

The Country of Iron and Steel on Stage. Theatres and Political Propaganda in the Rákosi Era

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Abstract: In my study, I examine how theatre appeared in the official propaganda journal of the Rákosi-era, whose declared aim was to support the “cultural revolution”. Through an analysis of the linguistic propaganda devices that appeared in the journal, the focus of my writing is to show the ideological relations that defined not only the official theatre, but also the framework of workers’ or factory theatre. The ideologists and political decision-makers of the period made excellent use of the phenomenon that, in a total dictatorship, artistic works always carried a political message and conveyed values. In this way, theatre was used as a tool of propaganda to influence people's thinking, emotions, and behaviour.

Introduction

By the late 1940s, after losing in World War II, Hungary had established a Soviet-style political system as part of the international socialist totalitarian world empire. The country had completely lost its external and internal sovereignty. The one-party totalitarian dictatorship that emerged was linked to the despotic personal power of Mátyás Rákosi. The vast majority of the means of production were nationalised, and private property and private enterprise were minimised. The independence of democratic freedoms and the judiciary were severely restricted. The new system, outlined in the 1949 constitution, was a complete break with historical tradition, essentially a word-for-word copy of the Soviet model. The totalitarian regime abolished all guarantees of human rights and based its rule, to a large extent, on terror. All

economic, social, and political autonomy and pluralism were abolished.¹

The basic institution of the party-state between 1948 and 1956 was the highly centralised, hierarchical, and militarised Hungarian Worker’s Party (MDP). The entire political structure was organised to carry out the orders of a single central will, with neither those at the party’s various levels nor regular members of society having any meaningful influence on decisions. The cohesive forces of the order were a system of ideology, power structure, coercion, prestige, and privilege. While property relations were thoroughly transformed, radically limiting the private property of individuals, social policy was characterised by paternalism and narrow-minded class politics, its main aim being to transform society as a whole. The state intervened in the lives of individuals at both macro and micro levels, seeking to control every aspect of society, and making absolute obedience and loyalty to the party a value. The MDP mobilised great efforts to entirely transform the social structure, which took a long time, despite its very drastic steps. The ensuing mass social change was almost exclusively politically motivated; it was not of the free will of the people, but because the political changes made it difficult or impossible for them to continue with their previous way of life. One of the aims of this top-down transformation was to dismantle the traditional peasant society, and force the population of the villages into producer coopera-

¹ BIHARI Mihály, *Magyar politika: 1944-2004 – politikai és hatalmi viszonyok*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005), 94–102; ROMSICS Ignác: *Magyarország története a XX. században* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 285–295, 338–346.

tives. Great numbers of people who had previously been peasants were forced to change occupations, most of them becoming unskilled industrial workers, resulting in a loss of social status.²

Forced industrialisation led to an increase in the number of urban workers, but becoming one of them in the 1950s did not represent a real social uplift, as workers perceived their working and living conditions as deteriorating.

In 1949, unions were banned and any grassroots organisation of society was stopped. Thus, instead of the self-organisation of the past, authorities took care of leisure activities. In the workplace, brigades were formed following the Soviet model, whose members stayed together outside working hours, not least because this provided another opportunity to convey the party's ideology. One of the common recreational activities of the workers in a factory was to participate in various cultural groups.

Since one of the goals of the system was to create a "socialist type of man", culture was used to impart socialist ideology: science and the arts, such as film and theatre, were seen as necessary in educating the masses. The Ministry of Popular Culture, set up in 1949, was responsible for supervising cultural life at the ministerial level, and its creation was praised on the front page of the Free People newspaper: "The task of the newly established Ministry of Popular Culture will be to make up for our backwardness on the cultural front, to change our whole public thinking, to raise the cultural standards of our people, to fight against hostile ideologies".³

² KORNAI János, *A szocialista rendszer. Kritikai politikai gazdaságtan* (Budapest: Kalligram, 1993). Cited in VALUCH Tibor, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 23–24.

