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Árpád Kékesi Kun

# Ambiguous Topicality

A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre



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## **Ambiguous Topicality: a Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre**

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# AMBIGUOUS TOPICALITY



A PHILTHER OF STATE-SOCIALIST HUNGARIAN THEATRE

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# INTRODUCTION

## PHILTHER AS A HISTORIOGRAPHIC MODEL



This book focuses on theatre productions in times of state socialism in Hungary according to the protocol of Philther, which is both a method of writing theatre history and a website. These two, however, are interlinked. Both were developed at the Department of Theatre Studies of Károli Gáspár University, Budapest by Magdolna Jákfalvi, Árpád Kékesi Kun and Gabriella Kiss between 2010 and 2014 in a project financed by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA).

The acronym ‘Philther’ comes from two words, ‘philology’ and ‘theatre’, referring to the subject of the research as well as to its nature, basic and applied research alike. The project behind it aims at exploring the recent decades of Hungarian theatre history and presenting them by means of digital culture. Almost two centuries of Hungarian theatre history (from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have already been well researched and the results are available in three separate handbooks with more than 3,000 pages altogether.<sup>1</sup> If we look at them from the periodization of *Theatre Histories*, edited by Gary Jay Williams, first published in 2006 and based on the assumption that “theatre and performance [are] complex kinds of communal reflection and communication”, determined both culturally and historically, these three companions discuss Hungarian theatre in the era of print culture and, in part, in modern media culture.<sup>2</sup> However, Hungarian theatre in the era of globalization and virtual communication, dating from 1950, has not been the subject of a similarly comprehensive examination yet. Philther tries to fill this gap, adapted to the most influential medium and mode of communication of the period under examination, as far as the representation of results is concerned. Leaving the two-dimensional pages of handbooks and taking advantage of the possibilities of the world wide web, the dynamics of photographs, motion pictures and textual references, Philther captures

<sup>1</sup> Ferenc Kerényi (ed.): *Magyar színháztörténet 1790–1873*, Budapest, Akadémiai, 1990; György Székely – Tamás Gajdó (eds.): *Magyar színháztörténet 1873–1920*, Budapest, Magyar Könyvklub – OSZMI, 2001; Tamás Bécsy – György Székely – Tamás Gajdó (eds.): *Magyar színháztörténet 1920–1949*, Budapest, Magyar Könyvklub, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Jay Williams (ed.): *Theatre Histories. An Introduction*, London – New York, Routledge, 2006, xxvii.

theatre in its three-dimensional form, i.e. as a complex art form – even in the method of research. So Philther has been developed for the Web, but as a method of approaching theatre (history), it is not completely dependent on it and can be demonstrated in the good old way. This monograph, mainly aimed at the English-speaking world, tries to prove this.

Based on the now far too obvious realization that “the typical and central subject of theatre studies” is performance itself,<sup>3</sup> Philther focuses on examining the outstanding and historically paramount theatre productions of the past few decades. The investigation mainly follows the visual and textual traces left to us, and in some cases it considers individual memories (the researcher’s own previous experiences, as in the last few chapters of this book) and uses Oral History (i.e. the experiences of others, either creators or spectators). It explores the *genealogy* of contemporary Hungarian theatre (in the Foucaultian sense of the word) – i.e. those latent and manifest forces that form even the present in manifold ways –, and its performance analyses bear in mind both the aspects of dynamic usability and the norms of disseminating scientific knowledge. Although Philther is not a database, it provides certain data about the analyzed productions, which are, according to the orientation of theatre studies, specified by the name of the director, the title of the production and the time of its opening, so e.g. Gábor Székely: *The Misanthrope*, 1988. These data, based on the consideration of several sources, sometimes question and correct the information provided by the theatre databases that serve as starting points for the research. Each performance analysis comprises six units, which detail (1) the context of the performance in theatre culture, highlighting the significance of the production and giving reasons for its selection for analysis, (2) dramatic text and dramaturgy (i.e. the relationship of the dramaturgy of the play and that of the production), (3) staging, (4) acting, (5) stage design and sound, (6) impact and posterity. These units provide an elaborate and systematic description of the production as an event, as an aesthetic structure, as a part of artistic attempts, oeuvres, social and political processes, etc. They contain numerous references to other productions, which give a continuously broadening view on history, setting in motion a network of events connected to each other. This network sheds light on the main trends of theatre in the second half of the last century, together with the keywords and various ways of their approach. The special structure of the website ([www.theatron.hu/philter](http://www.theatron.hu/philter)), the analysis and even the research preceding it, reflect the changes in writing theatre history in the past three decades, and the whole intellectual matrix of Philther aims to develop knowledge based on the altered expectations.

