

Chapters from the history of the Hungarian Playwrights' Union: The Hungarian Playwrights' Association from its conception until its foundation (1898–1904)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The Hungarian Playwrights' Association was founded on 7 January, 1904, with the aim of providing moral and financial protection to theatre authors and the developing Hungarian stage. In its first incarnation it lasted until March 1919, and was subsequently re-established in December 1920. Like so many associations at that time, the Association was dissolved by ministerial decree on 8 December, 1950. The legal situation of playwrights at the time, along with the lack of adequate representation of their interests, prompted the Hungarian cultural sector to protect their rights by setting up an appropriate body of self-representation, following the examples of foreign countries. The association is of great importance in the history of the self-organisation and interest representation of Hungarian artists, as it was the first such independent Hungarian representative body.

KEYWORDS

Hungarian Playwrights' Association, theatre authors, copyright law, interest representation organisation

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The present article is a revised section of my thesis reconstructing the history of the Hungarian Playwrights' Association, which was a special prize-winning entry in the copyright category of the János Ujvári diploma competition (academic year 2020/2021) announced by the National Intellectual Property Office.

The Hungarian Playwrights' Association was founded on 7 January, 1904, with the aim of providing moral and financial protection to theatre authors and the developing Hungarian stage. In its first incarnation it lasted until March 1919, and was subsequently re-established in December 1920. Like so many associations at that time, the Association was dissolved by ministerial decree on 8 December, 1950. The legal situation of theatre authors at the time and the lack of adequate representation of their interests prompted the Hungarian cultural sector to protect their rights by setting up an appropriate body of self-representation, following the examples existing in foreign countries. The association is of great importance in the history of the self-organisation and interest representation of Hungarian artists, as it was the first such independent organisation in Hungary. This was pointed out by cultural historian Eleonóra Erzsébet Géra writing about the history of the Hungarian association of composers and music publishers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "The creation of a united domestic association of music composers and publishers, however, needed another decade, thus in Hungary the first independent domestic interest protection organisation was founded by playwrights in January 1904."¹ However, the work presenting the history of the establishment and operation of the Hungarian Playwrights' Association is still to be written, so this article is part of that project: I will look at the path and circumstances leading up to the formation of the association, using archival collections and contemporary press material.

CULTURAL CONTEXT – A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE THEATRICAL-LITERARY SCENE

After the Compromise of 1867,² the problems of theatre companies were far from resolved, conditions for actors still needed improving. It was primarily left to theatrical society to find solutions, as well as to organise adequate protection and promotion for their interests. At that time, theatre affairs were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Royal Hungarian Ministry of the Interior, and were to remain there until 1907. In addition, a system of theatre districts was established, which remained in effect from October 1879 until 1949.³ In essence, Budapest became one of the leading cities of European theatre culture after its civic unification in 1873. New state initiatives were launched, and numerous private theatre enterprises were set up in the capital as well as in the large rural cities.⁴ New theatrical forms, new types and genres

¹Géra, Eleonóra Erzsébet (2007): Magyar Szövegírók, Zeneszerzők és Zeneműkiadók Szövetkezete 1907–1952 / The Cooperative of Hungarian Lyricists, Composers and Music Publishers 1907–1952. In: Géra, Eleonóra Erzsébet – Csatári, Bence *From the Composers' Cooperative to the Artisjus Association 1907–2007*. Budapest: Artisjus. 135–256.

²See e.g. Solyom-Fekete, William (1967): The Hungarian Constitutional Compact of 1867. *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*. Vol. 24 No 4, 286–308.

³Kerényi, Ferenc (2001): Színháztörténet / History of the Theatre (1867–1920). In: *Kettős kötődés. Az Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia (1867–1918)*. Budapest: Enciklopédia Humana Association.