³ N.N., „Az új kormány”, *Szabad Nép*, 1949. jún. 11., 1.

In March 1950, the Ministry of Culture launched a cultural mass movement magazine called *Művelt Nép* (Educated People), which was a monthly until April 1954 and a weekly from then until October 1956, informing its readers about the events of cultural life.

In my study, I will examine how the working class appeared as an 'active participant in culture' through theatre-related articles published in a journal whose declared aim was to support the 'cultural revolution'. Through an analysis of the linguistic propaganda devices that appeared in the articles, the focus of my writing is on the ideological relations that defined not only the official theatre, but also the framework of the workers' or factory theatre. I will show how propaganda and theatre were linked in the toolbox of the ideological re-education of the working class.

"Our working people, with the help of the Soviet Union, under the leadership of our Party, have won political and economic power, and have begun to build socialism. An important condition for this is the spreading of knowledge and education, the raising of the cultural level of the working people, and the victory of our cultural revolution"⁴ wrote Antal Berczeller, head of the Theatre Department of the Ministry of People's Education, in the columns of *Művelt Nép*. The aim of this "cultural revolution" as well as of popular education was to develop a new attitude to culture in society as a whole, for all people to acquire a socialist worldview. In the interests of this re-education, Berczeller wanted to turn all institutional means – science, the arts, cinema, theatre, and publishing – towards the masses.

Frameworks of theatrical life

After the war, which had done much damage to education and culture, the idea of nation-

⁴ BERCELLER Antal, „Színházaink jövő évadja és a közönségszervezés kérdései”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 7. (1950): 20–21, 21.

alising theatres was raised almost immediately. For example, in its action programme adopted in 1945, the Social Democratic Party stated that “just like cinemas and radio, theatres should be taken out of the hands of private capital, once the necessary preconditions have been created.”⁵ In 1948, the programme declaration of the Hungarian Workers’ Party (MDP), which was formed by the merger of the Social Democratic and Hungarian Communist Parties, stated that “scientific research and artistic creation must be freed from dependence on capital, and put at the service of the people”.⁶

Soon after the parliamentary elections of November 1945, coal mines and electric power stations were taken into state administration, and then large banks and the companies they owned were nationalised. In 1948, the pace of nationalisation accelerated, with state ownership of industrial enterprises employing more than 100 workers and then of schools. In the theatre sector, the old system of district and private theatres continued until 1949. In 1948, the year before theatres were nationalised, there were 27 county theatre districts in the country, and the theatres in the capital.⁷ Minister of Finance, István Kossa, presented the case for the nationalisation of theatres in the capital city on 19 July 1949. It was approved by Ernő Gerő, President of the People’s Economic Council on 21 July.⁸

⁵ BALOGH Sándor, IZSÁK Lajos, *Pártok és pártprogramok Magyarországon (1944–1948)* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1977), 214–215.

⁶ BALOGH, IZSÁK *Pártok és pártprogramok...*, 339.

⁷ Decision No. 101/6/1949. of the People’s Economic Council.

⁸ István Kossa’s proposal on the nationalization of the capital’s theatres. MNL OL XIX-A-10-53-1949. Reprinted in DANCS Istvánné, ed., *A Vallás- és Közoktatásügyi Minisztérium színházi iratai 1946–1949*, (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 1990), 194–207.

