

“World Theatre in Szolnok” during the 1970s. Gábor Székely: *The Drake’s Head*, 1973

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Abstract: Gábor Székely’s stagings of Örkény, Chekhov, Molière and Shakespeare in Szolnok during the 1970s overshadow his *mise-en-scène* of *Gácsérfej* (*The Drake’s Head*), whose significance is almost made imperceptible by the unfamiliarity of the play (and its author), and the complete absence of its stage history in Hungary. However, the 1973 performance of George Ciprian’s play illustrates the far-reaching boldness of the effort that “we want to create world theatre here in Szolnok”, which could be the motto of the Székely Era in this small Hungarian town. The essay outlines how *The Drake’s Head* developed into the essence of this ambition, and how free from orthodoxy Székely handled “committed political theatre”, even against the expectations of the authorities.

Context of the performance in theatre culture

My essay focuses on a single theatre production, which serves as an imprint of an entire era. *The Drake’s Head* was performed no more than 23 times in a small Hungarian town of about 66,000 inhabitants in 1973, so its run spanned only six weeks. But why do we study phenomena that are subjected to time so much that they have palpable presence for a very short period and then merely sporadic traces lead to them? The answer is given by “Impact and Posterity”, the last but all the more important aspect of Philther,¹ my method of performance analysis. A produc-

¹ See Árpád KÉKESI KUN, “Introduction: Philther as a Historiographic Model”, in *Ambiguous Topicality. The Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 9–19 (Budapest: Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L’Harmattan Publishing, 2021).

tion can initiate or influence processes that go far beyond its own sphere, and directly or indirectly contribute to tendencies and eras of historical importance. Gábor Székely’s stagings of Örkény, Chekhov, Molière and Shakespeare in Szolnok during the 1970s overshadow his *mise-en-scène* of *The Drake’s Head*, whose significance is almost made imperceptible by the unfamiliarity of the play (and its author), and also the complete absence of its stage history in Hungary. However, the 1973 performance of George Ciprian’s play illustrates the far-reaching boldness of the effort that “we want to create world theatre here in Szolnok”,² which could be the motto of the Székely Era³ on the bank of the river Tisza. This ambitious statement did not only mean that the world premiere of István Örkény’s *Catsplay* in Szolnok in January 1971 launched the only world success of Hungarian theatre for the following 40 years, but it also meant that all productions were made

² N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, *D. URH*. 5 October 1973, 8:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 3.

³ Gábor Székely (born in 1944) was the manager and chief director of the Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok between April 1972 and April 1978. He was a recent graduate when he directed for the first time in this theatre still led by Gábor Berényi: it was *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller in 1968. Afterwards he was working as a director there until he was appointed chief director in 1971, then manager in 1972. He left Szolnok in 1978, and headed directly to the management of the National Theatre. At the time of the premiere of *The Drake’s Head*, he was already referred to as one of the best directors in the country.

with a sense of standards far above the average in the provinces, he tried to follow current trends in (world) theatre, and aimed at joining international theatre life, though the chances of this were rather small. My essay outlines how *The Drake's Head* became the essence of this ambition and how free from orthodoxy Székely handled "committed political theatre" (his own expression),⁴ even against the expectations of the authorities.

A year and a half before the premiere of *The Drake's Head*, Károly Vass, the manager of the Szigligeti Theatre stated that it was impossible "to create a unique image of a rural theatre".⁵ Among the obstacles he listed (1) outdated forms of organisation, (2) the inadequacy of educating actors, particularly the lack of musical actors, and (3) the conflict between the tasks of rural theatres concerning popular education and the artistic goals set by themselves. In addition, he pointed out (4) the race against time due to the obligations imposed on theatres by economics and cultural policy. His conclusion was that "with the current number of staff our obligations can only be fulfilled with extreme efforts and at the cost of artistic compromises".⁶ Nearly a month after the interview with Vass, Gábor Székely became the director of the theatre in Szolnok. The fact that by the autumn of 1973 the Szigligeti Theatre had turned into one of the most prominent institutions in the whole country with a highly individual image obviously indicated that Székely did not agree to any "artistic compromises", although the obstacles mentioned by Vass had not disappeared.

⁴ BÁTOKI Mihály, "Tájékozódás a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban", *Élet és Irodalom* 17, No. 20. (1973): 7.

⁵ AMBRUS Tibor, "A szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban. Rádióinterjú", *Petőfi Radio*, 4 March 1972, 9:10 p.m. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Not only theatre people but also critics assessed that the season preceding *The Drake's Head* was "the best season of recent years".⁷ The number of reports, full of superlatives, on the Szigligeti Theatre in national newspapers had significantly increased. Székely's staging of *The Versailles Impromptu* and *George Dandin* as a double bill was broadcast on television in June 1973, two members of the company received the prestigious Jászai Award, and the theatre received the Ministry's Excellence award. (As a result of thinking of theatre as a performance workshop and undertaking experimentation, the towns began to excel at that time so that in terms of theatre they would soon surpass the capital.) All this was not solely due to the merits of Székely, but undoubtedly occurred under his management, although he relied on Gábor Berényi's important achievements, who was manager of the Szigligeti Theatre between 1959–1971. With great effort, Berényi had reduced the number of premieres in a season to ten, and Székely did not change their number and composition at first.⁸ In his interviews Berényi had also repeatedly referred to boldness and the need to take risks (for example with the Hungarian premiere of Brecht's version of Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1968). The ten productions of the season before *The Drake's Head* were played 320 times, of which 120 performances were held on tour in neighboring towns and villages. In the season of *The Drake's Head*, 8,000 season tickets were sold, more than in the theatre of Szeged, even though the population of the other town on the banks of the Tisza was twice as large as that of Szolnok. Székely realistically stated that "the results of the last

⁷ N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió" (Roundtable discussion), *Petőfi Radio*, 27 September 1973, 12:43. Typed transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest, 6.

