Gypsy' characters address them differently from how they address representatives of the majority society;
2. the author signals the speech of 'Gypsy' characters through an orthography that imitates an accent or dialect;
3. the utterances of 'Gypsy' characters create an entirely new linguistic register by means of words associated with Romani.

*Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man), which is likewise a text forming part of the Hungarian dramatic canon, may therefore be regarded as an outstanding exception. It entirely abandons linguistic differentiation. Yet this is not its only peculiarity. It belongs among the few texts that depict a 'Gypsy' woman rather than a 'Gypsy' man. Not only the dramas of the nineteenth century, but also a large proportion of the texts produced during the twentieth century, frequently present occupational types associated with 'Gypsies'. Among these, the musician 'Gypsy' is the most common – a musician 'Gypsy'

who, in the great majority of cases, is unequivocally male (and in the remaining cases presumably so). Alongside him, the 'Gypsy' fortune-teller appears most frequently, who, according to the Hungarian designation, is unequivocally female: oracle woman. In the remainder of the study I shall continue to use the term 'fortune teller', but I shall indicate whenever the original Hungarian expression refers to a specific gender: (f) for female. In order to examine this occupational type and the representation of the 'Gypsy' woman, it is first necessary to provide context concerning 'Gypsy' fortune tellers (f) in the period under discussion.

The first mention of the 'Gypsy' fortune teller (f) in Hungarian-language daily and weekly newspapers dates from 1848. It describes the artworks found in Luther's cell in Erfurt and in the corridor of the adjoining friary. One of the figures in the danse macabre depicted there is the 'Gypsy' fortune teller (f), alongside, among others, the astronomer, the hunter, the gravedigger, and the actress. It is striking how strongly this description recalls the conclusion of the eleventh, London scene of *Az ember tragédiája*, where a danse macabre featuring a 'Gypsy' character likewise appears. Descriptions of the same images can also be found in English in Mary Shelley's travel journal, although in that account the fortune teller is not mentioned explicitly.

'We breakfasted this morning at Erfurt, and made duteous pilgrimage to the Augustine convent which Luther inhabited as a monk. (...) The convent is now used as an Orphanhouse. There is a gallery in it, with a strange series of pictures. Death is represented as coming upon men and women at all moments, during every occupation – the Beauty at her toilette – the Miser counting his money – the Hero in the hour of victory – the King on his throne – the Mother fostering her first-born – the Bride, proud in her husband.' (Shelley 1844, pp. 209–210)

Considering the Hungarian-language references, it may be concluded that in nineteenth-century representations of 'Gypsies' the 'Gypsy' woman appears as a fortune teller (*f*) or healer, while the 'Gypsy' man appears as a musician. These appearances may be regarded as continuous throughout the century and can be divided into, or classified according to, several thematic groups. In what follows, I present those thematic groups that can be established on the basis of the 131 processed newspaper articles. Reading nineteenth-century Hungarian newspapers, one finds an increased number of references to 'Gypsy' fortune tellers (*f*) during the carnival season. It may be observed that at this time the costume of the 'Gypsy' fortune teller (*f*) was a favoured disguise at masquerade balls. In addition, the figure already appears as a character in novels published in instalments in various newspapers. Reports of frauds committed by 'Gypsy' fortune tellers (*f*) occur frequently. These are lurid tales describing money and other valuables extorted from innocent and naive individuals. In this connection it is worth noting that Ferenc Csepreghy's 1878 *népszínmű* (popular folk play), *A piros bugyelláris* (The Red Purse), contains precisely such a lurid tale. Here, of course, the 'Gypsy' woman is not frightening but merely a source of comic effect. We encounter the fortune teller (*f*) in the figure of Suták Kata, who appears as an investigator and exposes the character guilty of treachery by means of card reading. Her prophecy reveals the truth, yet she also deceives the woman who has hired her. Thus we cannot be certain whether her successful prediction is merely a matter of chance or whether she is indeed connected to the supernatural. Through the unmasking she plays a significant dramaturgical role, yet her character remains undeveloped. She is a type figure whose personality is not given nuance. She is cunning and avaricious, but these traits are generic and form an integral part of stereotypical representations. Mentions of 'Gypsy' fortune tellers (*f*) and their predictions occur frequently in nineteenth-century Hungarian newspapers in connection with figures of political life and with rulers. Here a 'Gypsy'

woman's prophecy becomes part of the ruler's surrounding lore – a prophecy which, naturally, has since come to pass. In such cases the calculating and cunning 'Gypsy' woman is less prominent; instead, the emphasis falls on a woman who is in some form of genuine contact with the transcendent and possesses magical power. Such a representation also appears among the 'Gypsy' women depicted in Hungarian drama. In Lajos Kövér's 1858 text *Indiána*, the fortune teller (f), Pudika, possesses such power. She, too, prophesies for a ruler, the last female 'Gypsy' voivode. Although the act of fortune-telling itself is not shown, we know her prophecy, and by the end of the drama it is confirmed: she was right. Such a fortune teller, in genuine contact with the transcendent, also appears within the genre of operetta. The work based on a story by Mór Jókai, set to music by Johann Strauss the Younger and becoming world-famous within a few months, *A cigánybáró* (The Gypsy Baron), likewise includes a woman in real connection with the transcendent, Czipra. She successfully foretells a dream and its fulfilment. It is a particular curiosity that even in this century we encounter a classified advertisement in which Cypra/Czipra, a 'Gypsy' fortune teller (f), offers her services. Although the spelling *Cypra* appears in the advertisement, the exposé reporting on it refers to the fortune teller as *Czipra*. This is no coincidence, for the operetta *A cigánybáró* (The Gypsy Baron) had been premiered a little more than a decade earlier. According to the advertisement, Cypra is able to convey her predictions not only in person but also by letter to those seeking her counsel. This classified advertisement is not only jarring and attention-grabbing from a distance of nearly 130 years. Already in the year of its publication articles were appearing about the fraudulent fortune teller (f). The periodical *A Hét*, in connection with the case, published an exposé criticising the police and the political authorities, from which we also learn that the newspaper sent its own detective to the fortune teller. The most frequently recurring item in the contemporary press is a volume published under the title

*A czigány jósnő* (The Gypsy Fortune Teller) (*f*), whose popularity is indicated by the fact that it reached a third, expanded edition by the end of the nineteenth century. A similar type of representation can be found in the English-speaking world. In 1891 a nearly 300-page volume by Charles Godfrey Leland, *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling*, was published in New York (Leland 1891). The 'Gypsy' fortune teller (*f*) is not only a constant figure in Hungarian-language newspapers; even Archduke József devoted a short, separate subsection to 'Gypsy' fortune-telling in his 1888 volume *Czigány nyelvtan* (Gypsy Grammar), as part of the chapter entitled *A czigányok ethnológiája* (The Ethnology of the Gypsies). The text *Jóslásukról, varázslásukról, kúrásukról* (On Their Fortune-Telling, Magic, and Healing Practices) gathers together the figures of 'Gypsy' seers and magicians appearing in the literature, supplemented with brief summaries in its Hungarian- and German-language bibliographies. While among the dramas it includes Csepreghy's previously mentioned *Piros bugyelláris*, *Az ember tragédiája* is omitted from its overview.

In Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája*, the fortune teller (*f*) appears in the eleventh, London scene among the figures of the city's bustle. Here the fortune teller is a grasping woman whose prophecy does not indicate any genuine connection with the transcendent, but merely the calculating business-woman who predicts whatever her potential clients wish to hear. It is important to note that, apart from the designation of the Madách character, the drama contains the word 'Gypsy' nowhere else. Thus, in staging the Gypsy Woman of the London scene, the construction of the 'Gypsy' image is left entirely to the director. Madách signals no linguistic otherness in the character's mode of speech, which, as I have already noted, is unusual for nineteenth-century 'Gypsy' characters. We are not given any description of the 'Gypsy' woman's appearance, and none of the characters stigmatises her with this designation. It is her occupation, not her origin, that is emphasised. The first staging of the drama was presented by the National Theatre in

Budapest on 21 September 1883 in a production directed by Ede Paulay. Since then, numerous productions have been created. If we look at photographs of some of these stagings, we may observe that the visual portrayal tends to incline towards a stereotypical 'Gypsy' image. Large, colourful, often floral-patterned shawls can be seen draped over shoulders, skirts, or heads. In certain productions accessories such as pipes and jewellery appear, the presence of which may activate spectators' associations and stereotypes concerning authenticity – or the appearance of authenticity. A very similar representation can be seen in Marcell Jankovics's 2011 animated film *Az ember tragédiája*. In contrast to all this, it is worth examining the production of the Budapest Bábszínház, directed by Dezső Garas and premiered in 1999. Although the large gold hoop earring approaches a similar visual conception, the puppet – with its straw-like material and large nose – blends associations of connection with the transcendent, rituality, a certain folk quality, and the characteristic appearance of witches. It simultaneously activates multiple experiences, traditions, and stereotypes, and although it signals strongly, the result is more abstract than concrete in its representation.

Although less explicitly, 'Gypsy' fortune tellers are also represented in English-language dramas. I state that this is not explicit because the texts often do not refer to them as 'Gypsies', Roma, or Travellers, but as Egyptians (Matthews 2018, p. 151). This is not without precedent in Hungary either, since in Ferenc Csepreghy's *A sárga csikó* (The Yellow Foal), a popular folk play, we likewise encounter the form of address 'pharaoh' applied to 'Gypsies', and in Ede Szigligeti's *Csikós* (The Horse-Herdsman) the term '*fáraó vakarcsai*' ('the pharaoh's brats') is used for them. The work that contains the most widely known – albeit limited – representation of 'Gypsies' in English-language drama is perhaps associated with the name of William Shakespeare. In his case no 'Gypsy' characters appear; only references to 'Gypsies' occur. Through these references we gain insight into the perspective of the majority society on

'Gypsies'. Such a passage can be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, yet there is an even more relevant work that includes a mention of a 'Gypsy' fortune teller (*f*), namely *Othello* (Othello):

'OTHELLO: That is a fault. / That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give; / She was a charmer, and could almost read / The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it, / 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father / Entirely to her love, but if she lost it / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies.' (Shakespeare 1969, p. 963.)

In this case, although we do not see or hear a 'Gypsy' character on stage, the origin story of the drama's most important object is nonetheless linked to her. It is as if her dramaturgical function does not depend on her concrete appearance.

Although among the representations of 'Gypsy' women the fortune teller (*f*) is the most frequent, we nonetheless encounter in Hungarian-language drama a few female 'Gypsy' figures that fall outside the category of fortune tellers. One such character is Rózsi, one of the protagonists of Ede Szigligeti's 1853 popular folk play *A cigány* (The Gypsy). No specific occupational type is associated with Rózsi. She is a young woman in love who helps her father at home and undertakes seasonal work in order to support him. In terms of character, she appears in the role of the ingénue, and her presence proclaims the equal right to love between people of differing origins. Her character unfolds and becomes significant primarily through her relationships rather than in isolation. Among the representations of 'Gypsy' women, the largest number of female characters appears in Lajos Kövér's *Indiána*, a tragic play previously mentioned. In the corpus I have examined thus far, this is the only text in which the principal and title role is that of a 'Gypsy' woman. *Indiána* is the last female 'Gypsy' voivode, whose love life we also come to know through the plot, yet

her position remains the most significant aspect of her character. She is the chief voivode, and thus holds political leadership. She makes decisions and passes judgments, negotiates with other political leaders, and within her own community is regarded as the sole head of the leadership. The text is unique not only because of the importance of the protagonist's status, but also in terms of the 'Gypsy' women – indeed all 'Gypsy' characters – who appear within it. In the list of dramatis personae, thirteen named 'Gypsy' characters are included, all of whom are speaking roles.

Today, in the twenty-first century, we likewise encounter a greater number of female figures. Yet this woman already differs in many respects from the nineteenth-century representations of 'Gypsy' women. If we consider both drama and performance texts in terms of the female characters represented by the majority society, these too often relate to an occupational type. This occupation, however, is no longer that of the fortune teller (*f*). Its place is taken by the prostitute, now the most frequently appearing occupational type: the image of a woman who is vulnerable and lacks control over her own life. Thus the cunning, exploitative 'Gypsy' woman of the nineteenth century becomes, by the twenty-first century, dependent on others and exploited herself. The image of the 'Gypsy' woman in recent dramas is of course not so sharply drawn. Other representations also appear, yet a parallel may nevertheless be observed that both continues and transforms the form of 'Gypsy' depiction traditionally regarded as characteristic.

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Eszter Gál

‘RESTRAINED DIRECTION’  
AN ANALYSIS OF ILDIKÓ MÁNDY’S *KÉK HÉTFŐ*  
(BLUE MONDAY) PERFORMANCE

Abstract: My research area is the cultural history of contact improvisation<sup>1</sup> in Hungary, and within this framework I examine the modes and possibilities of applying this dance form in works of dance and theatre art. In Ildikó Mándy’s *Kék hétfő* (Blue Monday)<sup>2</sup> the choreography clearly builds on the movement vocabulary of contact improvisation; the performers’ mastery-level knowledge of the form’s principles and technique is strikingly evident in their acting. The direction exploits the situational character of contact, while the movements’ emotional inflection shapes the performers’ relational attitudes. The performance is one of the emblematic works of the 1990s, through which Mándy – dancer, choreographer, and director – established her career. This study briefly presents the artist, the theatre-cultural context and structure of the performance, and then discusses in more detail the mode of performing the choreography. The analysis has been pre-

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<sup>1</sup> Contact improvisation is a duet dance form developed from the movement explorations of Steve Paxton (1939–2024) in the early 1970s. ‘The dancers in contact improvisation focus on the physical sensations of touching, leaning, supporting, counterbalancing, and falling with other people, thus carrying on a physical dialogue’ (Novack 1990, p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> Production details for *Kék hétfő*. *Date of premiere*: 13 December 1993. *Venue*: Budapest, MU Színház (Lágymányosi Közösségi Ház). *Director*: Ildikó Mándy. *Choreography*: Ildikó Mándy and Éva Régenhart, Gábor Goda. *Music*: Hugues Le Bars. *Costume designer*: Szilvia Pálffy. *Lighting designer*: Kágé (Gábor Kovács). *Performers*: Gábor Goda, Ildikó Mándy, Éva Régenhart (Fuchs 1995, p. 222).

pared on the basis of the operational principles of contact improvisation and with the aid of the Philther method.

Ildikó Mándy's artistic formation began with musical studies; later, the practice of rhythmic gymnastics, team sports, and subsequently pantomime and modern dance techniques directed her towards movement theatre. In the art of theatre she was inspired by the productions of Egyetemi Színpad, by the productions of Károly Kazimir, and by Jerzy Grotowski. Her performance career began in 1977 in Miklós Köllő's Dominó Pantomime Ensemble, and from 1984 continued in András M. Kecskés's Corpus Pantomime Company. I classify Mándy among the first-generation practitioners of contact improvisation in Hungary. Alongside Gábor Goda, Péter Uray, László Hudi, László Rókás, and Ágnes Tana-Kovács, she too came to know the movements of contact in the mid-1980s, the specific use of the body made possible by the duet form, the sense of freedom inherent in it, and the sincerity that arises from fully inhabiting the moment. For Mándy, contact improvisation<sup>3</sup> provided a secure technical foundation and a mode of conscious bodily use. In contact movement she regarded the body as material (Gál 2024, p. 68). When she joined the Corpus, the members of the workshop were already working with increasing independence and exploring new directions of movement-based expression. As one of the founding members of Artus Tánc és Ugrószínház, Mándy experimented with

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<sup>3</sup> Mándy regards Steve Paxton as her master. She learned the movement technique of contact improvisation from him and from József Nagy. In Mark Tompkins's classes she discovered partnership, partner relations, and the sense of freedom inherent in the form (Gál 2024, p. 64). József Nagy encountered Mark Tompkins in Paris, attended his dance performances, and then enrolled in his contact dance improvisation classes. The impact on him was so profound that he immediately passed on everything he had practised and experienced, first in France and then, in December 1984, in Budapest (Gál 2024, p. 225, p. 227).

the heightened curiosity<sup>4</sup> characteristic of the 1980s among the independent creators of theatre and dance art.

When the first Hungarian Contemporary Dance Theatre Festival – regarded as opening a new era – was held in 1992, twenty-one companies presented their productions, most of whom were 'formations or artistic directors/performers originating from the legendary workshops active from the early to mid-1980s (primarily from the Corpus Pantomime)' (Halász 2007, p. 30). In the following year, at the 2nd Review,<sup>5</sup> which was intended 'to represent the possibilities of the modern dance language [and] the diversity of theatrical thinking' (Sándor L. 1994, p. 18), new companies of young artists, regional formations, and creators who had separated from earlier collaborations also appeared.<sup>6</sup> At this Review, Artus presented its new production, Mándy's first direction, which received the award of the Budapest Municipality for the best theatre performance of 1993 (Fuchs 1999, p. 30). In the following year, the Review was replaced by the choreographers' showcase *Inspiráció* (Inspiration), organised by Műhely Alapítvány, in order 'to offer a forum and an opportunity for visibility to young and/or unknown creators' (Halász 2007, p. 29).

The experiments and creative work were also inspired by the increasing number of guest performances by foreign con-

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<sup>4</sup> In this movement-based experimentation, the technique and exercises of contact improvisation played a major role, together with the bodily sensory qualities experienced in their execution and the situational modes of connection among the participants in the dance. The dance form offered a wholly new approach for creators of movement and dance theatre, who first had the opportunity to learn its foundations in the mid-1980s in József Nagy's contact dance classes.

<sup>5</sup> The 2nd Review was organised by the Contemporary Dance Theatre Association, founded in 1990. 'The Contemporary Dance Theatre Association, as an open interest-representation organisation, was established within the Hungarian Dance Artists' Association, initially under the name Contemporary Dance Art Association' (Halász 2007, p. 29).

<sup>6</sup> At the 2nd Contemporary Dance Theatre Review, 18 companies participated with 20 performances (Fuchs 1995, p. 222).

temporary dance companies. 'In 1992 the audience of Petőfi Csarnok, Szkéné Színház, and Merlin Színház – the venues hosting the genre – saw the highest number of guest performances' (Halász 2000, p. 103). Among the foreign guest performances I would highlight the London-based DV8 Physical Theatre and the Belgian company of Wim Vandekeybus, whose productions Hungarian audiences could see in the autumn of 1992 (Fuchs 1993, p. 165, p. 186). Their work was characterised by virtuosic physicality (falls, rolls, jumps, collisions), bodily risk-taking, and the dismantling of boundaries between dance, theatre, and personal expression. In the 1990s new opportunities opened for acquiring novel movement forms and dance techniques. In 1990 the first professional contemporary dance training institution, the Modern Tánciskola, opened its doors; it was reconstituted the following year and, from 1992, operated under the name Budapest Tánciskola within a morning-training framework. From early 1992 the Kortárs Táncművészeti Műhely,<sup>7</sup> in collaboration with MU Színház, organised continuous dance and movement training sessions for those wishing to learn and create outside institutional frameworks. In addition to arranging courses, the Műhely also provided opportunities for experimentation and presentation (Halász 2007, p. 30). At the Műhely the first contact improvisation classes were taught by Gábor Goda,<sup>8</sup> with Mátyás regularly assisting.

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<sup>7</sup> The Contemporary Dance Art Workshop was established by Gábor Goda and Ferenc Kálmán. For six years its courses provided regular opportunities for movement and dance training for those engaged in dance outside institutional frameworks (Gál 2021, p. 80).

<sup>8</sup> Gábor Goda, a founding member of Artus, was likewise a member of András M. Kecskés's Corpus Pantomime Ensemble. Alongside József Nagy, his teachers in contact improvisation were Steve Paxton and Mark Tompkins. He took over the teaching of the form from József Nagy in 1986 in a relay-like manner, taught it continuously until 2006, and then, building on its principles, developed his own technique under the name Weight Flow Contact (Gál 2021, p. 79).

As a member of Artus, Ildikó Mándy appeared in almost all productions created between 1984 and 1993, and from 1993 also worked as a choreographer's assistant. The basic ideas for *Kék hétfő*<sup>9</sup> (Blue Monday) were first developed by three members of Artus<sup>10</sup> during one of their international tours. Their initial movement experimentation began on the extendable sofa that plays a central role in the performance (Gál 2024, p. 68). The production is a three-performer, speechless, tightly structured movement text that dispenses with storytelling (Fuchs 1999, p. 30). In place of narrative, it presents everyday matters, solitude, various human games, small acts of malice, and the minute manifestations of affection (Fuchs 1994, p. 15). The dramaturgy is built upon the micro-environment created by the musical selection. The director used fifteen compositions from Hugues Le Bars's double album *J'en ai marre*,<sup>11</sup> most of them instrumental and saturated with raw sounds, noises, voices, and fragments of sentences.

I divided the performance into twelve scenes, attending to the performers' relations to one another, the atmospheres created by the music and the silences between them, and the changes in the stage image.<sup>12</sup> In nine scenes one piece of music

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<sup>9</sup> Mándy borrowed for the title the name of the vodka-based, very high-alcohol cocktail *Blue Monday*, and her choice was further inspired by a chapter in Buñuel's autobiography devoted to various drinks and cocktails. She was also interested in Monday, perhaps the most detested day because it follows the weekend, yet at the same time a day that promises the possibility of beginning anew (Fuchs 1994, p. 15).

<sup>10</sup> Éva Régenhart, Gábor Goda, and Ildikó Mándy.

<sup>11</sup> Hugues Le Bars's *J'en ai marre* album appeared in two parts, the first released in 1987 and the second in 1991. The double album contains a total of 47 compositions.

<sup>12</sup> I named the scenes on the basis of their overall stage effect, as follows: 1. *Awakening* – the introductory part of the performance, in which the initial dynamics of the performers' relational triangle are outlined; 2. *Gift-giving* – the man enters, and through his brief actions shapes and nuances the relationship between the two women; 3. *Cocktail*; 4. *After-effect*; 5. *Rolling* – in these scenes the male–female duets follow one another; 6. *Chase* – all three performers take part simultaneously in a shared dy-

is heard, and in three scenes two. Le Bars's music creates a distinctive sound world imbued with irony and sensitivity.<sup>13</sup> The music drives, strengthens, supports, and at times underscores the choreography. The movements are most often brought fully into synchrony with the music's tempo, rhythm, and dynamics. The shifting lengths of the musical pieces and silences, as well as of the scenes and transitions, lend the performance its particular rhythm.

The performance as a whole can be divided into three larger sections and a concluding part. This structuring is indicated by the qualities of the performers' relationships, the character and dynamics of the movements, the costumes and their changes, and the use of objects. The first section, consisting of two scenes, may be understood as corresponding to the start of the day and its atmosphere. Two women are visible on stage, one in the armchair, the other half sitting, half lying on the sofa, while the man is present behind the screen, scarcely visible. The performers wear nightclothes; the sound of an alarm clock and of typing is heard; the movements are those of a body awakening. In this scene the performers' relations to one another gradually take shape. The two women remain on stage throughout; the man comes and goes, busies himself with small tasks, and his appearances divert attention

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dynamic movement; 7. *Tenderness and Deliberation* – the duet of the two women, followed by the man's solo; 8. *Ice Cube*; 9. *Inner Struggle*; 10. *Jewellery* – incorporating these objects into the play gives rise to heightened emotions; 11. *By Themselves* – a calming-in-themselves and a return to the positions occupied at the beginning of the performance; 12. *Showering*.

<sup>13</sup> Hugues Le Bars (1950–2014) was a French composer and musician who wrote music for films, animated films, children's productions, and fashion shows. For several years he collaborated with Maurice Béjart, composing the music for nine of his choreographies. Interested in 'bruitisme' and *musique concrète*, Le Bars frequently incorporated raw sounds into his compositions, including, on the album *J'en ai marre*, the voices of Maurice Béjart and Eugène Ionesco. Very little information is available about Le Bars and his music; most of what I was able to find comes from the blog of Karyn Nishimura-Poupée, a French independent journalist living in Japan.

from the female performers only briefly. In the next scene the relationship between the two women begins to unfold, shaped by the gesture of gift-giving initiated by the man. Competition emerges between the two women, together with the conflict inherent in the dynamics of the trio. The next two longer sections allude to events taking place during the day, consisting of five and three scenes respectively. For the second section the performers change clothes, wearing daytime attire and shoes.<sup>14</sup> The women walk into the space with an air of elegance and sit down on the sofa beside one another. The scene is initiated by the man entering from the area of the stage bordered by screens, and it is unmistakably he who directs the increasingly tense relationship between the two women.<sup>15</sup> A sequence of longer duets and brief solos follows; in this section the sofa is unfolded to provide the setting for the duet between the younger woman and the man. Every movement of the performers takes place in relation to one another's gaze. They constantly follow and observe one another, so the tension between them does not cease for a moment; indeed, it all but explodes in the production's most dynamic trio dance. This is followed by a gradual easing, in the two women's embracing, gently intertouching dance. In the scenes that follow, the objects (ice cube, jewellery) provide an outlet for the stirring of emotions that are at first restrained and then erupting. The

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<sup>14</sup> The women's nightwear and daytime clothing are elegant, stylish, and richly tailored, made of a light and seemingly elastic fabric in various shades of blue. The man's silk dressing gown is dark blue; he later wears black trousers, a white shirt, occasionally a scarf, and a long dark blue waistcoat. The costume is the work of Szilvia Pálffy, a fashion designer who graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts, was a member of Orlando and later of the Creo Studio, a co-founder of the Eventuell Gallery, and subsequently a member of the Blue Paprika collective (k.z.s. 1988; Molnár 2012).

<sup>15</sup> A rolling bar table is brought into the playing space, on which a tabletop football game unfolds from gift wrapping; then the man serves cocktails from the lower compartment of the bar table, drinks he had prepared behind the screens in the previous scene.

female solos placed between the two women – man duets are once again observed by the man, who positions himself in the centre of the sofa and leans back. The final, concluding section evokes the atmosphere of evening. First, everyone returns to their place: the women to the armchair and the sofa, the man to the chair behind the screen. After a brief interval they seem to reconsider, rise, take hold of a screen each, place them side by side at the front of the stage, and then step into the centre of the spaces thus created.<sup>16</sup> These simple, matter-of-fact, and purposeful movements differ markedly from everything seen in the piece up to this point; they jolt the spectator, and with them the sequence of events is brought to a halt. At the end of the performance the performers remain by themselves, glancing at one another only occasionally, then, in unison, they turn the screens around and set off with slow steps towards the interior of the stage.

The choreography of the performance blends everyday and natural movements with the movements of contemporary dance and contact improvisation. The acting is shaped not only by the performers' dance and movement-technical proficiency, but also by their familiarity with contact improvisation. Floor work, slides, tilts, falls, rolls, jumps, and lifts all form part of the choreography's movement vocabulary. The performers sense and understand the laws of physics; they use them, command them, and yield to gravity. This is perceptible both in the movement sequences executed in duet and trio contact and in the performance of the solo movements. Their bodies are capable of being simultaneously tense and released. In the duets, support-giving, lifting, pulling, pushing, rolling, lifting, turning, propelling, sliding, friction, and, in certain scenes, the manipulation of an inert body all appear. In these duets and in the trio dance the performers connect through touch. As a choreographic device, touch may be abstract, as when they lift or carry one another, roll, tumble, fall, and rise together. In

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<sup>16</sup> The man positions himself between the two women.

such instances it is primarily the movement relationships and the changes in bodily tone that bear meaning, complemented by the dancers' facial expressivity and nuanced by the direction of their gaze. In contrast to the abstract use of touch, the choreography also employs it as a direct means of expressing emotion. For example, when the man, with a sudden sharp movement, pulls his female partner towards himself by the arm, or when he seizes and grips her wrist, prompting the woman to yank herself free with raised shoulders. The two women's small, slapping hand gestures likewise exemplify this, as does the moment when they grasp one another forcefully and then push each other away. Touch as a direct means of expressing emotion also appears in a different dynamic from the preceding examples. In one of the women's duets, they draw close to one another, gently embrace, one smoothing the other's face and rocking her. From this embrace and rocking motion the women's duet develops progressively, retaining the emotion-expressing quality of touch. The intended sensuality of touch appears only once in the performance, when, in the duet of the younger woman and the man, they touch one another with ice cubes. The slow, stroking movements along the forearm, then the neck and the face, constitute an unmistakably sensual act of seduction.

The acting is shaped by the fact that the performers' relations to one another and their emotions arise either from the representation of bodily sensations or from lived bodily sensations. It is a matter of representation, for example, when the swaying of the bodies is clearly not the genuine alcoholic intoxication of cocktail-induced inebriation. Alternatingly slackening and tensing body parts, loss of balance, or at times the complete yielding of the body to gravity – collapsing into one another's arms, an embracing catch in sitting, then plunging from it into a new roll, or falling from a tentative rise onto the partner's shoulder and from there rolling on together – all evoke bodily disintegration, drunkenness. The ice cube, by contrast, is genuinely cold. The female performer's face glows

when the man strokes it with the ice cube. The woman visibly experiences her surprise when the man drops the ice cube into the décolletage of her clothing. A similar, though different in nature, instance occurs in the table-football scene, when the two women play and compete with one another for a brief moment in an entirely real way. The expression of emotion may also emerge through the dynamic execution of movements. The exertion of force, the spatial directionality of the movements, the use of weight and momentum, the flow of the movement sequences and their rhythm and tempo all carry emotional expressivity. In the most dynamic trio dance of the performance, the speed of the movements, the rapid changes of direction, the constantly shifting connections, running, jumping, lifting, catching, spinning, rolling, pushing, gripping, tilting, clinging to one another, and the sudden reactions of drawing towards and veering away from one another together convey the emotions and relationships of the three performers. Throughout the performance one can observe the energising of the movements' execution and their saturation with emotion. Tension and release pulsate in the movements, in the tone of the bodies, in the emotions, and in the relationships. This mode of performance characterises the performers' acting throughout.

On stage, the furniture of a living room and a smaller study separated by a screen are arranged in a semicircle, thereby providing space for movement. The principal items of furniture in the performance are the blue three-seater sofa and the matching armchair, both of which play a role in every scene. They enter into play not only in accordance with their intended function, with the performers sitting or lying on them, but also in unconventional ways, becoming integrated into the choreography. In several scenes of more dynamic movement the performers leap onto, off, and across them, or roll over them. At other times the performers shape their bodies to the contours of the furniture, then slide to the floor and roll or crawl back, or spring up again. Elsewhere they use them

for support, stand on them, sit on the backrest, or balance there. The choreography virtually exhausts the possibilities for movement on and around these pieces of furniture.

The stage lighting reinforces the division of the performance into sections and highlights the central figures of each scene. In the first section, the half-light and the play of shadows created by lamps shining through the screens evoke the atmosphere of morning. In the second and third sections, full-stage illumination alternates with narrowed beams that follow the performers, creating the impression of an eventful daytime. In the final section of the performance, the lower light level, followed by the three circles of light illuminating the space in front of the three screens, evokes the mood of the day's end.

Ildikó Mándy's production is carefully constructed (S.E. 1994, p. 6), and her direction is measured, 'transforming everyday situations into a grotesque dance-play' (Sándor L. 1994, p. 19). With *Kék hétfő*, Mándy entered the ranks of dance-theatre or movement-theatre directors. Among the female directors<sup>17</sup> she was the first to apply, use, and integrate the movement vocabulary and technique of contact improvisation, and to exploit the possibilities inherent in the form. In the analysis I have highlighted the various modes of touch and those characteristics of contact improvisation that contributed to the novelty of the choreography and the specificities of the performers' acting.

The success of the production was indicated both by the award conferred for its direction and by the number of invitations it received. Among the theatres hosting independent companies and performers,<sup>18</sup> Székéné kept it in its repertoire

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<sup>17</sup> The female directors of the 2nd Hungarian Contemporary Dance Theatre Review were: Yvette Bozsik – Bozsik Yvette Ensemble; Zsófia Murányi and Andrea Mészöly – DekaDance; Ibolya Holb – Modern Tánc-Játék Stúdió; Mari Balázs – Dream Team; Anikó Zsalakovics – Andaxinház; Eszter Gál – Huenza Trio; Mária Tatai – Orkesztika Csoport (Fuchs 1995, p. 222).

<sup>18</sup> MU Színház, Merlin, Székéné Színház.

for several seasons. In 1994 the production featured in the month-long programme series Magyar Táncpanoráma '94 (Anon 1994, p. 9), toured provincial towns,<sup>19</sup> appeared at international festivals and in foreign theatres,<sup>20</sup> and was performed forty-two times over five years. Its impact is felt most strongly in Ildikó Mándy's career as choreographer and director,<sup>21</sup> yet alongside the work of Artus, József Nagy, Yvette Bozsik, and the Szárnyak Theatre it came to occupy a period-defining position (Halász 2010, p. 42).

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<sup>19</sup> It was performed at the Thealter Festival in Szeged, and in Eger, Gyöngyös, and Pásztó.

<sup>20</sup> Vienna: 28 April 1994, WUK, within the framework of Wien in Budapest – Bécs Budapesten, the Tangentiale / Tangenciális contemporary art exchange festival, Austria. Poznań: 29 June 1994, Wielki Theatre, Biennale of the Contemporary Dance, Poland. Skopje: 23 September 1994, Theatre Centar, International Theatre Festival, Macedonia. St. Vith: 11–16 October 1994, Agora Theater, 7th International TheaterFest, Belgium. Kassel: 28 October – 11 November 1994, 2nd Internationales Tanzfestival Kassel, 'Identität und Freiraum', Germany. Sitges: 3 June 1995, Sitges International Theatre Festival, Spain. Basel: 16 and 17 June 1995, Kulturwerkstatt Kaserne, Switzerland. Graz: 17 and 18 July 1996, Theater im Palais, Austria. Ildikó Mándy's private archive.

<sup>21</sup> Csaba Szögi, the director of the Central Europe Dance Theatre, after seeing the premiere, invited Mándy to create a choreography for the company. This resulted in the productions *Csendes játszma* (Quiet Game) and *Fej vagy írás* (Heads or Tails) (Anon 1996, 74). Following the premiere, János Mucsi, director of the BM Duna Art Ensemble, likewise approached her to lead regular contact improvisation training sessions for the ensemble, after which her choreographies for the company followed in succession (Gál 2024, p. 68).

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Botond Kaáli Nagy

THE FIRST NATIONAL THEATRE OF MAROSVÁSÁRHELY  
(TÂRGU-MUREŞ)

Abstract: The first attempt to establish a permanent stone theatre in Marosvásárhely emerged during a period marked by social and political uncertainty, as well as by economic crisis, in the aftermath of the First World War. Marosvásárhely is located in Transylvania; at the outset of the theatre-founding process Transylvania still belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, while by the time of the first premiere it had already become part of the Kingdom of Romania – a change of sovereignty that affected the operation of the new theatre as well. The present study, offering only a partial account of the history of this theatre – the first in the city to bear the designation National – constitutes a chapter of a larger research project in which I attempt to demonstrate that the first permanent theatre building in Marosvásárhely was already realised in 1918, albeit only for a few years.

*Introduction*

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I have examined the history of the first permanent theatre established in Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş) during the turbulent Transylvanian period following the change of sovereignty, focusing on institutional power relations and the processes that generated them. The subject is the theatre and company founded in 1918 by the theatre director and former journalist Pál Szabó, who obtained the concession for the Marosvásárhely, later Marosvásárhely–Brassó (Târgu-Mureş–Braşov) theatre district. Its first

premiere took place on 7 December 1918 in the theatre hall of Hotel Transsylvania, and by February 1921 the company already numbered 102 members (*Tükör*, 6 February 1921). It operated two sections – dramatic and operetta – and had permanent members, its own conductor, orchestra, and choir, and was defined by the daily press as the Marosvásárhely National Theatre even before its first premiere (*Tükör*, 2 June 1918, no. 22, p. 3). I have researched the history of this theatre from the founding of the company until the dismissal of Pál Szabó, ordered on legally questionable grounds by the local Society for the Support of the Theatre on 30 April 1922 (*Tükör*, 7 May 1922, p. 2), and the company's farewell performance on 12 June 1922.