In August 1949, the People’s Economic Council decided to take the rural theatres under state management, following a proposal by Minister Gyula Ortutay on 20 July 1949. The decision was justified by “political, economic, and personal considerations”, since until then “the programming policy of the rural theatres had been governed by the profit motives of private businessmen”. Their programmes thus predominantly included politically – and often morally – objectionable plays. Another reason given was that rural towns are not able to employ and support a large company on their own throughout the year. They have to cover a larger area, and each company has to be able to play in several towns. That way they won’t be forced to run new shows every 2-3 days without rehearsal, and present many bad plays in bad productions. We need few but good companies that put on good plays with many rehearsals and good performances. Therefore, instead of the previous 25 rural companies, 6 district theatre companies, one miner- and one opera-company were set up. In addition to performances in the capital, these companies were required to give 40 to 50 country performances a month, within a 50-kilometre radius. Nationalisation did not completely abolish travelling theatre but revived it in its own form with the Rolling Opera (1948–1954) and the State Village Theatre, which from 1952 was known as the State Déryné Theatre. These theatres were intended to provide performances for localities outside the reach of state theatres, in community and cultural centres. State ownership stabilised the theatres economically, but also created a completely new operational and artistic structure, which remained fundamentally unchanged throughout the following decades.⁹

⁹ KOROSSY Zsuzsa, „Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében” in GAJDÓ Tamás, ed., *Színház és politika. Színháztörténeti tanulmányok, 1949–1989*. (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 65–69.

The ministerial supervision of theatre life was transferred to the newly established Ministry of Culture and remained in its hands until 1957. The College of the ministry did not primarily take a position on artistic issues, but sought to align the operation of theatres with general cultural policy principles. For example, it determined the profile of the theatres, made decisions on economic and personnel matters, dealt with audience organisation and theatre criticism, and approved the work plan of the ministry's Theatre Department. The Theatre Department coordinated theatre life and was responsible for implementing the College's decisions.

Party leadership at the highest level was exercised by the relevant departments and committees of the MDP. The Agitation and Propaganda Committee played the most important role in the formulation of ideological standards. The intertwining of the party and state structures is illustrated by the person of József Révai, the Minister of National Education, who held several important posts at once, and was the head of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee at the same time as his ministerial post (1949–1953). It was him who personally managed the affairs of artistic life. Révai's aim was to translate the Soviet cultural policy associated with Zhdanov's name – socialist realism – into Hungarian practice.¹⁰ He was responsible for the creation of centralised theatre management, and for ensuring the political and intellectual message and quality of theatre performances. The basis for this was the artistic depiction of the everyday heroism of the people living under socialism, in a simple and comprehensible way for everyone.¹¹

After the nationalisation of theatres, political decision-makers intended to use them

to spread their ideology, and thus sought to tighten their control of them, strictly defining the nature, message, number, and target audience of the plays they could produce. The aim was to ensure that the plays preferred by politicians reached as large a proportion of society as possible. After 1949, one of the main objectives of the theatres' programming policy was to present as many new Hungarian plays dealing with contemporary problems as possible. A considerable number of the new shows produced were rather didactic pieces dealing with the transformation of agriculture and industrialisation, presenting a model of reality constructed according to communist ideology. The ideology demanded by the authorities also dictated that the plays should have a positive hero at their centre. The hero is a mythical embodiment of all that the individual cannot become, compensating for the individual's sacrifices.¹²

The toolbox of propaganda

The seemingly often absurd propaganda carried out by authoritarian regimes is not only designed to persuade the public, but also to lay down a form of acceptable public discourse that inhibits alternative ways of speaking and accustoms citizens to correct behaviour and communication.

A person who uses propaganda tools is trying to encourage others to accept his claims without questioning and to act as he wants them to. One of their most important tools is therefore suggestion (coercive influence), the process of inducing the public to accept a statement, even if there is no logical basis for doing so. The idea of suggestion is to use simple and known registers, to be clearly understood and to make positive statements, preferably in response to people's known desires, so that the reader does

¹⁰ Andrej Alekszandrovics ZSDANOV, *A művészet és filozófia kérdéseiről* (Budapest: Szikra Könyvkiadó, 1949).

¹¹ KOROSSY, „Színházirányítás...”, 66; BOLVÁRI-TAKÁCS Gábor, *A művészetpolitika mechanizmusai* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2020), 10.