⁴On the changes in the Hungarian theatre structure, including the state theatres (National Theatre, Royal Hungarian Opera House) and the new theatre enterprises (People's Theatre, Comedy Theatre / Vígszínház, Hungarian Theatre, etc.) see György Székely, editor-in-chief (2001): *Magyar Színháztörténet 1873–1920*. Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub – Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet.



of plays emerged, including Hungarian folk theatre and operetta.⁵ The institutions that introduced the latest Hungarian popular theatre works into their repertoires – the National Theatre being among the first, as well as several others – played a prominent role in the spread and consolidation of Hungarian language theatre and the broader movement of nation-building. At that time, the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház) and the People's Theatre (Népszínház) in Pest worked out an agreement to share theatrical works of various genres, and in 1879 they signed an 8-point contract. Thus, for folk theatre, there were two new theatrical enterprises, the Buda People's Theatre (Budai Népszínház) (1861–1864, 1867–1870) and the Pest People's Theatre (1875). But the Compromise also brought about many changes in the field of music culture, and Hungary became integrated into the European musical bloodstream.⁶ For example, the Opera House was built (1884 – Royal Hungarian Opera House), higher music education was established (1875 – National Royal Hungarian Academy of Music), and a vibrant concert life and music culture characterised this period. In addition to theatre and literary culture and musical life, it is also worth mentioning what would today be called media culture, or the concept and phenomenon of mass culture, understood as media culture, of which these areas in fact form a part. We can speak of the initial emergence of the logic of mass culture, especially in the period following the Compromise.⁷ Among other things, the late 1890s saw the beginnings of Hungarian silent film. During the 1880s the press emerged as a business enterprise, including small-scale tabloid products. However, the questions how and to whom this value system was conveyed by the language and whether mass cultural practices based on various spectacles could develop in a given city are of great importance. This flourishing theatrical, literary and musical life led – somewhat simplistically put – to an increasing number of theatrical authors, including writers, composers and translators, being active in Hungary as a result of increased demand and broader opportunities. However, first it was necessary to create legal regulations, i.e. an appropriate framework for the protection of intellectual property which would safeguard authors from the theatres and theatre entrepreneurs who sometimes exploited them financially and morally, and also protect them from each other (for example in the case of multi-author works). Unfortunately,

⁵Bozó, Péter (2013): *Operett Magyarországon / Operetta in Hungary (1859–1960)*.

<http://real.mtak.hu/8667/1/Operett%20Magyarorsz%C3%A1gon.pdf> (Retrieved: 5 October 2021.); On the Monarchy's folk theatre and operetta repertoire, see the music historian András Batta's very readable work of 1992, Batta, András (1992): *Álom, álom, édes álom... Népszínművek, operettek az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchiában / Folk theatre and operetta in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy*. Budapest: Corvina; The Cultural Role of the Vienna-Hungarian Operetta are written of by Péter Hanák. Hanák, Péter (1998): *The Cultural Role of the Vienna-Budapest Operetta*. In: *The Garden and the Workshop*. Princeton – New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 135–146.; On the beginnings of Viennese-Hungarian operetta, see Richard Traubner (2003): *A Theatrical History (Revised Edition)*. New York – London: Routledge.

⁶Gombos, László (2001): *Zenei élet a kiegyezés után / Musical Life after the Compromise (1867–1900)*. In: *Kettős kötődés. Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia (1867–1918)*. Enciklopédia Humana Egyesület, Budapest.

⁷Kálai, Sándor (2016): *A magyar (kelet-európai) médiakultúra első szakasza / The first phase of Hungarian (Eastern European) media culture (1840–1920)*. In: Kálai, Sándor, ed. *Médiakultúra Közép-Kelet-Európában*. Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület. 31–32.



the latter was a recurring problem for some authors. This decades-long uncertainty over copyright law led to the emergence of the movement to protect authors' interests in the late 1890s, which in turn led to the idea of organising actions aimed to protect their interests.