⁸ "Two operettas, three musical comedies, two serious dramas and three lighter ones." S.B., "Évadzárás a Szigligeti Színházban", *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. júl. 4., 1.

ten or fifteen years are starting to show up”.⁹ However, in spite of the indicators so important to cultural policy, he claimed that “we will assume the slogan »theatre for Szolnok«, only if it does not mean cheapness, but, on the contrary, a high level of demands”.¹⁰

Székely’s company comprised 25 full-time and 4 part-time actors, eighty percent of whom were under the age of 35 (and the oldest member was 54 years old), so it was referred to as the smallest and youngest company in the country. Since most season tickets were sold to high schools, so the auditorium was mainly filled with youngsters, and (according to the director’s decision) the production was about young adults, *The Drake’s Head* was born in the synchrony of youth: Székely staged a performance for young people with young people, about young people. Its precursor was the *mise-en-scène* of *The Seagull* in December 1971, which originated (according to Székely) as much from themselves as from Chekhov: “from our loudness, youth and occasional obstinance, but certainly from the cruel consistency of the pursuit of good and beauty, which we demand of others as well”.¹¹ Restlessness felt in the theatre and described with the synonym of searching was mentioned with a positive overtone in a roundtable discussion during the rehearsals of *The Drake’s Head*. It was said to be built on when arranging the repertoire and tried to be transferred to the spectators so that they would “be more” by and with it.¹² *The Drake’s Head* grew into the embodiment of this experience of restlessness and a forerunner of Székely’s staging of *The Three Sisters*, which expressed it in an extreme form a year later. That is how he created “a theatre of public life” that did not serve the Kádár Regime ideologically, as the question of “why should we »rot« like this”

⁹ BÁTKEI, “Tájékozódás...”, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See N.N., “Szolnoki stúdió”, 2.

was examined in almost all of his *mise-en-scènes*.¹³

In this respect, Székely’s approach to tragedies and comedies does not show any difference, as illustrated by the 1972 production of István Csurka’s “pathetic comedy” *The Braggart (Szájhős)* in Szolnok. This highlighted the “struggling rebellion”¹⁴ of the protagonist and the helplessness of his wife much more than the world premiere of the play in Budapest six years earlier. Moreover, “struggling rebellion” took on a spectacular form in Székely’s every *mise-en-scène*, not merely as a recurring pattern of individual fate, but also as an insurmountable state of social existence. The production of Csurka’s play also showed that “from the point of view of striving for perfection on stage, *the political interpretation and the artistic elaboration of the play can hardly be separated*”.¹⁵ If we do not separate aesthetics and ideology, and also take into account the political attitude inherent in Székely’s *mise-en-scènes*, we will come to a different conclusion than those recalling only the director’s participation in the foregrounded events of state socialism. From Székely’s speech at the 11th Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) in 1975, where he took part as a representative of theatre managers, the newspaper of the party made a dull headline that echoed official ideology: “We want theatre committed in its worldview”.¹⁶ However, none of Székely’s *mise-en-scènes* conformed to the expectations of the party-state like this, neither at the level of utterances, nor latently.

¹³ VALKÓ Mihály, “A Három nővér a Szigligeti Színházban”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1974. okt. 20., 5.

¹⁴ PÁLYI András, “Egy igényes színház”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1972. máj. 25., 6.

¹⁵ Ibid. (Italics in the original.)

¹⁶ N.N., “Székely Gábor a szolnoki színház igazgatója: Világnézetileg elkötelezett színházat akarunk”, *Népszabadság*, 1975. márc. 20., 5.

Székely's idea of "political theatre" or "theatre committed in its worldview" is explained by his plain speech given "at home" at the beginning of his first full season as a theatre manager: "The entertaining and artistic functions of theatre cannot be isolated. We prefer high-quality performances that also meet the spectators' needs of entertainment. [...] We took a risk [when arranging the repertoire], but the opportunity for original experiments is worth it."¹⁷ It is fairly conspicuous that "political theatre" occurs with "risk" and "experiment" in Székely's speech, which highlights that the new manager did not want to play safe or spread propaganda from the stage, but to invite the audience to an individual and collective examination. He wanted to invite the members of his company too, who mentioned "teamwork" in their interviews and made it clear that "we are searching for a thought in our rehearsals".¹⁸ All these suggest an ideal of theatre that avoids offering ready answers and asks those "daily moral questions" that people ask themselves, even "around the Central Tisza Region". After all, "we are trying to create a society here that is economically more successful than morally".¹⁹ *The Braggart* questioned its protagonist as he entered the world of corruption and cynicism without any power to change. It confronted the audience with such serious problems as mediocrity, pettiness, and degradation, pervading society as a whole. *The Drake's Head* focused on young people not finding their place, while *Makra*, premiered five months later, on a worker who did not find his place, and the 1974 *Three Sisters* dealt with family members not finding their place since the milieu rather than the individual seemed to be shiftless and lackadaisical. Thus, Székely's theatre expressed "thoughts emerging in sync with

rapidly changing time"²⁰ and made highly contemporary art not as a mouthpiece of socialist ideology, but as the living conscience of a society that was problematic in its human-ethical foundations. Institutionally, this theatre tried to function in a way that today we call democratic, although it could not be made obvious at that time, but the members of the company referred to the fact that "there are not despotic relationships among people here".²¹ And these people knew that "there are many ways to get to truth and we try to find the best".²²