¹² Jacques ELLUL, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 248.

not even think that there is another, possibly more positive, side to the issues. A more subtle form of suggestion uses innuendo, indirect statements.¹³

Propaganda texts often use terms such as “justice”, “law and order”, or “peace” to create favourable attitudes in the reader and thus prepare a good background for the message they want to convey, but they may also use words like “radical” or “war” to encourage readers to reject a cause or idea that they consider contrary to their own interests.

Other main features of propaganda are simplicity, the selection of information, the frequent repetition of the content to be conveyed, and the use of metaphors to facilitate the transmission of information and mobilise the masses, if possible by inducing them to act without thinking. In political communication, especially in dictatorships, the choice of metaphor is important: themes complete with metaphors help keep the issues the power considers important on top of the agenda. The most common metaphors used in propaganda texts are related to the words “body”, “life”, “death”, and “war”.¹⁴

In totalitarian regimes, propaganda is of paramount importance, because the more violence is inflicted upon society, the greater the need for ideological justification. To this end, political propaganda uses all the means at its disposal.¹⁵ One of the aims of propaganda is to arouse suspicion and doubt about the (supposed) enemy, since its story is based on the idea of “us versus them”. The

¹³ PÉTER Mihály, *A leplező nyelv. Álcázás és ámítás a nyelv használatában* (Budapest, Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2012), 108–113; Klaus KRIPPENDORF, *A tartalomelemzés módszertanának alapjai*, (Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 1995), 17–18; KÖVECSES Zoltán: *A metafora* (Budapest: Tipotex Kiadó, 2005), 19–29.

¹⁴ JOBST Ágnes, „A HARC metafora szerepe az '50-es évek politikai köznyelvében”, *Magyar Nyelvőr* 133, No. 4. (2009): 233–446.

¹⁵ ELLUL, *Propaganda...*, 9.

inclusive “us”, defined in opposition to the hated “them” is a powerful cohesive force.¹⁶

On the one hand, the language of propaganda is simple and ordinary, easily understood by the members of the addressed group while using words with vague meanings that “evoke powerful and indefinite images, and it is this very vagueness that envelops them that increases their mysterious power.”¹⁷ Political propaganda also often operates with complex, multi-meaning expressions whose meaning can only be determined in a specific context, or uses symbols whose meaning creates a sense of belonging to a community.¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of totalitarianism, observes that “the real aim of totalitarian propaganda is not to persuade but to organise [...] The masses are not persuaded by these facts, not even by invented facts, but only by the consistency of the system of which they are a part.”¹⁹

Next, I will examine the propaganda tools that can be identified in the theatre-related reports, i.e. the ways in which the Rákosi-era used theatre as a medium to spread its ideology. To do this, I used the system developed by the American Propaganda Analysis Institute in 1937, used to study propaganda ever since. This grouped propaganda tools as follows:

- Name-Calling: Giving an idea a bad label to reject it without examining the evidence.

¹⁶ PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 108.

¹⁷ Gustav LE BON, *A tömegek lélektana*, trans. by DR. BALLA Antal, (Franklin Társulat, Budapest, 1920). Cited in PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 107.

¹⁸ Edward SAPIR, „Beszéd és személyiség”, in SAPIR, *Az ember és a nyelv* (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1971), 141. Cited in PÉTER, *A leplező...*, 111.

¹⁹ Hannah ARENDT, *A totalitarizmus gyökerei* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1992), 273, 268.

- Glittering Generality: Vague term that evokes positive emotions (“freedom”, “security”, “well-being”)
- Transfer: Transmitting the authority of positive symbols.
- Testimonial: Consists of having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program, product, or person is good or bad.
- Plain Folks: Putting the claim in the mouths of ordinary people, associating it with them (“of the people,” “plain folks.”)
- Card Stacking: Involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person, or product.
- Bandwagon: Everybody thinks a certain way, if you don't, you are left out, you don't belong to the community (“everybody—at least all of us—is doing it!”)
- Either-or: turning the debate into a bipolar one.²⁰

Writing on theatre in the propaganda press

The theatre-related writings of *Művelt Nép* can be divided into two broad categories for the purpose of analysis. The first group includes the articles that attempted to evaluate the programming policy of the official theatres, while the second group includes those that dealt with theatres for workers or theatres in factories.