THE FIRST STEPS IN INTEREST REPRESENTATION – *THE IDEA*

In 1898, the *Budapest Journal* was the first press organ to report on the formation of the interest representation group, which it referred to in its article published on 25 February, 1898. "It was the *Budapest Napló* that mentioned the idea of an association for Hungarian stage authors. The first step in this matter, which is important from both a literary and a theatrical point of view, has now been taken, and hopefully the Hungarian Playwrights' Association will finally be formed."⁸ The paper was clear that the association could be set up in the year in question. Such was the activity of the authors that a meeting of writers, composers, translators and other stage authors was convened in the writers' and journalists' circle *Otthon*, and the newspaper also published an invitation to the meeting, thus helping to give greater publicity to the subject of the legal situation of domestic authors and the new initiative.⁹ The Sunday referred to in the article was 28th February, and a report of the meeting was published in the same newspaper on the same day.¹⁰ The event was attended by a large number of interested stage authors, where "József Márkus presented the goals of the association, and a six-member committee was sent out to draft the statutes under the chairmanship of Árpád Berczik, and whose members were József Márkus, Emil Szalai, Antal Radó, Viktor Rákosi and Jenő Heltai."¹¹ Among the members of the committee were prominent figures of the Hungarian stage and literature. Árpád Berczik (1842–1919) – who had successfully begun to re-organise the movement in 1903 and by 1904 achieved the goal with several of his colleagues – was a novelist and playwright with a law degree. From 1887 onwards he acted as a ministerial adviser, and from 1873 was also a member of the Kisfaludy Society.¹² Dr. Emil Szalai (1874–1944) was the member of the committee who dealt specifically with copyright, was involved in the preparation of the Copyright Act and was legal adviser to the Hungarian Playwrights' Association, the Budapest Theatre Directors' Federation and the Philharmonic Society.¹³ Antal Radó (1862–1944) worked as a poet and translator, and in 1891 he was one of the founders of the Writers' and Journalists' Circle *Otthon* mentioned earlier. He helped to promote the idea of *Otthon* by organising 'rooms' (club

⁸Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 56 (25 February 1898) 8.

⁹Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 56 (25 February 1898) 8.

¹⁰Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 59 (28 February 1898) 6.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Kenyeres, Ágnes, editor-in-chief (1967). „Berczik Árpád”. In: *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon / Hungarian Biographical Dictionary*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 185–186.

¹³Kenyeres, Ágnes, editor-in-chief (1994): *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon / Hungarian Biographical Dictionary*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.



rooms). Viktor Rákosi (1860–1923)¹⁴ was a writer and journalist who was also a member of the Kisfaludy Society and the Petőfi Society. Jenő Heltai (1871–1957) lawyer, writer, journalist and theatre director¹⁵ was a key leader of the Hungarian Playwrights' Association and was active in other advocacy organisations such as the Hungarian Lyricists, Composers and Music Publishers' Cooperative (MARS).¹⁶ At this meeting, the committee looked towards future goals and was asked to obtain the statutes of the English, French and German authors' associations and to draw up their Hungarian counterpart on the basis of these.¹⁷ Finally, the participants set the date for the next meeting: "The constituent general assembly shall be convened to meet on 27 March."¹⁸ However, a source revealed on 22 April that the March inaugural general assembly had not materialised, it seemed that at the meeting in question the formation was only referred to as a plan. At the same time, in March, other media outlets reported the same information, pointing out that the decision had been taken on the basis of a foreign example.

Unfortunately, the momentum towards the organisation and development of the movement slowed down, the situation of the authors did not improve, and new problems became obvious before the wider public. The unfair remuneration of stage authors – especially playwrights – at the National Theatre became the subject of a series of articles in the periodical *Magyar Újság* in 1898, on 14 June and 21 June, and again on 27 September, by an author going under the nom de plume *Ripp*. In these articles the association appeared in a negative context. In the first article, the author mentioned the association in order to draw attention to the declining literary and aesthetic quality of the works. He did not, however, attribute this fault to the writers, but described the situation as a consequence of the theatre's financing structure, "We do not think the fault lies with the authors, but very much with the theatres and primarily the National Theatre. This is not the first time that we have spoken out about the financial appreciation that the country's premier art institution grants to its writers, nor is it the last."¹⁹ In other words, he was criticising the background of these recurring problems in the moral, financial and legal appreciation of writers. He contrasted actors' and writer' commissions as follows. "During this time actors pay has increased fivefold, the writers commission has remained unchanged and is still what it was before."²⁰ He also reflected on the transformation of the theatre structure, looking to the future with optimism, and was positive about the creation of the association, "If I am correctly informed, the Hungarian Playwrights' Association has been formed, which may