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: Die Inszenierung: Probleme ihrer Analyse, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 11:1 (1989), 29.

At the end of his book devoted to theatre historiography, first published in 2009, Thomas Postlewait makes it clear that “history happens and re-happens, as we continue to reconstitute the past each time we comprehend it. We are always rewriting and rereading history.”<sup>4</sup> The fact that this realization has become a commonplace by now, is the result of the development of theatre theory and its impact on writing theatre history since the 1980s. However, the “boom” in theatre theory, becoming far-reaching in the 1980s and 1990s, had little impact on theatre history for some time, since comprehensive historical surveys mostly remained theoretically “untouched”. The relationship between the two aspects of theatre studies was still problematic: theatre history, which had dominated for centuries, and theatre theory, which aimed at omnipotence at the end of the last century, formed almost two separate disciplines. Theatre historians did not seem to have been influenced by any theories (except positivism, of course), and theoreticians were not really interested in historicity, while using a larger and larger slice of contemporary performance (and even performance culture) as examples. Theatre history was exclusively under the spell of expanding our knowledge of the past, and theatre theory became increasingly lost in the extravagant application of cultural studies. They were far apart, but were interested in “reviewing everything, rewriting everything, restoring everything, face-lifting everything”<sup>5</sup> with similar zeal, to produce a more complete/perfect report on their subjects in a way that showed the symptoms of paranoia. The one was striving to raise the number of our memories of history, and the other to expand the scope of theatre-like phenomena and/or performance.

However, historical and theoretical research cannot be done separately, since the validity of our theoretical assumptions is granted by historical examinations, and the results of historical analysis (the answers we receive) cannot be achieved without continuous theoretical reflection and without questions that can only be formulated in this way. Examining changes in the paradigm of theatre studies since the 1970s, Patrice Pavis prophesied “the re-historicization of research”<sup>6</sup> for the period 1998–2008, which could resolve the epistemological futility of a great number of theoretical essays (and also essays masked to be theoretical) published in the 1990s. Looking back from 2021, Pavis’s prediction seems to be right. Researchers of history may have realized that the chances of the (obviously partial) relevance of theatre history could only come to the fore by the attempt to (re)arrange and not necessarily

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Postlewait: *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 268.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard: *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Patrice Pavis: Theatre Studies and Interdisciplinarity, *Theatre Research International* 26:2 (2001), 155.

expand our set of memories without leaving today's theatre out of sight. In short, they may have realized that they cannot escape into the past without looking at the *Jetztzeit*.

Although contemporary research still includes the simplest form of reconstruction, i.e. the collection and setting out of documents, theatre studies have already irrevocably questioned the validity of positivist theatre history. (In fact, for the first time in the 1980s and by means of phenomenology.) This was the result of a new orientation of historical science in the 1960s and 1970s, which had a major impact on art sciences as well. The changes in the assumptions of the philosophy of history, the "metahistorical turn" brought about by Hayden White, had a serious influence on theatre history (and, of course, on literary history behind it, which often served as a model). Together with the turn to the process of reception and the multiplication of trends in understanding theatre, they called forth a pluralism of methods. Taking into account the specific ontological status and mediality of their subject, theatre studies, which focused on performance, and theatre history, which defined itself as the history of performances, had to give a special answer to the questions raised in the corresponding arts and sciences. Since performance understood as an event cannot be recorded or "passed on", only documented, the investigation of past performances can only undertake the analysis of documents conjuring up memories of the performances in question.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of our research, however, is frequently in determining where to find these documents and how to approach them, and we often have to face the immensely sporadic nature of the memories of even legendary performances. While there are far more documents about theatre performances in recent decades than about (let us say) theatre of the Hungarian Reform Era, none of these documents can be expected to speak for themselves. In other words, we cannot hope that a document will bring the performance directly to our eyes, without the medium of the document itself, which confronts us with many problems. While positivist theatre history minimizes source-criticism, contemporary research pays as much attention to the epistemological status of sources (see e.g. the chapter on the Operetta Theatre's *Free Wind*) as to the definition of the researcher's own position of understanding.

Consequently, theatre historiography has actively followed the end-of-the-century developments in historical science, which motivated dissatisfaction with the canonical way of narrating and representing theatre history as much as other serious influences did: anthropological research, Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Hans-Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics and Stephen

<sup>7</sup> As Metzler's lexicon of contemporary theatre theory puts it, "sofern [Theatergeschichtsschreibung] als Geschichte von Aufführungen betrieben soll – ausschließlich über Dokumente, nicht über Monumente verfügt." Erika Fischer-Lichte et al. (eds.): *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, Stuttgart–Weimar, Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2005, 344.