The articles in the first group cover two major themes, one being the question of audience organisation and the other the propagation and promotion of the production of plays with the appropriate ideological content by theatres. The task of organising theatre audiences was primarily the responsibility

of mass organisations, mainly because workers living predominantly in the suburbs did not necessarily go to the theatres in the city centre to buy tickets. The actions devised to solve this problem, such as taking tickets to the factories, were not only supposed to help but also to exert pressure, requiring workers to buy tickets.

Audience organisation served two propaganda purposes: on the one hand, it helped to drive workers to the theatre and spend their leisure time in a controlled way, and on the other hand, newspaper reports about audience organisation supported ideological goals, i.e. the party state gives workers the opportunity to be cultured, it gives them a cultural outlet, it gives them opportunities that were not available to them before. In the auditorium, through ideological and didactic plays, the workers in the auditorium would be then given a precise idea of how they should behave in everyday life, and what the norms were. The majority of the plays presented were extremely simplistic so that the message could be understood by all spectators without giving it much thought.

However, in many cases, the organisers themselves – called cultural workers to bring them closer to the audience by making them a part of the “we” of workers – did not know the plays to which they were supposed to draw the attention of others. As a result, organising audiences often meant little more than delivering tickets to the factories. The press of the time still portrayed audience organisation as a success story, citing the fact that the number of theatre-goers was on the rise throughout the period (compared to 3,435,579 in 1951, 5,531,638 in 1955, 44.7% of which were sold through the publicity agencies).²¹

In the writings, “good” cultural workers are said to be skilled and reliable on which performances to attend. In listing the fail-

²⁰ Victoria O’ DONNEL, Garth S. JOWETT, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1992), 237.

²¹ TARÓDI-NAGY Béla, ed., *Magyar színházi adatok 1. Színpad és közönség* (Budapest: Színháztudományi Intézet, 1962), 53.

ures, we find panels: if audience management fails, it is partly the result of the theatres' poor programming policies: "The inappropriate programming policies of our theatres, which are out of touch with public opinion, also cause many difficulties. Even the best factory public relations manager cannot persuade his most enthusiastic theatre-loving workmate to see three Hungarian plays on the same theme at the same time."²² It was also described as partly the fault of the press, which writes about plays at the wrong time (i.e. too late) and with inappropriate content:

"There is little information in advance and, apart from the usual reviews, the performance of an actor or a new young artist is rarely remembered. Many working publicists have experienced the damaging, almost irreparable effect of criticism that is not benignly critical but demoralising, not only on the author but also on the audience!"²³

Professional acting

The columns of *Művelt Nép* mostly reported on the travelling performances of professional theatres, and much less on a single performance in a permanent theatre. Behind this, one can easily see the intention of showing actors meeting ordinary workers directly, to bring the theatre closer to them. Most of the plays known to us are either by Soviet or "people's democratic authors", or new Hungarian dramas, the most common being miners' plays. The descriptions of the performances paint an idealistic picture for the reader: the actors go off to the country for a performance, sing merrily, and return home even more joyful because of the satisfaction they feel at the work they have done. The audience is, of course, always very en-

²² PONGRÁCZ Zsuzsa, „Jegyeladás vagy közönségszervezés?“, *Művelt Nép* 6, No. 22. (1955): 3.