I wish to clarify what I mean by theatre in the case of Pál Szabó's company, and according to which conceptual framework I attempt to define it and analyse its relationship to power. In her study 'Teatralitás és medialitás, avagy miért nem definiálható „A” színház' (Theatricality and Mediality, or Why "The" Theatre Cannot Be Defined), published in *Játéktér* (2020, winter), Beatrix Kricsfalusi refers to Hans-Thies Lehmann, who

'when revealing the political potential of theatre, warned that in certain cases we may have very different things in mind when we say "theatre".' As she writes, 'within the semantic stratification of our seemingly unified concept of theatre, we can distinguish anthropological, social, and institutional dimensions', then quotes Lehmann: 'Theatre is first and foremost a certain form of human behaviour – acting, watching – then a situation – a particular mode of assembly – only thereafter an art form and finally an artistic institution.' (Lehmann 2002, p. 11)

In line with Lehmann's line of thought – and with regard to the relationship between theatre and power – I examine theatre primarily as a situation and, secondarily, as a form of be-

haviour (particularly in relation to the audience). Concerning the question of power, I would emphasise that power is not an external entity; this is not a case of theatre versus power. Power is a distributed phenomenon that everyone exercises, or attempts to exercise, both within and outside the theatre. I investigate the extent to which, and the ways in which, the power manifested in the structural organisation of the political, administrative, and theatrical spheres – for instance the system of patronage – intervened in the operation of the theatre and what kinds of power relations it produced.

My hypothesis is that, through Pál Szabó's company, the hope could have been realised that Marosvásárhely might also become a city with a permanent stone theatre. I have concluded that this theatre did indeed come into existence – albeit only for a few years – and that it was justified in bearing the designation Marosvásárhely National Theatre.

In this study I highlight the chapters dealing with the performance venue, the company, the first season, and the beginnings of the power struggles.

### *Background*

In Marosvásárhely, school theatre had existed since the second half of the eighteenth century, and from 1803 onwards various companies performed there as guests almost continuously (Kuszálík and Zalányi 2013, p. 41). In 1803 the first society for the support of the theatre was established in the city (the Marosszék Theatralis Commissio – Fodor 2015, pp. 314–315), and on 12 June 1803 the first professional theatre performance took place in the wooden theatre beside the fortress, which had an uncovered auditorium (Kuszálík and Zalányi 2013, p. 118). Subsequently, other venues more or less suitable for theatrical performance hosted the itinerant companies that, according to the regulations of the theatre-district system, appeared in Marosvásárhely as guests and held 'seasons' there (in most cases covering only a few weeks). Although the idea of construct-

ing a permanent stone theatre in Marosvásárhely arose several times, the initiative failed on each occasion for various reasons until the inauguration of the building of the Marosvásárhely State, later National, Theatre in 1973.

### *Foundation of the Company*

In July 1918 Szabó received the concession from the National Actors' Association (*Temesvári Hírlap*, 22 November 1924), but he had already obtained the theatre hall of Hotel Transsylvania from the Marosvásárhely Council on 20 April 1918 for a period of four years, and he also undertook the obligation to organise a distinguished theatre company and to have the hall of Hotel Transsylvania converted into a theatre with 1,400 seats and balcony boxes (*Tükör*, 19 May 1918, p. 3). He engaged Mihály Sebestyén as artistic director, and actors and singers joined the company from Budapest, Kassa (Košice), Temesvár (Timișoara), Szeged and Pozsony (Bratislava) (*Tükör*, 2 June 1918). In August 1918 the renovation works on the hall commenced, and until their completion the new company performed in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) and then Déva (Deva) within the framework of ensemble-building activity (*Tükör*, 18 August 1918, p. 3; *Az Újság*, 18 August 1918, Sunday, p. 12; *Pesti Hírlap*, 18 August, Sunday, p. 7; *Pesti Napló*, 18 August 1918, p. 14).

A report reproduced from the *Pesti Hírlap* of Thursday, 30 May 1918 and published in the 2 June 1918 issue of *Tükör* presents the list of performers engaged by the 'Marosvásárhelyi Nemzeti Színház' (National Theatre of Târgu-Mureș). From this list one can discern the high standards of Pál Szabó and Mihály Sebestyén, who engaged them. Although, according to Jenő Szentimrei, 'at that time the actors' market was full of actors returning from military service or captivity' and 'one could pick and choose from among them' (Szentimrei 1957, p. 81), the founding pair nevertheless did not opt for the obvious solution – the engagement of unemployed actors

and singers – but instead enticed artists away from other, in several cases renowned, companies. Among them were such widely known artists as Béla Nagypál (born Friedenstein, 19 July 1894 – 30 June 1968), conductor and composer, and his wife, Ferike Pásztor (born Paszkesz Frida, 26 January 1890 – 11 May 1968), soprano; Alfréd Jávor (Márk, 4 April 1891 – Budapest, 1 September 1977), later a holder of gold and diamond diplomas; Gáspár Szántó (Mezőtúr, 1874–1951), baritone; and Artúr Demény (Budapest, 1891 – ?), tenor.

### *The Performance Venue*

Hotel Transsylvania<sup>1</sup> stood at the corner of today's Bolyai Street and the main square, until it was demolished in the late 1950s. According to some sources, the three-storey neo-Baroque building was constructed in the mid-nineteenth century by Vilmos Knöpfler, Doctor of Medicine (information from Mihály Spielmann), while other sources attribute it to the Ugron family (Keresztes 1998, p. 75). It was opened on 3 January 1874. What is certain is that by the end of the century it was already owned by the Ugron family (Keresztes 1998, p. 75), and its theatre hall was inaugurated in 1898 (*Székegy Lapok*, 20 October 1898). The location of the hall, however, was far from ideal: it lay on an upper floor, along a narrow corridor, in a place crowded with noisy establishments, private apartments, and hotel guests. During performances the shouting from the taverns could be heard, the smell of roux and sauces permeated the air, the scuffling of waiters was audible, and, in addition, the nearby latrine frequently filled the space with a stench intense enough to cause dizziness (Kuszálík and Zalányi 2013, pp. 152–157).

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<sup>1</sup> The hotel is mentioned under several names in contemporary sources. I retain the form *Transsylvania*, as this was the spelling visible on the building's façade.

### *Renovation Works*

Szabó commissioned two Budapest star architects of the period – Tivadar Kocsis<sup>2</sup> and the later Kossuth Prize laureate and Artist of Merit Gyula Kaesz<sup>3</sup> – to carry out the design work, and they accepted the assignment (*Pesti Hírlap*, 14 December 1918, Saturday, p. 6). Their reputation makes clear the significance of the theatre question in Marosvásárhely – they ranked among the most renowned architects in Hungary at the time. Szabó's determination and enthusiasm are indicated

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<sup>2</sup> Tivadar Kocsis (1892–1958) graduated in 1917 from the Royal Hungarian National School of Applied Arts as a pupil of Loránd Almási Balogh. Together with his classmate Gyula Kaesz, he achieved success in numerous architectural competitions: 'After his apprenticeship years, Kocsis opened his own office; he worked on the reconstruction of the theatre in Marosvásárhely and designed clubhouses and a holiday resort on the shore of Lake Balaton. No comprehensive monograph exists on his oeuvre, but even a shorter period of archival research shows that he was involved in the plans of at least thirty houses or villas in Buda.' (Anita Fonyódi: Kocsis Tivadar, a neobarokk budai villák építője. [budaipolgar.hu](http://budaipolgar.hu) – [https://www.budaipolgar.hu/helyortenet/kocsis\\_tivadar\\_neobarokk.html](https://www.budaipolgar.hu/helyortenet/kocsis_tivadar_neobarokk.html)). He also designed the villa on Budapest's Naphegy that became the home of Raoul Wallenberg, and in which the contemporary artist Yvonne Vándor Singer, Wallenberg's goddaughter and the daughter of a Jewish civil servant in hiding, was born (Szijjártó 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Gyula Kaesz (1897–1967) was an interior designer, architect, applied artist, college professor, recipient of the Kossuth Prize (1956), and Artist of Merit (1965). He studied at the School of Applied Arts in Budapest and, from 1919 to 1952, taught at the school and later academy in the Department of Interior and Furniture Design, serving as its director between 1952 and 1958. As director he implemented several significant educational reforms and established the Department of Industrial Design. He trained generations of outstanding artists. He practised as an architect, interior designer, and furniture designer, edited professional journals, and also engaged in exhibition design: he created the interior designs for the Milan Triennale (1933–1936), the Hungarian pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Exhibition, and the Transport Exhibition of 1947. From 1948 to 1952 he headed the interior design division of the first state design office. His work had a profound influence on the development of Hungarian interior design and modern Hungarian furniture art (Kenyeres 1967–1994).

by the fact that he entrusted them with the completion of the design process.

The work proceeded at a rapid pace, and news of the theatre under construction reached the capital as well: on 18 August, in the week when the renovation works began, the Budapest newspapers *Az Újság*, *Pesti Hírlap*, and *Pesti Napló* all published the same report under the title *A marosvásárhelyi nemzeti színház megnyitása* (The Opening of the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureş). They announced that ‘the Marosvásárhelyi Nemzeti Színház has been granted to director Pál Szabó for a further four years’, and that ‘the construction of the splendidly remodelled, vast theatre will be completed in the middle of October’.

### *The Spatial Configuration of the New Theatre Hall*

The spatial configuration of the rebuilt hall, seating 700–800 spectators – Jenő Szentimrei reports a hall with 700 seats (Szentimrei 1996, p. 61), although he does not indicate any source material in his book – is illuminated by a 1920 article concerning an increase in theatre ticket prices (*Ellenőr*, vol. XIV, no. 23, 28 February 1920, Saturday, p. 1). According to this, the theatre hall of Hotel Transsylvania possessed ground-floor and upper-level proscenium promenades, ground-floor boxes, central and side boxes on the upper level, a stalls area with ten rows of seats, a balcony with six rows, a gallery, and in addition upholstered chairs and round seats. All this does not suggest the image of a small hall: the theatre on Farkas Street in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), the first stone theatre in Transylvania, seated 800 spectators and must have had a similar spatial arrangement.

However, with regard to the ground plan of the Marosvásárhely hall, its decoration, its position within the building, and the location of the extension, we can only venture conjectures.<sup>4</sup>

What can be assumed is that it was a large theatre hall of at least three levels, with a box system encircling the ground-floor auditorium, together with a balcony and a gallery, and decorated in neo-Baroque style (the building itself was constructed in the neo-Baroque style, and Tivadar Kocsis likewise worked in this stylistic idiom). Its entrance opened from Bolyai Street (Keresztes 1998, p. 75). Numerous photographs survive of the exterior of the building, but almost none of its interior spaces. In the postcard-collection volume by András and Henrik Csepreghy, *Volt egyszer egy város – Képeslapok igézetében* (Once There Was a City – Enchanted by Postcards, Csepreghy and Csepreghy 2016), however, we found four photographs of the Transsylvania's restaurant, café hall, and billiard room. The photographs of the restaurant reveal that it also had natural overhead lighting, that is, a glass roof. As such, the theatre hall (which nineteenth-century sources state was located on the upper floor) could not, after the renovations, have been situated above the dining hall. In the absence of usable data, the question remains whether the theatre hall had already earlier been moved down to the ground floor, whether it continued

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<sup>4</sup> Neither archival and library research in Marosvásárhely, nor online sources, nor oral history yielded data that could be processed. According to the historian Mihály Spielmann, former director of the Teleki Téka, the building was already in such a state of disrepair in the 1950s that the pavement running alongside it was closed, as there was a danger that it might collapse onto passers-by. The architect and museologist István Karácsony likewise revealed that the Transsylvania building is the least well known structure on the main square; neither he nor his predecessors succeeded in discovering who designed it. No ground plan or blueprint has survived, and only a single contract exists, pertaining to the plot, bearing the name of Vilmos Knöpfler. Eminent architects from Marosvásárhely searched for decades, but found nothing. This is most probably the consequence of the fact that, during the 1960s and 1970s, by higher instruction, the entire archival material of numerous buildings of Hungarian relevance was pulped.

to be located on the upper floor, or whether an entirely new hall was constructed in the wing of the building that lay along Bolyai Street.

*The Opening Ceremony of the First Marosvásárhely National Theatre*

At the completely sold-out performance, the new Marosvásárhely company presented Alexander Brisson's drama *A névtelen asszony* (The Nameless Woman) in a production directed by the artistic director Mihály Sebestyén; the premiere was preceded by Sebestyén's theatre-opening address. We do not know the text of the 'deeply affecting' opening speech (*Tükör*, 8 December 1918, Sunday, vol. VI, no. 56, p. 1).

Brisson's (9 April 1848 – 27 January 1912) four-act drama, known in Hungarian under the title *A névtelen asszony*, was a world-famous play by the French author: the drama *Madame X* (*La Femme X*), written in 1908, was revived on Broadway three times from 1910 onwards with Sarah Bernhardt in the leading role, and was adapted for the cinema twelve times (Gibbons 2013, p. 211); a musical version was also produced in 2006. The work was well known in Hungary as well: on Saturday 5 October and Sunday 6 October 1918 it was on the programme at the Olympia in Budapest, in a production directed by Jenő Janovics with Emilia P. Márkus in the leading role (*Magyarország*, 5 October 1918, Saturday, p. 12; *Magyarország*, 6 October 1918, Sunday, p. 17). In the Budapest production, the role of the state prosecutor was played by Mihály Fekete, who later succeeded Pál Szabó as theatre director at the Marosvásárhely theatre.

As an opening performance, the choice of this drama heightened the significance of the occasion: the company staged not a great classic or a fashionable operetta, but a (near-)contemporary, world-famous text – moreover, a tragedy that also touched upon questions of power. The selection of this play may indicate an intention to signal the momentous

nature of the event and to distinguish the artistic principles of the new theatre from the comic entertainments of itinerant companies – a gesture towards the celebrated works of contemporary drama and an opening of the newly founded Marosvásárhely theatre towards the international theatrical world.

### *Repertoire Policy and Sections*

On the day after the theatre's opening, *Az obsitos* (The Veteran) was performed, and in the evening *A czigány* (The Gypsy) (*Tükör*, 8 December 1918, Sunday, vol. VI, no. 56, p. 1). Although the contemporary press almost never mentioned the authors of the works underlying the performances, it is probable, given the theatrical customs of the period, that *Az obsitos* refers to Imre Kálmán's second operetta, while *A czigány* was likely Ede Szigligeti's three-act folk play from 1853, embellished with songs and dance.

From its inception, Pál Szabó's company already operated with two sections – dramatic and operetta – and it also presented a world premiere in Gyulaféhérvár, where it staged a completely new play: Gábor Drégely, who achieved world fame with his *Kisasszony férje* (The Young Lady's Husband), had written in 1918 a three-act comedy entitled *Egy férj, aki mindent tud* (A Husband Who Knows Everything).

On Friday, 7 February 1919, an opera was presented: Jacques Offenbach's *Hoffmann meséi* (The Tales of Hoffmann) was performed in a production directed by Károly Binder. The press described this premiere as a 'sparkling milestone' in the theatrical history of Marosvásárhely (*Tükör*, vol. VII, no. 5, 9 February 1919, Sunday, pp. 1–2). On 26 March 1919 another opera, *Tosca*, was performed (*Ellenőr*, 26 March 1919, Wednesday, vol. XIII, no. 46, p. 1).

Star-making began: the greatest star elevated was the prima donna Ferike Pásztor (*Tükör*, vol. VII, no. 5, 9 February 1919, Sunday, pp. 1–2). In a somewhat unusual manner, the theatre's

other star became the conductor Béla Nagypál, whose work was written about with the highest praise (Ibid.).

Even in the first months of its operation, Pál Szabó's company simultaneously focused on prose theatre staging contemporary dramas, on operettas (in several cases likewise contemporary), and on opera. As was characteristic of the period, operettas predominated in the repertoire, but the discerning approach of the theatre's leadership is indicated by the fact that they did not think exclusively in terms of popular entertainment genres: alongside operettas and comedies, tragedy (for example Alexandre Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias*) and opera also found a place.

The staging of contemporary works also proved important: *A névtelen asszony* and Ferenc Herczeg's five-act play *A dolovai nábob leánya* (The Daughter of the Dolova Nabob), published in 1894, are almost contemporary pieces, while *Az ob-sitos*, premiered in 1910 at the Vígszínház in Budapest, is fully so. The same applies to the three-act romantic singspiel *Három a kislány* (*Das Dreimäderlhaus*), compiled by Henrik Berté from the works of Franz Schubert, whose world premiere took place on 15 January 1916 in Vienna. The world premiere of Imre Farkas's three-act operetta *Túl a nagy Krivánon* (Beyond the Great Kriván) was held on 23 July 1918 at the Budai Színkör.

The theatre's first season lasted until the summer of 1919. In May 1919 Pietro Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Der Schneemann* (The Snowman), the ballet by the future Academy Award-winning composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, were staged. The premiere of the latter counted as a world premiere, not only in terms of the work itself but also in terms of genre: this was the first ballet performance in Marosvásárhely. The production was directed by its lead performer, Károly Faludi. In June, works by contemporary authors were also presented: Albert Kövessy's three-act musical urban vignette *Goldstein Számi, vagy az új honpolgár* (Sami Goldstein, or The New Citizen), premiered on 11 August 1894 at the Krisztinavárosi Színkör and reaching its 100th performance at the Városligeti Színkör

on 16 May 1896; and *Der Favorit* (The Favourite), the operetta by Robert Stolz, later nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Score and musical director of the Theater an der Wien between 1907 and 1917 (s.n. *Ellenőr*, 13 June 1919, Friday, vol. XIII, no. 88).

In July 1919 the works of Hungarian authors dominated the repertoire of the Marosvásárhely theatre. In the final month of the season the company staged the comedy *Ófensége kalapja* (His Highness's Hat) by the likewise contemporary author Nándor Újhelyi (premiered in Budapest in 1917). The choice of this play – which also illustrates Pál Szabó's boldness – is noteworthy in that they selected a work by an author against whom several lawsuits had been brought because of his erotic books, and who fled from these proceedings first to Vienna, then to Berlin, Paris, and finally London.

Also staged was *Francia négyes* (French Quadrille), the two-act comedy premiered in 1919 by the contemporary Lajos Bíró – later a Hollywood screenwriter and author of the globally successful drama *A cárnő* (The Czarina). Like Újhelyi's play, it is likewise a satire, and both its text and the performance 'fully worthy' of it were praised to the skies by the critics. Also on the programme were *Cavalleria rusticana* and Franz von Suppé's one-act operetta *Die schöne Galathée* (The Beautiful Galatea). The first autumn opera premiere took place in November, when the company staged Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*.

In the following years the company's operation continued to be characterised by a repertoire policy similar to that of the first seasons, and even the repertoire of the initial months makes clear the programme strategy that defined the theatre's beginnings and its later activity: alongside staging works conceived within the popular entertainment genres necessary for sound economic functioning, the leadership also sought to serve a more discerning segment of the audience. From the list of plays and productions included in the repertoire there emerges a deliberate theatre-management concept attentive both to professional standards and to audience demand. They

aimed to provide high-quality theatrical experiences, and the repertoire policy sought to cater to all segments of the public.

### *The Company*

According to the surviving sources, the theatre began its operation with a company of 28 members. The operetta section comprised László Áldory, László Horváth, Miklós Kondor, Jenő Sebestyén, István Major, Béla Nagypál, Margit Madarász, Ferike N. Pásztor, Rózsi S. Bordás, Károly Faludy, Bálint, Nusi Dobozi, Olga Fehér, and Jenő Sebestyén; the dramatic section consisted of Mihály Sebestyén, Gyula Kiss, Jenő Dózsa, Sándor Zsoldos, Ferenc J. Földváry, Eszti Gróf, Böske Ardó, Julia Sándor, Julcsa K. Nánássy, Blanka H. Sárközy, Alfréd Jávor, and Sári Virth. For permanent opera guest appearances, the baritone Gáspár Szántó and the tenor Artúr Demény were engaged.

In the period that followed, the cast changed and expanded several times, and in addition to the artists listed above, the following also performed in Pál Szabó's theatre: the tenor Vilmos Kertész, the baritone Károly Binder, the mezzo-soprano Eszter Ungvári, Kálmán Szerdahelyi, Manó Pattantyús, Gyula Szabó, Margit Madarász, Károly Kürti, Tibor Lóri, László Horváth, Emil Begovits, Lola Begovits, the tragically fated Sándor Zsoldos,<sup>5</sup> Vilmos Lengyel, Julia Sándor, Gyula Kiss, József Békéssy, Stefi Csengeri, Marcsa Seregh, Klára Hajnal, Ida Horth, Jenő Medgyaszay, Károly Kassay, Blanka Sárközy, Imre Ladányi, Margit Geppert, Böske Rajnai, Gizi Gergely, Józsa Szendrey, Béla Tompa, László Katona, Ida

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<sup>5</sup> *'The Tragic Death of an Actor*. Report from Marosvásárhely: Sándor Zsoldos, a member of Pál Szabó's theatre company in Marosvásárhely, died suddenly of apoplexy. He spent four years at the front, during which he was twice shot in the lung and, in addition, suffered a serious illness. At last he was able to return to the stage, and a few weeks ago he married. Fate, however, beggredged him his happiness. Now, at barely twenty-five years of age, he has died in such a tragic manner.' *Egyetértés*, 5 June 1919.

Havasi, Piroska Dolinai, Vilma Pataki, Frigyes Vajda, Kató Borosnyai, Pál Zilahi and the prompter P. Vajda (s.n. *Egyetértés*, 6 June 1919, p. 4).

I am also researching the life paths of the actors and singers. From the trajectories identified so far it has emerged that they did not belong to the most prominent figures of the profession, but neither did they stand outside its recognised circles: they had completed drama school and had been members of companies prior to their engagement in Marosvásárhely, and many of them were later invited to appear in films. Pál Szabó's company was not composed of amateurs, but of artists whom the director recruited from other theatres to Marosvásárhely.

All this suggests that an institution with its own company of drama-school-trained artists, an artistic director, dramatic and operetta sections, a choir, an orchestra, its own conductor, and a multi-level, renovated and extended theatre hall was not called the Marosvásárhely National Theatre by accident (*Tükör*, 2 June 1918, no. 22, p. 3) – even if we do not know whether this designation was official or merely bestowed by a grateful audience. The intention is nonetheless discernible: the Marosvásárhely public, the local society for the support of the theatre, and evidently the theatre's leadership and employees sought to ensure that theatrical life in Marosvásárhely could catch up with that of Kolozsvár, the Transylvanian theatrical centre led by Jenő Janovics, as well as with the theatrical life of other Transylvanian and Banat cities that at the time already possessed permanent stone theatres. And this possibility – in light of the circumstances, the repertoire policy, and the personnel involved – was indeed present. Pál Szabó clearly strove to distance himself from the tradition according to which Marosvásárhely could host only itinerant seasons (often composed of amateur performers), and attempted to establish a contemporary theatre staging international, high-quality works, one from which the long-desired permanent theatre building of Marosvásárhely might in time emerge.

*Theatre and Power. The Operation of the Marosvásárhely National Theatre*

In connection with the approval of Pál Szabó's concession request, the relationship between theatre and power has already been mentioned; in this instance power adopted a permissive stance and authorised a journalist coming from outside the profession (who had, it is true, previously acted as an amateur) to establish a theatre in Marosvásárhely. Contemporaries and successors alike characterise Pál Szabó as a resourceful man who could find his way in any situation, a trait that proved important not only during his period as director of the company but also in the analysis of the relationship between the theatre and power.

'It was the end of the war, there was inflation, and there was a theatrical boom. The journalist [Pál Szabó – author's note] was christened "the knight of the day" by Sándor Bródy, and Slepí Szabó – as the entire city called him – was doubly the knight of the day: he had also been an actor at one time. He was a specialist of the moment. (...) He organised a large opera, operetta, and dramatic ensemble with a large chorus and a large orchestra (...), there was even a ballet company. (...) For the momentary financial difficulties of the oversized company, Pál Szabó always knew with what magic word one could open a vein in the pockets of which bank or major enterprise' (Szentimrei 1957, pp. 80–83).

Pál Szabó believed in his theatre to the utmost; its first and second seasons went well. In August 1919, that is, at the end of the first season, he gave an interview to the editor of *Tükör* concerning his plans for the forthcoming season. The director spoke with satisfaction about the period following the establishment of the theatre, about a season that had exceeded

expectations ‘despite the enormous difficulties and struggles’, mentioned the works carried out in the meantime on the theatre hall, and expressed confidence regarding the next season. He stated that he had engaged, among others, Ferenc Táray and Vilmos Lengyel from the Kolozsvár National Theatre, as well as Ferenc Jeney, Marcsa Sereg, and Kató Borosnyai from Debrecen, and that he had expanded the male chorus; he was also satisfied with the theatre’s financial situation, despite the fact that he had been able to repay very little of his own debts. Nonetheless he remained optimistic: ‘I believe that before long I shall be directing the Marosvásárhely theatre entirely free of debt’ (s.n. *Tükör*, 17 August 1919, Sunday, vol. VII, no. 32, p. 1).

We can only conjecture what difficulties Pál Szabó may have had in mind, but traces remain of the processes that already hindered the theatre’s affairs in the period following the establishment of the company (and that later multiplied). One of these may have been the ‘palace revolution’ that occurred in March 1919, not long after the company began work. According to an article published in the 26 March issue of *Tükör*, during the director’s several-day absence in the previous week, one member of the company organised a coup. This plan was thwarted together with its instigator, and upon his return Pál Szabó immediately restored order within the company (s.n. *Ellenőr*, 26 March 1919, Wednesday, vol. XIII, no. 46, p. 1).

Three months later, in June 1919, the next blow struck Pál Szabó: on 11 June his artistic director, Mihály Sebestyén, and his brother, the *bonvivant* Jenő Sebestyén, were invited to the Máramaros theatre district. And although they had concluded a three-year contract with Szabó, they accepted the invitation and, moreover, enticed several actors from the Marosvásárhely company to join them (Sebestyén 2011, p. 23).

From these two events one can sense that power struggles may have been raging within the confines of the Marosvásárhely theatre. The question arises as to the extent to which Szabó – who sacrificed everything for the cause of the theatre – regarded the institution as his own playground, how authori-

tarian he was, and to what degree he made decisions alone. The actors' coup and the fact that his own artistic director, who had previously managed the theatre's affairs shoulder to shoulder with him – for example, in May 1919 he went alone to Temesvár, Nagyvárad (Oradea), and Déva to procure plays and engage actors (Sebestyén 2011, p. 20) – left Szabó after barely half a year, and did so despite being bound to him by a valid contract, which would have entitled the director to initiate legal proceedings. For reasons unknown, the director did not do this; instead, he recruited replacements from Arad, Nagyvárad, Kolozsvár, and Debrecen (Sebestyén 2011, p. 23). All this indicates that the company was not entirely satisfied with the director's conduct; cliques may have begun to form, and on this occasion it was those who stood by Szabó who emerged victorious.

Alongside the presumed yet highly probable internal conflicts, the local theatre company also experienced the first signs of the change of sovereignty, and the daily press first reported its financial difficulties in February 1920 (*Ellenőr*, vol. XIV, no. 23, 28 February 1920, Saturday, p. 1). The article is valuable not only because it is the first to shed light on the deterioration of the theatre's financial situation in parallel with post-war inflation, but also because it contains the increased ticket prices, thereby assisting in the reconstruction of the spatial configuration of the hall discussed earlier. For individual performances the most expensive seat cost precisely twenty times the cheapest, yet even the price increases did not carry the theatre through the initial and subsequently mounting phase of financial decline.

By the summer of 1921 the theatre had fallen into a financial situation from which it could no longer find a way out on its own (*Temesvári Hírlap*, 1924; *Színház és Társaság*, vol. VII, 15 September 1923 – 22 September 1923, no. 37, p. 22; *Tükör*, 21 August 1921, p. 3; *Tükör*, 22 December 1921, no. 51, p. 6). Pál Szabó's difficulties, however, were exacerbated not only by internal conflicts and by the issue of financing a company

oversized in relation to the city's audience base: in 1920 the change of sovereignty occurred, Transylvania was annexed to Romania, and the shift in political power created three direct threats to the company's continued existence. The first was the dissolution in Transylvania of the Actors' Association – now a Hungarian organisation – responsible for the actors' employment relations; the second was inflation, which deepened even further with the introduction of the leu as the new currency; the third was the repatriation of company members and of part of the Transylvanian Hungarian population, that is, a portion of the audience. Szabó himself spoke about all this in the interview he gave in August 1921, at the nadir of the theatre's deepest crisis. Szabó acknowledged his own responsibility, but he also blamed the 'extraordinary circumstances' of the post-war period for the company's situation. He considered the beginning of the sequence of financial difficulties to lie in the fact that, with the cessation of the Hungarian Actors' Association's authority in Transylvania, several of his actors simply blackmailed him in order to force higher salaries:

'The most frequent complaint is that the company paid salaries beyond its means, and that we maintained an excessively large staff. My comment on this is that in the summers of 1919 and 1920, when I renewed the contracts, the Transylvanian and Banat Actors' Association did not yet exist, and I was in fact at the mercy of my members' overheated demands. The moment someone noticed that the audience had begun to favour them, or that they had become downright indispensable, they immediately demanded a salary increase. What could I do? After the separation from the Budapest centre, the contracts became blank scraps of paper on the part of the members, and if I did not meet their demands, however unjustified, they simply left. On several occasions I let the person go,

but in such cases the programme was so disrupted that there was scarcely any revenue.

These frequent resignations brought about – it sounds rather strange – the overstaffing. A portion of the members were constantly prepared to depart, and out of caution I had to secure substitutes so as not to be taken by surprise’ (*Tükör*, 21 August 1921, p. 3).

With the disappearance of the authority capable of holding actors accountable for breach of contract, Pál Szabó – by his own account – found himself in a trap situation; his previously dominant position as theatre director thus shifted into a subordinate one. He became dependent on his own employees. We may assume that there was a clique within the company whose members placed Szabó under constant pressure (‘a portion of the members were constantly prepared to depart’), while others left even in the middle of the season, despite having agreed to different salaries in their contracts. With the sudden loss of contractual validity, the director – who had previously held genuine authority – was forced into overspending by actors who, owing to his legally paralysed position, now found themselves in a superior power position: ‘In the absence of the Actors’ Association, I could not reduce the high salaries forced upon me last summer, the overheads were enormous, while the revenues were slight’ (*Ibid.*).

Szabó learned his lesson: following the re-establishment in Romania of the Transylvanian and Banat Actors’ Association, that is, the supervisory body, he reduced both salaries and the number of company members. Yet Szabó did not regard this as the origin of the theatre’s situation; in his view the catastrophe – to use his own term – was caused not by an internal but by an external shift of the centre of power, namely the succession of economic difficulties arising from the Romanian takeover:

‘The crisis was in fact not caused by the high salaries and the large staff, for these were more or less present in the first two seasons as well, when the theatre’s financial situation appeared fairly favourable. The catastrophe began with the currency conversion, last August, when the audience in Brassó suddenly became reticent, and we ended the last third of the summer season with empty houses’ (Ibid.).

For the Brassó season, which lasted from 1 June to 1 October, Pál Szabó obtained the concession in May 1921 (*Tükör*, 8 May 1921, p. 2), but the season resulted in a catastrophic financial collapse (*Tükör*, 21 August 1921, p. 3).

The director’s position of power weakened further: through internal conflicts, external pressures, and financial setbacks he found himself in situations in which he became the victim of circumstances, and this form of vulnerability could no longer be counterbalanced by his legendary ability to secure patronage. He became entangled in a web of power relations that exceeded his strength and possibilities, and the ensuing consequences and power dynamics drove the Marosvásárhely National Theatre into an increasingly hopeless position in its struggle for survival.

Szabó, moreover, did not consider his own situation exceptional, and within the framework of minority theatre, which had been placed in an extremely difficult position after the change of sovereignty, he did not regard himself – in his own words – as an isolated phenomenon. As he stated:

‘The companies in Arad and Szatmár are also living through critical moments, although those are old, seasoned theatres. And then there are the other Transylvanian companies. The Cluj – Kolozsvár Hungarian theatre owes its undisturbed operation solely to Director Janovics’s immense financial sacrifices. In my opinion – concluded Director Szabó – the only

possible solution would be to base the company on a strong joint-stock association. As for myself, I face objective criticism calmly. Three difficult years lie behind me...’ (*Tükör*, 21 August 1921, p. 3).

We do not know whether Pál Szabó mentioned Jenő Janovics’s name deliberately, given that his relationship with the Kolozsvár theatre director – who at the time was the head of the Actors’ Association – would later prove far from harmonious. What he already saw clearly, however – and what he admitted in the lines quoted – was that from this point on he would no longer be able, on his own, either to maintain or to save the first Marosvásárhely National Theatre that he had founded.

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Roland Kelemen

THE RE-ENACTMENT OF THE EVENTS OF THE 1989  
ROMANIAN REVOLUTION IN THE PERFORMANCE  
*ANUL DISPĂRUT. 1989* (THE VANISHED YEAR: 1989)

Abstract: Re-enactment denotes the meticulous reconstruction of past events, often realised at their original locations and under comparable conditions. Within the arts, however, re-enactment does not simply reproduce historical occurrences; rather, it revisits past moments whose significance persists in the present. The Romanian Revolution of 1989 has been addressed only sporadically in theatrical form, particularly during the 1990s, when Romanian society was still negotiating the legacy of the communist regime. The play and performance *Anul dispărut. 1989* (The Vanished Year: 1989), written by Peca Ștefan and directed by Ana Mărgineanu, examines the prelude to and aftermath of the 1989 Revolution through personal recollections, with the family serving as the principal conduit to the past. Although not a strict historical re-enactment, the production employs techniques associated with living history, reconstructing everyday life and the subjective memories of 1989. By integrating oral history and first-person testimony, it foregrounds the emotional and political complexities inherent in remembering the revolution.

The re-enactment of an event denotes its most detailed possible repetition, staged at the original location and under the same conditions as when it first occurred. This method is widely employed, including for the reconstruction of criminal acts. According to the German media theorist Inke Arns, artistic re-enactment does not signify the performative repeti-

tion or restaging of historical events; rather, it re-enacts those 'events (often traumatic ones) [...] that are viewed as very important for the present' (Inke 2007, p. 2). According to Mónika Dánél, corporeal/atmospheric and acoustic memory likewise play a significant role in the interpretation of past events. The essence of corporeal memory lies in the fact that the body preserves the traces of past experiences even when the conscious mind no longer recalls them. In historical re-enactments the participants embody the experiential dimension of past events, enabling the audience to engage with their emotional and physical aspects. Within the context of re-enacting historical events, acoustic and atmospheric memory can recreate the mood, soundscape, visual characteristics, and constituent elements of the past, drawing spectators into the environment of the event (Dánél 2017, p. 101).

In Romania of the 1990s, in the wake of political and social transformation, the number of artistic works that addressed the revolution or re-enacted and recalled its events was exceedingly low. In the period following the collapse of communism, Romanian society sought to understand and work through the years of oppression; however, this process unfolded only slowly and gradually.

Until the 2000s, scarcely any dramatic texts or theatrical productions were created in Romania that examined the events of the revolution or their consequences. The construction of the new political system, the processes of social transformation, and the formation of new cultural orientations all claimed the attention of the community. As a result, Romania in the period between the 1990s and the early 2000s lacked the broad spectrum of theatrical works that might have engaged more profoundly with the still highly dispersed events of December 1989.

The events can be approached and interpreted from multiple perspectives, and the diversity of narratives and interpretations refines and shapes contemporary remembrance. At

the same time, even more than thirty years later, we remain far from a full understanding of the historical picture.

The drama and performance *Anul dispărut. 1989* (The Vanished Year: 1989) that I analyse relies primarily on the antecedents and effects of the events of the revolution, and in particular on personal recollections, supplemented by references to the occurrences preceding the December events; it also centres on the family as a mode of connection with the past. Theatrical productions and dramas that examine the events of the revolution frequently present the interweaving of family relations and national representations through the memories of family members. Thus the family occupies a prominent role both in the process of remembrance and in that of artistic re-enactment.

The drama and performance I examine proceeds from the premise that a deeper history lies behind the events, a history whose potential understanding is possible primarily through individuals, specifically through oral and living history, since the communist–socialist era – marked by political oppression, widespread suffering, and significant loss of life – left an enduring imprint on citizens and, beyond this, on the country's collective memory. Although this production does not fall entirely within the category of historical re-enactment, as it does not strive for the most exact representation of the revolutionary events, it may be associated rather with living history – insofar as one distinguishes the two practices – for it concentrates on the re-enactment of everyday life surrounding a given period or event (Schneider 2011, p. 2), drawing on the memories of the participants in the performance.