¹⁴Székely, György, editor-in-chief (1994).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶A few facts about the development of the Hungarian authors' interest protection are worth recording, as the Hungarian Writers, Composers and Music Publishers Cooperative (MARS) was founded during the first phase of the operation of the Hungarian Playwrights' Association and its inaugural meeting was held on 17 May, 1907. There is some overlap in the leadership of the two organisations.

¹⁷The situation of foreign authors' associations was also mentioned in the newspapers from time to time, and in April 1898, the *Budapest Napló* wrote about the German theatre authors' association and mentioned its Hungarian counterpart in this context. See German Authors' Association. *Budapesti Napló*. Vol. III No. 111 (22 April 1898) 8.

¹⁸Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 59 (28 February 1898) 6.

¹⁹A színházi hét / The theatre week. *Magyar Újság*. Vol. VII No. 163 (14 June 1898) 1.

²⁰Ibid.



be willing to act in its own interest, all the more so as it is also in the interest of the theatres. Make playwriting worthwhile for those who can write plays.”²¹ In the continuation of the article, published on 21 June, we read about the association in a different context, I mentioned last time that the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association (which I heard existed, but now I see it does not) might do something to look after its own interests: after the dazzling performance of the National Theatre, I really wouldn’t dare renew that hasty proposal. The Hungarian Playwrights’ Association should do what it has been doing thus far: nothing”²² His statements referred to the difficult and protracted formation of the association and the fact that any representation of interests was not yet actually effective; he was also pointing to the inaction of the (prospective) members of the association. Then, in an article on 22 September, the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association came up again, with *Ripp* asking members if they were going to organise and resolve this pressing issue of Hungarian writers first. “[...] Start work by forcing more appreciation for the work of Hungarian authors. Topple the spirit of bartering which rules the theatres regarding this question and break the apathy of the media. Make it worthwhile for writers to write plays. It is not just a question of money [...]”²³

However, the repeatedly mentioned inaugural general meeting of March 1898 did not achieve its goal, and the topic arose again in August 1898, for the first time in the *Budapest Nalpo*.²⁴ On 12 August 1898, the news was announced that the Hungarian Stage Playwrights’ Association would be founded in September.²⁵ In addition, Dr. Emil Szalai played a key role in both the preparations and the running of the association, “[...] the draft will in all probability be in the hands of the preparatory committee this month, and the inaugural general meeting was called immediately afterwards.”²⁶ A very detailed article was published in *Magyar Polgár* on 13th August, beginning with an outline of the background,²⁷ and it was also reported that the authors would soon submit the draft statutes to the Minister of the Interior. The article wrote of the tasks facing the organisation in the field of interest representation and its goals. The plan was firstly to protect the interests of stage writers and translators, as well as of theatre directors (especially in the case of foreign contracts), but it was also intended to extend this protection to stage authors who were granted rights under Hungarian and foreign contract law and contracts.²⁸

²¹A színházi hét / The theatre week. *Magyar Újság*. Vol. VII No. 163 (14 June 1898) 2.

²²A színházi hét / The theatre week. *Magyar Újság*. Vol. VII No. 170 (21 June 1898) 1.

²³A színházi hét / The theatre week. *Magyar Újság*. Vol. VII No. 268 (27 September 1898) 2.

²⁴Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 222 (12 August 1898) 8.

²⁵See also Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 248 (9 September 1898) 5.

²⁶Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 222 (12 August 1898) 8.

²⁷“The long-awaited association of Hungarian authors, whose preparatory committee was commissioned by an organizational meeting in April, will be formed in the near future.” Magyar szerzők egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Magyar Polgár*. Vol. XXI No. 115 (13 August 1898) 6.