²³ PONGRÁCZ, „Jegyeladás...“, 3.

thusiastic, with many more people showing up than expected, all clapping loudly, welcoming the actors with love, often inviting them into their homes or treating them to homemade food and drink, as if they were family. Almost all the media report that there are plenty of bright-eyed children in the audience, alongside the workers.²⁴

All these images served to create a sense of community in the reader. They brought the artists closer to ordinary working people so that the messages of the pieces were not conveyed by a distant "other" but by "someone like us". The articles used a number of well-established propaganda tools at the same time, and references to ordinary people are accordingly frequent: "The performance has already started, the 'Closed' sign hangs above the box office. A farmhand with a serious moustache and boots is still busily shaking the window of the glass case."²⁵

The descriptions of audience reactions, which read like a children's theatre performance where the public even shouts into the performance, are crucial. Again, the point was to make the message simply accessible and approachable, both to the audience and to potential readers. It suggested that one does not need to be educated to go to the theatre, because it is about ordinary life, and it also told prospective theatre-goers when to rejoice and when to shed a tear at the performance. Because, to use a popular propaganda device: "I can make no exceptions, but the whole company will help the miners' fight, the coal battle, with all its heart and soul."²⁶

The expectation of the authorities was that the spectators would see on the stage an artificially created world, which the party had deemed ideal. After all, socialist-realist

²⁴ ZOLNAY Miklós, „A »Csillagtárna« Királdon“, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 2. (1951): 27–28, 27.

²⁵ FÖLDÉNYI Ervin, „Az üzemi és városi kultúrverseny bemutatói Győrött“, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 5. (1951): 13–14, 13.

²⁶ ZOLNAY, „A »Csillagtárna«...“, 27–28.

theatre, following in the footsteps of Gorky, had to follow the same principles as Soviet theatre: to present works that dealt with issues that were understandable and important to the workers; that were set in the same places as the workers' everyday lives; that represented reality; and, last but not least, that expressed the goals of the party. The message of the plays was to be simple: you have to notice your mistakes, exercise self-criticism, correct yourself, and struggle to achieve the best possible results in the working world.²⁷

One of the major problems of the period was the lack of plays with appropriate content. That is why the press gave a prominent role to the presentation of ones adapted to the expectations, which were usually didactic performances inspired by the life of the producers' cooperatives, mining or factories, written by Hungarian, Soviet, or "people's democratic authors". Two plays by the Romanian author Michail Davidoglu, *Miners* and *Iron and Steel* fit into this series. The first premiered on 13 April 1950 at the Hungarian Theatre, directed by Zoltán Várkonyi, and the second on 15 April 1952 at the Szeged National Theatre, directed by Albert Szilágyi. The importance of these two premieres is well illustrated by the fact that, in addition to the professional press, they were also reported in the official daily newspaper of the MDP, *Szabad Nép*. The reviews of *Miners* essentially include all the propaganda tools: we can read about the victorious struggle of Stakhanovist workers against reaction, the successful unmasking of the enemy, the development of the character of the socialist

²⁷ Makszim GORKIJ, „A szovjet írók I. Összszövetségi Kongresszusa”, in *Irodalmi tanulmányok*, 388–429 (Budapest: Szikra Lap- és Könyvkiadó, 1950). Cited in LEPOSA Balázs, „Martinászok polgári köntösben. A magyar termelési dráma Mándi Éva *Hétköznapi hős* című műve alapján”, *Theatron* 14, No. 3. (2020): 71–77, 71.

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man, the difficulties of the miners' life, which they then overcome through heroic work. The play was considered so important that the first act of the three-act play was published in the *Művelt Nép* as a stand-alone piece, especially for workers' theatre groups, and it was reported that several such companies did successfully perform it.²⁸

Art groups – company/workers' theatre

Two-thirds of the theatrical writings in *Művelt Nép* dealt with the issue of factory or workers' theatre, which it described as the most popular art form of the mass cultural movement (with thousands of occasional or permanent theatre groups) and as such playing an important role in the political and cultural education of the working masses.²⁹

The dictatorial political authorities were quick to recognise the potential of workers' theatre, which had its roots in the 19th century. Workers' art groups provided controlled leisure time, and the content of the performances offered an excellent opportunity to convey the ideology of the party. In this way, propaganda texts were made gleefully accessible to the workers, making up for any shortcomings in their reading skills or their lack of familiarity with ideological messages. As worker-actors, they were able to internalise information more easily than if they had read or listened to it.