The events of the revolution were first written about by Caryl Churchill as early as March 1990, not long after the execution of the Ceaușescu couple, in her drama *Mad Forest*. The British playwright travelled to Bucharest together with the choreographer Ian Spink, the playwright David Lan, the director-teacher Mark Wing-Davey, and students of the Central School of Speech and Drama in London in order to examine the Ro-

manian events more closely three months after the revolution and the execution. In collaboration with students of the Ion Luca Caragiale National Academy (now University) of Theatre and Film Arts, they subsequently created the piece, which premiered in September 1990 at the Bucharest National Theatre.

In creating Caryl Churchill's drama, the collaborative working method involving both actors and civilians was preferred (Gobert 2014, p. 152), a practice for which there had been no precedent in Romania prior to 1989 (Boros 2021, p. 136).<sup>1</sup> In addition to the participation of the Bucharest theatre students in the working process, their families hosted the British students, who thereby gained even more detailed insight into everyday life in Romania. The workshop relied on various acting techniques (improvisation, re-enactment), interviews conducted in the streets, and ethnographic observations (Gobert 2014, p. 152). Upon returning to London, Churchill wrote *Mad Forest*, her three-act drama addressing the events before, during, and after the revolution, in scarcely three weeks.

After Caryl Churchill, it was only in the new millennium (Popovici 2019) that dramas and performances began to appear in Romania which thematised the 1989 revolution as an event of political and historical significance.

The playwright Peca Ștefan and the director Ana Mărgineanu created several consecutive series of performances together (Peca 2019, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> They returned to the events of the revolution with the drama *Anul dispărut. 1989 – originally 1989*.

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<sup>1</sup> Boros Kinga, in connection with the 2002 launch of the dramAcum competition in Romania, also explains that the selected playwright participated in 'a play development-type process in which the text was adapted for the stage jointly with actors, a director, and a dramaturg/playwright, the playwright was elevated from a "desk writer" to a stage author. This working style [...] represents a major shift from the pre-1989 practice, in which the finished text, that is, the text completed and closed by the writer, [...] appeared on stage without alteration' (Boros 2021, p. 136).

<sup>2</sup> Peca Ștefan and Ana Mărgineanu, in their performance cycle *Despre România, numai de bine* (About Romania, Only Good Things), examined the cities of Bucharest, Baia Mare, Piatra Neamț, Târgoviște, Sfântu Gheor-

*Kilometrul zero* (1989: Zero Kilometre) – which premiered on 19 December 2015 on the main stage of the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest as the first part of the *Anul dispărut* trilogy.<sup>3</sup>

The working method characteristic of the two creators involves jointly researching the topic to be addressed and conducting interviews; consequently, the process of text creation is closely intertwined with the shaping of the directorial conception. In this way Peca does not follow the classical methodology of playwriting, but rather employs techniques of collective text creation. As in their previous works, in the case of *Anul dispărut. 1989* as well they focused on the subjectivity of a group, in this instance the theatre workers' recollections concerning the Romanian Revolution.

The creative team concentrated on the year 1989, taking into account its political and historical significance as the transitional period marking the collapse of communism and the beginning of democracy. The integration and dramatisation of subjective memories emerged from a thorough, in-depth research process that incorporated personal recollections and real (family) stories drawn from interviews conducted with the actors, creators, and technical staff participating in the production. These memories and stories were later transformed into fiction during the process of creating the performance. In this way the direction subordinated itself to the dramatic text, since a comparison of the drama with the performance text reveals only minimal alterations and divergences.

As the title itself suggests, alongside the events of the revolution they examined primarily what memories the creators and technicians actually possessed of the entire period of 1989 (Peca 2019, p. 7), since that year was closely bound to the events of December, and memories scarcely focus on the

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ghe, and Timișoara between 2009 and 2015 through a series of productions based on the accounts of the local inhabitants (Peca 2019, p. 5).

<sup>3</sup>The remaining two parts of the trilogy are *Anul dispărut. 1996* (2016, Teatrul Tineretului, Piatra Neamț) and *Anul dispărut. 200/7* (2017, Teatrul Mic, Bucharest).

preceding months; the January–November period may thus be regarded as ‘vanished’ (Peca 2019, p. 7). Peca Ștefan and Ana Mărgineanu shaped the ‘small history’ of these eleven months (Peca 2019, p. 7) by arranging a series of stories that follow a chronological order in time, yet remain distinct from one another.

In the prologue-like opening scene, the actors introduce (perform) the entire creative team of the production by name, responding to the questions of how old each was, where they lived in 1989, and whether they took part in the revolution – including those who were too young to remember but know the events from family accounts. Before all this, the Moderator informs the audience of the production’s aim: ‘This evening we are reviving the memories of our team’s artistic and technical members from 1989’ (Peca 2019, p. 7). This is followed by one of the actors, Viorel Cojanu, stepping forward and ‘re-enacting’ Nicolae Ceaușescu’s New Year’s message of 1989, parodying the former dictator’s characteristic intonation, so familiar to everyone.

The presentation of the eleven months of 1989 is not restricted to historical re-enactment; concrete historical data are mentioned only incidentally at the beginnings of the scenes, serving merely to underpin the reality of the events. The drama and the performance are divided into three scenes entitled *Istoria* (History), in which the creators’ personal memories, and the questioning of their factual accuracy (Popovici 2016), are placed in a more prominent position. At the same time, the performance is supplemented by two so-called parallel scenes, in which only those spectators may participate who are selected on the basis of numbered tickets received before the performance.

The first part, the scene entitled *Istoria (Parte I)* (History [Part I]), covers January–February, when such historical events took place as the legalisation of the Warsaw opposition, the Petrova revolt, the arrest of the authors of the samizdat *România*, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

The performance, however, does not present or re-enact these events; instead, it engages more deeply with occurrences that may be regarded as more significant for the theatre: the rehearsal process of the production *Fără Aprobare* (Without Permission) at the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest, whose lead actress – and likewise one of the performers in the present production – was Maria Ploae. The basic situation arises from the fact that disciplinary proceedings were initiated against Gheorghe Visu at the beginning of 1989, since during a performance in which he appeared only in the first part he went to the Philharmonic and was therefore absent from the curtain call. The factual accuracy of the recollections of Visu (who is likewise one of the actors in the production) and Ploae is called into question, a point further heightened by the directorial device whereby Visu and Ploae do not play themselves, although they are present in the scene almost throughout. In this scene Gheorghe Visu is played by his younger colleague, Viorel Cojanu, while Maria Ploae is played by Isabela Neamțu; Visu portrays the theatre's director at the time, Dinu Săraru, and the stage manager is played by Maria Ploae. Stepping out of their roles, Visu and Maria occasionally interject with '*Fals!*' ('False!'), indicating that the re-enactment does not correspond to the reality of their memories, thereby rendering the re-enacted event even more obscure and even more relative. In this instance the theatre appears not merely as a medium presenting events, but also as an active participant and commentator in the present shaping of historical memory.

The second part opens with the historical data for the period between March and June, such as Liviu Babeș's shooting in Brașov, Ana Blandiana's letter addressed to Ceaușescu, and the Deva manifesto. Here too, greater emphasis is placed on the reconstruction of a fictitious event: a meeting of a school association, the 'Club of the Bold',<sup>4</sup> founded with the aim of

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<sup>4</sup> 'Clubul Cutezătorii. Inspirat de revista Cutezătorii.' = 'Club of the Bold. Inspired by the magazine *Cutezătorii* [The Bold]' – quotation from the

enabling pupils to organise independently of the school and the Pioneer Organisation. While on stage the schoolchildren Simina (Ilinca Manolache), Alexandru 3 (Viorel Cojanu), and Grasu<sup>5</sup> Răducu<sup>7</sup> (Toma Cuzin) hold a meeting together with four spectators invited onto the stage, in parallel a former competitive athlete (Mihaela Rădescu) and the party secretary Apostescu (Gheorghe Visu), seated in the auditorium, conduct a parents' meeting in the presence of Comrade Ghizdeanu, the form teacher (Isabela Neamțu), who appears alternately in the events on stage and in the auditorium. The two narrative planes are connected by the fact that both address the same event, albeit separated from one another to some extent in space and time. The topic initially focuses on how Alexandru 3 has come into possession of his Mickey Mouse pencil case, Levi's jeans, Adidas shoes, Parker pen, butterfly eraser, and Turkish geometry set, and, at home, a video player with *Pink Panther*, *Terminator*, and similar cassettes – all objects that could be obtained either from the West (and thus illegally) or only at prices far beyond the reach of the average person. The scene appears to be a criminal re-enactment, since when Alexandru 3's mother lies that she received the video player as a competitive sports prize, Alexandru 3 proudly tells his companions that his mother brought it from abroad. When they begin to taunt him that his mother is connected with the Securitate, he starts insisting on the opposite, arguing that his mother tells Ceaușescu jokes and listens to Radio Free Europe. In order to prove that neither he nor his mother have anything to do with the Securitate, Simina forces Alexandru 3 to bring them something from the construction site, promising that they will befriend him if he does so. At the end of the scene, however, it is revealed that his mother has not seen her son since, and no one is willing to help in finding him. As before, the central

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drama. *Cutezători* was a children's and youth weekly in communist Romania.

<sup>5</sup> Meaning: 'Fat'.

organising principle of the scene is not the analysis of the events but rather the constant fear of informers or members of the Securitate, the acknowledgement of people's unjustified disappearances, and the collective silence that entirely shaped the public atmosphere at the time. The spectator, too, can easily find points of connection, since many are likely to retain memories of similar cases.

In the final, third, and perhaps longest part, the events of July–December are likewise listed as historical coordinate points (the Warsaw Pact session held in Bucharest, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ceaușescu's 're-election' in November, etc.). In contrast, the focus here too falls on subjective memories, and the story of a family is recounted. The seventeen-year-old Luminița (Ilinca Manolache) wishes to flee abroad with her poet partner, Filip, crossing the Danube, because she does not want to raise her unborn child in this country. Her elder sister, Nicoleta (Isabela Neamțu), and her brother-in-law, Tase (Cuzin Toma), and later her father (Gheorghe Visu) and mother (Maria Ploae), try to dissuade her from doing so. In the end Filip is betrayed by Luminița's father and arrested, leaving the two-month-pregnant girl at home, where she is, moreover, forced by her family to undergo an illegal abortion. Beyond the memory image of this (fictional) family, this segment also unfolds the mechanism that constituted one of the important supports for the survival of the communist regime: adaptation and the voluntary informing on others in the interest of one's own survival. At the end of the scene the only piece of recorded music in the production is heard: the theme song of *Good Night, Children* (*Лека нощ, деца*), also known as *The Sun* (*СЪНЧО*), a Bulgarian children's television programme popular chiefly in southern Romania,<sup>6</sup> titled *I Am the Sun* (*Аз съм СЪНЧО*).

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<sup>6</sup> Before 1989 the television programme could also be watched in southern Romania, where the channel Bulgaria 1 was accessible via terrestrial transmission. At that time the Romanian Television broadcast cartoons for only five minutes at weekends.

After the darkness, Mihaela Rădescu steps forward from the back of the stage, having just returned from one of the parallel scenes, and addresses the audience as her friends and as the ‘revolutionaries’. From her monologue it emerges that the twenty-six-year-old Luminița, her closest friend, was shot in the street not far from her on 23 December 1989. Here Rădescu appears not to be playing a role – although we may be aware that all this is fiction based on memory – but to be conveying her own testimony, in which she explains that she bears not only the burden of her own lies, but that of others as well: ‘But the biggest problem is not that I lied. The problem is that I allowed so many others to lie. And look where this country has ended up’ (Peca 2019, p. 72).

Following this, projected montage images of the December sequence of events appear in the background, while Cuzin Toma, gesticulating with his left hand, forcefully emphasises the lisping, fragmented sentences of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s final speech, which are continuously interrupted by the Moderator, played by Ilinca Manolache, addressing the audience with the question: ‘What were you dreaming about on Wednesday, 20 December 1989?’ (Peca 2019, p. 73). Responses come exclusively from the actors, who at intervals hum the first two, readily recognisable notes of Romania’s national anthem, *Deșteaptă-te, române*. In the final scene, entitled *December*, there is no precise, verbatim reconstruction of the events of the revolution; rather, the attempt is to evoke the atmosphere of chaos and fear. The performers build a barricade out of the set’s furniture, while in the background the Ceaușescu couple (Cuzin Toma and Isabela Neamțu), standing and clinging to one another, cry out in despair the sentences spoken during their trial. The key line of the scene is also uttered here: first chanted by the dictator couple, then taken up and repeated by all in a refrain-like manner: ‘Ask those who have power!’ (Peca 2019, pp. 76–77). As a concluding summary, the Moderator confronts the audience with the statement: ‘26 years later... 27 years later... 28, 29, 30 years later... The question remains

open for those in power' (Peca 2019, p. 77). In doing so, the production suggests that its aim is not the finding of answers, but collective confrontation with historical trauma. The creators, however, avoid a tragic ending; therefore Gheorghe Visu, in the form of an epilogue, recounts the story of Nae Gavrilă, a glass-eyed construction worker who, in his joy at the news of Ceaușescu's death, hanged himself from a radiator pipe, leaving behind a note reading: 'I am glad he is dead! I am going after him so that I can tell him to go to hell!' (Peca 2019, p. 78). He then asks the spectators whether Nae Gavrilă was the most foolish or the most intelligent – a question for which he does not expect an answer, but through which he encourages the audience to reflect along the lines of an ostensibly simple, even clichéd, open question.

The creators also sought to render the shaping of a subjective, shared story even more intimate and immediate through the direct address of the spectators. They attempted to combine the classical *Guckkastenbühne* with the form of participatory theatre, since before the performance numbered tickets were distributed to the audience, which were drawn at particular points during the production. The spectators whose numbers were selected were addressed with specific questions at times – for example: 'How old were you, where were you, and did you take part in the revolution?' (Peca 2019, p. 21), through which the spectators could place their own memories alongside those of the creators in this retrospective performance. At least, this may have been the creators' intention, since in the performance recording made available to me by the author, only one of the three spectators addressed actually participates in the first interaction, stating that she took part in the revolution. The story recounted by the spectator named Anca<sup>7</sup> does not alter or add to the unfolding of the performance. The actors show no curiosity beyond this; they

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<sup>7</sup> I picked up some leaflets from the ground and ended up in the office, where I was a young engineer. My boss said: "Oh, Anca, your mother would be very worried and angry if she knew that you had taken those

thank her quickly and reflexively, then continue with the performance. At two other points in the production, however, the selection of three or four numbers offered the spectators – in this case now seeming to be genuine participants in the performance – the opportunity to take part in a ‘parallel scene’ corresponding to the main plot on the main stage, that is, to the first and third parts, in alternative spaces of the theatre (or outside the theatre) (Peca 2019, pp. 7–8). Recordings of these scenes were, understandably, not made; from the press and from the dramatic text we can deduce what this very small number of spectators saw at each performance. If we take the drama as our basis, no genuine participation takes place: none of the spectators is given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the performance or to influence its course. Consequently, these brief addresses and ‘parallel scenes’ remain closed-ended interactions (Cziboly 2017, pp. 2–5).

In the first such parallel scene, entitled *Lizard*, a secretary named Zizi (Ilinca Manolache) leads four spectators into the office of Comrade Victoria (Mihaela Rădescu), where they are offered coffee and Snagov-brand cigarettes. Victoria then gives a short lecture on ‘Comrade Aristotle’, on theatre, on catharsis, and on the ‘lizard’, which, as the character explains, ‘smuggles itself in among the metaphors’ and enables spectators to understand the political allusions beneath the text (Peca 2019, p. 38). In effect, what takes place is the recruitment of the spectator-participants, since Victoria urges them to sign a ‘collaborator’s contract’, the fulfilment of which allows them to leave freely, and they even receive instant coffee to take home. The participants are thus seemingly forced into a real decision-making situation, and the drama operates with both possibilities: if the spectators sign, they are allowed to go home (that is, return to the main auditorium); if they do not, they are presumably still permitted to leave, although this is not made ex-

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pamphlets” – quotation from the performance recording. Source: Ștefan Peca’s private collection.

plicit in the text. However, the drama instructs the performer playing Comrade Victoria to threaten them: 'Come with me. This will not do. You will have further opportunity to reflect on what you have done' (Peca 2019, p. 39). It is clear from the text as well that the dramaturgically closed interaction is fully aware of the spectators' possible reactions – that is, they are not really able to speak, and they obey every instruction.

In the second parallel scene, entitled *Lie* – perhaps the only one set in the present – Marius (Viorel Cojanu) leads three spectators, likewise selected by lottery, to a car where his mother (Mihaela Rădescu) is already waiting for them. The spectators are placed in the role of the (silent) grandmother, and while they drive through the streets of Bucharest (Galer 2016), Marius and his mother discuss the events of the revolution – through the subjectivity of the mother and the grandmother. According to the drama, the grandmother remains silent throughout, but, as Marius recounts, his 'true' knowledge of the revolution comes from his grandmother, who urges her grandson to ask his mother about Luminița. The mother initially lies, but eventually recounts Luminița's full story: that after her abortion her family quarrelled frequently, that her father was even imprisoned, and that she was then shot in front of the University (the mother also points out the place, presumably at the very moment when, thanks to good timing, they are passing the location),<sup>8</sup> and it is revealed that Marius's father is Filip. Returning to the theatre, the mother steps onto the stage with a microphone in her hand and confesses before the audience seated in the main auditorium that she had lied throughout and had allowed others to lie as well. The car scene may also be interpreted as the younger generation – Marius – who were not even born in 1989, calling the then highly active generation to account for having made everything related to

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<sup>8</sup> MOTHER: Do you see that place? On the other side of the road. Right in front of the University? MARIUS: Yes. MOTHER: That is where she was shot. (...) – quotation from the drama.

the revolution, and especially its consequences, a taboo. Overall, it can be stated that these two scenes did not necessarily direct attention to interactivity or participation, but rather to exclusivity: the selected, very small number of spectators were fortunate enough to witness scenes that the rest of the audience perhaps never would.

In the creation of the performance text, the ‘small memories’ (Peca 2019, p. 7) played a major role, facilitating what is known as ‘atmospheric remembering’, since a significant proportion of the spectators were able to connect more easily through the mechanisms of nostalgia. The set and costume design by Anda Pop also contributed to this, as the visual world sought to reproduce the material reality of the state-socialist era: lacquered brown furniture, small white porcelain figurines in the display cabinet, the Persian wall carpet, the white lace on the table, the green Pegas bicycle, the Pioneer uniform, and the key worn around the neck. In certain scenes, period black-and-white footage is projected (video design: Cinty Ionescu), which merely underpins the atmosphere of the scenes and complements the stage action. Overall, the set likewise has only a signifying function; it does not strive to create complete historical authenticity, nor to offer anything visually more innovative or unconventional than earlier (or subsequent) productions that address this historical period. At the same time, the sparse soundscape of the performance – the single recorded Bulgarian children’s song and the humming of the first two notes of the Romanian national anthem – likewise does not aim to evoke more than nostalgia or to go beyond presenting the nuances of the era.

The performance was followed by two further productions in Piatra Neamţ and then again at the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest, where Peca Ştefan and Ana Mărgineanu worked with a similar mode of composition and technique to address the lesser-known events of individual years (1996 and 2007). Beyond this, as part of the reception history of the *Anul dis-părut trilogy*, one may also mention Carmen Lidia Vidu’s multi-

part performance series *Jurnal de România* (Diary of Romania), which likewise treated real, local events and stories using similar techniques in several cities (Sfântu Gheorghe, Constanța, Timișoara, and Bucharest) between 2016 and 2020. Both series offer the audience the possibility of establishing a personal connection with past events and of reinterpreting them, even from other perspectives. Their success can be understood through the fact that the Romanian events of 1989 are still characterised by disinformation; thus acoustic and atmospheric memory may provide firmer ground for the receiving audience. By engaging with the physical and sensory aspects of past events, spectators may be able to comprehend the complexities of historical re-enactments and to form their own interpretations on the basis of the embodied memories (Dánél 2017, p. 95).

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Krisztián Kiliti

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OPERETTA GENRE  
IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SEKLER THEATRE  
IN TÂRGU-MUREŞ, EXAMINED THROUGH THE STAGING  
OF IMRE KÁLMÁN'S *THE CSARDAS PRINCESS*

Abstract: *The Csardas Princess*, premiered on 8 June 1946, was the eleventh production of the newly established Sekler Theatre in Târgu-Mureş. In the theatre's inaugural season – a theatre that would later develop into a pronounced art theatre – the repertoire was dominated by works by Kálmán and Lehár. Both the operetta genre and *The Csardas Princess* already had an extensive performance history in the city. Miklós Tompa, one of the founders of the Sekler Theatre, was undoubtedly aware of the work's local and Transylvanian significance and popularity. Nevertheless, operetta as a genre was incompatible with his uncompromising artistic ambitions; it is therefore unsurprising that Kálmán's most renowned operetta returned to the stage almost seventy years later at the National Theatre of Târgu-Mureş, in a production by the Tompa Miklós Company, the theatre's Hungarian ensemble.

Miklós Tompa,<sup>1</sup> the founding director of the Sekler Theatre in Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş), established in 1946,

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<sup>1</sup> Miklós Tompa was a Transylvanian Hungarian theatre director and theatre manager. Following the Second World War, the introduction and artistically substantive refinement of the aesthetics of grand realism on stage in Transylvanian Hungarian theatrical practice is associated with his name. The Sekler Theatre in Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureş), founded in collaboration with Baron János Kemény, became the workshop of this distinctive formal idiom through the productions of Miklós Tompa

proved to be not only an ambitious theatre professional but also a politician who understood the emerging socio-political power structures and was able to mobilise them to secure political and communal recognition for the institution. In the two years following the end of the Second World War, he both recognised the logic of the Romanian Communist Party's consolidation of power and, by analogy, shaped his repertoire policy accordingly, whose cornerstone was the operetta, which ensured a broad audience base.

The operetta *Csárdáskirálynő* (The Csardas Princess) analysed here, which premiered on 8 June 1946, was the eleventh premiere of the newly established Sekler Theatre in Marosvásárhely and, within that season, the fifth operetta to be staged. It followed the theatre's opening performance of 10 March, *A mosoly országa* (The Land of Smiles), and three further operettas: Ferenc Lehár's *Luxemburg grófja* (The Count of Luxembourg), Imre Kálmán's *Marica grófnő* (Countess Maritza), and Mihály Krausz and István Békeffy's *Eső után köpönyeg* (Cry over Spilt Milk; Kántor and Kötő, 1994). The repertoire of the theatre's very first season was, in fact, dominated by the works of Imre Kálmán and Ferenc Lehár. These operettas, composed in the final period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in the years following its dissolution (*Luxemburg grófja*: 1910; *Csárdáskirálynő*: 1915; *Marica grófnő*: 1924; *A mosoly országa*: 1929), already at the time of their creation enabled communal reflection on the changing political order and the social tensions accompanying it, as well as their consolidated resolution, through the enjoyment of the stage work.

By virtue of its nostalgic interpretation, the operetta thus became an instrument in the hands of politics, for the past presented on stage – the world of the Monarchy, from which, on the level of actual politics,

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and, by the 1950s, its ensemble had developed into an artistically acclaimed company recognised throughout the country.

they wished to hear nothing and from which they distanced themselves politically – appeared there in a form that evoked this past yet represented it as consciously nostalgic kitsch, caricatured in such a way that the spectator would finally lose all desire for that earlier form of state, which had been abolished without consulting the people’ (Csáky 1999, p. 259).

Although Móric Csáky speaks of the twilight of the operettas of the Silver Age following the end of the First World War, his observations can also be projected onto the conditions in Romania after the conclusion of the Second World War. In 1944, the Romanian political leadership, which had reached an accommodation with the Soviets and withdrawn from the war through a coup d’état, achieved the dismantling of the borders redrawn under the Second Vienna Award of 1940 – borders that had reincorporated into Hungary precisely those predominantly Hungarian-speaking territories corresponding to parts of the former Monarchy – and the reassertion of Romanian sovereignty over Northern Transylvania.<sup>2</sup> All this was followed, after the Romanian–Hungarian armistice agreement of September, by the occupation of the region by the Red Army and the withdrawal of the Romanian state apparatus (Romsics 2018). The Hungarians of Transylvania therefore had to confront the sombre consequences of the repetition of history, which clearly – and now after yet another world war – gave space to a nostalgic mood, to a sense of detachment from contemporary realities, to a longing for the past, all of which the operetta genre fully satisfied.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Treaty of Trianon, ratified on 4 June 1920, Transylvania, which had previously formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was annexed to Romania. In 1940, as a result of the so-called Second Vienna Award, the northern regions of Transylvania were returned to Hungary. In 1944, the borders defined in the Treaty of Trianon were reinstated.

In March 1945 the Red Army did withdraw from Northern Transylvania, making way for the reorganisation of the Romanian administration, yet Soviet influence grew ever stronger. The monarch was compelled to approve the formation of a government by Petru Groza, who enjoyed substantial support from the Communist Party (Romsics 2018). This was a crucial development for the Hungarian minority in Transylvania – or, according to the decision of the new government, now no longer a minority but a nationality – since the Groza government ‘promised full equality to the nationalities living in Romania’ (Novák 2008, p. 205).

As part of the Groza government’s policy, which proclaimed ‘the “fraternal coexistence of the Romanian and the Hungarian people” and the friendly relations between Romania and Hungary’ (Romsics 2018, p. 368), the government indeed implemented – in comparison with the previous political order – significant concessions in the fields of administration, education and – as the circumstances of the founding of the Sekler Theatre also demonstrate – culture (Novák 2008). By 1946 a seemingly paradoxical situation had emerged with regard to the political orientation of the Hungarian population, for the sympathy directed towards the Romanian communist leadership, which had immediately annulled the results of the Second Vienna Award, simultaneously constituted the key to the survival of the nationality

[...] in a situation in which, for all those Hungarians living as a minority who were of an age capable of making decisions – that is, were in a position requiring decisions in 1944–1945 – cooperation with communism, representing the practice of Stalinism, was not merely a theoretical thought experiment, nor even a moral question, but the precondition for taking part in the everyday workings of the majority states, that is, for staying alive. In other words, it was a necessity. [...] Minority Hungarians either attempted to co-

operate with the Communist Parties of the majority nations, or, within moments, they had no possibility whatsoever of securing participation in the decisions concerning their own fate, and they would simply have been excluded from the radical and rapid process of creating the new society' (György 2013, n.p.).

The interests of the Party and, together with it, of the government (namely the creation of an increasingly broad social base with a view to establishing future state socialism) were served to a considerable extent by those benefactions that reached the ever-expanding ranks of the Hungarian nationality gathered within the organisation primarily through the Hungarian People's Alliance, and that thereby effectively re-directed ever broader social strata towards the ideological system of communism and, in parallel, towards the government. All the more so, given that in the period under discussion the membership of the Hungarian People's Alliance – which represented the political interests of the Hungarian population – reached 48,000 in Maros County (Novák 2005).<sup>3</sup>

The Groza government's permissive attitude was likewise discernible in its approach to the question of founding the Sekler Theatre and to the theatre-organising activities of Miklós Tompa and János Kemény. As theatre director, Miklós Tompa regarded it as essential to secure the institutional standing of the organisation he directed (also on an artistic and intellectual level) within the emerging power structure. He repeatedly emphasised that he did not intend to base the future Székely Land theatre on private capital:

'The age of private enterprises has, however, come to an end; the matter of the theatre is a public matter. Theatres must be elevated to the rank of public insti-

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<sup>3</sup> For comparison: in 1948, the population of Marosvásárhely was 47,043, of whom 34,943 were Hungarian.

tutions. Organised society can no longer relinquish its intellectual weapons. With this awareness the Salamon Ernő Athenaeum initiated the necessary steps on behalf of the theatre. It undertook the organisation of a new, healthy, progressive permanent theatre... [...] We are convinced that the government's favourable attitude, while striving to ensure the peaceful and undisturbed life of the peoples living here, will not withhold its moral and material support from the theatre' (Marosi 1981, p. 193).

Appeals aimed at arousing the government's sympathy,<sup>4</sup> together with the concrete steps taken in accordance with this intention (namely Miklós Tompa's journeys to Bucharest and the advocacy pursued through the Hungarian People's Alliance), undoubtedly also won the approval of the government which shortly thereafter took the theatre's cause under its wing, despite the fact that, alongside the capital of contemporary financiers from the entrepreneurial sphere, the theatre's establishment was presumably supported by substantial financial contributions from the politically less representative baron, János Kemény, who 'still had a property in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) that could be converted into cash, so that they might at least begin the organising and make the initial purchases...' (Szentimrei 1957, p. 84).

In effect, at the local level Miklós Tompa applied the model of the state's political mechanism in the first years of

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<sup>4</sup> The state's leniency presumably also derived from the fact that the government could find nothing objectionable in the repertoire policy of the Sekler Theatre's opening and subsequent seasons, since it was dominated by tolerated and politically ideologically harmless operettas from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which were particularly popular in Marosvásárhely. Furthermore, the government's considerable tolerance may also be explained by the circumstance that communist aspirations were seeking opportunities for expansion in a country whose form of state remained a constitutional monarchy until 30 December 1947.

the Sekler Theatre and thereby legitimised his newly founded theatre not only in the eyes of the authorities but also for the narrower social milieu, that is, the audience of Marosvásárhely. Just as the provisions of the Petru Groza government, which offered considerable concessions, gradually brought ever larger masses over to the side of the Romanian Communist Party (Novák 2008), so Miklós Tompa, who was fully aware of Marosvásárhely's extensive musical-theatre tradition and the theatrical taste of its audience, sought through the large number of operetta productions in his repertoire policy to win over the spectators of Marosvásárhely. For the director, the first two operetta seasons of the theatre – which from the outset was organised with the intention of being an art theatre – were, of course, a form of expedient solution, since the composition of the newly assembled company did not allow for the high-quality production of non-musical drama: the theatre employed artists with a background in musical theatre, and the organisation of the non-musical drama ensemble was still in progress. Thus, in the early years of the Sekler Theatre, the established performance tradition of operetta figures popular throughout Romania met the performances of Marosvásárhely's musical-theatre practitioners, who possessed a professional background and a history as itinerant actors.

‘Most of the well-known actors did not return to Transylvania after the change of sovereignty, and those who did had already signed new engagements. Moreover, the official employment and travel arrangements of the seventeen actors previously contracted by Tompa – now considered Hungarian actors – also proved a difficult task. In this constrained situation he relied, on the one hand, on the well-known actors of the companies in Kolozsvár, Nagyvárad and Szatmár, and, on the other, drew extensively on local resources: the amateur ensembles and the actors with local ties’ (Ungvári Zrínyi 2021, p. 29).

The operetta *The Csardas Princess*, premiered on 8 June 1946, did not, in musical-theatre terms, arrive in a void in Marosvásárhely – nor did *The Land of Smiles*, which debuted as the opening performance. The roots of Marosvásárhely's operetta culture are linked, on the one hand, to the name of Pál Szabó, who in 1918 received a concession from the city to establish a company.

The company organised by Pál Szabó – composed predominantly of actors from Debrecen and Kolozsvár, as well as performers returning from military service and captivity – performed operas, operettas and dramatic works, and possessed a large orchestra, a chorus and three conductors (Szentimrei 1957). It is therefore unsurprising that by the early 1920s the profile of the theatre had become distinctly musical-theatrical, since 'the dramatic ensemble left something to be desired, but they understood operetta [...]. There was a large chorus, even a ballet corps: what more could the local *jeunesse dorée* have wanted? This company sustained a continuous ten-month season in Marosvásárhely – something without precedent in the history of the city' (Szentimrei 1957, p. 81). Despite offering a programme that, by contemporary standards, exceeded even the nine-month season of a modern repertory theatre, Pál Szabó's ensemble could still not develop into a permanent company.

Alongside the professional groups holding concessions, the audience of Marosvásárhely was nevertheless able to sustain amateur communities capable, from time to time, of undertaking large-scale musical productions. The activity of the Catholic Amateur Choral Society was outstanding in this respect. The community was led by Sándor Tóth, cantor and future conductor of the Sekler Theatre, in collaboration with István Fodor as company director, who was, incidentally, the city's postmaster (Ungvári Zrínyi 2021). From 1927, beginning with their production of the operetta *Les cloches de Corneville* (The Chimes of Normandy), they staged an operetta every year up to the founding of the Sekler Theatre.

Despite the fact that we have no knowledge of the Catholic Choral Society ever having performed *The Csardas Princess* before the 1946 Sekler Theatre premiere, it is certain that Sándor Tóth was an excellent connoisseur of the operetta genre, and that in 1939, together with the theatre director József Szabadkay, he created two open-air superproductions (measured by the standards of the time) in the Erzsébet Park of Marosvásárhely by staging the grand operettas *A cigánybáró* (The Gypsy Baron) and *A gésiák* (The Geishas), productions intended to convey to the city's bourgeoisie the atmosphere of metropolitan life.

Not only the operetta genre but *The Csardas Princess* itself possessed an extensive performance tradition in the city. Reports of productions of *The Csardas Princess* had appeared in the local press since 1919 (Anon 1919). In 1923 it was precisely Pál Szabó's company that programmed Kálmán's work (Anon 1923). In 1934, Kálmán Battyán – who in the meantime had received a concession and who would later play Ferkó Kerekes in the 1946 Sekler Theatre production – revived the piece with his company 'at the express wish of the audience' (Anon 1934, p. 4). On 2 November 1939, Szabadkay's company staged the operetta (Anon 1939).

*The Csardas Princess* was thus a familiar and popular work for the people of Marosvásárhely and therefore could not be absent from the repertoire of the permanent theatre launched in 1946. Miklós Tompa was in all probability fully aware of the work's significance and popularity both locally and within the wider Transylvanian context.

The production discussed here shows a particular affinity with a 1945 Nagyvárad (Oradea) staging of *The Csardas Princess*. A report published on 30 November 1945 in the Nagyvárad daily *Új Élet* stated the following: 'Yesterday evening the Nagyvárad Municipal Theatre revived Imre Kálmán's *Csárdáskirálynő*, with its unforgettable charm and colourful music, to great acclaim and in an excellent staging' (Anon 1945, p. 2). The creative teams of the Nagyvárad production discussed in the

article, presented in November, and of the staging mounted in Marosvásárhely roughly half a year later overlap in two respects. First, both productions had their sets designed by Lajos Háy; second, Imre Domby – who made his debut as a director in the Sekler Theatre's *Csardas Princess* – was the lead dancer of the Nagyvárad staging and, on the basis of the surviving Marosvásárhely playbill, presumably danced the same waltz at the June 1946 premiere as he had in Nagyvárad the previous November.

In the absence of further information<sup>5</sup> it can, of course, only be assumed that the Municipal Theatre's production of *The Csardas Princess* served as the direct model for the Marosvásárhely staging. However, the coincidence of the set designer's identity and the fact that Irén Kovács, who played the title role in the Marosvásárhely production, likewise joined the company from Nagyvárad, point in this direction. It is therefore conceivable that the two stagings displayed a high degree of similarity and correspondence. Given the financial circumstances of the Sekler Theatre, it is of course unlikely that the matter involved the purchase of complete productions. Miklós Tompa himself mentions the practice of 'bringing productions home' in his conversation with László Bérczes:

I knew that Kovács was playing role X in Kolozsvár, Dely was playing role Y in Nagyvárad, and Lantos was playing Z in a third place. They then arrived and played almost without rehearsal. That is how we began. Do not say anything, my boy; of course this is not the ideal! But we had to start somehow. At that time it had to be, *it could only be* done that way. [Emphasis in the original.] It was enough to know the Budapest production. Every provincial theatre copied it. They

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<sup>5</sup> There is no trace of the performance in question either in the archive of the Szigligeti Theatre in Nagyvárad or in the 1940s programme lists compiled by Lajos Kántor and József Kötő.

say of Artúr Bárdos, for example, that he heard of an interesting Paris production and took the set designer and the director there so that they might “bring the production home” (Bérczes 1996, p. 127).

This procedure was perhaps even more effective in the early years of the Sekler Theatre with regard to operettas, since the genre relies heavily on fixed stock characters which, once mastered, remain permanently at the performer’s disposal. Consequently, given the acting practice of the period and, above all, the operetta tradition’s perpetuation of the late nineteenth-century musical-comic performance practice and, even earlier, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century itinerant theatrical traditions, the director’s function was in fact logistical in nature. His work was therefore not that of a stage creator in the modern artistic sense, who, within the stylistic and formal requirements of a previously conceived concept, homogenises the various elements of the production, including the actors’ performances (Székely 2001).