²⁸*Ibid.*



A few weeks later, however, the Hungarian Playwrights' Association was still only mentioned in draft form, but the press were informed on 9th and 10th September that draft statutes would be printed in the foreseeable future; they would be distributed for study to authors wishing to join the association, and a preparatory committee would be convened.²⁹ The first to publish the draft statutes of the association, which Szalai had drawn up in 1898, was the *Magyar Újság*. "The association which is called upon to protect Hungarian authors, that is to say, all those who are entitled to rights under the Hungarian Copyright Act, and to safeguard them against innumerable abuses, will soon be formed."³⁰

The aims of the organisation were clearly focused on ensuring legal protection: "To protect Hungarian authors out of court on the basis of Hungarian copyright law and the international treaties in force, and to take measures and support measures for the judicial enforcement of copyright."³¹ In addition, they wanted to establish cultural institutions and "[...] to bring together into a moral body all those to whom the Hungarian copyright law grants protection and rights, to act in matters of interest to Hungarian authors individually and collectively, to encourage Hungarian authors to assert their rights as advantageously as possible, to provide moral and financial support for the exercise of these rights, and to advise authors in this respect."³² Another objective of this draft was to launch various movements for the development of Hungarian copyright.

The headquarters of the association and its structure and daily operation were naturally also mentioned in the 1898 draft, "For the achievement of these aims, the association shall organise an office, and shall see to its organisation and equipment in such a way that the members and Hungarian authors in general may use it to exercise, control and defend their rights; it shall maintain liaison with all those factors with which the interests of the members and Hungarian authors in general are connected."³³ The members of the future association were divided into three groups: honorary members, founders and guests.

The operation and running of the office would have been made possible primarily through membership fees, which were set at 8 crowns per year in the draft statutes (to be paid in advance by all authors every six months). In addition, the basis for the internal functioning of the organisation was laid down by Dr. Szalai – a board of directors elected by the general assembly – and then the composition of the acting officials, "[...] a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary-general, a secretary, a treasurer, an auditor, legal council, three account auditors, a librarian."³⁴ It was also planned that they would organise different committees according to the different needs of each field.³⁵ The nearest meeting was scheduled for 25 September,³⁶ and the plan was to start operations in November 1898.

²⁹Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 248 (9 September 1898) 5; (Hungarian Playwrights' Association). *Magyarország*. Vol. V No. 240 (No. 250) (10 September 1898) 11.

³⁰Magyar szerzők egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights' Association *Magyar Újság*. Vol. VII No. 263 (22 September 1898) 6.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵I will return to this in a study on the first phase of operation.

³⁶„Szerzők egyesülete...” / “Authors' Association...” *Pesti Hírlap*. Vol. XX No. 262 (22 September 1898) 7.



In an article of 22 September,³⁷ *Pesti Napló* reminded its readers of the precarious situation of Hungarian writers, and tried to paint a realistic picture of the Hungarian ‘literary industry’. “In our country, literature has always been a free industry, in the bosom of which honest writers have peacefully got along with the pirates of literary culture, and have always been exposed to the risk that the first upstart who came along would simply claim their work for himself.”³⁸

At that time, the rights of authors were protected by Act XVI of 1884³⁹, preceded by Act VIII of 1872 on Industrial Law;⁴⁰ Act XXXVII of 1875 on Commerce also covered this area, but codification efforts can be seen as early as 1837. In his 2004 study, Péter Mezei stressed that, prior to 1884, many plans focused only on writers, approaching copyright legislation from the point of view of the interests of writers.⁴¹ In fact, it had been far from a smooth path to the 1884 Act. Meanwhile, on the international scene, the first international treaty on the subject (the Berne Union Convention) was concluded in 1886, specifically to protect literary and artistic works.⁴²