²⁸ N.N., „Román drámát mutat be a Magyar Színház”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 8., 6; MOLNÁR Miklós, „Bányászok. Mihail Davidoglu színművének bemutatója a Magyar Színházban”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 18, 6; N.N., „Beszélgetés Mihail Davidogluval, a »Bányászok« írójával”, *Szabad Nép*, 1950. ápr. 16., 4; VÁRKONYI Zoltán, „Vas és acél. A Szegedi Nemzeti Színház bemutatója”, *Szabad Nép*, 1952. jún. 12., 6.

²⁹ ESZTERÁG Albert, „Az egyfelvonásos. A legnépszerűbb drámai műfaj problémái”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 8.

"I have studied this character carefully,' says the young man seriously, 'Pável is a loud-mouthed, pretentious man who does his work superficially and lives only for his own pleasure. He is detached from the workers, he directs from above, and when he is forced to admit that the mine is lagging behind, he looks for the fault not in himself but in others... I must admit that the fourth act is the most difficult for me because I want to show honestly and authentically what a useful worker the community will make of this pretentious character.'"³⁰

Cultural competitions were regularly organised for students of workers' theatres, not only significant for giving them an opportunity to present their plays to a wider audience, but also to receive detailed ideological evaluations in the press. Such was the propaganda importance attached to these cultural competitions that one can read reports of them in almost every issue of *Művelt Nép*. Readers of the paper could learn that the workers in all of the country's major factories, and even in the most remote and smallest mining villages were undergoing a huge development of character through the study of the characters they were playing, which contributed to better work performance. Thus, the most diligent factory actors almost certainly became the best workers: "The real juxtaposition of production and culture is a guest performance, which inspires all of them, the workers of the village and the theatre, to work even harder and achieve even greater results".³¹

³⁰ NAGY Piroska, „Úgy kell nekünk a művészet, mint lenn a bányában a fény”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 1. (1950): 15–16, 16.

³¹ LÁSZLÓ Anikó, „A Pécsi Nemzeti Színház vendéjjátékai”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 31.

One-act plays

While in official theatres there were opportunities for classical plays that had passed through the filter of censorship to be presented under a “new guise”, in factory theatres it was preferred that groups performed one-act plays or even scenes from everyday life. The necessary one-act plays were regularly put out to tender, and financial incentives were offered to both playwrights and workers themselves. *Művelt Nép* also relayed what a good one-act play was like.

“A play achieves its effect, however, if its author draws his message from life and his characters are living figures [...] Characters also develop in one-act plays, but there is not as much time to portray this development as in plays that take up the whole evening. It is therefore necessary to present a stage in the development of the characters in which it is possible to refer to their past and to indicate the direction of their development. It is, therefore, necessary for the author of a one-act play to create, in a short space of time, a situation on the stage which, despite the conclusion of the play's plot, clearly determines the further development of the hero's character [...] A one-act play, like other literary works, must depict our people's struggle for peace, for the building of socialism, and show the difficulties and triumphs of this struggle. However, it can only do this if it draws its themes from life, and thus responds to the problems that the spectators of the plays face in their daily work and private lives.”³²

The point, then, is to portray the development of character, embedded in simple everyday situations through which the worker-actor and the spectator can easily internalise

³² ESZTERÁG, „Az egyfelvonásos...”, 8.

the ideology of the party. And to further emphasise the importance of workers' theatre, the text could not fail to mention the struggle for wages and for the construction of socialism, which, according to the propaganda, should be the fundamental task of all workers.

The legitimising role of professional artists

Professional and working-class theatre, however, was not and could not be separated. Workers could thus meet actors not only in stone theatres or in country performances, but also in the context of factory theatre.