‘Actors, up to the advent of naturalistic acting, performed largely on the basis of the tradition that had developed in the eighteenth century. The actor was responsible for his own artistry; this was the primary reason why there had previously been no need for a director, nor any demand for the possibility of ensemble playing. [...] Melodramas and well-made plays possessed stereotypical figures which, once actors had worked out how to shape them, they could – and did – use for every such stereotypical role’ (Székely 2001, p. 471).

The director – in the case of the 1946 *The Csardas Princess*, Imre Domby – thus had responsibilities that lay in organising the smooth execution of the performance, not in arranging the stage’s expressive means into a coherent whole and cer-

tainly not in the so-called direction of actors. The director was, in effect, a staging master rather than a director in the modern sense, all the more so because, according to the theatrical conception of the period, the operetta genre did not belong to the sphere of director's theatre. This is clearly observable in the context of the newly founded Sekler Theatre, since, in a directorial capacity, the figures who appear in connection with the early months' operetta stagings possessed substantial experience in musical theatre, but their expertise was primarily performative in nature.<sup>6</sup>

The 'individual tradition' carried and operated by performer-personalities (Heltai 2005, p. 83), as an established practice of character construction that dispensed with the director's actor-directing function, persisted in operetta performance up to the mid-twentieth century and created the conventions of role types characteristic of the Budapest–Vienna operetta tradition (Székely 2001). In effect, performers deeply familiar with the genre brought with them into the staging the components of scene construction, the movement patterns of the character mastered and perfected in earlier roles, their characteristic dance movements, gags and gestures.

The next component of the model devised for analysing traditional comic acting style is individual tradition. This refers to the fact that in this cultural field there is no codified acting tradition; comedians organise inherited entertaining devices, verbal and physical gags into an individual rhythmical montage. [...] The mask – the figure created by the comedian through the means listed above – is in fact a recurring fictional

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<sup>6</sup> The opening performance of 10 March (Lehár Ferenc: *A mosoly ország*) was coordinated by Irén Kováts – the Sylvia of *The Csardas Princess* analysed here – while the subsequent operetta premiere of 26 March (Krausz Mihály – Békeffy István: *Eső után köpönyeg*) was realised under the direction of Márton Andrási, operetta actor and dancer-comedian, formerly an artist of the Király Theatre in Budapest.

personality marked by distinctive outward characteristics and a characteristically stylised manner of speech, which the comedian elaborates and employs throughout his career' (Heltai 2005, p. 83).

Operetta actors were, in effect, their own directors, since – as a consequence of the performance tradition transmitted and retransmitted over decades – they were fully familiar with the staging conventions belonging to each production. The director of the 1946 *The Csardas Princess*, the then twenty-four-year-old Imre Domby, was surrounded by performer-personalities who, on the one hand, were themselves actively directing or had directed (Irén Kováts, Márton Andrási) or had led a company (Kálmán Battyán), and, on the other, were outstanding masters of the operetta genre and connoisseurs of *The Csardas Princess*. For this reason it may be assumed that the staging bore the imprint of the performers rather than the artistic intentions of the director, or staging master.

For Imre Domby was primarily a ballet dancer who – together with several others – likewise arrived at the Sekler Theatre from Nagyvárad at the invitation of Miklós Tompa (Márki 1986). He made his debut as a ballet artist at the Alhambra Theatre in Bucharest in 1938, where his teacher was Oleg Danovschi; he later performed at the Romanian Opera and studied classical ballet basic movements and figures with Florea Capsali (Katona Szabó 1972). During his years at the Alhambra Theatre he became acquainted at a very early stage with the stylistic features of the revue theatre. By 1946 he was already a popular dancer of the Nagyvárad Municipal Theatre, taking part not only in operas, dance-theatre productions and fairy-tale plays, but also as solo dancer and choreographer in numerous operetta productions across Transylvania (*Boronkay lányok*, *The Csardas Princess* [Nagyvárad], *Luxemburg grófja*), and thus was thoroughly familiar with the characteristics of the genre.

Imre Domby thus operated across a wide spectrum in performative terms. Alongside his qualities as a dancer and singer, his acting training made him an important contributor to contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian musical-theatre productions (Katona Szabó 1972). He undoubtedly understood the mechanisms of effect in the musical genre, whose dynamic arrangement was the key to audience success in operetta productions. For the Sekler Theatre, which was struggling with serious financial difficulties in 1946–1947, achieving this was the guarantee of survival.

Taking into account the professional background of the director-choreographer, in particular his background as a dance artist, his extensive stage experience in operetta and popular entertainment genres, as well as the company's high-level musical-theatre competence, it is highly probable that dance numbers dominated the production: the directorial work was likely aimed at highlighting these elements on stage and at achieving their refined, technically virtuosic realisation (Anon 1946). According to the playbill of the production, the director not only worked in the capacity of choreographer but also appeared as a dancer, so that, through his performative multifunctionality – in the interest of economy – Domby was able to fulfil several creative and performative roles single-handedly.

Despite the popularity of operetta productions, Miklós Tompa considered the light musical genre incompatible with his own ambitions for an art theatre. In 1946 he still stated that, for the sake of launching the Sekler Theatre and establishing the economic foundations of its future professional standard, he would gladly undertake the direction of musical-theatre works, chiefly operettas; yet among the operetta premieres of the first two seasons there is not a single production bearing his name.

By May 1947 he was already saying that 'the lightweight pieces intended solely for superficial entertainment' (Eaer 1947, p. 3) had been programmed '*against his conviction* solely in order to meet his [financial – my insertion] obligations towards

the members of the company' (Eaer 1947, p. 3, emphasis in the original).

The systematic establishment of the grand-realist acting style based on a non-musical drama ensemble, which was Miklós Tompa's declared intention (Kepes 1947), finally displaced operetta from the repertoire of the Sekler Theatre for the 1948–1949 season, and – with the exception of a 1954 production of *Gül baba* – the genre's works did not return to the stage until after the political transition. The operetta *The Csardas Princess*, despite possessing an extensive Marosvásárhely performance tradition in its own right, was restaged only nearly seventy years later, in 2015, at the Marosvásárhely National Theatre, the institution regarded as the successor to the Sekler Theatre, by the Hungarian-language Tompa Miklós Company.

'For the fulfilment of the cultural mission articulated and repeatedly emphasised by Miklós Tompa – a mission extending not only to Marosvásárhely but to the whole of Sekler Land – the creation of artistically high-quality productions was of key importance. In the founder-director's discourse this was invariably formulated in opposition to the musical genre, thereby excluding the possibility that a musical-theatre work might possess artistic value.

One must not compromise at the expense of art. One must establish the sharp balance between artistic and economic considerations. I am aware that an artistic crisis inevitably leads to an economic crisis. Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to realise my principles fully in practice, but all my efforts are directed towards this' (Kepes 1947, p. 3).

Once Tompa felt assured of the theatre's state maintenance – realised with the nationalisation of 1948 – he disengaged from the operetta genre, which until then had generated

substantial financial revenue, and from its leading practitioners. This was all the more the case because, by 1947, the actors of major stature required for his art-theatre ambitions, those who would later create the performance style and formal language that became the hallmark of the Sekler Theatre, were already at hand.

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Orsolya Moldován

THE HABITUS OF REALITY: COSTUME IN FILM

Abstract: This study examines how costume shapes the actor's creative agency within the filmmaking process and contributes to the construction of character. I analyse the phases of the actor's work that involve interaction with costume, treating dressing as a social practice through which individuals define themselves in relation to a community. Everyday clothing conveys the wearer's physical, material, mental and spiritual condition, a principle that equally applies to costume. The habitual decoding of garments in daily life can therefore be reconfigured as an act of artistic creation and reception. My analysis addresses the determining role of costume in the actor's work through my own professional experience, with particular reference to its developmental stages in Cristian Mungiu's film *R.M.N.*

For the actor, one significant characteristic of presence on film is that shooting does not provide the linearity of role-building afforded by a theatre production; events that, within the fiction, occur on the same day are sometimes recorded with several days or even weeks of separation, and only later placed in chronological order during the editing process. Overcoming these temporal gaps – the recreation of the same mental state and physical presence – constitutes one of the essential components of the film actor's work, and the donning of the costume serves as a crucial point of orientation and support within this working process. The somatic-level impulses of a costume re-donned after three, five, or even ten days elicit emotional and cognitive stimuli, producing continuity of state

when the actor and the costume form complete symbiosis, when ‘the costume is the perfect characterisation of the role, not merely the superficial shell of the character, but the external projection of its inner emotions and lived experiences, the material embodiment of the self-image’ (Tihanyi 2019, 10). I analyse those stages of the actor’s work that, in the course of filmmaking, articulate the reciprocal dynamics of the relationship with the costume. Three distinct phases can be identified, each building upon the previous one and accompanying the entire process of role creation as an integral and indispensable component: casting; rehearsals and test shootings; and the actual period of filming. I develop my argument through an examination of my own creative experience, focusing on the working process of the film *R.M.N.* The film, a Romanian–Belgian–French co-production released in 2022, was written and directed by Cristian Mungiu; cinematographer: Vladimir Tudor Panduru; editor: Mircea Olteanu; production designer: Simona Pădurețu; costume: Cireșica Cuciuc.<sup>1</sup>

### *Casting*

The casting process constitutes the first creative phase of the actor’s work, beginning with the decision to take part in an audition to which one has been invited or, in the case of an open casting call, to apply for the announced role. At this stage one is ordinarily provided with a few pages of script, a brief character description, the name of the director, and information on whether the project is a short film, a feature film, or a series for which a particular character is being cast. In the present case, the director followed the practice of requesting the casting director<sup>2</sup> to record a scene from the screenplay, which was then filmed with the actors selected by him.

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<sup>1</sup> The film’s complete data sheet: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18550182>

<sup>2</sup> The casting director of *R.M.N.* is Cătălin Dordea, a long-standing collaborator of Cristian Mungiu; their first joint project was the director’s de-

‘The profiling of the characters was carried out together with the director. Then I went through my photo database and selected everyone who more or less matched a given character. I then met the director again, showed him the selection, and we talked until I understood how he envisioned each character. Once he chooses the actors to be invited to audition, I try to bring them as close as possible to the director’s conception.’ (Dordea)<sup>3</sup>

‘Dialogue constitutes the primary point of orientation. At this stage, the actor must recognise that the writing of the screenplay is a lengthy creative process during which the director and/or screenwriter comes to know the characters and situations intimately, having worked on them for months, and in some cases for years. The written dialogues contain the natural history of the characters’ social positions and establish the specific register of each figure. The actor must trust that, if the suggested punctuation of the dialogue is observed, the text will generate itself and bring forth the required state; in such instances, the operative mechanisms of the figure are to be sought not in lived experience but in the logic of the text. The dialogue I have written has to be appropriated by the actor and transformed as if it were his or her own. This distinctiveness has its rhythm, its sound, its meaning; the actor must work from this composition, and it is this rhythm that I observe during casting.’ (Mungiu)<sup>4</sup>

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but film, *Occident* (West), released in 2002, followed by *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days), *După dealuri* (Beyond the Hills), and *Bacalaureat* (Graduation).

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Cătălin Dordea. Source: Orsolya Moldován’s online conversation with Cătălin Dordea on 23 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication from Cristian Mungiu. Source: Orsolya Moldován’s conversation with Cristian Mungiu in Budapest on 10 February 2023.

‘I always have a clear idea of how my characters ought to look. In the end, two things convince me: how closely they correspond to the characters (in terms of biological data), and how well they infer the logic of the dialogue I have written. Every dialogue has its own logic, and if they understand from the outset what I intended to express with each line, then we can work together. I record everyone, and sometimes I watch the recordings dozens of times.’ (Muşat 2022, online)

The costume is the actor’s secondary working instrument, existing outside the actor’s own physical being yet also through it. In the casting process of a historical film, a costume fitting is evidently important, since it is essential to determine how the actor is able to exist in garments belonging to a period far removed from his or her own, and whether such attire supports or hinders naturalness and presence. In the case of *R.M.N.*, the film’s time and space coincide with the creators’ present, and the realism of its visual articulation is grounded in everydayness. ‘Realism does not mean something real will be represented, but that the representation is itself real. – That a situation arises that carries all the consequences of the real for those involved.’ (Rau 2018, p. 177) Every element of the film serves this reality, and the costumes are likewise conceived along the lines of the everydayness of the clothing worn. In this case, therefore, the use of costume did not exercise a decisive influence on the casting process. The question is whether the actor, at such a stage, must already take into account the problematic of the costume, since it is the creation of the costume designer and the result of her collaboration with the director. From this perspective, it is indeed an irrelevant factor; however, if we take into account the performative character of the costume – insofar as it is defined as an instrument for preparing the body, as the act of entering into the role – then it may be regarded as a real element of preparation for casting. The assumption of

one's own reality, one's personal traits and unique physicality, is also expressed in the clothes one wears; thus the actor must choose attire appropriate to his or her character and habitus, in other words, must dress as himself or herself. He or she must be aware that participation in the given casting is primarily due to possessing physical traits that correspond to the director's envisioned character; therefore, the actor must reveal his or her own reality by every available means. The visibility of the self must function as an automatism, something the actor can achieve through practice and conscious internalisation. Preparation for casting must be treated in the same manner as the practice undertaken in the dressing room, when the actor puts on the costume and prepares not only internally but also externally for a performance or a shoot. A costume becomes a costume through the conscious act of showing oneself through dress; by consciousness here we must understand that the actor puts on clothing (even when it is everyday attire) in order to carry out some form of dramatic action, whether on stage or on film. To borrow the analogy of Bazin's formulation, what matters is not how much the costume differs from reality, but how fully it is able to reveal it.<sup>5</sup>

### *Rehearsal*

For the actor, rehearsal is a multilayered working process of preparation, data gathering, and becoming acquainted with the environment and creative collaborators, in which the shifting dynamics of insight and uncertainty simultaneously impose physical, mental, and psychological demands. The manner in which the actor resolves the tension arising from these demands, and the extent to which he or she is able to integrate it productively into the work, are determined both by individually developed working methods and by inherent

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<sup>5</sup> 'What matters is not how much the film differs from reality, but how fully it is able to reveal it.' Bazin, *Mi a film?* 1995.

temperamental characteristics. The director's personality, preparedness, and manner of communicating with the actors and the crew significantly contribute either to the intensification or the alleviation of this pressure. Mungiu is interested in the actor's everyday self and in the actor's creative self. A key feature of his distinctive working method is precisely the process of getting to know the other person. Rehearsals involve not only reading the screenplay or outlining the situations, but also uncovering the actors' habitus. It is precisely for this reason that he is able to interweave his written characters with the actor's individuality in such a way that the figure appearing later on screen can function as a reality. He seeks to cultivate this form of curiosity in those engaged in the collaborative relationship, not only so that the actors, having come to know one another, can work together more easily, but also so that they can think together. In the initial phase of rehearsals, the establishment of communication is paramount. He invited his actors to converse on various social, cultural, or artistic topics.

'The foundation of communication is listening, hearing and understanding other viewpoints, for I believe that only from this can a shared creation emerge. When I met the actors at the first rehearsal, I had already passed the phase of gathering material a year earlier, which was likewise concerned with dialogue. Today, a global problem is how we relate to one another, how rationally we think, and how we are able to bridge the gap between ideological convictions and reality.' (Mungiu)<sup>6</sup>

The point of departure for the film's creation is a real event: in January 2020, in Gyergyóditró, Hargita County, a lo-

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication from Cristian Mungiu. Source: Orsolya Moldován's conversation with Cristian Mungiu in Budapest on 10 February 2023.

cal bakery employed two Sri Lankan workers because it could not find local labour willing to work for the wages offered. The community reacted vehemently; a public Facebook group was formed, and eventually a general assembly was organised at which they voiced their dissatisfaction and fears concerning the migrant workers. The case received substantial media coverage both in Romania and abroad. The writing of the screenplay was preceded by a documentary research process: the director conducted interviews with the mayor, the company's owners, the migrant workers, and local residents. In his earlier films as well, Mungiu has written screenplays based on contemporary news, but his intention is not to reenact events; rather, he reveals the contexts in which certain decisions are made. 'Events that have actually occurred mean more to people than fiction, because they possess a truth-value and say something about society.' (Mungiu 2022, online) He displaces his story from a mono-ethnic community, yet leaves it unambiguously in Transylvania, for the kind of national and confessional plurality that is crucial to the film's narrative is characteristic of this region. The village is given the fictitious name Récfalva (Recia), but the place names mentioned as neighbouring localities are real (Bradu, Maroshévíz, Csíkszereda), thereby defining quite precisely the geographical location of the events. Secondly, he alters the fundamental conflict by using a private, personal problem as the point of departure, in which the protagonists come into contention precisely because of their divergent value systems at the moment when the community rises up. The story begins one week before Christmas 2018, when Matthias Aunner, working in Germany, returns home to Romania upon hearing of his young son's illness. At home he vacillates between an estranged marriage and a rekindled love affair, while the community proves unable to digest the presence of the migrant workers who have arrived from abroad. 'Through his inclination towards social realism, Mungiu draws inspiration from various facts and is able to transform the document into a moral tale.' (Mandelbaum 2022, online)

Encountering the text constituted the next phase of rehearsals. The screenplay is sixty-five per cent Romanian, thirty per cent Hungarian, with the remaining portions in German, English, French, and Sri Lankan. In finalising the dialogues, Mungiu relies heavily on the actors, not only for the meaning of the text but also for the naturalness of its speakability. In parallel with the read-through rehearsals, the costume also enters the process, likewise adapting itself to the actor. For each character, the designer offers several costume variations, which the actor supplements with items of everyday clothing at the director's request; in this way, the character's physical appearance is constructed so as to carry something of the actor's own self, a material projection of his or her comfort. The fact that the actor first experiences the reality of the figure to be portrayed not on a theoretical level, through a form of psychological analysis, but empirically (how the figure speaks, how the figure dresses), generated reflexive actions, postures, and modes of relating to partners that supported not playing but the creation of the reality of presence. In Robert Bresson's interpretation, there is no actor and no acting in film; there is a model, who must not feel himself or herself to be dramatic: 'You must not play another person, nor must you play yourself. You must play no one.' (Bresson 1998, p. 46) In this construction of presence, the costume must create a form of uncostumedness, bearing the texture of everyday dress; it must characterise and accompany the actor, not endow him or her with a character. 'In life, clothing is always highly characteristic of the person who wears it, yet in film this characteristic force must be conveyed in such a way that it is present without becoming ostentatious or conspicuous' (Bíró 1993, p. 173); the nature of its designedness should manifest itself not in spectacle but in functionality. The setting and story of *R.M.N.* largely coincide with the creators' present and their geographical origins; the film's time and place are familiar to them, and the plot is organised around social conflicts they recognise. Thus, although the operative mechanisms and habitus of the

written characters may not overlap with their own concrete life situations or worldviews, they nonetheless carry social specificities that are immediately intelligible. All of them know the rules and behavioural patterns of this society, and this includes the ability to read the codes of dress; for this reason, they are able to make proposals regarding their costumes. The costume designer's suggestions function as a foundation, a point of departure, which the actor supplements and the director finalises.

'In rehearsal I encourage the actors to think and act actively; I rewrite texts, and I rely heavily on their immediate intuitions regarding the character's physical appearance, for they must be able to articulate their own reality also in the determinacy of their dress. But this, too, varies from actor to actor. There are those who simply accept the proposals, those who seek out deficits at all costs because that is where they find themselves, and those who work consciously on the construction of their costume as an integral part of their acting process.' (Mungiu)<sup>7</sup>

Work with the text and the costume was supplemented in the third phase by familiarisation with the locations. The rehearsals and much of the shooting took place in Torockó and its surroundings, with the exception of the bakery scenes, which were filmed at the Panemar factory in Zsuk, the abattoir scenes near Vienna, and the border-crossing sequence at the Nagylak border post. Lengthy fieldwork preceded the decision-making process, which had historical, demographic, and not least visual implications.

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication from Cristian Mungiu. Source: Orsolya Moldován's conversation with Cristian Mungiu in Budapest on 10 February 2023.

‘Transylvania is a melting pot owing to the diversity of the people living there, a territory that throughout history has passed from one country to another; thus its inhabitants must live together with people of different languages, cultures, and religions. It was surprising even for me to see settlements where three, and in many cases even six, churches of different denominations stand, yet the villages are dying out because most of the young people work abroad. The civilisation of bygone eras is nevertheless present, impregnated into the built heritage, the traditions, and the behaviour.’ (Mungiu, 2022, online)

A location was required that embodied all of this visually and in its ethnic composition, while also corresponding to the film’s narrative. Torockó is a monument to Transylvanianness, a multi-ethnic region into which the director indeed inserts the film, yet he does not romanticise the landscape; he makes it a protagonist in a story about fear of otherness and the power of instinct over reason. The other reason why this environment became the shooting location is the position of the forest in relation to the settlement: ‘the forest is always the subconscious, the mystery; you never quite know what is there, but something frightens you. When every house is connected to a forest neuron, you feel a different energy.’ (Cosmin 2022, online) Beyond these aspects, the designer individualised the characters in such a way that, often with minimal additions, she grasped the essence of the legibility of their dispositions. Csilla’s and Mrs Dénes’s more refined garments signal their distance and material superiority; Ana’s headscarves indicate her religiosity and loneliness; Matthias’s torn leather jacket his wildness and instinct-driven nature; and the worn condition of Papa Otto’s distinctive Saxon hat reveals the dwindling of a specifically Transylvanian culture. It is evident that the actor wears these garments not for their meaning but for their function, and it is this act that becomes a sign, the clothing

thereby becoming costume. Cireșica Cuciuc's costumes create real people; the essence of her design work is thus sublimated in her creations precisely by remaining concealed.

'The role of the costume is to disappear; my work is not primarily about the clothing, but about creating a personality whom the viewer believes had a life before the film began and will continue to have one after the story ends. I achieve this by designing from the inside out.' (Cuciuc)<sup>8</sup>

The costume world of *R.M.N.* may be treated as a three-component construction, for beyond the unity of the reality of the garments worn, the film also required the making of the distinctive attire associated with the folk customs depicted, and, thirdly, their chromatic qualities had to adapt to the film's visual articulation. The designer had to undertake documentary research into the costume-historical aspects of folk traditions such as the traditional New Year's Bear Dance from the Comănești (Kománfalva) region or the Ruginoasa Stick Dance. The folk customs of the winter festive cycle, once placed within the fabric of the film, became parables of social norms and behavioural patterns, 'deep play' moments whose 'creation, comprehension, and use are just as much social events as anything else; as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture' (Geertz 1994, p. 152). The folk-custom sequences presented in the film thus become functional bearers of meaning for the society from which they are drawn. The ritual choreography of the dancers dressed in bearskins enacts the overcoming of the animal instinct within the human being, a kind of primordial evil, in a traditional Moldavian year-end custom; alongside it, the Stick Dance from Ruginoasa appears as another year-end tradition, staging a clash between those

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication from Cireșica Cuciuc. Source: Orsolya Moldován's conversation with Cireșica Cuciuc in Bucharest on 3 June 2023.

living ‘in the valley’ and those ‘on the mountain’, in which the power relations of the coming year are established through a confrontation. These are archaicised moments of tribal fears of the stranger, of the evil outside ourselves; they articulate the ever-present social impulse to locate someone else who is responsible for our torments, someone who does not resemble us, someone who is other.

The third aspect concerning costume is the problematics of the colour palette and texture of the garments, that is, the manner in which they are organically integrated into the film’s visual world and become its constitutive elements. *R.M.N.’s* cinematographer, Marius Panduru, and its production designer, Simona Pădurețu, construct a chromatic and lighting design that, through dense and muted images, intensifies the tension of the narrative. ‘In winter the quality of the light is different; it has a coldness, and the visceral presence of the low-hanging clouds inspired us. We sought to construct the conflict between the warmth of the interior spaces (domestic interiors) and the harshness of the outdoors through the perspectives of colour.’ (Panduru 2022, online) Thus the costume is intended simultaneously to support the characters’ reality, the chromatic structure of the image, and the legibility of the symbols, while its presence must not draw attention to itself but rather be sublimated into the fabric of the image and the narrative.

### *Filming*

As filming approaches, the actor’s increasing uncertainty is mixed with the pleasurable excitement of anticipation. In theory, he or she knows the situations and motivations, has become acquainted with partners and crew members during rehearsals, and possesses the text, yet still experiences a considerable degree of uncertainty. What is the factor that nonetheless enables the actor to overcome these obstacles? How can this initial disadvantage be made up within an optimal timeframe? How can this vulnerability be integrated into the

actor's work? The primary answers to this multitude of questions lie in the director's personality and distinctive working method, as well as in the human and creative compatibility established with the immediate partner. The scene structure of *R.M.N.* is organised around the axis of a relationship. The story unfolds through the life situations of the two protagonists, Matthias and Csilla; every event in the film appears with them and through them. The character I portray, Viktória Dénes, is connected to the narrative through Csilla. She is the owner of the company to which the foreign workers arrive and of which Csilla is the managing director. Beyond their working relationship, a particular bond of trust exists between the two women, a kind of friendship. For both of us, the first shooting block consisted of the scenes set in the bakery, yet during the rehearsal period there had been no opportunity to become acquainted with this location. In order to be able to inhabit this space with ease, indeed to perceive it as our own, we spent the day before shooting at the Panemar bakery in Zsuk. The opportunity to rehearse in a real location, in costume, and in the presence not only of the director but also of the cinematographer greatly alleviated our initial anxiety.

Before filming, the director writes biographies for the characters, outlining their pre- and post-histories; this practice helps the actors to sense more fully the reality of the character. The overlap between the written biographies and the actors' personal selves is sometimes so pronounced that, after the initial surprise, a sense of security emerges – one that the actor generally attains only as the result of an extended rehearsal period, when a character can be activated both physically and emotionally. Mungiu individualised the characters through his manner of writing as well, so that the turns of phrase in the text corresponded to the actor's own speech style. The actor who recognises himself or herself in the character description encounters facts rather than psychological explanations, and thus does not strive to experience emotions but to draw on the distinctive features of his or her own being. One of the spe-

cific features of Mungiu's work with actors derives from the way he grafts the empirically experienced character, developed during rehearsals, onto the actor's own personality, thereby liberating them both physically and psychologically. He rehearses the scenes multiple times, giving precise indications to the actors regarding physical actions, delivery of the text, and the intensity of presence. The automatism produced by repeated sequences of movement does not result in mechanical execution, but rather in a form of freedom in which the actor no longer thinks about what he or she is doing or saying, but acts reflexively and becomes real. Movements, behaviour, and the actor's entire presence thereby convey not elaboration but a quality of unpolished immediacy. 'This unpolished immediacy, however, does not point to deficiencies in aesthetic formation, but to the infinitely subtle distinctiveness of the real.' (Kracauer 1964, p. 196) Twenty to twenty-five, and in some cases even forty, takes are filmed for a single scene. After each take the director adjusts or alters something: 'I seek the truth of the scene; for me, truth has its own sound and rhythm. I construct the scenes according to precise choreography, and in this way I find the appropriate rhythm, which is essential, because I do not use editing' (Mungiu).<sup>9</sup> A high degree of trust and mutual attentiveness is required on the part of the actors in order to sustain the construction of a scene – in its dynamism, its truth, and its presence – under the specific conditions of filming. My immediate partner is Judith State, who portrays Csilla. The experiences of the rehearsals and the first days of shooting made it clear to us that we were able to connect effectively, both in terms of conceptual and physical communication. We conveyed the intimate nature of the relationship between our characters through complementary movements (such as the way we unpack the car or handle the documents) and through

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<sup>9</sup> Personal communication from Cristian Mungiu. Source: Orsolya Moldován's conversation with Cristian Mungiu in Budapest on 10 February 2023.

forms of relaxed posture that we typically assume only in the presence of someone close to us (massaging a shoulder, adjusting a piece of clothing).

‘People always expect some explanation that apparently is not there. Yet it is right in front of them: if someone touches another person’s shoulder with a certain intention, that person will feel something, and the viewer will feel it as well. (...) Things come into being through movement; physical action will resonate in the viewer’s soul. No explanations are needed.’ (Cummings 2010, online).

In English film terminology, the term *supporting actor* denotes an actor who assists or sustains, while *supporting role* designates a role that provides support or grounding. In the process of constructing a role, the moment is often absent in which the actor becomes conscious of his or her function within the work as a whole – when the task can be viewed from the perspective of how it sustains the overall creation. For a supporting actor, it is particularly important and unequivocally effective to identify the point of connection through which the main current of the story can be nourished, for it is precisely in this way that the actor can establish the credibility of the character. In the present case, it was self-evident to me that I could activate the character of Mrs Dénes through her relationship to Csilla. In her restraint, elegance, and manner of speaking, it was necessary to construct a combination of personality traits belonging to a woman who is both the superior and the friend of a self-willed, progressive-minded person fundamentally different from the rural environment. The costume is an essential component in rendering this relationship legible. Their attire is not similar in style, but similar in that it sets them apart from the others. This desire to differ is not ostentatious or deliberately demonstrative, but a natural concomitant of their habitus. Csilla wears combinations of white

and grey blouses and jumpers, wide trousers, and boots; the simplicity and similarity of the garments are attributes of the decisiveness of a clear and uncluttered personality. She does not interiorise her femininity; we see her as fragile only in the intimate environment of her own home. The director preserves the freedom of the characters, taking no position for or against them, yet the apparent randomness of their costumes functions as an alternative bearer of meaning. Matthias's torn leather jacket articulates the duality of reason (the human) and instinct (the animal) with which he is in constant struggle. In the film's opening sequence we see the butcher working abroad, who responds to a workplace conflict with instinctive physical aggression and is then forced to flee. His departure for home, discarding his work clothes and carrying no belongings, significantly underdressed for the winter weather, is the projection of the fear with which the character is in constant struggle. The anxieties that Matthias experiences pass on to the child, whom he repeatedly tries to cure of the very fear he himself feels. He wishes to prepare Rudi for a mode of existence oriented towards survival and combat, considering the inculcation of the *libido dominandi*<sup>10</sup> state of being to be the only correct solution. Marin Grigore relies extensively on the support afforded by his costume, wearing the same garments throughout the entire shooting period, even when he is not in a scene. He does not put on his costume in the dressing truck but arrives at the shooting location already dressed, without exception. He learns to ride an enduro motorcycle, spends considerable time in the forest, and shapes his gait and posture as extensions of these actions. The impulses generated

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's coinage; the term designates 'a sense of duty grounded in an inner compulsion, an almost instinctive desire for domination to which the man is, as it were, "indebted to himself". The basis of this inner compulsion is the belief in the obligation to emphasise one's masculinity. This belief impels men to defeat other men (as well as the women associated with them), that is, to engage in contests whose extreme form is war.'

through the costume, at a somatic level, ultimately lead to the adoption of a habitus ‘as if we were witnessing an accidental or reflexive event, one among the many events that occur to this character’ (Kracauer 1964, p. 198).

The central scene of the film is a seventeen-minute, uncut, fixed-camera shot in which we see almost all the characters. The scene is simultaneous with the viewer’s present; the camera does not direct attention, nor does it reinforce any particular opinion or form of behaviour. It ‘shockingly reflects the spectrum of opinions on this subject. As one unbroken, static shot, it’s amazing how they pulled off such a dialogue-heavy scene this way, a breathtaking achievement in screenwriting and directing’ (Zhuo-Ning Su 2022, online). Placing the twenty-one actors and the more than one hundred extras within the space and composing the visual field required several hours, and it was at this stage that the twenty-seven microphones were positioned and the colour palette and forms of the costumes were adjusted. The chromatic design of the image also guides the viewer’s attention; the costumes carry a reality of apparent randomness and unplannedness that supports and accompanies both the creation and the reception of the scene. The actors are not distinguished from the extras either in terms of costume or in terms of visual focus, thereby creating, at the level of the image, the communal sensibility on which the scene’s legibility depends. At the same time, the director employs the unusual shooting practice of allowing the extras to unfold themselves, to express what they feel in relation to the issues raised. After the initial chaos, ‘they gradually learned that the tendencies of this collective character, which the film seeks to depict, were very precisely present within them. At the beginning I still tried to conduct<sup>11</sup> the scene in order to give the atmosphere its proper rhythm, and in the end the scene was born’ (Mungiu 2022, online).

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<sup>11</sup> Standing on a box behind the camera, he conducted the intensity and volume of the extras’ reactions during the takes like a conductor.

In the film all the characters are present with a disquieting realism, writes Bazin of the participants in neorealist works, especially those of De Sica, many of whom were, as is well known, amateurs. Mungiu's working method and his filmmaker's attitude display a strong affinity with the directors of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave; this applies not only to his formal or technical procedures, but also to the way he articulates social reality. He opens social discourse through the individual's problem, and he activates his central characters in such a way 'that they do not detach themselves from other people, but that their presence carries an essence that is found within the masses' (Bazin 1995, p. 414). The scenes recorded in a single take, through the simultaneity of the performers involved, produce in the viewer the perception of real time. The fact that the time of the image is simultaneous with the time of its reception and that the camera does not direct attention makes the viewer a participant in the events; he or she is released from passivity<sup>12</sup> and becomes an active participant in the social problems raised by the scene. The essential element of film as an artistic creation is the time manifested through the recording of movement, which in turn aids reflection on time itself. Jacques Rancière connected the temporality of film with social existence; in analysing the treatment of time in films of different periods, he developed the theory of pluralised temporality, according to which we perceive time according to our position within society. He was able to transform individually experienced time into an egalitarian perception of coexistence through the distinctive capacity of film art to make anonymous individuals the present-tense protagonists of social problems. 'The anonymous individual became visible

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<sup>12</sup> 'The audience must first be liberated from the passivity of the spectator. It must be wrenched out of the role of the passive viewer and thrust into that of the scholar, who observes phenomena and investigates their causes. (...) On the one hand, it must replace its mode of looking with a better mode of looking; on the other, it must abandon the spectator's position itself.' (Rancière, 2010, online)

on the stage of history because photography and film were elevated to the status of art; or conversely, the recording of the anonymous individual became art because anonymity as such became an object of art' (Rancière 2013, p. 26). Mungiu's films are present-tense events of the post-1989 search for direction, a shared creative practice of makers and viewers. In his films he constructs a ciné-semiotic<sup>13</sup> linguistic system through which thought enters into a natural relation with film, and consciousness itself becomes the image.

For the creative artist, articulating one's own practice in theoretical terms is always problematic; very often simple decisions acquire significant meaning or theoretical explanations that surprise the artists themselves. Yet the formation of a conscious creative intention and a distinctive stylistic configuration is an indispensable condition for those works which, by presenting a local problem, are able to open up the relation between individual and society into a universal human question. Mungiu may certainly be counted among such creators. Concerning the proposition that the use of the *plan-séquence* technique as a mode of visual articulation constitutes for him a system of thought, he stated: 'If not a philosophy, there are nevertheless certain ethical principles behind my decision that a scene should be a single shot. When I began making films, I wondered what the essence of film is, what it can do that no other art can. To record how time passes, real time – but this requires that you do not cut. I adopted this way of thinking; I direct so that the viewer understands that what he or she sees is part of reality. A continuity like our lives' (Mungiu).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze defines film as a new instrument of philosophical expression. 'The philosophical reading of film is, in fact, the elucidation of problems and questions raised by an artistic mode of thought through their conceptual objection, the encounter of two disciplines.' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 91)

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication from Cristian Mungiu. Source: Orsolya Molodován's conversation with Cristian Mungiu in Budapest on 10 February 2023.

The actor, however, cannot theorise his or her own reality within the creative process, for the reality of lived selfhood is the natural constant beyond which nothing else is known. Every character the actor creates on stage or on film exists through the reality of the actor's own physicality. The bodily presence that accompanies this is the garment we call costume, and this remains true even when the costume consists of an item from the actor's own wardrobe. Mrs Dénes's mustard-yellow turtle-neck becomes a costume from the moment the actor puts it on and wears it in the two scenes of the film. At the same time, if Orsolya Moldován puts on the mustard-yellow turtleneck and attends a family dinner, the same garment does not constitute a costume. The person and the clothing are the same, yet the quality of both changes. The change lies in the context, in the role it assumes within the act of creation. Because the garment was familiar to the actor, it increased her sense of comfort and supported her in the process of constructing the role, in which the lived reality of the self constituted the most essential substance of the creative state. The principal attribute of the costume as it appears in the film is thus to accompany the reality of the character formed by the actor, while becoming a legible signifier grounded in a collective viewerly knowledge, thereby reinforcing the narrative of the story.