However, it may help better to understand the situation of contemporary playwrights if we read it as it was expressed in the everyday wording of a journalist of the age: “If a starving man stole a bun, he was locked up, but if a man put a short story or a play [written by another] – the most ingenious work of a brilliant mind – on the literary market under his own banner, neither the lawyer nor the judge cared.”⁴³ The author went on to criticise Article XVI of the 1884 law, and he shared the view that the solution lay in the organisation of an association for the protection of writers’ interests. “We already have the authorship law, but now we can all clearly see that it does not sufficiently protect writers’ interests. Authors in foreign countries have long since realised that what the individual writer cannot do, a body formed by an elite of writers can easily accomplish.”⁴⁴ He looked forward to the moment such a group would be formed, and expressed his hope for the organisation of real advocacy when he spoke of the draft statutes. “Everything has a theoretical flavour at the moment, but we shall hopefully soon see what the merits of the association are in practice. The authors, after all, owe it to their own

³⁷Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Pesti Napló*. Vol. XLIX No. 262 (22 September 1898) 9.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Act XVI of 1884 on Copyright.

<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=88400016.TV&txtreferer=A0400002.TV> (Retrieved 29 December 2021)

⁴⁰For more information, see Attila Horváth (2016) :A szellemi alkotások jogának története, a szerzői jogi védelem alakulása, a jogalkotás kezdetei Magyarországon / The history of intellectual property law, the development of copyright protection and the beginnings of legislation in Hungary. *Iparjogvédelmi és Szerzői Jogi Szemle*. Vol. XI / Vol. CXXI No. 4, 93–123.

⁴¹“Like *Toldy* in his epoch-making writings, the *Kisfaludy Society*, when it drew up its first draft (1844), had only the literary class in mind.” Péter Mezei (2004): A szerzői jog története a törvényi szabályozásig (1884: XVI. tc.). *Jogelméleti Szemle* Vol. IV No. 3 <http://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/mezei19.html> (Retrieved 16 October 2021).

⁴²Mádl, Ferenc – Vékás, Lajos (2014): *Nemzetközi magánjog és nemzetközi gazdasági kapcsolatok joga / Private International Law and the Law of International Economic Relations*. Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.



talent to have their products valued at least as much as the machine workers and the bone latherers.”⁴⁵

“The members of the preparatory committee sent out to form the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association will, we are informed, meet next Sunday to deliberate on the printed draft statutes. The members of the preparatory committee are Árpád Berczik as president, József Márkus as vice-president, as well as Viktor Rákosi, György Butkai, Jenő Heltai and Dr. Emil Szalai.”⁴⁶ The subsequent meeting mentioned above, which took place in October, was referred to in an article in *Pesti Napló* on 2nd October 1898.⁴⁷ On the whole, the articles of 1898 were mostly positive, with the exception of the one by the correspondent *Ripp*. However, after the October 1898 report, the organisation of an authors’ self-interest group was taken off the agenda for a while, and at the end of January 1899, and especially in February, the association was still only discussed as an idea. At the same time, however, news of the period’s international copyright laws was constantly being published in the press.⁴⁸ And from time to time, the authors held meetings and various interested parties met to try to make progress in the matter.⁴⁹ The success of the idea was seen by the proponents primarily in the commitment of renowned stage authors, and this was obvious from an article in the *Budapest Napló* of 17 February 1899, “[...] those present at the meeting firstly established that it is precisely those who could do the most in the interests of bringing this idea to fruition who are the least interested; the famous authors of the Hungarian stage.”⁵⁰ Negotiations were held with music publishers – although we know that such an organisation could only really be realised outside the association in 1907, but the question had already been raised here, though it faced a lack of support – “the idea raised did not find much resonance”⁵¹ – and was rejected.

The lengthy process of founding the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association continued throughout 1899, when the association was again brought up in a specific case, the central issue being who actually owned the rights to a particular play, the National Theatre or the Comedy Theatre. The former had bought the rights from a theatre agency, while the latter had procured them from the author. The problem, which the playwrights also wanted to tackle by forming an association, was primarily related to the powers of the various theatre agencies: “In recent years, theatre literature has boomed in Hungary, with competing theatres driving up the price of plays, and only the theatre agencies, the intermediaries, have benefited from this. The time has finally come for Hungarian theatres to remove themselves from the agencies’ sphere of influence and

⁴⁵A Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete előkészítő bizottságának ülése / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association preparatory committee meeting. *Pesti Napló*. Vol. XLIX No. 262 (22 September 1898) 9.