It would be narrow-minded to consider *The Drake's Head*, i.e. a play from a neighboring "people's democracy", written by a Romanian author, to belong to that part of the repertoire that was determined by the theatre's duties of cultural policy. During Székely's management, none of the productions of the Szigligeti Theatre satisfied the official expectations of the annual presentation of a drama from the Eastern Bloc through a play of dubious aesthetic quality. *The Drake's Head* was translated into Hungarian by Pál Réz and came out in the volume of *Modern román drámák* (Modern Romanian Dramas) in 1967. Its publication was presumably due to the fact that the April 1966 Bucharest premiere (actually the second "world premiere" of the play first staged in 1940) drew attention to it. Romanian theatre had been swept by the fervor of "retheatricalization" for a decade, and *The Drake's Head* was staged by David Esrig, a distinguished representative of this movement, with Radu Beligan, manager of Teatrul de Comedie in one of the main roles. This production, gaining far-reaching reputation due to its participation at the Venice Drama Festival in 1967, launched the play's prestigious Romanian stage history.²³ The production of *The Drake's*

¹⁷ B.A., "Évadnyitó társulati ülés a Szigligeti Színházban", *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1972. aug. 25., 5.

¹⁸ N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió", 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ N.N., "Szolnoki stúdió", 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Cimec.ro* indicates seven premieres in Romania until 2004 but neglects the Hungarian-

Head in Szolnok entered into a dialogue with Esrig's *mise-en-scène*, but this was not observed by critics, who merely satisfied with claiming that “many of the pieces of Romanian dramatic literature are still unknown in Hungary. [...] Therefore, the staging of Ciprian's satirical comedy praises the enterprise and lucky choice of the Szigligeti Theatre”.²⁴ As for cultural policy, the premiere won brownie points, but the production clearly showed that Székely did not only want to achieve that. This is reinforced by the fact that the Hungarian premiere of *The Drake's Head* was scheduled to be the opening production of the season, with which the theatre could make a guest performance at the Budapest Art Weeks. In front of a mostly professional audience, it achieved huge success there and was celebrated as another masterpiece of one of the best theatre companies. However, Székely stated that “we are not after success but cling to our aims”.²⁵ And it was this attitude that provided the Szigligeti Theatre with unparalleled artistic greatness for a few years.

Dramatic text, dramaturgy

Despite its publication six years earlier, George Ciprian's comedy and the author himself were as unknown in Hungary in 1973 as they are today. Although the Víg Theatre in Budapest planned to show the play in the 1971/72 season, the premiere did not take place. Thus, before *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok, the Romanian author with Greek ancestors had only one play staged in Hungary: *The Man and His Old Crock* (*Omul cu mârtoaga*), performed as *The Fifth Pharaoh* in Eger in 1962. Ciprian, a well-known actor turned to literary author, created *The Drake's Head* (*Capul de rățoi*) in 1938, which had its

language production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe in the 1976/77 season.

²⁴ CSERJE Zsuzsa, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, *Színház* 7, No. 2. (1974): 33–36, 33.

²⁵ N.N., “Szolnoki stúdió”, 9.

world premiere in Bucharest two years later. The grotesque vision and absurd elements of the play were certainly the main attractions for the creative team in Szolnok: *The Drake's Head* may have seemed an appropriate choice after the nationally acclaimed premieres of *The Toth Family* (1969) and *Catsplay* (1971), and before *The Key-Seekers* (1975), all plays by István Örkény, a renowned representative of “the Hungarian absurd”.

Ciprian does not have a firm place in the canon of literary history but his name often appears next to notable agents of the literary avant-garde, such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Urmuz, “the Romanian Jarry”, who committed suicide at the age of forty and left only a few dozens of manuscript pages behind, but whose life and prose inspired *The Drake's Head*.²⁶ Therefore, most reviewers felt Ciprian's oeuvre fitting into a line from Caragiale to Ionesco and Marin Sorescu, being an integral part of a continuity. Ciprian was also frequently appreciated as a predecessor of the theatre of the absurd, but critics were eager to state that his pieces could not be considered fully parts of this “movement”. Hard-line critics, who wanted to separate the author from the theatre of the absurd for ideological reasons, described him as dissenting from dramas “leading us to the regions of violence and despair”, and preferring “affirmative” lyrical comedy instead.²⁷ Others pointed out the “Ciprian paradox”, i.e. reaching exaltation through the grotesque, sensing the author's implacable attitude in the “final triumph of reason”, that is, in the belief that “man can improve and strive

²⁶ Beside Urmuz, Ciriviș was a pen name of Dimitrie Dim. Ionescu-Buzeu, and one of the protagonists of *The Drake's Head* is also called Ciriviș.

²⁷ See Ileana Popovici's essay (without a title) in the programme of the production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe. n.p.

towards perfection".²⁸ George Banu noticed with a keen eye that the absurd becomes liberating in Ciprian's plays, so his dramatic oeuvre is basically "a theatre of regaining a *raison d'être*".²⁹

Alternating Chekhov with Örkény and completing them with Ciprian, while making one-dimensional sensibility impossible in his *mise-en-scènes*, Gábor Székely used the uniqueness of *The Drake's Head* to create "absurdist theatre" in a special way among the rather sporadic productions of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, etc., whose pieces had already been tolerated but far from supported in Hungary. While Székely was attracted to "problem plays", the most striking example of which was *Timon of Athens* (1976), the dramaturgical problems of Ciprian's comedy were overcome by him. The play was slightly reshaped into "contemporary slang poetry born of very timely worries and anxieties" to build on "absurdly amusing and deeply disheartening situations".³⁰ Székely eliminated the references to the political milieu of the late 1930s and made social criticism, which unfolded under completely different conditions in 1940, carry out in Hungary of the 1970s. When a critic referred to "the struggle against spiritual indolence and stupid prejudices", which "the drake's head alliance" resisted,³¹ he pointed out a phenomenon that could not be linked to a specific social system or period. It was also extensively felt by intellectuals in the quarter-century-old socialist regime in the early 1970s, so Székely was able to adapt the play relatively easily to the present.