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Gábor Olajos

HUNS ON THE STAGE OF DICTATORSHIP  
SÁNDOR SZINBERGER: *ATTILA*, 1973

Abstract: This study examines the 1973 Cluj-Napoca performance of Verdi's opera *Attila*, staged at the Hungarian State Opera. The opera addresses several themes that were sensitive for Romania's totalitarian political system. The concepts of freedom, patriotism, and national unity were not aligned with communist ideology. Additionally, the depiction of the Huns was problematic from the perspective of state authorities, as it was closely linked to the identity and cultural traditions of the Hungarian minority. *Attila* is one of Verdi's lesser-known and rarely performed works. The circumstances surrounding its staging can be explained by the post-World War II reorganisation and gradual rise of the institution, in which Sándor Szinberger played a key role as both the opera house's director and the production's stage director. Although the work did not leave a significant historical impact, its performance during one of the most prominent periods of opera in Cluj-Napoca reflects the artistic potential of the local society and the creative power of the community.

*The Context of the Production in Theatre Culture*

Verdi's opera *Attila* and its 1973 premiere in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) was, beyond its distinctive artistic value, a highly significant event politically and, from the perspective of the Hungarian minority, also in ethnic and cultural terms. It is noteworthy, first of all, that the Hungarian State Opera of Kolozsvár undertook the staging of this lesser-known work

by Verdi. The political significance of the premiere lies in the fact that the opera was written in the spirit of freedom and national cohesion, themes that were sensitive issues for communist ideology and its political system. Since these two themes are connected to Attila the Hun's campaign against Rome, they also touch, in view of Hungarian cultural traditions, upon the sense of cross-border solidarity and awareness of identity. All this raises two questions from the standpoint of repertoire policy. How could a work that strongly foregrounds freedom and national cohesion reach the stage under the Ceaușescu dictatorship, and why was a seldom-performed, scarcely known opera chosen in preference to – or alongside – Verdi's more popular works?

In the first half of the 1970s, Kolozsvár possessed a vibrant cultural life, one of whose principal venues was the Hungarian State Opera. The institution began its activity in 1948 as the continuation of the city's operatic tradition, which by then already looked back on 125 years. Following the annexation of Transylvania to Romania, and after the economic crisis and the Second World War, a favourable turn for both theatre and opera was effected by the new theatre law adopted by the Romanian parliament on 22 June 1947. Under its provisions – in accordance with the arrangements applied to other Romanian national theatrical institutions – it became the responsibility of the state to guarantee the economic conditions necessary for the functioning of the Hungarian State Theatre and Opera (Enyedi 1991, p. 89).

The adoption of the law took place in the spirit of the Groza government's pro-Soviet policy (Fülöp 1995, p. 17). After the Second World War, Petru Groza sought to settle Hungarian–Romanian relations peacefully and pursued a cultural policy aligned with the communist model. Within this framework, the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár was established, which, together with the theatres in Nagyvárad (Oradea) and Marosvásárhely (Târgu-Mureș), received state support (Csákány 1995, p. 116). An accompanying feature of

this development was the increase in state influence, which sought to enforce communist ideology through artistic institutions as well. Behind the financial support one may also discern the political intention to demonstrate assistance to those living as a minority and to forge cohesion among different ethnic groups. There are no precise data concerning the extent of the support, but state funding presumably covered general maintenance and operating costs, salaries, and the material expenses that the institution would have been unable to meet solely from its own revenues (Laskay 2003, p. 51).

Alongside the state and political support manifested in material terms, the social backing for the establishment and operation of the Hungarian opera is demonstrated by the assistance provided by the Romanian Opera in Kolozsvár and by the close cooperation between the two institutions (Szentimrei 1948, p. 2; Szinberger 1958, p. 10; Laskay 2003, p. 50). The Romanian National Theatre and the Romanian National Opera of Kolozsvár occupied the building of the former Hungarian National Theatre in 1919; this was returned to Hungarian control for a few years when Northern Transylvania was reannexed in 1940. From 1944 to the present day it has served as the venue for Romanian theatre and opera, while the Hungarian theatre was once again relocated to the building known as the Nyári Színikör (Summer Theatre). The founding of the Hungarian opera, beyond political and ideological aims, also served the cause of preserving minority language use and identity. As Jenő Szentimrei, director of the Hungarian State Theatre in Kolozsvár, stated: ‘Why are two operas needed in Kolozsvár? (...) Because Kolozsvár is still a cultural centre, situated on the main line. Beyond Kolozsvár, half a million Hungarians direct their gaze here and gravitate towards it. This is why it is justified to establish the opera in Kolozsvár and not in Marosvásárhely [Târgu-Mureş], where, incidentally, there is not even a theatre auditorium’ (Szentimrei 1948, p. 2). The interview excerpt also reveals that Marosvásárhely, the other major cultural centre, was likewise a candidate for the estab-

lishment of the Hungarian opera. Szentimrei's words further argued in favour of plans for a people's opera, whose first director became the composer Mihály Eisikovits. From 3 May 1948 until the first premiere held in the presence of the Romanian prime minister on 11 December 1948 he headed the institution under the name State Hungarian People's Opera, and thereafter under the designation Hungarian State Opera of Kolozsvár (Lakatos 1974, pp. 390–391).

Alongside the financial background, the most important task was the establishment of the personnel and technical apparatus. The training of singers and musicians took place at the Hungarian Arts Institute, likewise founded in 1948, and from 1950 at the Gheorghe Dima Conservatory, with which it was merged (Sófalvi 2018, p. 28). In the first years, alongside a few professional singers, the company consisted primarily of amateurs and students pursuing musical studies (Lakatos 1974, p. 391), and several others joined during talent-scouting tours held in Transylvanian towns (Laskay 2003, p. 13). At the first premiere on 11 December 1948, Zoltán Kodály's musical play *Háry János* was performed. The remaining premieres of the season fell in 1949. After the January performance of Smetana's comic opera *The Bartered Bride*, Johann Schenk's opera *The Village Barber* was staged, alongside two one-act dance pieces – Kodály's *Marosszéki hegyekben* (In the Mountains of Marosszék) and Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsody* – performed by the members of the ballet ensemble. The premieres of all three productions fell on 3 February. A few days later, the dance performances were followed by another: on 6 February Anatolii K. Liadov's dance piece was presented under the title *Egy ukrán faluban* (In a Ukrainian Village). In the following two months, one opera each was performed: Ferenc Erkel's *Bánk bán* (Bánk the Palatine, 8 March) and Musorgsky's three-act comic opera *The Fair at Sorochyntsi* (28 April). The final premiere of the first season was Johann Strauss's *The Gypsy Baron*, which was completed for 24 May. The series of premieres in the second season began with an Erkel opera, *Hunyadi László*, on 3 November 1949,

followed by one further premiere that year: on 21 December Asafyev's *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* was performed. In the remainder of the season, two comic operas were presented to the public: Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and Otto Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Two one-act works were also premiered: Kodály's musical play *Székegyfő* (The Spinning Room) and a dance piece entitled *Alkonyattól virradatig* (From Dusk to Dawn), which was based on Musorgsky's music for *Egy éj a kopár hegyen* (*Night on Bald Mountain*). The final premiere of this season was likewise an operetta performance, *The Tobacco Captain* by Vladimir Shcherbachov (Laskay 2003, p. 505).

From 1950 onwards, under the next director, 'during the tenure of József Kallós, Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (13 May 1951) and Bizet's *Carmen* (14 December 1950) were placed on the programme. This marked the beginning of the construction of the major international repertoire' (Lakatos 1974, p. 391), for by the third season they had already succeeded in presenting some of the most popular masterpieces performed by renowned opera houses. The only difficulty lay in the lack of a director with adequate preparation. By approaching specialists in Bucharest, the director reached Constantin Georgescu, who, however, became involved in the life of the Kolozsvár opera only for a short time. His memorable staging of *Carmen* nevertheless represented a significant step forward in the unfolding of the company's artistic standards (Laskay 2003, p. 51). 'The development of the group of singers, the soloists, and the orchestra at the premiere of *Carmen* appeared to confirm that the young company could undertake exacting tasks. In the early years the programme featured smaller but more significant chamber and comic operas, as well as musical plays in a folk and *verbunkos* idiom, and thus among the most urgent tasks of the following years was the construction of the international operatic repertoire' (Lakatos 1974, p. 392).

In the realisation of this project, a key role was played by Sándor Szinberger, who from 1951 onwards spent twenty-three years at the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár as di-

rector and chief director, seventeen of which he held in the position of general director, succeeding Antal Rónai from 1956 to 1973 (Laskay 2003, p. 524); besides Szinberger, Antal Rónai was similarly long-serving at the Hungarian State Opera as conductor between 1951 and 1970, as was Vilmos Demián, also as conductor, from 1949 to 1971; Laskay 2003, p. 525). Neither before nor after has anyone held this office for even remotely as long. Both his directorial and his managerial activity profoundly shaped the theatre-historical context of the production under analysis.

In contrast with his immediate predecessors, Szinberger did not belong to, nor did he join, the more prestigious group of the Hungarian intelligentsia:

‘Szinberger was known primarily in professional circles; regrettably, he became isolated from local Hungarian cultural life. He could not be seen at theatre premieres, exhibition openings, or literary events. He did not wish to “maintain” relations with the press, and, in his wake, neither did the entire membership of the Hungarian State Opera. After a promising beginning, he developed his own line, and his behaviour could scarcely be described as jovial’ – notes István Szócs in connection with his appointment. (Laskay 2003, p. 77).

In another piece, Szócs criticises the weight – the ‘monopoly’ – exercised by Szinberger, who held the position of director and chief director, in the life of the opera, as well as the general dependence on the director’s authority (Szócs 1976, p. 43). Ferenc, the literary historian and colleague of the Kolozsvár opera director, offers a more nuanced picture. As an editor at the Hungarian radio in Kolozsvár, he was in close contact with Sándor Szinberger:

‘Szinberger belonged among the refined directors, as a cultivated individual. In his case, professional knowledge was combined with a witty gift for presentation. Everything interested him – I can attest to this, since I worked with him for at least a quarter of a century. (...) ... he not only directed and managed, but occasionally even stepped into certain roles when the designated performer was unable to appear. (...) Such was Sándor Szinberger during his period in Kolozsvár, someone whom many at the Hungarian State Opera resented, for he kept his colleagues together with iron discipline. Many also liked him’ (Kovács 2003, pp. 5–6).

His appointment to the post of director was likely initiated by the Ministry of Culture, which supervised the functioning of artistic institutions, in cooperation with the local party organisation. Szinberger himself recalls this period as follows:

‘On 23 October 1956 the duties of director of the Hungarian Opera were forced upon me, which I undertook for six months. (!) On the first day of carrying out my new task (...) a man at the entrance to the opera asked what we were playing that evening. I informed him of the title of the work, whereupon the stranger continued ironically: ‘I did not ask what is on the poster. I can read as well, but at your institution it is fashionable to change the announced performance even at the last moment.’ I knew that he was telling the truth, and I became extremely angry with myself for having agreed to take on the temporary leadership of an institution that was on the verge of falling apart. But my composure gradually returned, and suddenly my first plan as director was born: to bring out *Rigoletto* in record time, since a cast was available for it, and, before the end of the year,

to enrich the repertoire with a classical operetta. (...) Both premieres were successful, and audiences began to return to the performances in large numbers. I knew that I had found the fundamental principle of a repertoire policy capable of attracting the public: alongside the continual enrichment of the operatic repertoire, the surest way to increase the audience numerically was to stage a classical operetta each season in addition to the newly presented operatic works. The correctness of this principle was confirmed by the year-on-year rise in the number of season-ticket holders' (Szinberger 1997, pp. 31–32).

The 'repertoire policy' outlined by Szinberger was not without precedent at the Kolozsvár opera, for the first three seasons had proceeded precisely in this spirit. In the three seasons preceding Szinberger's appointment as director, however, the opera had no operetta premieres. From this perspective, the return to the initial programming strategy may be regarded as a new change of direction.

Szinberger's professional preparedness and talent are likewise confirmed by the critiques of his productions (Lakatos 1957, p. 2; Jánosházy 1958, p. 8; Szegő 1960, p. 9; Márki 1961, p. 2; Simon 1961, p. 9; Incze 1965, p. 14; Terényi 1967, p. 2; Vigh 1968, p. 15). A study of these reveals consistently high-quality productions, inventiveness, artistic sensitivity, and stagings worthy of the works themselves. In his own writings, his thoughts – articulated in an easy, readable style – and his bibliographical references attest to thorough historical and drama-theoretical knowledge. In his articles on professional and theoretical matters, as well as in interviews with him and in later recollections, he formulates with marked clarity his ideas and expectations regarding opera direction (Szinberger 1978, pp. 491–495). His principal principle is the prioritisation of dramatic thinking supported by musical means, which he presents in a systematic arrangement, emphasising the role of music

in dramatic expression and in the depiction of the action. In his view, even the smallest musical units can assist dramatic expression within the domain of basic musical knowledge. In addition, harmony and counterpoint constitute the 'science of internal musical construction' (Szinberger 1978, p. 38), that is, structural theory. The third field serving dramatic expression is 'instrumentation, the knowledge of the technique and notation of the instruments, the science of creating the score' (Szinberger 1978, p. 38). Alongside the musical means of expression, Szinberger highlights the unique feature of the operatic genre, the 'multi-layered action' (Szinberger 1978, p. 28), which can come into being solely within the musical environment. The first plane is the dramatic text, which, bearing the textual element, is linked to the second plane, 'the sung interpretation fused with the text', which already carries a 'vocal sub-element'. These two planes, in close interconnection, meet with the 'orchestra's mode of dramatic expression', in which 'instrumental sub-elements' are present (Szinberger 1978, p. 28). These three planes together constitute the 'large musical sub-element' (Szinberger 1978, p. 28), which is specific to the operatic genre. With this, Szinberger demonstrates that operatic dramaturgy and textual dramaturgy are mutually incompatible. Consequently, he considers the high-level cultivation of operatic dramaturgy essential. 'The number of writings dealing with operatic dramaturgy is negligible, as is the number of well-trained dramaturges. In their place, pseudo-dramaturges possessing doctorates in linguistics have insinuated themselves into the opera houses, or experts in depth psychology who understand everything except two things: one is music, the other is the operatic genre' (Szinberger 1978, p. 26). On this basis, Szinberger also formulated the necessity of a higher level of dramatic training for opera singers (Benedek 1978, p. 13).

Critical assessments were also made of Szinberger's work at the head of the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár. In a retrospective piece, Szinberger responds to an article by the music historian Ferenc László, who criticised the functioning

of the Hungarian opera (Szinberger 1997, pp. 31–32). László believed that a dubious compromise may have been in force in Kolozsvár between the Hungarian and the Romanian opera. According to this, the Romanian opera was the venue for the traditional grand-opera repertoire, whereas the Hungarian opera performed ‘popular operas suitable even for a lower level of taste’ (László 1998, pp. 9–10), and later primarily operettas. Szinberger rejects this (Szinberger 1997, pp. 13–14) and, referring to the cooperation between the Romanian and the Hungarian opera, notes that ‘the musical material for the major opera premieres was borrowed from the Romanian Opera’ (Szinberger 1997, p. 14), and that there were overlaps in the repertoires of the two institutions. In his article on the former director’s memoir, Ferenc László accepts this line of argument but adds critical remarks concerning Szinberger’s political connections. He claims that Szinberger was a man of the authorities, who primarily observed instructions from above rather than the interests of his own community. László takes the director to task for ‘not uttering a single word of reproach regarding the Romanian cultural policy of the period, or indeed the system itself’ (László 1998, p. 9).

Regardless of – but not independent of – the contradictory assessments of Sándor Szinberger, his period as director was ‘the time of the naturalisation and flourishing of the international operatic repertoire’ at the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár (Laskay 2003, p. 77). The significance of this era was also acknowledged by visitors from beyond the boundaries of the operatic world of Kolozsvár and Romania. The East German musicologist Ernst Krause visited the city in the 1968/69 season: ‘I was greatly surprised by the vibrant, high-quality musical life that I encountered in Kolozsvár. (...) How much talent, what enthusiasm and depth of work characterise the entire musical life here!’ (Terényi 1969, p. 10). Krause attended three performances in Kolozsvár, which he recalled with appreciation, and wrote in an enthusiastic tone about the city’s musical life: ‘Are we not perhaps close to an operatic

paradise if a city of two hundred thousand inhabitants has two permanent opera houses? (...) The two institutions play virtually to the same audience, although they are otherwise independent of one another. It is a particular pleasure to count the repertoire pieces of the two institutions: seventy! (Krause 1969, p. 11). Like his compatriot, the Berlin-based Željko Straka also spoke in commendatory and encouraging terms: 'The Hungarian Opera is well on the way to becoming an institution of international stature and renown' (Terényi 1969, p. 10). His enthusiasm and assessment are characteristic of the one-sided critical disposition typical of socialist countries at the time. Yet with regard to the operatic world of Kolozsvár they are apt, for it is a phenomenon unique in Europe that a single city should sustain two opera houses organised on an ethnic basis.

In the late 1960s, guest artists arrived not only in Kolozsvár from other countries, but the company of the Hungarian State Opera also toured in Skopje, Kumanovo, and Subotica in April 1969. Following the appearances of the Skopje company in Temesvár (Timișoara) and Kolozsvár, Szinberger and his ensemble took on their Yugoslav tour Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Verdi's *Nabucco*, Bartók's *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (Bluebeard's Castle), as well as Bentoiu's *Doktor szerelem* (Doctor Love) and two operettas by Imre Kálmán, *Marica grófnő* (Countess Maritza) and *A cigányprimás* (The Gypsy Virtuoso), achieving great success (Laskay 2003, p. 176). In the following season, before the guest tour in Italy, the Kolozsvár world premiere of Salvatore Allegra's *Il Ritratto* (The Portrait) was held, an event for which the visit of foreign theatre experts – among them the director of La Scala in Milan – was expected (Szinberger 1969, p. 15). The venues of the guest tour were the Teatro Regio in Parma and the theatre of the nearby city of Reggio Emilia. Alongside Bartók's two stage works, *Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Miraculous Mandarin*, excerpts from ballet performances were included in the programme. During their stay in Italy, the artists from Kolozsvár visited the birthplaces of Verdi and Toscanini, and also met the communist mayor of Parma (Mikó 1970, p. 11).

The foreign appearances and connections were significant not only for the recognition of the Hungarian State Opera. In these years, they also marked outstanding milestones in Szinberger's personal career: the West German productions linked to Robert Schulz's visit to Kolozsvár, who, after seeing *Turandot* and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, offered him a contract. In Gelsenkirchen, *Prince Igor* was performed in his staging, followed by *The Flying Dutchman* in Cologne and *The Magic Flute* in Nuremberg (Horváth 1967, p. 16).

Alongside the successful premieres and the appreciative critiques, the criticisms voiced by audiences must also be noted. These prompted self-examination, self-assessment, a re-definition of artistic identity, and a confrontation with existing problems on the part of the leading figures of the opera and the competent specialists closely associated with it, and this self-assessment was published in an extended summary article (N. N. 1968, p. 3). The article recorded responses to three questions from five respondents: Sándor Szinberger, Ferenc V. László, Antal Rónai, Albert Márkos, and Ede Terényi. They identified the principal problem in the Opera's activity as the disproportionality between, on the one hand, the grand-opera and ballet performances that reflected a high standard and exceptional artistic development and, on the other, the markedly inferior quality of the operetta productions. In a piece published eight years later, István Szócs characterises the same phenomenon with the term 'lack of conception', projecting it onto Szinberger's directorship and the subsequent period as well. He speaks in a critical tone of the 'two-faced policy': the alternation of spectacular grand-opera productions with substandard operetta performances (Szócs 1976, p. 43). The institution derived very substantial income from the touring performances whose quality was criticised by both reviewers and audiences. Szinberger himself acknowledged the problem of the artistic standard of the operetta productions. He considered it extremely difficult to find an effective solution because of the inadequate conditions typical of the stages in

smaller towns. He cited as an additional problem the institution's determination to meet operetta invitations at all costs, even beyond its strength. This inevitably detracted from quality, since the company became fragmented and inadequately prepared performers had to be brought into the programme. At the same time, because of the significant revenues involved, they were reluctant to forgo the possibility of performing operettas in the provinces.

Alongside the characterisation of the immediate socio-cultural environment of the production under analysis, the factors related to the staged work by Verdi are also noteworthy. In connection with the choice of play, it may be mentioned that in 1972 *Attila* was also presented in Budapest, on the Margaret Island Open-Air Stage, and almost simultaneously it was performed at the Edinburgh Festival as part of a guest appearance from Palermo, with Ruggero Raimondi in the title role. As a precursor to the Kolozsvár production, it should be noted that two performers from the Hungarian production appeared on Margaret Island as artists of the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár. The role of Ezio, the Roman general, was sung by Lajos Kónya, and the role of Foresto, the knight of Aquileia, by Ferenc Szilágyi. Whereas in 1972 Verdi's work was performed in the original Italian, in Szinberger's staging the company worked from the libretto translated by him. This libretto was also used in 1974 in Debrecen at the Csokonai Theatre.

An important circumstance in the selection of the work was Szinberger's admiration for Verdi, which is confirmed not only by his autobiographical writings but also by the proportion of Verdi operas presented during his directorship. In almost every year at least one Verdi opera was staged (Laskay 2003, pp. 507–512). His sympathy for Verdi was, moreover, intensified by his aversion to the other operatic giant, Wagner. Sándor Szinberger was sent to the Buchenwald death camp during the Second World War, and it is well known that Hitler's Germany used Wagner's art as a propaganda instrument of

its own power. Szinberger also rejected Wagner because of his antisemitism. He notes this precisely in connection with Verdi as well: 'Like most antisemites, Cosima's hatred also had its limits of interest; like her racially prejudiced husband, who entrusted the musical direction of Bayreuth to the Jewish conductor Hermann Levi, the widow, too, gladly welcomed at the festival's conductor's desk a son of the despised race, Bruno Walter. In his memoirs Walter writes of the conversation he had with Cosima, when with his "not well-considered" opinion he incurred the widow's anger by mentioning Verdi's marvellous development from *Ernani* to *Falstaff*' (Szinberger 1997, p. 69). Although Szinberger had several highly successful Wagner productions, of the two great contemporary composers it was Verdi's art that engaged him far more deeply. He regarded *Attila* as Verdi's most successful 'experimental opera': 'We venture to call several works of Verdi's vast oeuvre by this name, those operas which, in their independence, are merely promises of the masterpieces to come. Among these, *Attila* stands out, for it contains the rudimentary, still hesitant formulations of the great solutions of later creative periods' (Szinberger 1978, p. 23).

The choice of *Attila* is also self-evident in the respect that two singers from the company of an opera director who, both as musician and theorist, was receptive to the greatest master of Italian operatic culture, appeared as guest performers in the Hungarian *Attila* production in 1972. In the case of a less well-known and less frequently performed work, success cannot be as assured as in the staging of the greatest operas. At the same time, those responsible for the production enjoy greater freedom, since there are fewer established points of reference for the staging. In comparison with the Margaret Island production, Sándor Szinberger wished to present *Attila* according to his own conception. This is also indicated by the fact that he did not use the original Italian libretto but a Hungarian one, which he prepared on the basis of his own translation.

*Impact and Posterity*

*Attila* is a memorable production in the history of the Hungarian State Opera in Kolozsvár, but its reception history is scarcely perceptible. Rather, it is the moment of its presentation that may be regarded as significant, for it has remained in memory as part of the golden age of local opera performance. The members of the company at that time also presented themselves as successful artists beyond the Kolozsvár opera. 'Lajos Kónya is perhaps the most resonant name, but the tragically early deceased Ferenc Ottrok or Ferenc Szilágyi may likewise be mentioned – along with many other outstanding figures' (n. n. Ablonczy 1988, p. 22). The standard of operatic performance in Kolozsvár was shaped by the activity of Sándor Szinberger, then the institution's general director and the stage director of *Attila*, who left the head of the Hungarian opera in the season following the premiere of the Verdi work and, a few years later, in 1978, left the country as well, moving to Israel. Like him, the most prominent members of the company continued their careers abroad.

The political situation became unfavourable for Hungarian opera performance towards the end of the 1970s, and remained so until the fall of the Ceaușescu regime: 'The repertoire is constrained by the chains that once seemed to be falling away. Today *Háry János* no longer ploughs the emperor's court; the outstanding works of Hungarian music drama, *Bánk bán* and *Hunyadi*, cannot be staged. Nor can those operettas by Kálmán and Lehár that evoke the Hungarian world through waistcoats and petticoats. The people of Kolozsvár can only remember that once József Simándy or Stefánia Moldován could appear as guest performers in their city' (n. n. Ablonczy 1988, p. 22).

It deserves particular attention that the production was recorded by Hungarian Television in 1977, which contributed to its deeper microhistorical embeddedness, since in addition to written documents it remained accessible in audiovisual

form for memory and research alike. The television recording of the opera was an exceptional occasion, but alongside the welcome fact of its realisation it also brought to the surface bitter reflections concerning the functioning of the media in the mother country. The author of a 1989 article reproaches the staff and superiors of Hungarian Television for not devoting far greater attention to certain Transylvanian Hungarian theatre productions, which would have deserved it much more than – or instead of – the recording of *Attila*. ‘Between 1970 and 1982 the Hungarian theatres of Romania played in our country on nearly one hundred evenings. There was not even the slightest intention, for example, that the television should record Gábor Tompa’s staging of *Woyzeck*, Attila Seprődi Kiss’s interpretations of Caragiale, or the productions of the dramas of Gyula Illyés and András Sütő. Without any particular diplomatic manoeuvres, these recordings could have been made’ (n. n. Ablonczy 1988, p. 22). A similar indifference could be observed regarding the recordings of the Hungarian theatres of Romania and the reception of ‘other valuable documents’, recordings that in the end were destroyed (n. n. Ablonczy 1988, p. 22).

Even if the *Attila* production directed by Szinberger has no real reception history, it may remain part of theatrical memory not only because of the distinguished television recording. Its presentation during the most significant period of Hungarian opera performance in Kolozsvár left a strong imprint, and its success testifies to the cultural and artistic potential of the local society of the time, to the community’s capacity for creating value.

### *Details of the Production*

*Title:* *Attila*. *Date of Premiere:* 26 July 1973. *Venue:* Hungarian State Opera, Kolozsvár. *Director:* Sándor Szinberger. *Composer:* Giuseppe Verdi. *Libretto:* Francesco Maria Piave, Temistocle Solare. *Translator:* Sándor Szinberger. *Conductor:* Vasile Mureşan.

*Set designer:* Margit Sz. Witlinger. *Costume designer:* Lya H. Rosescu. *Choreography:* András Szántó. *Company:* Hungarian State Opera (Kolozsvár Hungarian Opera). *Cast:* Jenő Mátyás, Attila Kovács (Attila, double cast), Ferenc Szilágyi, Géza Szaday (Foresto, double cast), Gábor Andrásy, Endre Bretan (Leo, double cast), Dénes Lajos Kónya (Ezio), Annamária Albert, Ágnes Kriza (Odabella, double cast), István Szeibert, Vasile Ralea (Uldino, double cast).

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RÉKA DOROTTYA SZABÓ

‘IS THIS JUST EXHIBITIONIST THEATRE?’  
THE THEATRE-HISTORICAL RELEVANCE OF ANDRÁS  
URBÁN’S PRODUCTION BÉRES MÁRTA ONE-GIRL SHOW

Abstract: The study examines András Urbán’s 2011 monodrama *Béres Márta One-Girl Show* on the basis of the six criteria of the Philther method. Its principal perspectives are defined by the programme assumed by the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre, and it therefore outlines the production’s theatre-historical relevance primarily along the lines of postmodern aesthetics and intercultural aspects.

*The Context of the Production in Theatre Culture*

The Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre (Kosztolányi Dezső Színház, KDSZ) in Subotica (Serbia) was founded in 1994 by Frigyes Kovács and shortly became an experimental chamber theatre, which – given the realist tradition of the professional theatrical sphere in Vojvodina – constitutes a particularly significant event in the region’s theatre history. The ensemble of the KDSZ typically consists of five to six actors. This size is characteristic of independent, experimental creative groups and is conducive to non-conventional theatrical forms. The Vojvodinian theatre critic László Gerold distinguishes two tendencies that are simultaneously present in the KDSZ: ‘One is the kind of experimentation characteristic of alternative theatres – [the institution] stages non-traditional plays of the sort performed in alternative theatres, and the other is the intellectual ambition characteristic of art theatres’ (Gerold 2008).

According to András Urbán – the director who held the position of artistic director at the theatre between 2006 and 2023 – the KDSZ is an ‘experimental art theatre’, whose *ars poetica* is similar to that of independent companies in Hungary. In his view, ‘productions created according to alternative and artistic ambitions can establish contact with anyone’ (Gerold 2008). Since the KDSZ – despite its aesthetic manifestations – is a municipal stone theatre performing in a minority language, audience building and the creation of spectator–creator relationships also rank among its more important undertakings.

The theatre’s productions are diverse in both form and language, and since its founding its repertoire has been highly complex and heterogeneous. The KDSZ ‘provokes, questions, at times through words, at times solely through movement and images. It is (post-)avant-garde, alternative, radical. Yet by now recognised, even cultic’ (Szerbhórváth 2014). It can be asserted that in this theatre ‘the creators no longer seek to present a reality constructed on stage; instead, the performances continually reflect on themselves as theatrical events and on the concrete reality into which they are embedded as theatrical gestures’ (Deák 2013). The ‘burning questions’ of the community in which ‘András Urbán and his actors live, the milieu of the Hungarian population of Subotica’, therefore become a constant thematic presence (Cvetković 2012).

As a Hungarian-language theatre operating in Serbia, the Kosztolányi has assumed the mission of creating a bridge between Serbian (and ex-Yugoslav) and Hungarian theatrical culture. In practice, this is manifested first in its festival appearances: for decades the KDSZ’s productions have featured at various Central and Eastern European and Balkan theatre festivals. The theatre’s own international regional festival, the Desiré Central Station Festival, held annually since 2009, likewise fulfils a mediating function: alongside productions invited from the Hungarian-language region, the programme each year assigns a particularly significant role to works arriving from the territories of the former Yugoslavia, most frequently Serbia,

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia. Secondly, the theatre's bridging function is also evident in its collaborations and joint projects with creators and creative groups from Serbia and Hungary. Thirdly, the motifs of dual existence, minority existence, and the condition of being 'neither Serbian nor Hungarian' appear thematically in KDSZ productions, either explicitly or as cultural references. 'There is a tradition of numerous stories with Subotica-related associations being told in the plays: allusions that only those who live there can recognise' (Tanács 2011). The productions regularly draw on the knowledge world of Vojvodinian audiences, yet alongside the staging of local (Subotica- and Vojvodina-specific) realities they frequently employ elements drawn from the broader Serbian and Hungarian cultural spheres and from current public life. The language of the theatre's performances is Hungarian, but thanks to the projected translations the productions are also accessible to Serbian-speaking audiences.

András Urbán's production *Béres Márta One-Girl Show*, premiered on 13 May 2011, could in many respects serve as a textbook example of the KDSZ's principles. The production was the tenth project of the collaboration between the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre and the Szeged-based MASZK Association, ongoing since 2003 (Szerda 2011). Márta Béres, the actress of this one-person performance, played the *Show* in both Hungarian and Serbian. 'Both audiences receive the same thing, but merely because the language is different, the atmosphere of the performance also becomes different' (L. M. 2019). It is entirely uncharacteristic for the institution to schedule a single production in two languages; indeed, in the history of the theatre (up to the completion of the present analysis) this was the only such occasion.

*Dramatic Text, Dramaturgy*

According to the conception of the performance, the figure of an actress emerges through mosaic-like segments of a life story. The production ‘depicts the overdriven, extremely positive and negative alternatives of the fictitious life of a woman who appears real, filled with humour, irony, and self-reflexivity’ (Lénárt 2011). It is crucial that Béres does not play *a woman* in general, but specifically *the actress*. The constructed figure is brought into being through concrete reality elements known to the audience and the creators – that is, to the Hungarian community of Vojvodina. However, this does not mean that the production places national minority existence at its centre. In this respect, there is no single organising principle: in the construction of the character who speaks in the performance, the relationship to the majority nations (Serbs in Serbia and Hungarians in Hungary) is just as relevant as the relationship to men, to the audience, to the father, or to herself. ‘The work is not organised around a single ideological system. The mirror it holds up to the audience is multidirectional, that is, it shows several faces. It is not the performance but the spectator who must take a position’ (Deák 2013).

Márta Béres explains that, in the creative process, she and the director jointly decided that the material of the performance would be formed from selected segments of the actress’s life. During the creative process Urbán proposed certain topics to which Béres improvised – the text of the performance was later assembled on the basis of these improvisations. It is therefore inevitable that every element of the performance is subjective. ‘The central pivot of the work’s construction is, as it were, the *béresmártaiság* [the distinctive quality of being Márta Béres] and the succession of fictive, less fictive, or perhaps real sequences that draw upon it is virtually infinite’ (Brenner 2011).

‘We had no point of departure, no literary text’ (L. M. 2011), Béres repeatedly states. This is important because the performance is text-centred, with the predominantly epically

structured text – alongside the performer’s presence – occupying the central position. In *Amikor a dráma elbeszélőt keres* (When a Drama Seeks a Narrator), Zsófia Balassa formulates, in her discussion of dramas with an explicit narrator and of the memory play, that in such texts

‘the narrator’s personal stories thematise the narrator’s position within the stratification of the drama’s fictional world, the role the narrator plays in that same world, the modes of the narrator’s appearance, and, perhaps most importantly, the problems of internal perspective that are closely bound up with presenting the narrator as an explicit, concrete person’ (Balassa 2019).

Almost exactly the same phenomenon can be observed in the case of the *One-Girl Show*. The difference is that Béres not only performs the internally focalising narrator but is in fact herself the narrator. The tension is produced by the theatrical situatedness: because the spoken text makes dense and explicit use of theatrical self-reflexivity – for example, ‘[w]ith András we made a monodrama in which I spoke about my life directly to the audience’ (Béres – Urbán 2011) –, everything that is uttered is immediately detached from Béres as a person and becomes theatre.

One device for emphasising the theatrical frame is that Béres repeatedly looks out at the audience. The text contains asides such as the opening line of the performance, ‘[d]o you not like it?’, the amplification of the spectators’ presumed thoughts – ‘[s]o is this girl going to strip? [o]r is this just exhibitionist theatre?’ – and questions of the type ‘[g]ood, was it not?’ (Béres – Urbán 2011). Analyses reflecting on the production consistently highlight the improvisatory character of the active communication with the audience. It is unquestionably true that Béres maintains contact with her audience; however, it is important to add that these questions and remarks – how-

ever much it may appear that the actress is inventing them *here and now* and directing them at specific spectators – are part of the script. What is genuinely unpredictable – and herein, too, lies the performative character of the performance – is the audience's reaction. As to whether she expects answers to the questions directed towards the spectators, Béres states in an interview: '[i]t is not the case that if they say something, then it is good, and if they do not, then it is not good. What is good is the way it happens at that moment' (Tápai 2011, p. 1). The flexibility of the performance is also reflected in the occasion during the 2010/2011 theatre season when, as a season finale, 'the Kosztolányi's actress performed on stage together with her fellow actors' (Tápai 2011, p. 2).

There is no essential semantic difference between the Hungarian and Serbian scripts of the performance, at least at the level of denotation. Nevertheless, according to Béres, it is radically 'different to utter the same word in two different languages, because it may evoke entirely different associations, and this affects the performance' (L. M. 2011).

### *Staging*

A universal feature of András Urbán's directorial working method is that 'the text of the performance is likewise created together with the actors' (Gerold 2011). In this respect, therefore, the *One-Girl Show* cannot be considered unconventional. As the first chapter of this analysis has already shown, his productions are highly diverse and can be situated within most tendencies of Hungarian postmodern theatre. Simultaneity, stylistic pluralism, and the blending of genres are postmodern characteristics that form essential elements of the 'well-known [...] András Urbán idiom' (Török 2011), and they are likewise present in the *One-Girl Show*.