⁴⁶Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. III No. 266 (27 September 1898) 8.

⁴⁷A Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete előkészítő bizottságának ülése / Meeting of the preparatory committee of the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Pesti Napló*. Vol. XLIX No. 272 (2 October 1898) 7.

⁴⁸A szerző és kiadó közti viszony / The relationship between author and publisher. *Corvina*, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (30 January 1899) 12, published in the translation of the *Emlékeztető szabályok / Reminding Rules* by Viktor Ranschburg. The relationship between author and publisher. *Corvina*, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (30 January 1899) 12–14.

⁴⁹Magyar szerzők és zeneműkiadók értekezlete / Meeting of Hungarian composers and music publishers. *Budapest Napló*. Vol. IV No. 48 (17 February 1899) 8–9.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*



enter into direct contact with the big foreign theatres and foreign authors.”⁵² The author believed that the association could provide an answer to this problem. “[...] The question of the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association is appropriate, and has had its inaugural meeting, yet even after a year and a half has yet to form. Our theatrical agencies, that is to say, the foreign agency branches, take advantage of this opportunity and acquire all Hungarian works at ridiculously low prices, believing that we cannot do without them.”⁵³

However, in 1899, no further news of any importance regarding such association appeared in the newspapers. In the years that followed, the formation of the association was neglected, the preparatory process of many years seemed to have come to a standstill, and all attempts, as we have seen, were fruitless. After a hiatus of a few years, the idea came to the fore again in June 1903, after which point events gathered momentum. This time, the movement was led by Árpád Berczik and Ferenc Herczeg,⁵⁴ who were effective advocates and able to carry out the earlier plans. Firstly the leading figures of Hungarian stage life were invited to personal meetings, “The meeting will take place tomorrow before noon in the Prime Ministerial Palace, in Árpád Berczik’s office.”⁵⁵ The said meeting took place on 16 June that year, and among other things, the authors discussed the theoretical and legal basis, set up a three-member committee whose members were Ferenc Herczeg, Dezső Malonyai and József Márkus tasked with drafting the (newer) statutes; the inaugural general assembly was scheduled for autumn; the honorary presidency was proposed (Mór Jókai and Jenő Rákosi), the members of the governing board (Árpád Berczik and Ferenc Herczeg) and the notary (Zoltán Bosnyák) were appointed.⁵⁶ If we look at the members of the press organs and the interests behind them, we can see that the daily newspaper *Budapesti Hírlap* played a prominent role in promoting the idea. As editor-in-chief, between 1881 and 1925 Jenő Rákosi,⁵⁷ one of the future honorary presidents, had succeeded in creating a political press independent of political parties,⁵⁸ and in the 1880s the *Budapesti Hírlap* was already a daily newspaper with a circulation of 18–20,000 copies.⁵⁹

⁵²Színházi ügynökségek / Theatre agencies. *Magyarország*. Vol. VI No. 267 (27 September 1899) 9.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Magyar drámaírók egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. VIII No. 161 (14 June 1903) 12., See also Magyar Színpadi Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Magyar Nemzet*. Vol. XXVI No. 132 (15 June 1903) 7.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Magyar Színpadi Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. VIII No. 163 (16 June 1903) 12; See also Magyar Színpadi Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Magyar Nemzet*. Vol. XXII No. 143 (17 June 1903) 9.