²⁸ N.N., "G. Ciprian", in *Aspects du théâtre roumain contemporain* (Bucarest: Arta Grafica, 1969), 68–69.

²⁹ George BANU, "Az emlékidéző drámaíró embersége", in *The Drake's Head*, the programme of the production of the Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe. n.p.

³⁰ N.N., "Láttuk, hallottuk", 2.

³¹ CSERJE, "A szolnoki Gácsérfej", 33.

Ciprian's three-act comedy features nearly forty characters, only seven of whom stand out. The director's work on the text mainly involved shortening the lengthy piece into two acts so that "the joy and collisions of the play could come to life on stage"³² in addition to, and partly instead of, the dialogues of Pál Réz's "richly nuanced translation, full of ideas and humor".³³ However, the two-and-a-half-hour production did not fill the textual "blanks" with scenic or performative elements, so it did not become postdramatic. It was only condensed and accelerated in order to get freshness and dynamism without being retarded by situations repeated because of the variation technique of the play. The effectiveness of the dramaturgical work is shown by the fact that the critics who did not discuss Ciprian's comedy separately and came across the play only through the production, almost spoke of a masterpiece. In contrast to the 1984 radio version of *The Drake's Head*, directed by Árpád Jutocsa Hegyi, the reviewer of which noticed "complicated disarray" and revealed his confusion about the structure of the play.³⁴

Since no dramaturg is named on the playbill, it was certainly due to the director that the production in Szolnok "agitated much more upsettingly for meaningful human life"³⁵ than Ciprian's drama. Székely used the play as a double-edged weapon and did not stress its potential "partisanship". He recognized the possibility of "doublespeak" in the play, which arises from the plot unfolding on two planes. On the real plane, the so-called Drake's Head society is being formed, which

³² BARTA András, "Gácsérfej. George Ciprian szatírája a szolnoki Szigligeti Színházban", *Magyar Nemzet*, 1973. nov. 3., 4.

³³ MOLNÁR G. Péter, "Gácsérfej. A szolnoki Szigligeti Színház bemutatója", *Népszabadság*, 1973. nov. 3., 7.

³⁴ B. FAZEKAS László, "Rádió: Gácsérfej", *Film Színház Muzsika* 28, No. 48. (1984): 21.

³⁵ N.N., "Láttuk, hallottuk", 2.

“aims to scandalize »men of importance« by disdain[ing] the routine of bourgeois society in order to raise the imagination of people and a *peaceful revolution* in their conscience. After committing some innocent jokes, the four founding members of the »The Drake’s Head« buy a tree on which to establish the headquarters of their alliance. However, Mr. Dacian, an important statesman and a victim of their jokes, takes punitive actions to punish them in a swift and exemplary manner. But Dacian’s first action fails, so the arrogant pride of his personality becomes apparent even more ridiculously and foolishly. The newspapers comment at length on the war of the »men of importance« against these four knights of youthful unrest, spiritual nobility and the pursuit of purity. Dacian feels his prestige threatened and his authority mocked. One night, with the help of his accomplices, he knocks down the tree from which so many fantastic initiations and so much dangerous eccentricity have emerged. The four heroes of fantasy decide to take revenge, and the manner of their revenge resembles them and determines them: they force Mr. Dacian to cut off his imposing beard, a sign of his false dignity and dubious venerability, and they manage to return him to the human course in the end.”³⁶

However, the plot has another plane, on which “we can see a duel between intelligence and spiritual darkness, [...] between protesting spirit and that stagnation which is characteristic of retrograde regimes.”³⁷ Thanks to this symbolic plane, the production in Szolnok had turned into a virtuoso example of “floating”, and presented “a peaceful revo-

lution” that was restrained by critics as “a rash fight”³⁸ or “a rebellion before ideological maturity”.³⁹ Since the play is about spreading provocations against bourgeois society that pushes individual freedom between narrow (and already internalized, so almost invisible) boundaries and does not resist fascism, the production could be interpreted as an allegory of the rise of socialism.⁴⁰ However, the *mise-en-scène* evoked the present instead of the 1930s, so the spectators could associate the events just as much with the struggling but eventually triumphal resistance to the regime prevailing in the 1970s. After all, in Szolnok, in 1973, the rebellious young people of Hungarian socialism, which had already entered adulthood, wanted to preserve the “daring freedom of their soul and spirit”.⁴¹

The production did not make it obvious who “a degenerate”⁴² was (the petty bourgeois or the communist), whose thinking Ciriviş, Macferlan, Bălălău and Pentagon wanted to liberate. Or who the “representatives of moral and social conformity”⁴³ were, whom the four friends played tricks on (those who had submitted to fascism or those who had given in to communism). In this way, the *mise-en-scène* allowed interpretation, even quite subversive, depending on the attitude of the spectator, since the rebellious young people appeared differently from the official

³⁸ MOLNÁR G., “Gácsérfej...”, 7.

³⁹ CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

⁴⁰ Some critics even suggested this interpretation, discussing the “underground efforts” of The Drake’s Head alliance to destroy “the petty-bourgeois supporters of society” (cf. BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.). The audience could associate this with the opposition movement, which had a prominent position in the socialist view of history.