The montage-like, non-linear handling of scenes creates a cinematic effect. Although the performance is largely prose-based, it also contains musical, physical-theatre, and perfor-

mance-like scenes. Márta Béres sings in Hungarian and Serbian, both as a professional actress and as a timid child. She runs, dances, climbs, lies down and sits, eats a banana and spits water. Through the personified skeleton the performance employs puppetry, and through elements not spoken but shown it also draws on pantomimic techniques. As Goran Cvetković writes, '[t]he young actress presented an entirely new dramaturgy – the material is at once postdramatic and poetic, verbal and physical, musical and playful' (Cvetković 2012).

‘András Urbán’s direction confronts the spectator with scenes that speak about the spectator’s place within society and continually probe questions of identity. [...] Through the constant alternation of reality effects and theatrical effects, the performance becomes thought-provoking while, with its sharp self-irony, simultaneously managing to entertain its audience’ (Fáy 2013).

The eclectic formal character, combined with the thematic diversity, may appear crowded or excessive. The direction, however, does not lapse into excess: the stage action remains consistently easy to follow, and the performance is measured in every respect. There are no emotionally overstrained scenes or parallel actions that demand the division of attention. The heterogeneity characterising the performance manifests itself largely not simultaneously but diachronically.

If we examine the production in terms of postmodern theatrical characteristics, we can see that the *One-Girl Show*’s most important such attribute is its theatrical situatedness. At the level of the text, the direction, and the acting alike, the boundaries of theatricality are pushed. We witness the crossings of fiction and reality – that is, of theatre – in every interaction, for example when Márta Béres, sitting at the edge of the stage at the boundary between playing area and auditorium, recounts her father’s death directly, face to face, to the audience.

*Acting*

‘Márta Béres plays an actress’ (Fáy 2013). Most analyses consider precisely this to be the exciting aspect – the uncertainty as to whether what is occurring on stage is acting or whether the performer’s sincere words are being heard. Because, through the personal implications of the narrated story, or at least their appearance, ‘we feel every word to be real’ (Deák 2013), the question may arise: ‘is this theatre at all?’ (Fáy 2013).

In the skeleton scene Béres ‘appears primarily as an actress, that is, she operates on the level of fiction’ (Deák 2013). She plays a young woman mourning her father, and then suddenly ‘revokes the truth-value of the preceding scene, in which she conversed with the skeleton as though it were a sentient being, and reminds us that all of this was merely a prop, and that what we saw earlier was (only) skilled acting, the creation of an illusion’ (Deák 2013).

Katalin Deák, drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, analyses the acting. Lehmann defines the concept of complex acting as the combination of simple acting, when the spectator ‘judges the actor’s actions to be real’ (Deák 2013), and received acting, when ‘the spectator treats the performer as an actor’ (Deák 2013). Complex acting denotes a mode of performance whose effect is that the spectator perceives the performer almost simultaneously as an actor (that is, a person originating from their own reality) and as a fictional character (Lehmann 2009). For most of the *Show*, Béres’s performance can be placed in the category of simple acting – a point supported by those reflections which, in praising the realist mode of acting, make observations similar to the quotations above. In certain scenes of the performance, however, the mechanism of received and thus complex acting is also discernible: this is exemplified by the illusion-breaking ending of the skeleton scene. The effect of complex acting, belonging to the toolkit of postdramatic theatre, is that ‘[a]s spectators of the

performance we continually find ourselves in the play of the fusion of the real and the fictive' (Deák 2013).

On the subject of *self-transformation*, Lehmann writes that the actor – paradoxically – strives simultaneously for uniqueness and repeatability. The means of achieving this are that the actor 'rejects being a replica of a character, appears as an "epic" actor who merely shows, or, by representing themselves (*Selbst-Darsteller*), appears as a performer who uses their own presence as primary aesthetic material' (Lehmann 2009). In the case of Márta Béres we can observe a combination of these two modes. First, through the fact that the spoken text is the narration of one (or several) possible lives, the epic quality is immediately produced, along with a degree of distance. Béres does not in fact portray roles external to herself; she merely presents situations. 'In staging the "I", she does not play the characters of the given scenes, but only the different periods of her own personality: her childhood and adolescence, her university experiences, and the memory of her father's death' (Deák 2013). Secondly, because the *Shon's sacrifice* is the performer's own person, her presence becomes the focal point. The constancy of the production is, naturally, provided by the written text and the rehearsed elements. Nevertheless, Béres 'is constantly attentive to the reactions coming from outside, while at the same time carrying the stage situations through with a strong actorly presence' (Deák 2013). '[S]everal times she picks someone out from the audience, through eye contact or by directly pointing at them, someone she ridicules or with whom she begins to converse' (Deák 2013). Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of the 'shared corporeal presence of performers and spectators' (Fischer-Lichte 2009) thus generates the unpredictable and the unrepeatable: 'Márta Béres and her audience enter into a symbiosis, breathing together' (Török 2011).

### *Stage Design and Sound*

The performance – as conventional theatrical productions tend to do – begins with a lowered red curtain suggestive of a realist *mise en scène*, with the light focused at its centre. The difference here is that the performance does not wait for the curtain to be raised: the lowered drape is already part of the production, signalling that everything the audience will perceive is theatre. ‘It is very easy for me to speak about the set, for the simple reason that there is none’ (Brenner 2011), writes János Brenner in his analysis. Béres indeed performs throughout on a setless, empty stage, so that only a few props and costumes constitute the ‘visual aspect’. The production has only costume designers (Márta Béres and Andrea Ledenyák) and a lighting designer (Róbert Majoros); no set designer worked on it. (An exception to the absence of scenery is the scene performed at the end of the production when, as Béres enumerates her monthly expenses, an X-ray image of a lung is projected onto the back wall of the stage. This is the only element in the performance whose primary purpose is to function as visual spectacle.) ‘The austere, setless stage forces the spectator to focus exclusively on the story and on the person who is telling it. On the person who, apart from a chair, a microphone, and a banana, uses nothing at all. Or rather, who uses only her own body’ (Markovics 2011).

The stripped-down scenography does not mean that the space lacks significance. The most relevant function of the empty stage is to direct attention to the performer – thus Márta Béres is compelled to fill the empty surface with her actorly means. The movements are accentuated and in effect become the visual element. Béres’s movements always correspond to the narrative level of the performance. At first she moves with confidence and elegance, in a feminine manner, whereas in the second half of the performance she is markedly calmer, more restrained, and less theatrical. It is important that the movement not only illustrates the text but often

supplements it by creating a new layer of meaning. Although the performer indeed has to fill the entire stage with her own body, the lighting configurations assist her and define, narrow, or expand the concrete playing space.

Because the actor's body – alongside the text – stands at the centre of the performance, the performative elements are accentuated. In *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, Fischer-Lichte opens the chapter on corporeality with the general observation that '[i]n the case of performances, the "creating" artist cannot be separated from the material' (Fischer-Lichte 2009, p. 104). The performance of the stage body becomes, inevitably, more prominent when it is alone. And when a single body is placed in an empty space, it is unavoidable that the spectator's attention should be directed towards its (intentional or accidental) movements and minute gestures, even when the storytelling proceeds continuously in parallel with them. In addition to foregrounding the body, the empty stage highlights the theatrical situatedness: at every moment of the production the spectator perceives the theatre as the site of the event. That is, 'the stage of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre now serves only to evoke in us the idea of theatricality, of the so-called stage space' (Brenner 2011). The separation of auditorium and playing space can be regarded as traditional only in part. 'Under studio conditions, spectator and performer share a common space. Thus the performance partially abolishes the hierarchical relationship between creator and spectator' (Deák 2013). According to Deák, this aim is also served by the solution whereby, due to the lighting, the actress – in certain episodes – can see the first rows of the audience. In this way not only are the roles of performer and spectator equalised, but interaction also becomes possible.

The production is also highly minimalist in terms of props. Only a single chair, a glass of water, and a banana appear on-stage. The most important prop of the performance, however, is the life-sized, puppet-like skeleton. Béres does not place herself above the skeleton; she moves its limbs only minimally,

thereby signalling that the skeleton's role onstage resembles that of a human being rather than that of a prop or puppet. She creates the illusion and then destroys it. The episode in which the performer speaks with difficulty while hooking the skeleton's jaw into her mouth has a performance-art quality.

### *Impact and Posterity*

In the acting master's programme of the University of Novi Sad Academy of Arts, where actors from Vojvodina usually graduate, one of the requirements for obtaining the degree is the creation of a one-person production. Performances thus created – most often self-directed – very rarely enter the repertoires of Vojvodinian theatres; in most cases these monodramas are not performed after the examination performance, or only on a few occasions. It is likewise uncharacteristic of theatres in the region, including the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre, to present their own monodrama productions – the *One-Girl Show* is therefore a distinctive performance in this respect as well. In András Urbán's directorial oeuvre, the period following the *Show* saw an increase in explicitly postmodern productions in which the actors, rendering reality and fiction indistinguishable, perform under their own names. These are mostly not adaptations but authorial projects – among them, for example, the likewise 2011 production *Dogs and Drugs*, as well as the works premiered a decade later, *A csókos asszony lovagjai* (The Kiss-Happy Woman's Knights, 2021) and *A trianoni csata* (The Battle of Trianon, 2022). The heightened emphasis on theatrical situatedness is also observable in the productions created after the *Show*. Examining the work of the director and the KDSZ, we can see that the productions premiered after the *One-Girl Show* lose some of their performance-art quality and, in parallel, become more agitational and more metatheatrical.

In 2013 the *One-Girl Show*, during a Vojvodinian tour encompassing twelve settlements,<sup>1</sup> was able to reach places that – with the exception of Senta – do not have a professional theatre troupe. Although the press reported audience success on almost every occasion, Béres states that she acquired mixed memories during the guest performances. ‘Some were beautiful, some moving, painful, hurtful, or uplifting’ (Szerda 2013). The principal cause of the heterogeneous reception was that during the tour the postmodern production reached rural environments with predominantly elderly populations, where – beyond the guest performances of the Subotica-based Népszínház, which represents a realist aesthetic – only the Tanyaszínház’s<sup>2</sup> current production can be seen each summer, and only on a single occasion. The audiences of these guest performances were therefore accustomed above all to the theatre of realism, which is why touring the *Show* constituted an especially important programme from an educational perspective.

Beyond the Vojvodinian venues, the performance was seen not only by Serbian and Hungarian audiences but also by audiences in Montenegro, Romania, Slovakia, and Bosnia. Its more important festival appearances and awards include the Theater Festival (2011), the Timișoara Euro-Regional Theatre Meeting (2011), the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) (2012), the Euro-Underground Theatre Festival (2012), the Kisvárdai Festival of Hungarian Theatres (2013, Mayor’s Prize), Štrih Fest (2015, Best Actress), Teatar Fest (2013, Best Performance), the Pécs National Theatre Meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Bečej, Senta, Kula, Bačka Topola, Kanjiža, Maradić, Torda, Doroslovo, Bačko Petrovo Selo, Novi Bečej, Mali Iđoš, Bogojevo, Kupusina.

<sup>2</sup> The Tanyaszínház (Grange Theatre) was founded in 1978 by György Hernyák and Frigyes Kovács with the aim of providing access to theatrical culture for Hungarian-inhabited Vojvodinian settlements without a professional theatre. Within the framework of the programme, the acting students of the University of Novi Sad Academy of Arts present a production each summer with which they tour Vojvodina.

(2014), and the Deszka Festival (2014). For her performance in the *One-Girl Show*, Márta Béres received in 2011 the most prestigious recognition of the Vojvodinian Hungarian acting profession, the Pataki Gyűrű Award for the best acting performance of the season.

The penultimate performance of the production took place on 1 December 2023, in Serbian, at the Novi Sad Theatre. Its hundredth, and final, performance was seen by audiences on 2 December 2023, in Hungarian, on the KDSZ stage: in this way the *One-Girl Show* remained in the repertoire of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre for twelve years. In the institution's history, apart from the *Show*, only one production has reached such a high number of performances.<sup>3</sup> Márta Béres played before a full house on this final occasion as well – and the audience ‘bade farewell to the performance with unending applause’ (L. M. 2023).

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Rozália Székely

IF YOU DO NOT KNOW WHERE YOU ARE,  
SEEK THE GAZE OF THE ANIMAL  
SZENTKIRÁLYI THEATRE WORKSHOP:  
*A LEVÉL* (THE LETTER)

Abstract: The two founding members of a family theatre, in their desire to evoke the past, make the theatrical present the protagonist of their performance. The play confines the spectator's perception of theatre within their own personalities and their relationship to one another, assigning to theatre-writing a task that spans decades. A mysterious aesthetic quality – grounded in the identity of animal and human attention, the untouchability of space, and the fullness of human presence – plays hide-and-seek in a 420 square-metre basement. The inspiration for the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop's production of *The Letter* derives from a professional and personal story: the film director Dezső Magyar, the former husband of Lili Monori, defected in the early 1970s, the day after the failure of the film *The Letter*. Filming lasted one day and was halted centrally following a denunciation, because it contained excerpts from a banned Russian short story.

The Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop was founded by Lili Monori and Miklós B. Székely. Their sixth production was *The Letter*, staged in 2001. From 1990 to 2004, this theatre created performances in a cellar system in Budapest's Eighth District. The company's name derives from this location, since the venue was situated in the cellar of 4 Szentkirályi Street. The performances were written and directed by the two founding members, who were also the performers, together with their

children, occasionally their acquaintances, and their household animals. In the present production, besides Monori and B. Székely, Monori's son, Sándor Farkas Horváth, and Gina the dog appeared. The analysis of the performance *The Letter* was prepared by their daughter, Rozália Székely, on the basis of rehearsal recordings.

When *The Letter* was created in 2001, the Szentkirályi cellar had already been part of the public sphere for eleven years. For alternative theatres operating outside the official theatrical structure (in common parlance, the repertory theatre system), a system of state funding applications was already in place, but there was still no performing arts act. Although such an act has since been established, intended to regulate and support the proper functioning of this artistic field, in reality this has unfortunately not been realised because of political abuses. The particular segment of the alternative theatre scene at the time is nowadays referred to as the Independents. At the beginning of the 2000s several important theatrical institutions were established, for example the National Theatre Festival of Pécs<sup>1</sup> in 2001, and the Alternative Theatre Festival was still in existence then.<sup>2</sup> In 1998 the Trafó House of Contemporary Arts opened, and this institution, operating as a receiving theatre, has since remained a principal stronghold of the independent theatre scene. The new National Theatre was inaugurated in 2002. From 2001 Pál Mácsai became the artistic director of the Madách Chamber Theatre, initiating the theatre's renewal and its gradual detachment from the Madách Theatre. Instead of the earlier boulevard-theatre conception, he sought to transform it into an art theatre that operated with long rehearsal periods and relied on literary texts, while retaining the existence

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<sup>1</sup> The National Theatre Festival was held between 1982 and 2000 in Budapest and in various provincial cities. Its successor, POSZT, operated in Pécs between 2001 and 2019, and has since reverted to being an itinerant festival.

<sup>2</sup> Alternative Theatre Festival Review: held in Budapest, later in Szeged, then in Debrecen between 1994 and 2010.

of an ensemble and the repertory system. It finally became fully independent in 2009, and the former Chamber Theatre, which had borne the name Örkény Theatre since 2004, now functions as an autonomous institution. The Critics' Association's system of awards changed during these years in line with the current focal points of the theatrical sphere – always somewhat belatedly, yet nonetheless expressively. From the 1994/95 season onwards, the Best Alternative Theatre Production received its own category – from the 2003/2004 season under the name Best Independent. In the 2013/14 season, for the first time, a production by an independent theatre received the Best Production award: Béla Pintér's *Titkaink* (Our Secrets). From 2001 onwards, a prize could also be awarded for the best children's production.

In his assessment of the Alternative Theatre Festival, theatre critic Balázs Urbán explains that the outstanding productions of professional theatres (that is, repertory theatres) are generally realised on their studio stages, where they attempt alternatives to psychological realism and Meyerholdian stylisation. From the perspective of formal language, he considers certain repertory-theatre directors more experimental than those in the alternative scene, in whom, however, a discernible tendency can be observed towards becoming professionalised, both in terms of quality and in terms of institutional structure. The independents are, of course, far more exposed to financial insecurity than the repertory theatres. The categorisation of dance and movement-theatre productions is uncertain: if movement constitutes an alternative to verbal expression, then it too is alternative theatre. The role confusion to which the written reports on the 7th Alternative Theatre Festival of 2001 regularly draw attention also appears on the side of reception (cf. Urbán 2001, pp. 24–27; Zsámboki 2001a, p. 23 and 2001b, p. 26; Zsigovics, Zala, Deutsch, Ari-Nagy, Bobo, Golden, Vinczellér and Halász 2001, pp. 50–53.). On the basis of the reports, the professional discourse harboured a dual expectation towards alternativity: on the one hand, it should

not seek to resemble the repertory theatres; on the other, the repertory theatres should incorporate its innovations, or integrate alternative companies, directors, and actors into their own structures. The reports raise the question of whether an alternative/independent production, company, or creator can remain valid in the long term if it does not become institutionalised, yet whether it does not lose its very essence if it does become institutionalised. Is the artistic renewal of the repertory theatre equivalent to attempting to integrate the discoveries of alternative theatre-makers into its own profile?

The director-centred theatre of the period was characterised by two decisive tendencies. The mode of expression regarded as traditional, psychological realism, continued to dominate, yet another direction emerged that re-evaluated the relationship between literature and theatre and relinquished the primacy of the text. Visuality, sound, movement, and the performer's presence became equivalent to the text. Convincing examples of this are the Krétakör production *W – munkás-cirkusz* (W – Worker's Circus) of 2001 and Béla Pintér's first premiere, the 1998 *Népi Rablét* (Common Bondage).

The inspiration for the Szentkirályi Theatre Workshop's production *The Letter* was a professional and personal event: the film director Dezső Magyar, formerly Lili Monori's husband, defected in the early 1970s, on the day following the failure of the film *The Letter*. The shooting lasted one day; after a denunciation it was halted by central order because it contained passages from a banned Russian short story. The state funding intended for this film was subsequently allocated to another film then in preparation. Monori and B. Székely addressed the story of the one-day shoot in three consecutive years in their productions: in *A bosszú nyár II.* (The Long Summer II) of 2000, in the 2001 *The Letter*, and in *Ernő*, created in 2002. In one of Monori's rehearsal diaries she wrote: 'In the matter of *The Letter* I could not tell the truth. This is why *A bosszú nyár II.* is neither fish nor fowl. I regret it. These things,

too, enrich the list of our matters that have never reached the audience.’ (Lili Monori archive)

In *The Letter*, birth, rebirth, the exchange of identities, and falsehood as an instrument of survival are interwoven through a leaping, discontinuous dramaturgy that binds together *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, László Garaczi’s play *Csodálatos vadállatok* (Marvellous Wild Animals), Dezső Magyar’s screenplay *The Letter*, Sándor Tar’s short story *Lassú teher* (Slow Burden), and several sentences attributed to Fellini. The Gordian knot thereby created is untied by Gina the dog, who, by consuming the sizeable ox tongue that appears at the end of the performance, symbolically abolishes linguisticity. One should not look for causal relations or linearity. The named figures (Gábor, Dr Dezső Magyar), the personal and professional references attached to them, and the film screenplay that provides the occasion for the performance are insufficiently contextualised, and in the absence of background information the content and trajectory are difficult to reconstruct.<sup>3</sup> The presence of the dog, the everyday-inflected quality of the performance art, the atmosphere of the space, the acoustic effects, and the spoken texts resonate with such force that they sustain, or rather expand, attention. The piece is set in Ózd, just like the story of the film that in reality failed to materialise. The entire performance is a rehearsal for a concert appearance arranged in honour of Fellini’s reception. Into this foundational narrative are inserted scenes, with or without text, that bear only loose – or no – connection to one another. These scenes contain motifs which, scattered throughout the performance, yield a chain of associations. B. Székely, who ‘plays’ Dr Dezső Magyar, recounts that a priest arrived together with Fellini, who had been invited to the concert, and prayed so loudly that he himself began to neigh; soon an increasingly deafening concert of praying and neighing developed. The priest and Fellini eventu-

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<sup>3</sup> Gábor Bódy and Dezső Magyar were film directors. Gábor Bódy was to have played Lili Monori’s partner in the film *The Letter*.

ally fled. As he was running off, Fellini still called back to him: 'Pay no attention to it, Dr Dezső Magyar. In Italy there are those who devote their entire lives to becoming a horse. Or a stone. Or a tree. And nobody even notices. A trifle.' In the next spoken scene Monori instructs Gina the dog on what to do if she must be reborn. She must be very careful, because she may previously have been a human and later may nonetheless become a dog again. The sentences from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* concerning rebirth, Gina's absorbed attention, and the words of the Fellini story echo silently through the space. Later, amplified by the motifs from Sándor Tar's short story – *one heart for two people, a lent kneecap, a borrowed lung, half a kidney given to another person* – the conceptual sequences intensify. One person moves into another person's body; one relationship into another. This layer is autobiographical: Monori's former husband is played by her current one. What does Gina signify along the axis between birth in the maternal womb and the human being turned to stone? Her gaze embodies the spiritual unity of human and animal in a space where the untouched surfaces of the walls become consubstantial with the human face, voice, and breath. The symbolism of metamorphosis (a human who is a horse, a tree, and a stone; a husband who is Dezső but in fact B. Székely; a dog who is a human; an actor who is a human; a theatre that is in fact a cellar and a cellar that is in fact a theatre) constitutes the cohesion that is missing from the narrative progression at the level of words.

At the beginning of the performance Miklós B. Székely, lying on the floor, gives birth to plastic toys with moderate exertion, and the direction treats this action with the same unforced simplicity with which Monori throws out, 'I am going to the post office', then walks out of the light. The direction neither stylises the inscrutability and absurdity of life's events nor do the constituent elements of the performance illustrate the hesitant utterances or the semantic content of the spoken

text. The actors<sup>4</sup> drop words and sentences into the space: *cannot breathe, union nut*. The question ‘Has Fellini been here yet?’, spoken after the birth of the toy animals, however, positions the performance. It designates a future target for the audience’s attention: the arrival of Fellini (who, of course, does not come). Fellini is an emblematic name; the spectators at Szentkirályi were typically intellectuals and artists who would have been familiar with his oeuvre, or at least would have seen one or two of his films, and thus he becomes an immediate point of reference. At the same time the question hangs in the air, and the answer that follows does not lighten its weight. Hódmezővásárhely, Orosháza, Ózd: these are the locations Fellini travelled to in order to speak with B. Székely, whom we immediately learn to be playing Dr Dezső Magyar. This latter role-name readily becomes referential, since, as Andor Deutsch writes in his review (Deutsch 2001, p. 81),<sup>5</sup> the pro-

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<sup>4</sup> What does directing mean at all in the case of the Szentkirályi? During the rehearsal process of the productions, the external eye was, fundamentally, Monori. The scenes were recorded on camera; outside rehearsals Monori repeatedly watched the footage, and on the basis of the conclusions she drew from it she prepared herself as a ‘director’ for the next rehearsal. B. Székely also contributed overarching proposals, and the balance shifted to varying degrees towards Monori’s directorial presence and influence.

<sup>5</sup> ‘According to the accompanying booklet, the intention is to commemorate a single day in the shooting of a film that has not been completed for thirty years. The evocation of an old friend and an old story is a personal matter – this is not a repertory theatre, they do not deal with impersonal matters here, nor would it make sense – yet it is so personal that the innocent spectator is excluded from numerous details of the performance. I do not believe this surprises the performers, nor that they intended it otherwise. Their invitation is addressed solely to showing themselves: they offer the dense essence of their own lives and life experience to those who are receptive to essences. Everything else is mere play. A letter arrives; it may be bad news. Pardon: if a story could have taken shape, I did not understand it; even if I reconstructed something of it for my own private use, I have since forgotten it. I assume this is because it was not important. What is important is their life, and because that cannot differ so greatly from anyone else’s, yet here, in this infinitely everyday

gramme booklet for the performance contains a description of the aborted shooting of the film *The Letter*, of the director Dezső Magyar, of Lili Monori, and of Gábor Bódy, who would have played the leading roles.<sup>6</sup> Bódy is mentioned in the performance only as Gábor, without a surname, and it is uncertain to what extent he could be identified. Two further names are mentioned in passing: Béla and Uncle János. They are not truly introduced; we do not learn who these persons are. Yet none of this is important. The creator-performers offer no explanations, either in terms of directorial ideas or in terms of their stage presence; they simply exist. It is as if we were peering into the life of a family. And yet, taken as a whole, it is not lifelike at all. Through the lack of explanation, the fragmentary information, and the tatters of story, an impression becomes almost palpably the essence of the atmosphere: that in the real time of the performance events are not organised linearly, but time itself floats. An additional crucial pillar of this overall effect is the manner in which what is inside and outside the performance intersect. In the advertisements and brief interview published prior to the premiere, Monori details what happened around the one-day film shoot and how she experienced that 1972 event, and continues to experience it to this day (Kiss 2001, p. 11). Between the directorial and spectatorial positions that emerge in this way a kind of contract is formed concerning the personal dimension of the performance. At the same time this 'contract' is overridden by the direction, and autobiographicality arises on another level: the typical Szentkirályi spectator (Zentai 1997, p. 11),<sup>7</sup> on the basis of earlier performances and statements, had repeat-

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space, it was nonetheless able to become strange, unique, and above all very dense, it speaks about Life in general. Their highly individual, personal subject leads, without any trace of personalism, to the most universal questions. Pure, like a Pilinszky poem.'

<sup>6</sup> He is presumably referring to the advertisements and short interview published in *Pesti Műsor* and *Premier*.

<sup>7</sup> 'Rozi also said that she often sees the same faces.'

edly encountered the configuration (Zentai 1997, p. 11; Bihari 1997, p. 30; Legát 1997) in which they know that the subject is autobiographical, that it is moreover of particular importance to the creators' worldview, that the life event of one of the creators is performed by their family members, and that they do not strive for historical fidelity but rather for 'the evocation of memory' (Kiss 2001, p. 11). At the same time, as Andor Deutsch emphasises in his review, the point is not the autobiographical and other elements that may (or may not) coalesce into a story (Deutsch 2001, p. 81), but the effect produced in the spectator. What becomes perceptible is the performers' real-time life in the real time of the performance, and not through its events: 'Their highly individual, personal subject leads, without any trace of personalism, to the most universal questions. Pure, like a Pilinszky poem' (Deutsch 2001, p. 81).

A crucial element of actor direction at Szentkirályi is that the actor is not directed. The external eye is at most a partner, primarily Monori. Another important point of reference is the presence of the animal and the materiality of the cellar. The human word, gaze, movement, and facial expression are valid only if they are *at least* equivalent to those of the animal, in this case Gina the dog, in whose eyes the shared past is likewise present. When Monori teaches her about rebirth, she takes her with such profound seriousness as if she were human, thereby making her a partner. All this is palpably not a performed matter in the sense of an intention aimed at persuading an external observer, but rather a genuine act of establishing contact with another living being. In the same way, the actors' lack of theatrical means corresponds to the untouched state of the cellar. The tone of the dialogues and monologues is like that of an evening conversation in the kitchen. A natural mid-register, raised only slightly for emphasis during small, harmless disagreements. With subtle contrasts they lift the actors' presence, so cautiously that it never becomes conspicuous. One of the few dialogue scenes is when Monori sits in the armchair reading out animal advertisements. She is louder and more

animated than B. Székely, and she speaks considerably more than he does. She reads the advertisements in a pleasant, conversational tone, addressing her partner in a slightly instructive manner. Her timbre and liveliness invigorate the atmosphere in much the same way as in a later scene, when Gina the dog excitedly fixes her gaze on the tennis ball lying before B. Székely's feet, while the man mutters the kidney-passing, lung-lending passage from *Lassú teher*, yet still does not kick the ball to her. In the dialogues B. Székely appears to remain passive; his utterances are more muted and almost always merely reactions to the other's sentences. He walks out of the exchange with Monori and, among the chairs earlier arranged as part of the performance, plays the accordion, then sings the song *Akácos út* (Road with Acacias). He sings slightly off-key, without rhythm, yet as he plays the accordion in hat and jacket, his back turned to the woman watching him, an oppressive allure radiates from him – the allure of the struggle for freedom.

When Sándor Farkas Horváth arrives, he brings a letter sent by the building's caretaker, Uncle Kaposvári.<sup>8</sup> He admonishes Monori and B. Székely for not knowing how to play the drums. He shows them how it should be done, then, after receiving no portion of the ox tongue, disappears into one of the rooms to play the saxophone. With his unforced gestures, physical presence, and firm yet calm bearing, he creates the impression of a powerful, radiant man. Tall, muscular build, strikingly blond hair, leather jacket, red T-shirt. He does not blend into his environment; he generates a vibration in himself, which is again important, because there is no acted or

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<sup>8</sup> The key to the cellar was always with the Kaposvári family; we had to borrow it from them. They lived directly above the cellar, on the ground floor of 4 Szentkirályi Street.

The content of the letter to be read aloud is a fragment from the screenplay of *The Letter*. The letter was posted in 1953. B. Székely reads it aloud. A steel-factory worker commits suicide, throwing himself into the stream of hot, molten iron.

carried tension in the performance. Thus the human body, too, becomes a boundary element that creates contrast.

The cellar system at 4 Szentkirályi Street consisted of four large rooms. The entire area measured 420 square metres; subtracting the passageways, the individual rooms were between 70 and 90 square metres. Each room had an opening to the one beside it and to the one behind it. It was not a site built, designed, or furnished for theatre, yet the term ‘found space’ is not accurate either. The cellar, as a site, was the medium of Monori and B. Székely’s philosophy of art, not a theatrical space in the technical sense. The performance takes place in the dimension opened up by the space. *The Letter* was performed in a single location, in the rear room to the left of the cellar entrance. On either side of the playing area three enormous fissures gape in the wall; only the natural light filtering through the cellar windows glimmers in the darkness beyond the passageways, while the lights in all the other rooms are switched off. This contrast in illumination at times expands the perceptual horizon of the scenes, in such a way that the contourless darkness becomes slightly uncanny, yet in any case produces a sense of lack. This lack – the bottomless hole in the space – draws the gaze, opening a gate for inscrutability and mystery, through which the tatters of story spoken in the piece may wander freely. The relational dimension that opens in the dialogue scenes between Monori and B. Székely, when the animal advertisements are read aloud or when the pages of the screenplay are being arranged, twists the hierarchy of dominance and subordination through the way the disputing party, or the one withdrawing from the dispute, disappears into the darkness. It matters little who is stronger if one steps into an abyss in any case; which in the present instance is both the blackness between the walls and the solitude bathed in light. The use of contrasts appears not only in the actors’ bodies and tone, or in the play of light and shadow. The drum kit and the Oriental-style paper lantern are surprising objects in this space, though not ostentatiously so. The brown, grey, cream-

coloured, worn pieces of furniture – the stools, the shabby armchair, the small table with the wicker basket placed on it in disorder – stand in contrast to the metallic gleam and conspicuously good condition of the drum kit. Between them lies a small basin filled with toy animals, for example a little horse and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, evoking rebirth, and scattered sheets of paper from the screenplay scenes. There is an abundance of seating, more than there are performers. Owing to their original purpose, the objects create a homely atmosphere, while their condition introduces a sense of abandonment. The drum kit as a multi-part unit and the furniture as a multi-part chaos generate a contradiction in their effect, which is amplified by the neatly arranged yet empty chairs of the concert-style auditorium layout.<sup>9</sup>

The acoustic world is composed of the various shades of the human speaking voice, the dog's whimpering, panting, and, where applicable, snoring, the sound of the drum and the accordion, and the chance noises filtering in from outside the cellar. The noise of the street adds a piquant colouring to the tone of the performance: footsteps from outside, a siren, an ambulance. When a car passes along the street, it rumbles deeply above us. A cat in heat in the courtyard, or a small child on the pavement? It is difficult to decide. Another contrast emerges as the diverse sounds of bustling life meet the enclosed world of the cellar. The contradictions in the visual and acoustic registers likewise intensify the latent tension of the performance, opening a space for contemplation. Everything visible, audible, perceptible prods the attention continuously and delicately, sustains it without directing it, and thus renders the incomprehensible and the invisible capable of being received.

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<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the piece the spectators stood. During the Fellini story, B. Székely arranged the auditorium, after which the spectators remained seated throughout.

From the critical responses it is evident that the Szentkirályi is, in a certain sense, separated both from the Hungarian theatre profession in general and from the independents within it. This derives in part from the conceptual framework that also emerges from the reports of the Alternative Theatre Festival: the notion of genuine alternativity appears, that is, the clarification – or at least the desire for clarification – of the position and purpose of the professional milieu that, after the regime change, rechristened itself from amateur/underground to alternative. In this segment's search for identity – despite the generally appreciative tone – the path chosen by Monori and B. Székely is difficult for professional writing to approach (Deutsch 2001, p. 81).<sup>10</sup> In terms of acting and overall experience, critics value the creative work highly. In connection with *The Letter* they mention the force of the performers' personal radiance (Deutsch 2001, p. 81)<sup>11</sup> and 'minimal acting' (Molnár Gál 2001, p. 9). The interpretation of the creators' mode of existence, however, is a threshold they do not in fact cross. From the spectator's evaluative perspective, the assessment and interpretation of perseverance in an artistic vision is, according to Andor Deutsch, 'a matter of taste'. There is no adequate word, theory, or concept for it. Reception, though it becomes affected, falters. Péter Molnár Gál chooses the path

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<sup>10</sup> 'I do not know, but alternative theatre seems suspicious to me. It is not even an honour, yet far too many people are labelled as such merely because they perform differently or elsewhere. The few genuinely alternative ones, however – those creators or groups who truly regard the theatre as a terrain of research and seek the boundaries of that terrain (in order to cross them) – in their wanderings along these borderlands usually find it difficult to deviate from the path they have chosen. Their dogged persistence is sometimes interpreted by their audience as an inability to renew themselves, sometimes as admirable consistency, perceived as self-indulgence or inward-turning – a matter of taste, what else could it be. Miklós B. Székely and his cellar provide a perfect example of all this.'

<sup>11</sup> 'They do not remain civilians during the performance, yet they can probably play so dangerously close to civilianness because even offstage they possess that strong radiance which makes them so distinctive.'

of exalting the Szentkirályi and setting it against unnamed creators (Molnár Gál 2001, p. 9).<sup>12</sup> By this point Molnár Gál had already been a committed supporter of the Szentkirályi for eleven years and had done much for the theatre's visibility. He defined this theatre as a form of resistance – in terms of career trajectory and in terms of art alike.

The premise of '*acting as an art with an autonomous formal language*' (Porogi 2001, pp. 21–41)<sup>13</sup> became more readily a point of reference *to be judged* than an existential proposition (in the philosophical sense) that could be received. This raises the question of whether the *evaluation* of intellectual (and existential, in the material sense) independence is a relevant critical position in the case of a writer, painter, sculptor, or composer as well. We already know that theatre is not the handmaiden of literature, but what of its role within society?

After the premiere Ilona Gantner conducted a brief portrait interview with Monori, whose focus is not the performance but the idea that the Szentkirályi substitutes for another, unrealised acting career. She emphasises that Monori had been a scholarship holder of the French film production company Gaumont. It is with this that she contrasts the 'becoming independent', to which Monori 'defected' (Gantner 2001, p. 11).<sup>14</sup> The interviewer incorporates the text of Molnár

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<sup>12</sup> 'They do not dazzle with witty phrasing or the salon sophistication of sharp blades concealed beneath dialogue, but with the fact that they do not seek to dazzle at all; rather, through the soul-baring of suicidal honesty they communicate disquieting truths about the grey everyday. (...) Their path cannot in good conscience be recommended to dissatisfied actors. Renunciation. Asceticism. A subsistence level at a time when auxiliary actors who speak badly and deliver punchlines without rhythm grow rich on television through their shallow-tasted clearance sale of acting.'

<sup>13</sup> Monori and B. Székely submitted their application under the title *Acting as an Art with an Autonomous Formal Language* when they sought to rent the cellar. This artistic approach is perceptively analysed in Dorka Porogi's study.