⁵⁷“Jenő Rákosi is a core staff member of the *Budapest Hírlap*. He launched the literary weekly *Új Idők* in December 1894 and was editor until 1944. In 1903 he was one of the founders of the newspaper *Az Újság* and remained one of its key contributors. In 1891 he became a member of the Petőfi Society, in 1893 of the Kisfaludy Society, from 1904 to 20 president of the Petőfi Society.” Kenyeres, Ágnes editor-in-chief (1994): *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

⁵⁸The following is known about Rákosi’s experience as a newspaper editor and the circumstances of the founding of the press organ in question: “Jenő Rákosi, with his newspaper *Reform* in 1870, set the goal he had pursued after almost ten years of journalistic activity, first with the *Pesti Hírlap* and then with the *Budapest Hírlap* in the 1880s: the creation of a political press independent of political parties. (In the meantime, he was director of the People’s Theatre, which he organised.)” Szabolcsi Miklós chief ed. (1985): *A magyar sajtó története II/2. 1867–1892*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 267.

⁵⁹Ibid. 352–353.



In July, the playwrights organising the association took the subsequent steps, invitations to join were sent out to the authors, but due to a shortage of data many authors did not receive notification of the possibility of joining. To make up for this, some ten or twelve notices were published in newspapers urging authors who wished to join to forward their details to Árpád Berczik.⁶⁰ By September, more than 80 authors wanted to join the initiative, “the chairmen of the preparatory committee, Árpád Berczik and Ferenc Herczeg, sent an appeal to Hungarian playwrights asking them whether they were willing to participate in the action, and nearly 80 Hungarian playwrights proclaimed their willingness to join the nascent Hungarian Authors’ Association.”⁶¹ The inaugural general meeting was then scheduled for the first half of October. What was unique to Hungarian theatre was that the Hungarian Playwrights’ Association planned to be the only direct link between the playwrights and the theatres.⁶² The committee members also had serious plans for a contract between playwrights and the theatres, with a general formula to be accepted by all domestic authors and which if it comes into effect would clarify the ‘balance of power’ between stage directors and stage authors.⁶³

The inaugural general assembly was finally held on 7 January 1904, at 7 pm in the weekly meeting room of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The press reported the meeting in a mostly positive tone, welcoming the fulfilment of the idea. Around fifty Hungarian authors attended the event, including Dezső Malonyai, József Márkus, Jenő Rákosi, Sándor Somló, Antal Várady, Emil Ábrányi, Gyula Pekár, Jenő Huszka, László Beöthy, Mór Ditrói, Jenő Heltai, Árpád Abonyi, Jenő Hubay, Jenő Sztojanovits, Jenő Kemechey, György Ruttkay, Viktor Tardos, Ferenc Ferenczy, Ferenc Szécsi, and Ferenc and Lajos Palágyi.⁶⁴ The press sources helped to reconstruct the events of the evening: Berczik welcomed the audience and presented the plans of the association; the authors discussed the statutes – Károly Bakonyi objected to most members joining the association on the basis of an agenda to be agreed on and adopted in the future, and finally the members of the honorary committee were elected. Árpád Berczik was nominated as President, and Jenő Hubay and Ferenc Herczeg as Vice-Presidents. Mór Jókai and Jenő Rákosi were elected as Honorary Presidents. István Géczy was appointed as a registrar, and a twenty-four-member governing committee was set up and voted in.⁶⁵

In this article I have attempted to review the path leading to the foundation of the Hungarian Playwrights’s Association, an initiative that appeared as a concept in the last decades of the 19th

⁶⁰Magyar színpadi szerzők egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Pesti Napló*. Vol. LIV No. 177 (1 July 1903) 14.

⁶¹Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Budapest Napló*. Vol. VIII No. 258 (21 September 1903) 5.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Magyar Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Pesti Hírlap*. Vol. XXV No. 263 (26 September 1903) 7.

⁶⁴Magyar Színpadi Szerzők Egyesülete / Hungarian Playwrights’ Association *Az Újság*. Vol. II No. 8 (8 January 1904) 13.

⁶⁵Ibid.



century, but until 1904 remained characterised mostly by a few short-lived initiatives. At the same time, the precarious legal position of authors was a constant problem: they were constantly at the mercy of theatre management and of theatre agencies at home and abroad, which in time caused influential authors from the world of theatre to organise their own association in order to overcome these difficulties.

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