⁴¹ N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 1.

⁴² BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.

⁴³ VALKÓ Mihály, “Gácsérfej – mai hangszerelésben. Magyarországon először a Szigligeti Színházban”, *Szolnok Megyei Néplap*, 1973. okt. 16., 5.

³⁶ N.N., “La tête de Canard”, in *Aspects du théâtre...*, 69–70. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

youth policy in it. The reviews were trying to diminish the political vigor of the production and disarm its power, but *their* “doublespeak” also helped to assess the significance of “a rebellion so symbolic in its extremities”.⁴⁴

Staging

The production gripped the audience energetically, as the *The Drake's Head* “string quartet” attacked the sclerotic model of life represented by those around them with explosive force and glee. The “four cool Robin Goodfellows” had an extraordinary appeal, but they could also be feared. They made the spectators smile, but sometimes made them shake their heads. They were raging “through the first act in a delightful way, without a blunder, without stopping for a single moment”.⁴⁵ Their thought-provoking jokes had nothing to do with the controlled humor of the Kádár regime, represented by *Ludas Matyi*, a well-known humorous magazine. Moreover, elements of circus and show business were featured in the production fairly spectacularly. A year after the guest performance of Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Budapest, *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok demonstrated its direct effect. At the height of the Hungarian Beat movement, the production capitalized on the popularity of the Illés Ensemble and similar beat bands.

This is also related to the fact that the age of the four protagonists had been halved.⁴⁶ Instead of middle-aged people rejecting a decent bourgeois way of life, restless young men came into focus, all dissatisfied with the

⁴⁴ BARTA, “Gácsérfej...”, 4.

⁴⁵ SPIRÓ György, “Pozitív galeri”, *Élet és Irodalom* 17, No. 44. (1973): 12.

⁴⁶ “The heroes of the production of the Szigligeti Theatre became twentysomething. The original characters of the play are gentlemen in their 40s, who try to break out of the treadmill by reviving their former student jokes. This is their last attempt and opportunity.” Ibid.

world of their fathers – with the world that had once begun to be built by those already over the age of 40 in the 1970s. In addition, by the time of *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok, the proportion of the Hungarian population under the age of 30 reached 50 percent, and the country had already had a Youth Act for two years, created as a reaction to certain events of 1968 (student protests, the Prague Spring, etc.). However, the production in Szolnok did not confirm what the Hungarian Youth Act (4/1971) declared with threatening rigor. Namely, that “in the People's Republic of Hungary the fundamental interests and goals of the state, the society and the youth, which is part of the society, are the same. The youth, together with the adult generation, builds socialism, fights for social progress. [...] The society expects the youth to be a worthy heir to the revolutionary traditions of the Hungarian people, an unselfish participant in the construction of socialist society, in the realization of communism.”⁴⁷

The lads who replaced the grown-ups in *The Drake's Head* in Szolnok had swept away the cliché of rejecting the bourgeois way of life. By means of the anti-conformist revolt of young people, Székely tried to bring the play closer to the audience and especially to youths. He showed “a positive gang” (*galéri* in Hungarian),⁴⁸ and the adjective is particularly important in this case. The noun served as a criminological category at the time, but György Spiró's phrase suggests that the *mise-en-scène* did not intend to extract a cheap

⁴⁷ Quoted by KÁTAI Gábor, *Gondolatok az ifjúságpolitikáról és eszközeiről – Magyarországon és Európában* (Budapest: Belvedere Meridionale, 2006), 38. According to Káta, “this act clearly defines the roles, tasks and methods in all possible places that concern young people. It makes the state unavoidable and tries to keep young people »within striking distance«, thus making them incapable of confrontation as individuals and their organizations.” Ibid.

⁴⁸ SPIRÓ, “Pozitív galeri”, 12.

moral lesson from the play, and to pillory young people who disobeyed socialist morality. It did not echo the official attitude of the party-state towards certain youth groups (or *galeris*), subjected to constant (and irritating) supervision by the police between the 1960s and 1980s. However, it was not just the world of harmless street or nightclub troubles that gave a context to *The Drake's Head* “*galeri*”, but also the hardly tolerated and mostly forbidden actions of alternative performance groups, i.e. Kassák House Studio and Péter Halász's apartment theatre, the summer activities in the chapel of Balatonboglár (where Halász and his friends spent a week in 1973), the “Orfeo scandal”, Tamás Fodor's commune in Pilisborosjenő, and István Paál's *mise-en-scènes* at the Szeged University Stage, where the legendary *Petőfi-rock* created a furor in 1973. *The Drake's Head* was fueled by the spirit of 1968 (and all these efforts to keep it alive), which could not permeate official theatre culture, but the production “absorbed” all the energy of these restless, young people, who seemed wild and deviant and wanted something else.⁴⁹ Although Székely placed the four friends of the play in a good light, some reviewers described them as “extremely individualistic” and “Ur-hippies” whose illusions must col-

⁴⁹ It is also noteworthy that during the celebration of the national holiday on 15 March 1973, when numerous demonstrations were held against the regime all over the country, the police “acted against the protesters more harshly than ever before. This was embarrassing even for the intelligentsia of the Kádár regime. According to László Gyurkó's memo to György Aczél [the »controller« of cultural life – Á.K.K.], »for a few hours, the center of Budapest looked as if some serious rebellion had to be crushed«. Krisztián UNGVÁRY, “Március 15. a Kádár-korszakban: tüntetések és megtorlások”, *hvg.hu*, last accessed 14.06.2022, <https://hvg.hu/itthon/20060311marc15>.