<sup>14</sup> 'Later he defected for good from the official theatre. Perhaps also in order finally to experience the full freedom of acting. For the great game

Gál's review into the portrait section of her article and transposes the critic's insights and expressions as though they were her own, without citing him as a source. In fact, even prior to the few months Monori Lili spent at Gaumont (1980), she already had notes for the Szentkirályi's first production, *Műtét* (Operation), which premiered in 1990 (verbal communication from Lili Monori), and in a 1968 college interview she likewise expressed her desire to write and direct, moreover drawing on her own experiences (Gách, Nagy, Dalos and Geszti 1969, p. 9). From this perspective it would have been Gaumont and the traditional acting career that constituted a 'desertion' from the independent intellectual and artistic work that ultimately manifested in the Szentkirályi. The tone of the portrait interview is 'legend-making', and it quotes Molnár Gál's review inaccurately: between 'they communicate disquieting truths about *the* grey everyday' (Molnár Gál 2001, p. 9) and 'she communicated disquieting truths about *their* grey everyday' (Gantner 2001, p. 11) there is a small but essential difference. The former, as Andor Deutsch also formulated it (Deutsch 2001, p. 81), suggests that the true subject of the performance is a shared matter, whereas in the latter the balance tilts towards the private matter.

The 2002 production *Ernő* was likewise inspired in part by the story and experience of the shooting of the film *The Letter*. The production received a creators' award at the 8th Alternative Theatre Festival.

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of becoming independent he found the best possible partner: the most talented "partisan" of Hungarian partisan theatre, Miklós B. Székely. Since then they have tormented one another, life, and theatre together there in the coal cellar on Szentkirályi Street.'

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ADAPTATION AND VISUALS IN A STAGING  
OF KAFKA'S NOVEL *THE TRIAL*

Abstract: In my study, drawing on one of the six analytical perspectives of the Philther method – namely the analytic unit concerned with visibility and sound – I examine how, and by what means, János Szikora's 1978 production of *The Trial* challenges the canonical interpretation of the novel serving as its reference text. The director described the production as follows: 'it evokes many kinds of associations in one. I wanted to preserve this multiplicity.' János Szikora and Géza Morcsányi, the production's dramaturg, created their own adaptation that departed radically from the Kafka stagings familiar on Hungarian stages.

Franz Kafka's novels pose a considerable challenge to anyone who seeks to adapt them for the stage. The impassive, austere, and highly objective literary tone of his texts, together with the triviality and enigmatic quality of his drawings – which he refers to simply as a 'private system of signs' (Janouch 1972, p. 58) – strongly invite speculation and the construction of symbolic or allegorical domains of meaning. His works repeatedly evoke the invisible power of an alienated, inhuman bureaucracy, which permeates the atmosphere of worlds such as those of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. The enigmatic quality of the novels is further reinforced by their episodic structure: their composition resembles a cycle of short stories, meaning that if one were to rearrange or remove a chapter, the alteration would not appear as a logical inconsistency (Sükösd 1965, p. 122). Furthermore, in both *The Trial* and *The Castle*,

the characters appear in a single, continuously proliferating sequence that flows into one another's characteristics (Deleuze and Guattari 2019, p. 107), effectively emerging as variations of one another, while their depicted relationships are emotionless, indeed almost mechanical. In addition, the distinctive absurd and grotesque sensuousness of Kafka's prose further complicates the process of adaptation. The absurdity of power, the individual's vulnerability, and the writer's peculiar humour exert their force in the novels primarily on a sensuous level. This sensuousness in Kafka forms an integral part of the narration, which is as convincingly realistic as it is disconcertingly abstract. The reader is thus compelled repeatedly to reassess what has been read. The ostensibly objective descriptions of events, locations, objects, and characters prove illusory, for they cannot be fixed within any specific time or space; rather, they convey a constant, oppressive, and anxiety-inducing state of being, while remaining closely intertwined with the structures of bourgeois society.

On the basis of this introduction, Kafka's texts may appear to offer far from ideal material for dramatic adaptation. Yet *The Trial* has generated numerous adaptations, the best known being by Peter Weiss, published in Hungarian by Európa Könyvkiadó one year before the 1978 production at the National Theatre of Pécs, directed by János Szikora. In dramatising *The Trial*, Weiss retained almost all the dialogues, but these ultimately provided only the 'meagre framework' of the original work, while Kafka's most characteristic feature – 'the depiction of irrationalism through realistic detail' (Nánay 1979, p. 12) – was lost. In exchange, the drama acquired a socially critical charge that rendered the conflict between power and the individual excessively concrete. However, stark realism does not suit Kafka, and János Szikora, director of the 1978 Pécs production of *The Trial*, together with the dramaturg Géza Morcsányi, recognised this with precision. They made the very feature highlighted by the critics – 'the depiction of

irrationalism through realistic detail' – the foundation of their adaptation.

The director regarded the period in which *The Trial* was written (the early 1910s) as still 'idyllic in a bourgeois sense', yet, as he noted, 'through this superficial fabric of beauty seeped human filth, the signs of the approaching war' (Anon. 1978, p. 6). Accordingly, the production's setting was an idyllic landscape: a stage illuminated with white light and dominated by resplendently green hills (Zappe 1979, p. 13), framed by a grove of real pine trees. Although the stage of *The Trial* 'was neither narrow nor grey, no kind of labyrinth; the gates, doors, passageways, cul-de-sacs and low attic spaces were missing' (Anon. 1978, p. 28), it did not dispense with the well-known realistic props of the Kafkaesque world. On the green meadow serving as the playing area, details of bourgeois interiors and elements of the bourgeois way of life appeared: elegant clothing, a porcelain set and period furniture (Tarján 1979, p. 35), an iron washstand, basin, mirror, a skinned animal skull, antlers, gilded antique armchairs and a small table (Nánay 1979, p. 13). Yet within the expansive space, and in the absence of the intimate complexity characteristic of room settings, these maintained a chaotic, surreal condition. The director had not placed Kafka's text in nature for the first time: he had already staged his Tadeusz Rózewicz adaptation *Az éhezőművész elmegy* (The Hunger Artist Departs) as an outdoor production for his diploma production (Harangozó 1989, n.p.), where a paternoster compelled the actors to remain in constant motion. In both cases, László Rajk's set design evoked nature while not concealing its artificiality; this duality – and the tension arising from it – defined the visual world of the production (Tarján 1979, p. 34).

Szikora captured the perpetual state of motion characteristic of the Kafkaesque world by rendering the production simultaneously natural and artificial, realist and magical, oscillating between the serious and the ridiculous, the concrete and the abstract. Moreover, he made this clear to the spectator at

the very beginning of the performance: the idyllic green landscape begins to distort as, in an eerie, glimmering light – in which even the outlines of the trees are scarcely discernible – a dark silhouette appears at the back of the stage (Nánay 1979, p. 13). At first, only the hat is visible; then, as the figure steps up the hill from behind, the entire person gradually emerges, advancing with a slightly stooped yet relaxed posture (Nánay 1979, p. 13). The man holds a walking stick in his hand and proceeds slowly and ceremonially among the mounds, when suddenly (Vánca 1978, p. 6) another dark figure in a quasi-uniform steps out from among the trees on the right, then on the left, then front left (Nánay 1979, p. 13). By the time Josef K. reached the front of the stage, the others had almost encircled him, and at that moment the first line was uttered: ‘My breakfast!’ (Nánay 1979, p. 13). In this opening, the centuries-old ceremoniousness of bourgeois life is rendered null in virtually an instant, as the procedure of arrest is superimposed upon it, with the two nightmarish figures from the court, the idle onlookers who appear onstage, and the clerks behaving like monkeys. With this initial sequence of scenes and ‘a few minor characters, Szikora created the atmosphere of the production, the grotesque underlying mood of the Kafkaesque world, for K. was disturbed less by the fact of his arrest than by the figures swarming around him, especially the old people peering from the windows of the house opposite [recurrently noted in the novel]’ (Nánay 1979, p. 13). Scenes operating through counterpoint in this manner were suffused with ‘sublimely surging symphonic passages’ by Gustav Mahler, compiled by István Mártha (Szikora’s frequent collaborator since they worked together in Brobó a few years earlier). The effect produced by the images was deepened by the music’s ‘at times grotesquely mocking, at times dramatic motifs’ (Nánay 1979, p. 13). Mahler’s music intensified the mysterious, slightly surreal atmosphere of the production and heightened the irrational quality of the Kafkaesque events. In the Brobó performances, Szikora and his associates had already experimented

with fusing poetry, the visual arts, and music, and the director, beginning his career in the institutional repertory theatre, subsequently continued to structure his productions consistently around music. In *The Trial*, he conveyed human struggle, hope, and hopelessness through the formal language of music (Sziládi 1979, p. 257). In *A tenger asszonya* (The Lady from the Sea, 1980), he underscored 'the music of erotic passion' with Wagner (Pályi 1980, p. 75). In his 1989 production of *A titok kapujában* (At the Gate of the Secret), based on Michel de Ghelderode's *Sortie de l'acteur*, the complex interrelations of theatre and death were rendered memorable by Richard Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* (The Four Last Songs).

In *The Trial*, at the conclusion of the opening scene, the lights were dimmed; in the glimmering light the performers of the first scene continued their actions with slow movements, while the stagehands were still bustling about, and the participants of the next scene had already begun their stage existence, likewise with slow movements (Nánay 1979, p. 13). Whereas Peter Weiss wrote closed scenes, Szikora composed ones that merged into one another, indeed he thought less in terms of scenes than in images. He presented Josef K.'s story in a total of fifteen such images: *The Arrest*; *The Boarding House*; *At the Bank*; *Miss Montag*; *The First Examination*; *The Flogging*; *Back at the Court*; *The Uncle*; *At the Lawyer's*; *The Manufacturer*; *At the Painter's*; *Dismissing the Lawyer*; *At the Bank (The Italian)*; *In the Cathedral*; *The End* (János Szikora's archive), thereby evoking the episodic character of the novel. During the scene changes, the set was rearranged in an unhurried manner, creating a sense of incompleteness, continuity, and actions already in progress (Nánay 1979, p. 13). Although the production employed a single unified set, the furnishings that appeared within it continually altered the overall stage picture. The redressing of the set was often carried out by the actors themselves, who moved and rearranged the various pieces of furniture, objects, and props. This, however, did not modify the fundamental stage image: the 'mysterious trial' unfolded throughout in the 'picturesque

environment' revealed to the audience in the very first minute (Nánay 1979, p. 13).

Despite the fact that Kafka's texts consist of indeterminacies, his novels and stories are structured by empty spaces that 'the reader fills with meaning, that is, effectively violates the hermeneutic structure of the text and reduces it to experiential patterns familiar to him or her' (Robertson 2006, p. 81). Szikora and Rajk, however, 'fill in' these empty spaces with stylistic features spanning historical periods and with references to the visual arts, thereby rendering the production timeless (Nánay 1979, p. 13). For the unchanging background of the stage they employed an image inspired by a work regarded as a milestone of modernist cinema: Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1969). Besides suggesting a mysterious murder, the photograph in question also raises the problem of how far we can trust what we see, or indeed whether the search for 'truth' has any meaning at all if it is accessible only in obscured, fragmentary form.

In *The Trial* – as in Antonioni's film – the derailment of the simulation of reality contributed to the destabilisation of the conventional conception of reality's stability and of the order of perception adjusted to it. Critics of the production discerned in individual images echoes of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, as well as the world of Bosch, and even glimpses of Dalí's surrealism (Nánay 1979, p. 13), yet the whole cohered into a unified visual composition (Nánay 1979, p. 13). The production therefore sought to exert its effect through sensuous means in every respect. Although only a single review mentioned the eroticism represented – which plays a significant role in the novel – it nonetheless stressed that Szikora 'did not fear to present the sultry sensuousness permeating the novel' (Szilárd 1978, p. 9), even though it left unclear what should be understood by the claim that the director 'assigned a concrete dramaturgical function to eroticism' (Szilárd 1978, p. 9).

The production 'virtually compelled the spectator to replace the "horror" beneath the "beautiful" surface with as-

sociations drawn from his or her own experiential repertoire' (Szilárd 1978, p. 9). The production did not, after all, offer a tendentious interpretation of the Kafka novel, which in the Hungarian theatre of the 1970s was in fact broadly expected. Since Szikora placed the entire story within a dream-reality beyond logic, where improbable and irrational sequences of images succeeded one another, the production did not rely on coded allusion, did not refer to historical situations, and certainly did not update the material (Vánca 1978, p. 6). It became, rather, a reflective adaptation of Kafka's novel, one that invited further thought (Tarján 1979, p. 35). It did not employ the mechanisms of double discourse and severely tested contemporary habits of reception. The clock placed in the landscape, the mythological image, the phallus covered with a red cloth, and similar elements (Szilárd 1978, p. 9) did not in themselves carry meaning; rather, they became components of a cultural landscape inscribed into the natural one. Their joint appearance, their apparent incompatibility, and their visually captivating chaotic quality elicited laughter, not because what was seen was humorous in any literal sense, but because it was sensuously disconcerting – just as the reader is disconcerted by what he or she encounters in Kafka.

Contemporary critics were surprised to observe that, whereas stage adaptations of *The Trial* are generally difficult to assimilate, the grotesque elements of Szikora's production reinforced the ridiculous and simultaneously tragic nature of Josef K.'s figure. The small table wobbling on the uneven lawn, the subordinates behaving like monkeys during the debate surrounding the arrest, the figures standing onstage at awkward, slanted angles, the prison chaplain ascending into the balloon – all these curious contrasts pointed to images that elicited smiles. If one adds Mahler's music, which 'expresses enormous inner effort, a struggle' (Zappe 1979, p. 13), the critics' assertion becomes conceivable: 'in Pécs laughter was frequently heard in the auditorium, which is one of the best recommendations for the reception of the work' (Szilárd 1978, p.

9) – as we learn from the analytical reviews by István Szilárd, István Nánay, and László Zappe.

The ‘culmination’ of the production was the final image. After the scene in the cathedral, the stage emptied, and, as at the beginning of the performance, Josef K. entered from the rear in a glimmering light, followed by one very tall and one very small man (Nánay 1979, p. 14). In silence, K. removed his clothes; the two men meticulously folded each item, pairing the matching garments, and placed them in a sack. Then K., stripped to his underwear and covering his body with ‘chilly, habitual movements’, was forced to the ground, restrained, and stabbed in the heart (Nánay 1979, p. 15). The men wiped the knife, and, carrying the black sack in their hands, walked out side by side. After their grotesque silhouettes had slowly vanished from the stage and it had briefly darkened, an enormous fountain burst forth from the centre of the stage, illuminated by a sharp, almost painful white light, while – as the reviews report – an almost exultant music was heard. The column of water shot up nearly to the height of the fly tower, and this spectacular stage *Auferstehung* could be read as a symbolic image of the spiritualism that the director believed he discerned in Kafka’s work, which he associated with Musil, Rilke, and Mahler, just as it could evoke the unbearable, raw violence inherent in the religious and historical notion of purification through sacrifice. (It is no accident that the image of the geyser, the jet of water cleansing Adam and Eve, returns at the very end of Szikora’s 2002 production of *Az ember tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Man], created for the opening of the new building of the National Theatre in Budapest.)

Szikora’s adaptation technique, which intervened forcefully in the visual dimension as well, relied on presenting the source work with ‘maximal formal infidelity’ (Szilárd 1978, p. 9), as had his earlier Pécs production, *Óriáscssecsemő* (The Giant Baby). For ‘the events of *The Trial* actually take place in the world behind the words, which can be conveyed only through intuitive insight, yet according to Szikora the actors overcame

this difficulty' (Anon. 1978, p. 6). Yet 'the text was hardly actor-friendly', since the nearly forty actors (with the exception of K.) played only episodic roles, most receiving merely a few sentences and a few minutes of stage presence (Vánca 1978, p. 7). For this reason the ensemble playing that had by then come to be regarded as a standard could not develop (Nánay 1979, p. 13). The production illustrated instead that in Kafka there are no genuinely individuated characters; the figures who appear are replicas of one another, or, as the commentators describe them, merely allegorical figures.

Whether directing 'Déry, or Kafka, Vian', Genet or Beckett, Szikora consistently sought a theatrical realisation that 'forces spectators to relinquish their preconceptions' (Pályi 1980, p. 446). His choice of plays differed markedly from that of the previous generation of directors: Szikora did not stage Shakespeare, Molière, or Chekhov, but works by authors belonging to, or inspired by, the avant-garde.

One could say that Szikora confronted the impossible when he therefore did not 'translate' the text of *The Trial* (in contrast to Peter Weiss) (Nánay 1979, p. 12), but, 'hearing and amplifying the grotesque noises of the work', employed theatrical means to rework Josef K.'s ordeal (Tarján 1979, p. 35). The result was that 'this vision, though differing from Kafka's, nonetheless became akin to it' (Nánay 1979, p. 12). The production was thus recorded as a significant achievement in the period of the National Theatre of Pécs following the departure of István Paál, in Szikora's directorial oeuvre, and in the line of Kafka stagings alike (Nánay 1979, p. 15).

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Ildikó Andrea Végh

FROM AUDIENCE TO COMMUNITY  
THE COMMUNITY BUILDING DEPARTMENT  
OF THE KATONA JÓZSEF THEATRE – *BEHÍVÓ*

Abstract: In this study, I examine the challenges that twenty-first-century urban theatre faces in response to social, economic, and political transformations, as well as to changes in cultural habits. Through the example of the Katona József Theatre in Budapest, I demonstrate how a theatre institution may respond to these challenges. I show how the theatre's physical space, repertoire, self-definition, and function have changed; how *Behívó* (Invitation), the theatre's arts-mediation and community-building workshop, came into being and subsequently developed; and the aims that shape the structure of its programme portfolio. I argue that through the operation of *Behívó* the theatre gradually transforms its audience into a responsible, active community and constructs a new urban role for itself.

*Transforming Theatrical Operations*

By the twenty-first century, the remit of not only provincial theatres and cultural institutions had changed, but the function of metropolitan theatres had also been transformed. This can be attributed to several factors – we have lived through a global pandemic that compelled theatres to become more flexible in their repertoire planning, to make their productions accessible in the online sphere, and even to create premieres specifically for online presentation (Török 2022), while, in the name of social responsibility, they were expected to

maintain an online presence with educational and community-building programmes, thereby sustaining their connection with their audiences (Wihstutz, Vecchiato, and Kreuser 2022, pp. 7–13). The economic crisis, the energy crisis, and the decline in sustaining subsidies were accompanied by unavoidable increases in ticket prices, which compelled theatres to retain their regular audiences through various discounts and tailored programmes, and to attract new audience segments by means of progressive marketing campaigns. Changing patterns of cultural engagement likewise shape the operation of theatres: because pronounced generational differences have emerged in cultural consumption, it became necessary to reconsider participatory forms, to introduce educational programmes, and to place social responsibility at the centre through supplementary programmes accompanying productions. Digital development made it necessary for theatres to appear on an increasing number of platforms that had previously been unfamiliar to them in the online sphere, and indeed to remain continuously accessible to their audiences. In artistic practice, formal boundaries have become blurred, and the online sphere has expanded theatrical space. One of the greatest present challenges is that populist governments are seeking to impose new orientations on culture, with the consequence that theatres must rethink their modes of operation, search for new sources of funding owing to declining subsidies, and explore possibilities for collaboration with other theatres and with other cultural and social sectors, a process that results not only in artistically oriented projects (Rau 2024). These events and processes, even if they prompt enforced changes, also create an opportunity for the leaders of cultural institutions (museums, concert halls, community centres, etc., and likewise theatres) to rethink their tasks and their relationship with their audiences and visitors, and to establish a more sustainable structure.

In view of the changes outlined above, it is necessary to reconsider how a theatre makes use of its underutilised spaces, how its operation and accessibility are altered, and what forms

of participation it offers its audiences. Over the past thirty years, the operations of several major West European metropolitan theatres have been transformed. Theatre-pedagogical and community-theatre departments have been established within these institutions in which, alongside artistic work, community building also takes place (Deutsches Theater – DT Jung; Gorki Theater – Gorki R and Gorki X; Thalia Theater – Next Generation, Jung und mehr). These workshops have brought into use the theatre’s dead spaces alongside the stage, and have even stepped beyond the theatre’s walls in order to create the theatre’s field of force elsewhere in the city.

The Katona József Theatre<sup>1</sup> in Budapest sought responses to these challenges under the directorship of Gábor Máté (Jákfalvi 2023, pp. 75–84). The theatre’s self-definition on its website reads as follows: ‘The Katona József Theatre is not a narrowly circumscribed, particularist niche theatre, but seeks to address the widest and most differentiated possible audience. The existential and fateful problems of the individual and the community self-evidently do not concern an elite, but the community itself, potentially every individual. The theatre’s aspiration is not separation, but free dialogue with its audience.’<sup>2</sup> For this to be more than a resounding slogan, fundamental transformations were required in the theatre’s spaces, its infrastructure, and its repertoire.

For the thirtieth anniversary of the Katona’s founding, the theatre’s foyer underwent a complete transformation for the 2012/13 season. Materials evoking traditional theatrical

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1982, the Katona József Theatre in Budapest remains one of Hungary’s most influential metropolitan art theatres, and many of its premieres have become indispensable events in Hungarian theatre history: Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (1984), directed by Tamás Ascher; Gogol, *The Government Inspector* (1987), directed by Gábor Zsámbéki; Milán Füst, *Catullus* (1987), directed by Gábor Székely.

<sup>2</sup> The Katona József Theatre’s self-definition is available on the theatre’s website: [katonajozsefszinhaz.hu](https://katonajozsefszinhaz.hu), accessed 18 November 2025. <https://katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/a-katona/a-katona-toertenete>

taste and heritage – velvet, marble, mirror – were replaced by wood, glass, and concrete. In the industrial-style foyer, a café and gift shop open throughout the day were created; the cloakroom was relocated to the area in front of the Sufni, which hosts the Katona's experimental productions, where – as at the Schaubühne, Berlin – visitors to the Katona may place their personal belongings in free, lockable lockers. The entire space is an open, freely accessible area from the street front.

'Our aim was to extend the boundaries of the theatre and to create a cultural community space that is without precedent in Hungary' – stated Gábor Máté at the inauguration of the new foyer. Indeed, by opening the theatre towards the street front and by completing the new foyer,<sup>3</sup> the Katona created a space in which the audience could meet alongside, or even instead of, theatrical performances, and into which anyone could enter, including those unfamiliar with the theatre who were simply looking for a café near Ferenciek tere (Franciscans' Square). The new space deconstructed the festive character traditionally associated with going to the theatre; the industrial environment reinforced the idea that attending the theatre is a natural, everyday activity, that the theatre is accessible to anyone at any time. In addition to the café, this space was also suitable for introducing new types of programmes. It provided a homely

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<sup>3</sup> 'Today theatres, and indeed the arts in general, are in great need of this stance of openness towards society, for all are struggling for their audiences. One must quite literally go out into the street in order to bring artistic creations to people. Thus the idea of rendering the entire cross-section of the space visible from the street, including its various attractive functions, was of fundamental importance. The same applies to the concept with which I systematically constructed the process of communication with the audience from the street to the auditorium: its essence is that the flow of the street should continue, almost without interruption, through the circulation spaces of the theatre foyer, thus conveying the spectator, through various forms of communication (photographs, texts, leaflets, projected information) and functions, to the concrete experience of the performance' – stated Bea Molnár, architect and designer of the Katona József Theatre's foyer. <https://epiteszforum.hu/a-ter-magaban-hordozza-a-folyamatos-valtozas-aktualizalas-lehetoseget-interju-molnar-beaval>

setting for book launches, podium discussions, book clubs, charity auctions, charity collections, political debate evenings, concerts, brunches, camps, and improvisation workshops. Some of these programmes – such as the book club entitled *Katonatéka*, podium discussions linked to the ensemble and to productions, and workshops associated with productions – were aimed primarily at the Katona's regular audience, those inspired by the theatre's ethos, its ensemble, or its tradition. Another group of programmes targeted, and continues to target, people seeking high-quality leisure and cultural events: the Jazz Brunch, the political free university, and summer theatre camps. With the help of the programmes mentioned, the audience attending the Katona can become connected to the theatre's life and spaces through an increasing number of threads. They can experience that the theatre seeks to communicate with its spectators beyond its repertoire and alongside its productions. In addition to the café, a bookshop was also opened in the Katona József Theatre, enabling visitors to engage with emblematic productions and theatrical legends. This deepened the myth among the theatre's admirers, for whom the sight of the Ascher cough drops could evoke the stories surrounding the world-famous director, and it opened new avenues of attachment for those newly acquainting themselves with the theatre, with the Katona. Beginning with the 2024/25 season, the shop's manager, in addition to merchandise and theatre-themed books, has been designing utilitarian objects in collaboration with young applied artists, each linked to a particular production or theatrical event. This deliberate brand-building, together with the café and the shop, strengthens the bond with the regular audience and attracts into the theatre new potential spectators who stray into the café or the shop.

By virtue of the Katona's space having changed, the time its audience can spend in the theatre has also changed. The space no longer opens merely half an hour before seven o'clock; rather, the theatre is open throughout the day, even on days without performances and indeed during the summer

break. In this way, the ensemble and the audience can jointly and continuously inhabit the theatre's space throughout the day. Through this, the Katona also deconstructs the profane notion that the theatre is primarily a sanctum of art in which the artists are truly at home and the spectators merely visitors.

*Conscious Community Building at the Katona József Theatre*

Under the directorship of Gábor Máté, the Katona József Theatre's Youth Programme was launched in 2011, becoming the first arts-mediation, community-building, theatre-pedagogical workshop within the institutional repertory-theatre system. With the establishment of the arts-mediation department, active and deliberate community building and community development commenced alongside brand-building, offering new forms of participation and collaboration for visitors to the Katona.

'At the time of the founding of the Katona József Theatre, it exerted a strong attraction on young people. During performances, the young admirers who slipped in or pleaded their way in stood in a horseshoe around the stage. Those young people are now twenty-five to thirty years older. The Katona wishes to offer the young people who gather around it opportunities for active, cultivated pastime that advances their cultural education and invigorates their capacity for social engagement. In every era it has been the theatre's task to find ever new forms through which to reach its audience. This is what we are working on now as well.'<sup>4</sup>

What the aims of such an arts-mediation workshop might be, and what working methods it employs, naturally depend on many factors. They depend on the theatre's infrastructure, the composition of its audience, its repertoire, the theatre's role within the broader community, and also on the personal

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<sup>4</sup> Gábor Máté, introductory note published in the *Behívó* programme booklet for the 2013/14 season.

preferences and competencies of the theatre pedagogue or theatremaker.

There are, however, several fundamental aims, such as the *pedagogical aim*, which encompasses aesthetic education, the teaching of theatre-viewing, the development of critical thinking, self-knowledge, and teamwork, and the strengthening of linguistic competences and civic activism. Equally important in a theatre-education programme is the *artistic aim*, realised in connection with a given community-theatre production or project, when spectators become creators, become theatremakers (Pinkert 2014, pp. 12–69).

A particularly important aim is that, through the programmes, the audience should become involved in the theatre's operation and should become a *community*; that the theatre's space should be expanded; that the spectators' passive role should be altered through various forms of participation; that the theatre should become a shared undertaking of creators and spectators; and that, over the course of the programmes, the auditorium–stage relationship should be unsettled and the theatrical hierarchy transformed.

### *The Pedagogical Aim*

In 2011, when the Youth Programme was established, the pedagogical aim was paramount. The primary target group addressed consisted of secondary-school students. To this day, one of the *Behívó's* most important programmes is the three-stage theatre-pedagogy scheme entitled *123* (Jenni 2014, pp. 171–182).<sup>5</sup> This programme consists of a sixty- to ninety-min-

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<sup>5</sup> According to the five criteria for theatre-pedagogy sessions set out in the theatre-pedagogy handbook edited by Ádám Cziboly: '1. they are designed primarily for those involved in public education; 2. they contain a performance or a sequence of scenes; 3. the creators have a pedagogical aim; 4. participants may take part in open interactions that substantially influence the course of the programme or that substantially reflect upon what occurs within it; 5. they are repeatable programmes performed for different

ute workshop preceding the performance, the performance itself, and a forty-five-minute discussion or session processing the performance. The aim of the preliminary sessions is to open the young participants to the theme or to the formal solution of the production, to teach them how to watch theatre, for only those productions can truly have an impact to which spectators are able to form a connection.<sup>6</sup> Sensitivity to the theme was foregrounded in the theatre-education session linked to *Fényevők* (The Light Eaters, 2014), Maxim Gorky's play directed by Tamás Ascher, in which participants reflected on the role of the intellectual, on assuming that role, and on responsibility.<sup>7</sup> In connection with *Illaberek* (2013), directed by Gábor Máté, the focus shifted to the question of 'to go or to stay'.<sup>8</sup> Certain productions created from classical texts, from classical dramatic or epic sources, placed emphasis on analysis and on the question of the texts' contemporaneity: in relation to *Ithaka* (2018), directed by Kriszta Székely, the young participants reconceived the *Odyssey* from the perspective of its female characters.<sup>9</sup> Alongside the theme and the classical liter-

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groups on each occasion.' The definition of specifically two- and three-stage programmes: 'A theatre-education/theatre-pedagogy programme consisting of two or three modules. In the two-stage programme, the guided discussion, the session containing interactive elements, or the guided spatial analysis may precede and/or follow the performance or sequence of scenes. In the three-stage module, the performance or sequence of scenes is inserted, as a matter of course, between the preparatory and the processing modules.'

<sup>6</sup> It is instructive to compare this with the TUSCH programme, which has been operating for twenty years in Berlin, in which Berlin theatres and schools participate and in which workshops linked to productions are the central focus. Short- and long-term collaborations are established between the institutions. Its financial background is entirely different from that of the Hungarian programme.

<sup>7</sup> The production is an adaptation based on a new translation of Maxim Gorky's *Children of the Sun*.

<sup>8</sup> The production explores the problems of Hungarian migration. The text was created on the basis of the actors' improvisations.

<sup>9</sup> The production is an adaptation of Homer's epic in which the focus is not Odysseus but the women whom the hero encountered during his journey, and the woman who awaited his return at home.

ary texts, the theatrical perspective, the elucidation of artistic intentions, and the teaching of theatrical language through the productions are equally emphasised. In connection with *Embtrag* (2023), the production created from Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, secondary-school students reflect on the theatrical and dramaturgical difficulties posed to creators by this poetic vision of humanity: how one can handle the multitude of locations and historical periods; how the frame scenes may be reconceived; on what basis the text may be cut; how theatrical traditions may be dismantled; and why, for example, the Lord and Lucifer are played by an actress.<sup>10</sup> In connection with the production based on G. B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (2009), participants engaged in practical exploration and discussion of the dramaturgical function of music (composer: András Monori; song lyrics: Szabolcs Várady), while in the case of *The Cherry Orchard* (2023) the focus fell on the notion of bare theatre as space and scenography.

### *Creation as Aim*

The Katona Club is the same age as the Youth Programme. The clubs are creative groups of twelve to eighteen participants: they may consist solely of students, they may be mixed-age groups from ten to ninety-nine years old, or they may be adult groups in which participants create productions or project presentations over a longer or shorter creative process. Applicants to a club generally apply to a specific project with a written submission, followed by a joint in-person meeting and a workshop. There is only one selection principle: if an applicant already attends another theatre's club or is already a member of a drama group, they may join the work only if there is sufficient space in the given club. The rationale is

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<sup>10</sup> The production is a reworking of *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man), based on Imre Madách's poetic vision of humanity and Ádám Nádasy's prose translation.

straightforward: the Katona seeks to provide opportunities for young people who have not had the possibility to try themselves out elsewhere.

These clubs are neither student drama groups nor amateur theatre groups, nor are they actor-training schemes, but community-theatre<sup>11</sup> creative workshops in which the process of creation is at least as important as, if not more important than, the resulting production itself. Participants learn to make their own voices heard, to express themselves, to convey their thoughts authentically, and, not least, to use theatrical language and forms. Since in most creative processes the theatrical production is not the goal but the means, theatrical hierarchy is not present in the work of the groups. There is no director; instead, there is a project leader who accompanies the process. The project leader may be a theatre pedagogue, drama instructor, dramaturg, director, or actor, or, if the character of the club and the creative process requires it, a visual artist or sociologist. At present, two full-time and five contracted theatre-makers work in the clubs at the Katona József Theatre: one dramaturg, three drama instructors, one director, a dramaturgy

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<sup>11</sup> Community theatre is an umbrella concept without a single definition; Klaudia Antal details precisely in her doctoral dissertation why no single definition can be given: 'Community theatre does not possess a narrowly circumscribed definition, a fact also reflected in the diverse terminology used in Anglophone scholarship: alongside *community theatre* one encounters, for example, *community-based theatre*, *grassroots theatre*, *local theatre*, *ensemble theatre*, and *people's theatre*. The reason for this is that community theatre does not denote a single, self-contained participatory theatre genre, but rather serves as a comprehensive designation for various theatrical experiments that work with differing methodologies and aims. Community theatre includes, for example, forum theatre, the theatre of the oppressed, and certain instances of documentary and verbatim theatre. Their shared characteristic is the endeavour to provide participants with a communal experience that contributes to the strengthening of their collective identity and individual selfhood. The members of the group who apply for the project, or who are selected according to certain criteria, become a community over the course of their shared work – which may extend over several months' (Antal 2021, p. 132).

student, and a visual artist. Their work is supported by members of the ensemble, who participate as contributors and project leaders. Participants not only perform but also write, compose music, and direct their own scenes on the basis of the project leader's feedback. The duration of a given project may range from four months to several years. At present, the announced clubs run for the duration of a single season.

The resulting club productions and projects, whether more closely or more loosely, are connected to the Katona's repertoire and ethos. Productions created by clubs linked to specific plays and performances include *Budapesti színek* (Colours of Budapest, 2024)<sup>12</sup> and *Akarok még mondani valamit* (I Still Have Something to Say, 2016).<sup>13</sup> The aim of these productions is to enter into dialogue with the Katona's main-stage works, thereby creating a broader context for the text and the stage action. Over the course of the project, the young participants engage not only with the original dramatic material but also with the production based on it. They discuss artistic intentions and formal solutions among themselves and with the creators of the production.

Certain clubs connect to the Katona's ethos and reflect on social situations: *Origó* (Point of Origin, 2013) – examining young people's relationship to their national identity;<sup>14</sup> *Rendszhiba* (System Error, 2014) – uncovering the current state of the education system;<sup>15</sup> *Van egy ország* (There Is a Country, 2023) – investigating the mutual mechanisms of influence between young people who have grown up under the Orbán regime and state propaganda;<sup>16</sup> *Kivonulás* (Exodus, 2017) – fo-

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<sup>12</sup> *Embtrag*, directed by Kriszta Székely.

<sup>13</sup> *Sirály* (The Seagull), directed by Tamás Ascher.

<sup>14</sup> Review available on the Katona József Theatre's website: [katonajozsefszinhaz.hu](https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu), accessed 18 November 2025. <https://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/eloadasok/bemutatok/40419-origo--ugrai-istvan--7ora7hu>.

<sup>15</sup> Review available on the Katona József Theatre's website: *Shutdown előtt* – István Ugrai, 7óra7.

<sup>16</sup> Review available on [szinhaz.net](https://szinhaz.net): <https://szinhaz.net/2023/06/14/fan-csali-kinga-ugysem-erem-keresztul>.

cusing on the refugee crisis; and *Rétegek* (Layers, 2013) – presenting family histories arising from the traumatic events of the twentieth century. For these clubs it is particularly important that participants learn that theatre, even on a small scale, can serve as both a catalyst and a source of social change; that everything they have experienced in the Katona József Theatre's *Behívó* programme can be carried back into their own communities; and that they can create further projects independently, beyond the Katona as well.

In addition, the clubs can function as laboratories in which participants experiment with new or lesser-known theatrical forms: *Woyzeck études* (Woyzeck Études, 2012)<sup>17</sup> – composed of rhythm and movement études; *#faust* (2015) – built from self-performances;<sup>18</sup> and *Istentelen ifjúság* (Godless Youth, 2018) – a production created from extended improvisations.

Naturally, alongside the artistic aims, this working method also has pedagogical functions: the development of various competences; the acquisition and application of theatrical language, for example; but the most important pedagogical aim is that participants experience theatre as an adequate form through which to think about problems, about the world, and about themselves. Likewise pedagogically significant is the performance of club productions created by secondary-school and university students on the Katona József Theatre's smallest stage, the Sufni, and the presentation of these productions in schools and their reintegration into the students' own secondary-school milieu, especially when they are accompanied by a theatre-education session or discussion. Productions created by young people, such as *#faust* (2015) or *Akarok még mondani valamit* (2016), associated with *The Seagull*, establish a connection for secondary-school spectators with texts that are often alien to them or, in the case of *Origó* (2013), with an

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<sup>17</sup> *Woyzeck*, directed by Tamás Ascher (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Connected to the following production: *Faust I–II.*, directed by Árpád Schilling (2015).

ostensibly ‘adult’ theme, and they generate the feeling that ‘this concerns me’.