The theatres were not only given the task of organising country performances, but also patronising factory theatre groups. "Many of them travelled down to the villages, including Beremend, Pécsbányatelep, and Vasas. György Váradi, the director of the theatre, rehearsed daily with the actors of the Pécs Industrial Training School. All the patronised groups from the factories made it to the county and city shows. This successful work went hand in hand with the search for new, popular talent."³³

Behind the news reports on the relationship between professional artists and factory theatre, we can also discover a kind of legitimisation, for what better way to show the value of the work of a theatre group than to have the real, great artists take an interest in it, take time not only to watch the performances but also to work with the actors-turned-workers. In the columns of the *Művelt Nép* we can read several times about the rise of poor working-class youths in this way, which is almost like a folk tale.

"József Szalai was brought to my attention by the director of the National Theatre. 'We asked him if he would like to enrol at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. He has not yet given an answer.' I am talking to József Szalai, the mod-

est, smiling nineteen-year-old miner's son, in the park of the culture house, under the blossoming trees. 'I was the youngest of his six children' he says. 'At the age of nine, I was already earning my bread...'"³⁴

But the role of the actors was not only to legitimise factory theatre or the new Hungarian dramas. In the columns of the *Művelt Nép* it is not uncommon to combine the description of a major state project, such as the construction of Stalin's City, with a description of a visit to the National Theatre, thus proclaiming that the party was not only building a new city and providing jobs for the workers, but also bringing the most popular artists of the premier theatre to perform there.³⁵

Summary

The propaganda literature of the period was characterised by the predominant use of words expressing positive emotions ("peace", "freedom", "development", "love", "care"), which inherently conveyed conviction and did not require justification, but also by the constant expressions of force through various military terms ("fight", "combat", "mobilise", "front", "enemy") being recurring elements of the texts. Another characteristic was the bipolarisation of the argument (creating a sense of "we" vis-à-vis the enemy), and the consistent association of what the discourse of power perceived as a negative phenomenon with a specific negative term. In this system, the role of art was to support the need for political change and to convey optimism and progress. The texts are predominantly calls to action ("worker competition", "struggle for peace"), which is reflected in the frequent use of imperative verbs,

³⁴ RÁKOS Sándor, „Kultúrmunkások”, *Művelt Nép* 2, No. 6. (1951): 12.

³⁵ CSANÁDI Imre, „Új város születik, új ember formálódik”, *Művelt Nép* 1, No. 9. (1950): 6–7.

³³ LÁSZLÓ, „A Pécsi Nemzeti...”, 31.

while the frequent use of superlative adjectives indicates self-confidence, which helps to underline the importance of the political message and the unquestionability of the expectations conveyed by the system.

Among the various propaganda devices, the use of “glittering generalisations” was common, using highly valued concepts and beliefs to induce a general and unjustified acceptance of the phenomena associated with them, thus manipulating the reader’s engagement with the content of the text. In addition, the obfuscation of evidence, or erroneous conclusions based on incomplete evidence, justifies certain data and cases, while ignoring contradictory data. The texts also frequently used “either/or” structures where the negatives of the former bourgeois world were contrasted with the positive realities of the present. Another popular device was phrasing propaganda texts as the thoughts of ordinary workers. The texts were defined by templates and stereotypes that encouraged the recipients to act without thinking.

The propaganda language of the Rákosi-era was extremely militant, as Ágnes Jobst pointed out in her analysis, one of the central metaphors being “struggle”, which was transferred in the texts in a very creative way to any ordinary theme.³⁶ The ideologues and political decision-makers of the period made excellent use of the phenomenon that, in a total dictatorship, artistic works always carry a political message and convey values. In this way, the theatre was used as a tool of propaganda to influence people’s thinking, emotions, and behaviour.

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³⁶ JOBST, „Harc...”, 444.

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