lapse.⁵⁰ Others explained more precisely that “the director presents a group of counter-hippies, an elite team whose members dazzle with physical and mental feats as actors”.⁵¹

This helps us comprehend how “political theatre” is meant in Gábor Székely's speeches and interviews at the time. He made it clear that “we want to say something about our situation right now, in which we meet our most pressing problems directly”.⁵² Consequently, he did not turn the Szigligeti into a propaganda theatre, but a workshop that coincided with alternative theatre movements in the realm of officiality, where the protagonists of *The Drake's Head* questioned “what they felt *fundamentally wrong*” as opposed to those who “dare not change, even though they know that *the present way of life is untenable*”.⁵³ Dramaturgical alterations aimed at contemporaneity and immediacy,⁵⁴ not only by bolstering the second act, mentioned earlier, but also by inserting

⁵⁰ CSIK István, “A Gácsérfej – Szolnokon”, *Film Színház Muzsika* 17, No. 43. (1973): 10.

⁵¹ KOLTAI Tamás, “Színház vagy teátrum? Külföldi drámák az elmúlt évadban”, *Nagyvilág* 19, No. 8. (1974): 1250–1255, 1253.

⁵² CSERJE, “A szolnoki *Gácsérfej*”, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.* (My italics – Á.K.K.)

⁵⁴ Immediacy characterized Székely's *mise-en-scène* in contrast to the 1966 Bucharest production of the play, whose director attached a third plane to those of real and symbolic events through the melodies played by an old lady, accompanying the production on the piano in the orchestra pit. This plane of commentary became particularly important at the end, when Dacian's huge beard had been cut off, and everyone was dancing Charleston, but countless bearded men began to flood the stage. See Traian ŞELMARU, “*Capul de răţoi în optica de azi*”, *Teatrul* 11, No. 6 (1966): 34–37. Székely used as effective directorial methods as David Esrig, but he broke down the distance implied by the third plane in the Romanian production.

passages that “highlighted a few ideas”⁵⁵ and by transferring the events into the present. This suggests that the company did not handle the play as a parable about resisting fascism, but about resisting the social structure and ideological background of the current regime in Hungary. No wonder that fascism was specified in none of the reviews, although the strength of resistance had been curtailed in several ways. The target of the actions of The Drake’s Head group was identified either with “petty-bourgeois prejudices and premises”,⁵⁶ or with the dominant way of life in contemporary bourgeois democracies,⁵⁷ or (rather vaguely) with the apparatus that threatened the Ego.⁵⁸

However, Székely made the crowd an equal agent with the four friends, and identified it with the present audience. In doing so, he avoided the closure of representation, made the presence of performance a leading factor, and cast the current audience in a virtual role, which was carried out as a kind of Brechtian technique. At the beginning of the performance, a red sign was flashing on the open stage: “Silence! The performance is about to begin.” This sign is usually meant for those working behind the scenes, but this time it was meant for the audience to indicate that something was being performed. As a result of the opening of *Illusionstheatre*, the spectators became participants in the play. A reviewer also noticed that “the satire primarily aims at us”, since the opponent of the four friends is not only the bearded Dacian, but all those who let the beards of some people grow long.⁵⁹ This was revealed by one of the key scenes of the performance, when the bearded man was confronted with the audience. Although the critic of the local

daily felt “purification, the intention of cleansing” in this moment, as part of an “optimistic performance”,⁶⁰ others perceived resignation, which became an essential feature of Székely’s *mise-en-scènes*. This resignation was rooted in the fact that the four friends’ frequent squatting (the parody of salutation) had turned into a symbol of mocking, as more and more people started to greet each other this way. The government failed and the police stood up for the young men, who were lingering on an apple tree, just watching and assisting in the whole upheaval. Thus, the production showed rather maliciously how the best of intentions could unwillingly transform, and how something revolutionary could be institutionalized and made ineffective. In 1970, two years after the launching of the New Economic Mechanism, Endre Marton’s *Chapters on Lenin* in the National Theatre sought to return to the pure ideal of revolution full of hope.⁶¹ In 1973, Gábor Székely’s *The Drake’s Head* resignedly suggested that no return was possible. With the attitude of so-called “reform intellectuals” and in the name of “progressive leftism”,⁶² the production was arguing over rigidity a year after the 1972 constitutional amendment, government reshuffle and anti-reform measures.⁶³ In fact, it passed “severe

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See Árpád KÉKESI KUN, “From Idol Destruction to Idolatry. Endre Marton: *Chapters on Lenin*, 1970”, in *Ambiguous Topicality...*, 121–133.

⁶² Székely’s phrase, in CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

⁶³ Cf. “The opponents of the reforms included the managers of loss-making industrial enterprises and trusts unable to meet the challenges of market competition. [They] found supporters in Moscow, where Khrushchev was overthrown in 1964 and Leonid Brezhnev’s neo-Stalinist and conservative line overcame and strengthened. During his visit to Moscow in February 1972, Kádár was given a severe reprimand. His hosts, including Brezhnev him-

⁵⁵ CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

⁵⁶ VALKÓ, “Gácsérfej...”, 5.

⁵⁷ LUKÁCSY András, “Gácsérfej. Román szatíra bemutatója Szolnokon”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1973. okt. 26., 6.

⁵⁸ CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 36.