### *Community Building*

In 2015 the name of the theatre-education department was changed to *Behívó*, and the age-based restriction was removed from the designation. The aim of the new programme is to develop community, to initiate discourse, and to bring into play social groups that had not previously been addressed by the theatre.

A few of the new programme types include: *Eltáv* (Departure, 2016–2020), a four-year mobile-theatre project; *K:40* (2023), a promenade performance (for detailed descriptions of the programmes, see below); and *Közéletbevágó* (Civically Vital, 2021), a political free university through which the theatre sought, via a series of public-policy discussions, to bring representatives of different generations into dialogue and to place them in a position to act. In the *Újranéző* (Rewatching, 2016–2023) series, the audience could revisit the Katona’s emblematic productions in recorded form. The discussions of the productions featured, alongside the creators, the theatre’s young theatremakers in conversation with the audience. At the *ImpróWS* (from 2018) sessions, participants improvise with a member of the ensemble while the group develops shared stories. In connection with Jakab Tarnóczi’s *Extázis* (Ecstasy, 2023),<sup>19</sup> the associated workshop series *Extázis after* (from 2024) enables participants, together with a member of the production’s creative team, to connect to the performance through music, dance, play, and guided discussion. In this space, twelve to twenty people connect for two hours and can

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<sup>19</sup> The text by Jakab Tarnóczi and Zsófia Varga develops from the actors’ improvisations. The play unfolds along several strands and follows the lives of a number of young people. Its central question is how this generation can live well today, and how long happiness can last.

find that communal experience which, in Tarnóczi's production, is granted to performers and spectators alike for a few moments, when the stage and the auditorium transform into a single collective house party during the two intervals and at the end of the performance.

Among the programmes, I would single out the mobile-theatre project *Eltáv*<sup>20</sup> (2016–2019) and the promenade performance *K:40* (2023), and use them to illustrate how creators and spectators step beyond their accustomed frameworks and how an audience becomes a community.

Under the management of Gábor Máté, the Katona became more political. In Máté's productions – *A mi osztályunk*<sup>21</sup> (Our Class, 2011), *Vörös* (Red, 2013), and *Bihari* (2016) – unresolved historical traumas are addressed sensitively, while the theatre incorporates contemporary social problems through productions such as *Cigányok* (Gypsies, 2010) and *Az Olaszliszka*<sup>22</sup> (The Olaszliszka Case, 2015). In his productions, a central role is played by the individual and social frustration arising from the silencing and non-processing of personal and collective traumas, which again and again leads to tragedy. Theatre, however, is not only capable of exposing social problems but can also participate in their investigation and potential resolution. Through the *Behívó*'s programmes, important issues have

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<sup>20</sup> Further information on the various programme elements is available on the website of the foundation collaborating with the Katona József Theatre: <https://autonomia.hu/hu/programok/eltav-megnyilik-a-banya>.

<sup>21</sup> In Tadeusz Slobodzianek's *Our Class*, we follow the fates of ten Polish and Jewish classmates from 1925 to the present day. The play traces how the community disintegrates under the impact of historical events; how former classmates grow distant from one another along ideological lines; and how each of them lies even to themselves in order to rewrite the past.

<sup>22</sup> This latter pair of plays focuses on two particularly tragic events in contemporary Hungary. The play by Józsi Tersánszky and Krisztián Grecsó evokes the series of murders of Roma people and depicts a country living in mutual hatred and fear, while Szilárd Borbély's *Az Olaszliszka* addresses the story of the teacher lynched by Roma residents of Olaszliszka in 2006 and the trial that followed the killing.

been taken off the stage (*Az Olaszliszékai, Cigányok*), and with the Katona József Theatre's mobile-theatre project *Eltáv* (Vági Eszter 2021, pp. 83–101) the institution moved out to a Roma settlement in Heves County, Szúcs-Bányatelep.

In the *Eltáv* mobile-theatre project, the theatre's creators and theatre pedagogues worked together with the sociologists of the Autonomía Alapítvány (Autonomy Foundation). The project, which lasted four years, comprised numerous elements: experiential-education programmes in Szúcs and Budapest; theatre-education sessions both on site and at the Katona; the creation of a club production; camps; house-renovation and settlement-development projects; the launching of a social enterprise; musical programmes; and financial-literacy development schemes. These occasions offered a wide range of roles for the theatre's creators and for its audience to participate in the project. Once a month, a minibus of secondary-school and university students travelled to the settlement in Szúcs to take part in the sessions, undertaking to work together with the local Roma youths for the duration of the project. Besides mutual learning, these occasions aimed at community building through games, shared cooking, football, and conversation. The young people from Budapest were themselves participants in the project, and at times also facilitators and helpers, accompanying the sessions or excursions. Moreover, the families of the Budapest youths also became involved in the work. When, during one of the summer camps, the Roma youths stayed in Budapest, the families offered accommodation, meals, and individual programmes for them. Members of the Katona's audience who followed the project could join the house-renovation work as helpers, contribute to the Christmas collection, travel down to Szúcs for the open sessions, and take part in the activities. In addition to these programmes, we launched the e-learning initiative,<sup>23</sup> in which young people and adults from Budapest regularly studied with the youths of

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<sup>23</sup> The official name of the initiative was *Tanodu*.

the segregated settlement. We provided equipment for online learning, but regular in-person meetings also took place within the framework of the learning centre. We organised English lessons from audience donations for those young people who wished to continue their studies at secondary-school or university level, and we likewise received numerous contributions from our audience for community programmes and camps in the form of meals, activities, travel, and cinema tickets. Members of the ensemble also took part in the work in several roles and participated repeatedly in the theatre-education and community-building sessions held in Szúcs and in Budapest. At these occasions they were either participants on the same footing as the young people from Budapest or Szúcs, jointly working on a scene, or they acted as facilitators who led the sessions together with the theatre pedagogues. Members of the Katona could likewise take part in the community work: some joined the house-renovation efforts; some accompanied the camps or cooked; others helped transport people to Szúcs by car on particular occasions, or assisted in distributing the *bagolykalács* (a special cookie from the region) produced within the framework of the community enterprise. At other times, donations from the ensemble made it possible each year at the start of the school term to support families in Szúcs. For four years the theatre and its audience worked together on a shared undertaking. The project was entirely open: anyone who wished could join the programme and could choose, from among the available modes of participation, the one most comfortable for them.

In the 2017/2018 season, photographs documenting the project provided the background and framework for the season book presenting the theatre's new productions, repertoire, and ensemble.<sup>24</sup> With this publication, the Katona József Theatre

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<sup>24</sup> The photographs published in the season book are the property of Lenke Szilágyi; the accompanying informational texts were written by Gábor Máté, the theatre's director; László Suha, the programme's coordinator in Szúcs; Tibor Béres; and Ildikó Végh. These materials can

drew attention to the fact that theatre is a shared undertaking in which, alongside artistic work, the theatre's role in shaping society is equally important. It showcased a project in which the theatre and its audience worked together as a community.

As a community, the theatre's creators and its audience also participated in the promenade performance *K:40*, created for the fortieth anniversary of the Katona József Theatre. The event, structured in five parts, thematised the theatre's four decades and reflected on its future. Each location addressed one decade, and at Fuga the actors and spectators reflected together on what lies ahead.

The production did not use traditional theatre spaces: instead, the creators worked in the Katona's café, the foyer of the studio theatre, the artists' buffet, the foyer of the exhibition space at Fuga, and a corridor of the City Hall. The event, divided into five parts, also differed markedly in form: the first two parts were classical staged readings. The first was created on the basis of interviews with one of the theatre's founders, Ági Szirtes; the second concerned the opening of the Kamra (Chamber), the studio stage of the Katona József Theatre, and its theatrical experiments. In these scenes, the actors of the Katona – Zoltán Bezerédi and Péter Takátsy – together with participants from the Behívó programme, jointly read aloud the text compiled from the interviews. A scene based on semi-structured improvisation was then created in the artists' buffet with the participation of actors (Eszter Kiss and Barna Bányai Kelemen), spectators, and young people from *Behívó*. They created a scene about one of the Katona's defining directors and one of its defining productions: the imagined first reading rehearsal of *Platonov*, directed by Tamás Ascher. The actors and the young participants from Behívó played Ascher and the members of the reading rehearsal, while the spectators played

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be read on the Katona József Theatre's website: [katonajozsefszinhaz.hu](https://szucs.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu), accessed 18 November 2025. <https://szucs.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/ismerteto.html>

the remaining participants – the stage manager, props master, and so forth. The segment addressing the theatre's present was directed by the young director Júlia Bagossy at the Budapest City Hall. In the performative scene, the theatre's current director, Gábor Máté, practised yoga under the direction of the actor Adél Jordán and offered advice to his younger self, who was applying for the directorship, in light of the Covid era and the political and harassment scandals that had affected the theatre. The fifth part took the form of debate theatre. Spectators, the youngest members of the Katona ensemble – Kata Kanyó and Balázs Jakab – together with young people from *Behívó* reflected on what kind of theatre and what kinds of productions they wished to see at the Katona over the next ten years, and which traditions they regarded as essential to carry forward.

At this unconventional event there was no hierarchy between members of the ensemble, *Behívó* participants, and spectators. They reminisced, played, and reflected together on the theatre's past and future.

### *Expanding the Framework of the Theatre*

The stages, spaces, and structures of urban theatres are not, or are only partially, suited to the creation of performative or participatory productions. The aim of community-building creative workshops is to establish connections with city residents, offering forms of participation that create the possibility of new, active positions. One of the Katona József Theatre's *Behívó* programme's most important aims today remains the placing of the theatre's productions within a broader context, the dismantling of the stage–auditorium and actor–spectator hierarchies through its programmes, and the making of theatre and the world around us a shared undertaking for all concerned – spectators and creators alike.

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Anna Zsigó

EXAMINING DRAMATURGICAL PROBLEMS  
THROUGH AN IMPROVISATIONAL METHOD

Abstract: The study adopts a process-oriented perspective in examining the dramaturgical dimensions of two theatrical rehearsal methods. Contemporary Hungarian playwright and director Péter Kárpáti has developed and employs what he terms the ‘improvisation of existence’ or ‘reality simulation’ method. Almost one hundred years earlier, during rehearsals for Molière’s *Tartuffe* – known as his final directorial work – Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre applied an approach that diverged radically from his earlier practice. The common ground between these two rehearsal methods lies in their shared aspiration to establish a new mode of theatrical creation.

In this study I address the methodology of theatrical improvisation. I regard improvisation as a mode of research that plays a significant role in the process of creating a performance. I present in detail two rehearsal methods based on improvisation in which improvisation contributes directly to the development of the emerging production’s dramaturgy. In the creative practices of Péter Kárpáti and Konstantin Stanislavsky, what is shared is not only the use of improvisation, but also the requirement for a working structure and rehearsal period that diverge from those of institutional repertory theatre. In what follows, I demonstrate how the method of theatrical improvisation becomes an instrument of conceptual transformation, a pedagogical objective, and a dramaturgical creation.

## *Reality Simulation*

Péter Kárpáti, Hungarian writer, director, dramaturg, and university professor, has developed his own directorial and creative method, known as the improvisation of existence, long improvisation, surprise improvisation, or sometimes reality simulation. Kárpáti is the author of numerous successful plays with multiple productions; alongside his work as a playwright and applied dramaturg, he has, over the past two decades, also appeared with his own productions in Hungary and beyond its borders, primarily within the independent theatre sector. Kárpáti's plays were earlier performed predominantly in institutional repertory theatres. He later returned to these texts and, drawing on his idea of poor theatre, presented them as independent productions in his own, more experimental stagings. I worked as dramaturg on several such productions – *Negyedik kapu* (The Fourth Gate), *Tótféri*, and *Díszelőadás* (Gala Performance). In parallel, Kárpáti has been continuously developing and applying his so-called reality-simulation technique, a method of theatrical improvisation. Selected playtexts created through this method have also been published in a collected volume.<sup>1</sup> I acquired this technique through our collaborative work – *Két nő* (Two Women), *Titkos ajtó* (Secret Door) – and through various courses we taught jointly for theatre students.

When I began learning improvisation from Kárpáti, the method already existed and possessed a stable foundation. Earlier projects – the series entitled *Vándoristenek* (Wandering Gods) and the theatrical series known as *Színházi Jam* (Theatre Jam) – explored whether individual improvisation sessions could function as performances – in other words, how all this operates in front of an audience.

Thanks to the insights gained from these occasions, in the subsequent period – when I too joined the creative team

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<sup>1</sup> Kárpáti, Péter and friends, 2018. *Színház az orrod hegyn.* Budapest: Selinunte.

– it became possible to combine this rehearsal method with various formal, generic, or thematic considerations. We created theatre-education productions, pieces focused on movement, and rehearsal processes that experimented with space. In all such cases, improvisation functioned solely as a rehearsal method; it therefore took place without an audience, and we regarded it as dramaturgical and acting work.

In what follows, I outline several aspects of the improvisation of existence method that are of particular dramaturgical significance. First, however, it is necessary to clarify how improvisation of existence differs from the technique more widely known to the general public as improvisation. The answer is: in almost every respect. Reality-simulation creation does not place its focus on generating textual material, and therefore does not expect instant solutions or actorly quick-wittedness. We do not construct the scenes of the production; rather, the aim is for the actors to map the modes of operation of the jointly created world and, on the basis of their necessarily partial knowledge of this world, to respond to the impulses that reach them – just as happens in the reality outside the theatre.

### *Process-Oriented Perspective*

Reality as fiction concerns a theatrical approach to story construction and constitutes a dramaturgical method. In the improvisational rehearsal phase, we generate memories and produce story fragments together with the actors, then examine these repeatedly – this is not yet the period of playwriting or script preparation. That takes place in the subsequent phase of the work, when the author writes a play from the stories, which the dramaturg refines, the director stages, and the actors perform. A performance is created, audiences attend it, and from evening to evening they see roughly the same thing on stage.

Our point of departure is that we construct an alternative reality and use this as the framework for the fictional story and

the dramaturgy, even though we do not yet know what kinds of dramaturgies this reality will eventually offer. We first devise who our characters are and how they live, and only thereafter determine what happens to them. If, for example, we were working with Chekhov's *The Seagull*, we would first read what happens to the characters and only then construct how they live and who they are.

The process-oriented perspective (process art), as an alternative to outcome-centred work (and thus as a form of critique of capitalism), appears in artistic and scholarly movements alike. Process art exerted its influence primarily on the visual arts. In 1968, the sculptor Robert Morris wrote in his manifesto *Anti Form* that the rectangular shape dominating the visual arts and architecture, proclaiming rationality, had by then become the universally accepted symbol of well-constructedness. By contrast, for example, Jackson Pollock's splashes of paint falling randomly onto the canvas simultaneously dissolve the demand for rational order while directing attention to the act of creation. Instead of using a brush, Pollock applied the paint to the canvas with small sticks, thereby acknowledging and intensifying the paint's true nature: that it is liquid and less controllable than we might wish (Morris 1993, pp. 41–47).

I discern affinities between Morris's claims and the principles of improvisation of existence. The behaviour of paint when it is applied to the canvas with a stick resembles the moment in which we do not yet know what situations the reality we have constructed will offer.

### *The Rehearsal as Performance*

In these working processes we often hold phase showings, preliminary showings, or work-in-progress presentations prior to the final (or provisionally final) premiere. That is, we organise occasions on which we present the performance to the audience in a half-finished state. But what is it that the spectators see on such occasions? A performance? A rehearsal? Or both

at once? And what, in fact, is the difference between the two? What are their conditions?

This latter question elicits different answers from theatre-makers – and, within this group, distinct answers from actors, directors, and dramaturgs – than from spectators. An actor, for instance, might say that one may make mistakes in rehearsal but not in performance. A director might state that rehearsal is the period of searching, whereas performance is the outcome of the research. A rehearsal can be stopped and restarted; the actor can switch their nervous system – their performative presence – on and off. In the Stanislavskian theatrical tradition, which remains the dominant method in Hungarian theatre today, the actor creates, gradually and in detail during rehearsal, the psychological states from which the role's trajectory – the performance itself – is assembled by the end of the rehearsal process. Actors in effect build up reserves, and reserve themselves as well, in order not to 'burn out' either themselves or the role prematurely (prematurely meaning: before the premiere).

In an improvisational rehearsal process, the impulses that shape the actor's role arise in a different order. The duration of improvisation sessions typically differs from the conventional four-hour rehearsals of institutional repertory theatres, and it is the dramaturgy of the given situation, together with the creators' decisions, that determines how long they last. When we decide to examine a problem from multiple perspectives and apply the improvisation of existence method, we cannot foresee precisely what solutions will emerge, since surprises and the actors' situation-born decisions determine the dramaturgy of the situations. Thus the creators, while rehearsing through improvisation, are also watching a performance – one they have never seen before and whose story they do not yet know.

At times it depends solely on the participants' decision whether an occasion created through the improvisation of existence method is considered a rehearsal or a performance. We regard it as a rehearsal if our aim is eventually to bring the im-

provisational rehearsal process to a close and write a play from the material, which will then be directed. In this process, improvisation functions as rehearsal, as a trial of the dramaturgy.

### *Dramaturgical Specificities*

The sequence, then, unfolds as follows: first an impetus arises to translate a new perspective into practice; this is realised in the form of experiments; a new method emerges; and this method subsequently proves capable of generating theatre productions in the classical sense. Tadeusz Kantor articulated the same line of thought when he stated that he could not have created his theatre production *The Dead Class* had he not previously realised his series of seaside happenings (Kantor 2014, 9:32–9:59). The contingency inherent in happenings or improvisation generates a dramaturgical experience that later proves decisive during the creation of the performance. Theatre productions based on the improvisation of existence but possessing a fixed dramaturgy are, for instance, characterised by filmic cuts and montages. If we examine the dramaturgy of individual improvisation sessions, we can observe that the varied and unexpected solutions of non-hierarchical dramaturgies emerge. Thus, the dramaturgy of the improvised life-scenes generated during rehearsal is unruly.

The dramaturgical quality and density of the improvisations, as well as the nature of the conflicts and stakes that arise within them, differ entirely from those of the play and performance ultimately produced. Kárpáti introduces the concept of the implicit drama, which he defines as follows:

‘When someone is confronted with a genuine situation requiring an answer, in which they cannot decide, and are compelled to live with such a real dilemma, that is in fact far more exciting than when the matter erupts. For even in an eruption, the eruption itself is not the interesting part, but rather what happens an

hour later, the next day, a week later – that is, what will ultimately come of the whole thing. Thus, the least dramatic moment is actually the great drama. In other words, there is a difference between explicit drama and implicit drama.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, this does not mean forgetting conflict, one of the most important dramaturgical tools. In the improvisation of existence, behavioural exploration likewise proceeds along the lines of conflicts, but these are to be imagined rather as covert, underlying conflicts.

In this phase not only the actors improvise, but also the director and the dramaturg – that is, those who construct the improvisation. Intuition and risk-taking appear here almost as conscious creative tools, since everyone is playing.

### *Memory Construction*

One of the key elements of Kárpáti's method is so-called memory construction. This is the preparatory period in which, together with the actors, we create memories, a past, and relationships. It is, however, crucial that we never work with character sketches. There are no wicked, naïve, impatient, or easily offended characters. The aim is not for actors to manufacture characters, but rather, starting from themselves and incorporating their own genuine experiences and memories, to generate a collaboratively created fiction. It is therefore equally important that the actors genuinely connect to the memories and stories proposed either by themselves or by the director–dramaturg. If one actor invents that their occupation is car mechanic, it is essential that they possess some spatial and physical experience related to car repair (even if this ultimately does not become central to the role). Or if, during memory construction, someone recounts in character that a few years

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<sup>2</sup> Péter Kárpáti, personal communication, September 2024.

earlier they took a single rucksack and set off to try their luck in an unknown country, then it is likewise necessary that they have real experience of this, or that someone close to them has such experience, or that they possess a form of knowledge analogous to the situation of *leaving everything behind, beginning anew, and plunging into the unknown*.

During memory construction we work with concrete details, place particular emphasis on evoking the spaces of the memories, and conduct conversations with the actors along the lines of guided questions. These questions contain certain information for the actors, providing a framework for the construction. For example, the guided questions offer situations to which it feels natural to say yes. Their aim is not to squeeze ever more convoluted or sensational stories out of the actors; were that the aim, it would be a grave error, for it would treat the actors as instruments. The guided questions proceed from our curiosity about the person with whom we are working. (This curiosity, of course, is not specific to the improvisation of existence, but characteristic of any honourable theatrical creative process.) The shared conversations place the actor in a position of free choice, allowing them to offer as much of themselves, and in whatever manner, as they see fit. At the same time, responsibility is naturally shared: the actor trusts that we will treat what they offer with care, and we trust the actor to be able to work with what they choose to share.

Let us suppose that we are speaking with two actors, a man and a woman. All they know is that the improvisational process will begin from a family history. 'Do you remember where you were living when your first child was born?' (From this, for example, they can infer that they have at least one child.) 'On which street?' 'On which floor was the flat?' 'Was there a separate children's room? Where did you sleep?' 'Whose flat was it? Did either of you bring anything into it – furniture, objects?' 'Where did you go walking with the baby?' And we continue in this manner – focusing not only on space – moving through temporal leaps and using various techniques to deepen the

unfolding of the memories. Among the memories numerous secrets also emerge, both individual and shared, which the actors disclose only to us (the director and dramaturg) but not to one another.

The evocation of memories in our theatrical-cultural tradition is associated with Stanislavsky's method. When Stanislavsky speaks of memory, he employs the concept of emotional memory (Sztanyiszlavszkij 1988, pp. 200–231). In *An Actor's Work* he elaborates that the actor does not proceed correctly when they fix and reproduce what occurred in rehearsal by mechanically repeating actions performed in space; rather, they must shape their role by recalling the emotions associated with particular actions and with the space. Alongside emotions, Stanislavsky also mentions the memory of sensations, albeit somewhat incidentally, noting that their role in artistic work is merely auxiliary. He offers an example:

“I shall give an example”, replied Torcov. “Not long ago I witnessed the following scene: after some nocturnal carousal two young men were trying to recall the tune of a trivial little polka they had heard somewhere, though they themselves no longer knew where. »It was there... But where was it? We were sitting by some column...« one of them struggled to remember with difficulty. »What has a column to do with it?« the other burst out. »You were sitting on the left, and on the right... Who on earth was sitting on the right?« the first drunkard forced his visual memory. »No one, and there was no column at all. But one thing is certain: we were eating stuffed pike, and...« »There was some strong, flower-scented cologne«, added the first. »Yes, yes«, confirmed the second. »The smell of the perfume and the stuffed pike was so disgusting that I still cannot forget it«” (Sztanyiszlavszkij 1988, pp. 206–207).

With the help of these impressions they remembered a lady who had been sitting at a table with them, eating crab. Then the table, the place setting, and the column also came back to them – the column at which, as it turned out, they had indeed been sitting. At this point one of the young men suddenly recalled a flute passage, began to hum it, and even demonstrated how the musician had played the passage. They were even able to remember the conductor.

This exchange is strikingly reminiscent of the way actors generate shared memories during memory construction prior to improvisations. They more rarely recall emotional states, but all the more readily attach either fictive or real situations to physical sensations.

### *Secrets*

The experiential quality of the roles and situations arises from the fact that each participant possesses only a particular fragment of the reality, and the situations can never be fully known. Even the director and the dramaturg are not aware of all the characters' secrets – it has happened that years after a production's premiere a detail concerning two performers' mutual relationship emerged for me, one that the two of them had devised.

It is difficult to fall out of the constructed alternative reality; actors tend rather to move closer to or further from their roles, at times drawing more, at times less, on their real experiences and on themselves. It is the responsibility of the director and the dramaturg to ensure that this alternative reality becomes theatre. They are the ones who know the secrets, the interacting forces, the intentions, and their task is to preserve these pieces of information until the end of the improvisational phase and to employ them for dramaturgical purposes. Among the dramaturg's roles, this phase poses the most serious challenge. To preserve the secrets and to dispense them at the right moment and in the right measure entails enormous re-

sponsibility. Moreover, what renders the entire game theatrical – what distinguishes it from reality – is the participants’ awareness that there are two people (the director and the dramaturg) who know all the secrets (or nearly all of them). For the actors, this may constitute a source of security; it provides the framework. Keeping secrets requires a poker face; yet as a dramaturg I seldom come as close to the player’s position as when I speak with actors during an improvisational period. Every facial expression may carry significance; every request, piece of information, and formulation must be conveyed alertly and with control, and this strained attentiveness extends into rehearsal breaks and beyond working hours. During such times there is no distinction between the actors’ role selves and their offstage selves: for as long as the improvisations last, it is impossible to discuss, recount, or analyse what has occurred in rehearsal.

From the perspective of possessing the facts, a hierarchy is established among the creators. In other respects, however, the hierarchy is temporarily dissolved. Its most evident practical manifestation can be identified in a form of actor-centred creative attitude – a mode of working that is by no means exclusive to this method, since many creators operate in this way within diverse structures. It is actor-centred in the sense that it proceeds from the fundamental premise that nothing occurs in rehearsal, and consequently in the performance, that runs counter to the actor’s will.

### *Guardian Angels*

Within the improvisation of existence process a strategic position has developed, occupied by the director, the dramaturg, and other creative collaborators – the so-called guardian angel position. As a dramaturg I have often taken on the role of guardian angel during rehearsals. It involves invisible labour in a double sense. It is invisible in the literal sense of the word, and its invisibility can also be compared with the concept of invisible labour as used in gender studies. Here, watching be-

comes an active deed, enriched with additional meanings: care, vigilance, supervision, control, and even the adult–child relation are all present in the guardian angel's gaze and presence.

'From now on we are invisible' – this is usually how the live situation, the improvisation itself, begins. The sentence refers to those who are present but not playing. The statement presupposes the jointly accepted rule: we are present, but our presence does not influence how the actors set the previously discussed situation in motion. In this respect the presence and 'gaze' of the director, the dramaturg, the musician, and the designer fulfil a different function than in a conventional rehearsal. The actors are not producing for us; the aim is not for them to manufacture conflicts and twists for our benefit. Our gaze here does not demand but provides and sustains space. One may ask, however, why, if the goal is for the actors to fill the space with their mere existence – to spend, for instance, an evening in a flat – a 'spectator' is needed at all?

The guardian angel is not merely a guard of persons and property, although this too is undeniably an important part of overseeing the rehearsal, for improvisations frequently leave the safe walls of the rehearsal room. In the outside world as well, it is the guardian angels who maintain the framework of reality as fiction.

But how should one be a guardian angel? The actors naturally perceive the presence of the rehearsal's invisible participants. The situation functions well only when this perception is mutual. Alongside our tasks of vigilance and attentiveness, we must sense precisely, for example, when it is appropriate to laugh together with the actors – when our reaction to their play may serve as a signal that it is worth remaining on that trajectory. Yet it is equally crucial that we recognise in time when a full poker face is required, when even averting our gaze or positioning ourselves farther from the players becomes necessary. This delicate choreography creates a unity among the creators.

If the number of actors involved in the situation, or the situation itself, suggests that the group may split (some setting off in different directions, leaving the space, or introducing new themes), then it is advantageous for several guardian angels to be present. In such cases each guardian angel joins one or more participants, and, if necessary, the director and the dramaturg confer with one another during the improvisation.

The director intervenes in a long improvisation only in the rarest cases, and then primarily to avert a dangerous situation. Actors may receive new information during the scene itself – a telephone call, a message. The director and the dramaturg may reinforce an actor's intentions, offer suggestions, or indicate new directions. Because the rehearsal is long, it is possible to find points of rest at which we can whisper our messages to the actor concerned without disturbing their play. Since, however, we are entering a live situation, the manner in which these messages are formulated is of considerable importance. Directorial instructions or comments on the actor's performance do not yet have their place here; these come to the fore only in later phases of the rehearsal process. In the improvisational situation the actors receive new information, questions, or affirmations, and it may also occur that an unexpected turn is introduced if needed. In such moments the actor becomes our accomplice, for we briefly lead them out of the situation. The mere fact that this is possible – that the play of entering and exiting is permitted – makes visible that what is at stake is a shared game among all creators.

There is also a difference between situations in terms of when the improvisation comes to an end. It may occur that, after a more intense phase, the actors themselves quieten and close the situation. Such stories are most compelling when silence emerges but the tension remains, that is, when no resolution arises. From the perspective of further work, this is a useful point at which to conclude the improvisation. The other possibility is that the director stops the play at a certain moment, even unexpectedly. Here, too, the aim is to prevent all

secrets from being revealed and to keep at bay the natural 'civilian' instinct that would steer the situation towards harmony and roundedness.

In summary, during improvisations the actors bring into play the situation offered by the director and the dramaturg, and in doing so they themselves engage in dramaturgical work. In the course of play they diverge from our initial conceptions, expose the flaws of the devised situation, and the freedom of play generates unexpected turns and solutions that may later become key points of the written drama or the completed performance. Behind the problems thus outlined, the real questions begin to surface.

### *Stanislavsky's Final Rehearsal Method*

In 1938 an unusual rehearsal process began at the Moscow Art Theatre. Perhaps the most striking feature was that the actors rehearsed not in the customary rehearsal room or on the stage, but in the upstairs dressing rooms. For want of a better term we may call what occurred a rehearsal, but on the basis of the recollections of Vasily Toporkov, one of the company's actors, they were in fact playing with situations drawn from everyday life. An external observer would not have been able to guess which play they were rehearsing, for in this early phase of the process the explicit aim was for the actors to work, at a sufficient distance from text, play, and role, on the collective creation of a new world.

Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky, the Russian theatre director, began rehearsals for Molière's *Tartuffe* shortly before his death in 1938. The aim of the collaborative work was pedagogical rather than artistic. 'Do not think about any kind of performance – only study and more study', Toporkov recalls (Toporkov 1952, p. 145). Stanislavsky's aim in this case was no different from earlier: starting from physical actions, he sought to turn the actors back towards themselves, so that the point of departure for shaping the role would be life itself.

‘Art begins when the role disappears’, he taught the company (Toporkov 1952, p. 146). But what might have led him on this occasion to employ a rehearsal method that departed from the customary one?

Stanislavsky sought, through *Tartuffe*, to demonstrate that his method of realistic acting – his life’s work, which he regarded as possessing universal lessons – was applicable to dramaturgies beyond Chekhov. He placed emphasis on transmitting the perspective itself, in which he perceived the key to the method’s continuation. By examining Stanislavsky’s *Tartuffe* rehearsals, we can arrive at an answer to this question.

Toporkov gives a detailed account of the creative process, whose point of departure was the prohibition on learning the text. The text had to be forgotten, as if it did not exist. The first phase of the collaborative work was called the exploratory phase; today we might describe this phase as research or development. At the beginning of the improvisation of existence process, the director and the dramaturg draft a canvas of an imagined story – this later becomes the point of reference. Stanislavsky asked the actors to recount the play’s ‘storyline’ as if a ten-year-old child were telling the story, emphasising who does what – thus he approached the material from the perspective of actions. In the next round they proceeded to role analyses, but Stanislavsky adopted an unconventional approach here as well. The actors’ task was to describe, as precisely and as literarily as possible, the person they would be playing, drawing on observations and experiences from their own lives or from those of acquaintances, together with the help of their imagination. In its intention, this method resembles the memory-construction phase of the improvisation of existence.

Stanislavsky’s *Tartuffe* rehearsals and the initial phases of the improvisation of existence rehearsal method thus reveal similarities that may be grouped around two principal considerations:

1. *The first aim is the construction of a shared world existing outside the text.* Here the difference lies in the fact that in the Moscow process there was a text and a known story at the outset, whereas in the improvisation of existence both the text and the story come into being only later. This makes particularly clear that in both cases what is at stake is the transmission of a perspective: although the sequence in the two cases is entirely opposite (analysis of text/story – creation of reality; creation of reality – development of story and text), the work nevertheless begins in roughly the same way.

2. *The time.* Toporkov likewise emphasises that the most important difference compared with Stanislavsky's earlier rehearsal processes lies in the amount of time devoted to each phase. They engaged with the questions of the exploratory phase far more extensively, thoroughly, and subtly than before, continuing until 'we began to believe in it as an event that had already taken place' – that is, in the story of Orgon and his family.

After the exploratory phase, space and play emerge. Stanislavsky introduced this stage of rehearsal with the injunction: 'Forget the play. It does not exist... neither Orgon nor Marianne... no one from the play exists. Only you exist, so let us begin to play' (Toporkov 1952, p. 162). Thus the text continues to be irrelevant, while space becomes all the more important. In Toporkov's account we see how the actors transformed the theatre's dressing rooms into Orgon's bourgeois family apartment. In this gesture I recognise the found spaces of the improvisation of existence – Budapest flats, pubs, parks – that is, the necessity for real spaces to become fictional spaces through the actors' imagination. At first, Orgon and his family lived a peaceful domestic life; the recollections speak, among other things, of a large communal dinner. Of the types of reality simulation we employ, this phase most closely resembles the long improvisation or, in some cases, the pre-improvisation. The aim of both forms of improvisation is for the actors – already equipped with memories and relationships – to inhabit

the world they have created, to use its spaces in entirely everyday ways, and to explore the possibilities of the relationships. These rehearsals do not aim at producing dramatic compression; in certain respects they are expressly antidramatic. Toporkov uses the expression 'wandering' for this period – 'the whole family wandered along the corridors' (Toporkov 1952, p. 156) – and with this he identifies the essence of the matter, not only in the physical sense. During long improvisations there is room for both real and dramaturgical wandering: for testing dramaturgical ideas that may turn out to lead into a dead end, but may equally open new doors.

Stanislavsky led the improvisational life-experiment towards the play's story almost imperceptibly. Into the already familiar world of peaceful family life he introduced *Tartuffe*, whose arrival exerted its effects slowly and in varied ways. *Tartuffe* in effect fulfilled precisely the dramaturgical role of surprise within the improvisational process of the Moscow Art Theatre company.

Naturally, the performance itself became Molière's *Tartuffe*, which was ultimately staged by Kedrov after Stanislavsky's death; the premiere held in December 1939 was a considerable success. Can the success of the performance be separated from the success of the process? In my experience this varies, but in this case the more pertinent question is whether Stanislavsky succeeded in transmitting and passing on his perspective.

Toporkov writes that at the time he had no inkling of how profoundly this rehearsal process would influence the rest of his career. In his account he does not place particular emphasis on one of his observations, yet when read from the perspective of the dramaturgy and process of the improvisation of existence it seems almost to capture its essence: 'Most of the forms we discovered, which opened the way for us to dissolve completely in the present – we did not use them further' (Toporkov 1952, p. 194). With this he diverts attention, if only for a moment, from the final result and focuses on the outcomes of theatrical work that lie outside the performance

itself. The ‘forms discovered’ or the individual improvisational occasions do not aim at producing the visible scenes of the performance, but at dissolving into the present – that is, at experiencing and learning the creative perspective through action.

### *Summary*

In summary, the two rehearsal methods presented above share an investigation of contemporary reality and an examination of behaviour, in which a methodologically outlined experimental phase precedes playwriting and/or stage rehearsal. It may be assumed that implicit dramaticity remains present later as well, even in dramatically condensed, written texts and performances. What most closely connects the two, however, is a form of collective work whose aim, through the transmission of perspective, is to liberate collaborators and lead them into play.

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The studies of *His/story*, *Her/story*, *Theatre Histories* employ a common methodology, known as the Philther, which regards the performance as the object of theatre studies. We interpret its cultural context, directorial and dramaturgical characteristics, acting, sight and sound exclusively from the perspective of the work of art, and we trace its impact from the perspective of the performance as a whole.

In this volume, readers will find analyses of theatrical works that, by examining productions from Transylvania, Vojvodina, and Hungary, trace a shared history of Hungarian-language theatre. We will bring together the joint research of three theatre studies workshops and present the findings of three Philther Hubs, showcasing the diversity of approaches to writing theatre history, for which in most cases Philther provides the interpretive framework. You can read analyses of the first theatre of Târgu-Mureș, a contemporary dance performance, 19th-century drama, the characteristics of Molière performances under state socialism, the avant-garde under control, and the performativity of political upheavals; yet what all these essays have in common is that they view and reveal the community's cultural customs, theatrical repertoire, and traditions of stage expression through the history of performances.



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