⁵⁹ VALKÓ, “Gácsérfej...”, 5.

judgment over a repressive regime threatening with the terror of mental uniformity”.⁶⁴

Acting

The Drake's Head was celebrated by critics as a successful attempt to merge realistic character building and physical acting. Although the play offers major roles for only a few actors, the production involved most of the company in Szolnok, two-thirds of them in small roles or as extras. At the same time, “team play” was a real challenge and Gábor Székely, who made the Szigligeti Theatre “a center of educating actors and directors”,⁶⁵ saw the essence of the actor's work in it. Therefore, only the names of the actors were listed on the playbill, although not in alphabetical order, but in the order of the importance of their (undisclosed) roles. In his company Székely felt the willingness for ensemble acting, “without which modern theatre is unthinkable”, and thought that they had been able to achieve it first in the production of Molière's plays (*The Versailles Impromptu* and *George Dandin*) some months earlier, and at this time in *The Drake's Head*.⁶⁶

self, rebuked him that petty-bourgeois attitude was prevailing in Hungary, the agriculture had returned to small-scale capitalism, social justice was not taken care of, and people were not watchful enough in general. This is why the anti-reform forces could make Kádár and his followers adopt a number of measures between 1972 and 1974 that were economically unfounded or irrational and acted against the process started in 1968.” ROMSICS Ignác, “A Kádár-korszak”, in *Magyarország története a XX. században*, 269–380 (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2010), 310.

⁶⁴ LUKÁCSY, “Gácsérfej”, 6.

⁶⁵ GYENES András, “Képernyőn a Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház”, *Képes Újság* 14, No. 22. (1973): 11.

⁶⁶ TAKÁCS István, “»Az ifi edző«”, *Magyar Ifjúság*, 1973. szept. 28., Kulturális melléklet, 40.

This leitmotiv of the last century's theatre aesthetics was also picked up by the critics, and Székely's *mise-en-scène* was praised as “a brilliant example of modern ensemble acting”.⁶⁷

The reviewers also appreciated the extraordinary energy that emanated from the actors who played *The Drake's Head* four, because their every move “expressed explosive power and cheerfulness”.⁶⁸ While Székely's *mise-en-scènes* were usually characterized by the subtleties of psychological realism, *The Drake's Head* was an exception, because he did not feel them adequate with the situations of the play.⁶⁹ Therefore, he proposed more raucous humor and stylized forms of expression that required “extremely grueling rehearsals and the concentrated use of the actors' entire physique and nervous system”.⁷⁰ The result of this unusual strain in the rural theatres of the time was unanimously admired. The set also required the four protagonists to traverse the vertically divided sections of the stage with “a panther's skills”, and their striking physicality contributed substantially to the surprising dynamics and sometimes hilarious rhythm of the performance. However, this did not make the figures exaggerated, since the actors also took care to individualize their roles, with significant differences in the case of the four main characters.

Stage design and sound

The immediacy of acting was enhanced by the performance space, combining the influ-

⁶⁷ N.N., “Láttuk, hallottuk”, 2.

⁶⁸ SPIRÓ, “Pozitív galeri”, 12.

⁶⁹ He said that “the playwright's time management dictates the style of the play. If a man comes on stage and leaves after a few minutes, losing his name, this situation is so absurd, so grotesque, that you don't have to put something across by psychological motivations in it”. CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

ence of Brecht, Mejerhold, and Brook, the costumes that suggested the here and now of the events, and the sound effects, highlighting these events. The production featured a unit set and an open stage, dominated by a low but wide rectangular platform, a kind of small stage on the main stage, with a half curtain behind it (à la Brecht). Above this, a smaller platform of a few square meters was stretched out with a cord rope, at a height of about two meters. This higher platform could be approached on two ladders, just like the upper level of the set in Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* designed by Sally Jacobs. (A ladder had connected the two levels of the stage in Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scène* of Molière's plays too.) The floodlights that framed the stage from both sides and from behind also became important components of the visual world created by László Székely, and helped to prevent creating illusions. In addition, a few bentwood chairs, a big painter's ladder, a couple of garbage cans, and (as another allusion to Brook's *Dream*) trapezes in the air were used as props. This "variety stage painted with little red and a lot of gray and white"⁷¹ modestly evoked the extravagant constructions on Mejerhold's stage in the 1920s to become a springboard for excessive movement, while the four youngsters transformed its rigor and starkness into a "friendly, nice grove" at times.⁷²

Among the most influential theatre people of the last century, Stanislavsky is mentioned the most frequently in relation to Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scènes*. However, in terms of performance space, Székely was the most Brechtian director in Hungary in the 1970s, due to László Székely's stage design, characterized by an airy, sometimes two-story stage, furniture and equipment that barely evoked concrete places, elements that stressed the performed nature of the ongoing play, and curtains that divided the stage and could be moved easily. Moreover, the

cooperation of Gábor Székely and László Székely bear similarities to the productions of the Romanian movement of "retheatricalization". Gábor Székely's statements in his interviews echo those of Liviu Ciulei in his famous article "Theatricalization of the Stage Picture". "Theatricalization is necessary not for its own sake, not for an artificially aroused interest, and not for the sake of deviating from reality at all costs, but for the sake of conveying reality through the peculiar images of the art of the stage."⁷³ In case of *The Drake's Head*, this indirect and stylized expression was served by the bare stage elements in geometric shapes, e.g. the apple tree, that is, the smaller platform high above the larger one, chosen by the four lads as their residence. Similarly to Esrig's Bucharest production in 1966, where the apple tree was replaced by an orb that dominated the upper part of the stage and could be traversed, it functioned as a metaphor. (Even the grid structure of the orb in the Bucharest production turned up as the net of the hammock above the higher platform in Szolnok.)

The photos of Esrig's staging show actors in costumes reflecting the clothing style of the first half of the 20th century. In contrast, Mária Fekete dressed the actors in clothes that clearly corresponded to contemporary attire in Szolnok. The costumes underlined the current nature of the events and brought the reality of Hungarian streets to the stage via cool jackets, jeans, T-shirts, sweaters, ties, and short skirts. Only one anachronistic accessory was added to these costumes: the four young men wearing bowler hats. Although the bowler hat is included in Ciprian's stage directions and featured in the Romanian production as well, it turned up as a mostly ironic element in Szolnok, due to the pervasive contemporaneity of the production there. The audience could associate the bowler hat with Beckett's vagabonds rather than the time of the play's birth.

⁷¹ BARTA, "Gácsérfe", 4.

⁷² SPIRÓ, "Pozitív galéri", 12.

⁷³ LIVIU CIULEI, "Teatralizarea picturii de teatru", *Teatrul* 1, No. 2. (1956): 52–56, 55.

The acoustic dimension of the performance was determined by diction, but “Zoltán Simon’s powerful musical and sound effects played an important role”, even if they were only mentioned by a single critic.⁷⁴

Impact and posterity

Although historiography has hardly dealt with the production so far, the process of which it became an initiator (certainly not alone) has a prominent place in the memory of Hungarian theatre.⁷⁵ Its critical reception was unanimously positive, and it was widely accepted that *The Drake’s Head* was an “incomparably fresh performance whose spiritual intensity goes far beyond its own significance”.⁷⁶ A reviewer even considered it worthy to be broadcast on television “to the great public of the country”,⁷⁷ but, unlike with several other productions staged in Szolnok, this did not happen. However, it was performed at the Budapest Operetta Theatre on 20 October, during the Budapest Art Weeks, and Székely received the certificate of the Cultural Department of the Town Council for the successful event. Two more performances were held outside Szolnok: on the afternoon and evening of November 15, *The Drake’s Head* was performed in Kecskemét, as part of the guest performance exchange program with the local theatre. Since it was not taken on tour to neighboring towns and villages, 12 more evening and 8 afternoon performances were held, all in Szolnok. One and a half month after its premiere, *The Drake’s Head* was replaced by *The Midnight Rider* (a new Hungarian musical), followed by the new productions of *The*

Lower Depths by Maxim Gorky, and *The Chocolate Soldier* by Oscar Straus, until the end of 1973.

Despite all the acknowledgements, these 23 performances, the six-week run and the play itself have not inspired other directors, so the 1973 production in Szolnok became the one and only staging of *The Drake’s Head* in Hungary. Nevertheless, the short-lived production became an essential part of the artistic turn started in the theatres of Kaposvár and Kecskemét, besides that of Szolnok, in the first half of the 1970s. This turn culminated in the internationally renowned productions of the Katona József Theatre under the direction of Gábor Székely a decade later and extends well into the present through the work of prominent art theatres (e.g. the Radnóti and the Örkény) and smaller theatre workshops mostly based in Budapest. Moreover, *The Drake’s Head*, related to the theatre of the absurd, belongs to the celebrated series of Székely’s stagings of Örkény and Mrožek in the 1970s, ranging from *The Toth Family* (1969) to *The Emigrants* (1979). And despite all its humor, in terms of the resignation pointed out in connection with the *mise-en-scène*, *The Drake’s Head* contained the germ of bitterness that permeated Székely’s works for two decades from *Timon of Athens* (1976) through *The Misanthrope* (1988) to *Don Juan* (1995) and *Ivanov* (1996), two of his last *mise-en-scènes* in Hungary.

A portrait of the director in 1973 summarized Gábor Székely’s approach to literary theatre with the following characteristics: “an extremely careful analysis of plays focusing on their content from today’s point of view; a precisely developed style corresponding the dramas put on stage; and an excellent, imaginative but strict way of handling actors”.⁷⁸ These made the *mise-en-scène* of Ciprian’s comedy outstanding too, so that *The Drake’s Head* would become the epitome of a trend initiated by Tamás Ascher, Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki among

⁷⁴ MOLNÁR G., “Gácsérfej”, 7.

⁷⁵ See NÁRAY István, “A szolnoki évek”, in *A második életmű. Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*, ed. by Magdolna JÁKFALVI, István NÁRAY, Balázs SIPOS, 239–282 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó – Arktisz Kiadó, 2016).

⁷⁶ KOLTAI, “Színház vagy teátrum?”, 1253.

⁷⁷ BARTA, “Gácsérfej”, 4.

⁷⁸ TAKÁCS, „»Az ifi edző«, 40.

others, which got into the mainstream by the late 1980s. But it all started with small “Drake’s Head companies”, full of ambitions of making world theatre, commencing a modest rebellion against a mass of “false forms”.⁷⁹

Details of the production

Title: The Drake’s Head (Gácsérfej). *Date of Premiere:* October 12, 1973. *Venue:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Director:* Gábor Székely. *Author:* George Ciprian. *Translator:* Pál Réz. *Composer:* Simon Zoltán. *Set designer:* László Székely. *Costume designer:* Mária Fekete. *Company:* Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok. *Actors:* Gyula Szombathy, Gyula Piróth, Zoltán Papp, Péter Simon, József Iványi, László Huszár, Olga Koós, Endre Peczkay, Béla Benyovszky, András Berta, Péter Czibulás, Frigyes Hollósi, László Halász, István Kürtös, Attila Balogh Bodor, Jenő Czakó, Antal Gáspár, Ildikó Szeli, Mátyás Usztics, István Lengyel, Annamária Szilvássy, Endre Tatár.

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⁷⁹ Székely’s phrase, in CSERJE, “A szolnoki Gácsérfej”, 34.

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