Greenblatt's poetics of culture, among others. As a result, the traditional European model of history, as "the imaginary place of homogeneous and ever-evolving time",<sup>8</sup> has lost its integrating power, and the "grands récits" organized by the principle of progress (such as our two-volume Marxist history of world theatre, first published in 1972),<sup>9</sup> have increasingly lost their validity. Philther is not concerned with the issue of periodization, yet it does not assume the post-1949 period as a homogeneous one and does not describe processes in it in a homogeneous way. Its analyses do not render the aspirations discussed into a metanarrative, as they sometimes reveal radically different conceptions of reality, art and theatre: for example, the works of Endre Marton (whose four *mises-en-scène* are studied in this book) and Péter Halász (mostly known for his Squat Theatre in New York for English-speaking researchers) have little to do with each other. Philther creates micro-stories with each performance reconstruction, detecting the specific processes and specific cases of signification and interpretation rather than describing general characteristics. While the idea of reconstruction may seem like a foolish illusion now from the perspective of post-structuralist theories and cultural practices of writing history influenced by them, Philther does not cherish the positivist ideal of reconstruction at all.

It is well known that reconstruction of past performances, having disappeared due to the transient nature of their materiality (yet not without a trace), was already a key issue a century ago, during the period of the theoretical legitimation and methodological foundation of theatre science. Max Hermann, who cultivated Theaterwissenschaft as an independent discipline and did research in the performances of the mastersingers of St. Martha's Church in Nuremberg, advocated performance reconstruction in light of the restoration of artworks and the restitution of artistic attempts completely lost. In the spirit of positivism, Hermann relied on philology and art history in trying to paint a vivid picture of Hans Sachs's works performed from the 1550s on the basis of dramatic texts as well as illustrations from the printed editions of dramas.

Philther does not follow this historiographic attempt of Ur-theatre studies. Firstly, since the examined period is closer to us, and the "norms" of theatre science have considerably changed in the past hundred years, Philther relies on a generally accepted order of performance analysis (far from starting with the drama), the theories of performativity and various insights of cultural and media studies. Secondly, Philther aims at a vivid description in order to make present the analytically important moments of productions under examination, yet it does not chase the rainbow of immediacy, as Hermann's

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>9</sup> Ferenc Hont – Géza Staud – György Székely (eds.): *A színház világtörténete*, Vols. 1–2., Budapest, Gondolat, 1972.

undertaking, which was interested in restoring whole performances that already disappeared so that they would be present before our spiritual eyes with the vibrancy of “ein blutvolles Gesamtbild” or “ein unmittelbares Abbild”.<sup>10</sup> Although the Web makes it possible, Philther does not intend to simulate some kind of *liveness* (deconstructed by Philip Auslander in his seminal book),<sup>11</sup> also aimed at, for example, by the virtual reconstruction of the 1526 Battle of Mohács as a 20-minute film created through the marriage of historical research and computer animation at Károli Gáspár University with the engine of the Total War series of games.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, Philther does not share Hermann’s perhaps most ambitious goal: the influence of theatrical practice by confronting today’s audience with a reconstructed performance.<sup>13</sup> Recent examples of this attempt, such as the “original practices” productions at the reconstructed Globe Theatre in London or *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, directed by Benjamin Lazar in Paris in 2004, show the contradiction that Jan Assmann pointed out in relation to music in the context of “werkgetreue Rezeption”. Namely, that a work can be performed in the spirit of the ideal of fidelity, reviving its (supposedly) original way of performance, but it cannot be received or experienced in the spirit of this ideal, i.e. “faithfully”.<sup>14</sup> Since reception cannot be reconstructed, the relevance of this endeavor gets highly problematic from the point of view of contemporary theatre practice. Therefore, Philther prefers influencing the practice of *understanding* theatre. The way in which its historical analyses read theatre intends to serve as a model for the approach to productions of the present and the recent past. Fourthly, Philther does not cumulate documents treated as facts, but provides interpretation instead, putting textual and visual memories in context and evaluating them according to their reliability. It is not simply a matter of assessing certain documents as reliable or unreliable, but rather a matter of analyzing selection and interpretation themselves. It is a matter of examining what memories we are left with focus attention to (i.e. what is recorded in them and why) and what conception of theatre is revealed in them. Compared to the positivist form of reconstruction, this is the most important difference: the reflection of the memories of a past production, in terms of the expectations and the (not necessarily adverse) prejudices and values carried in their medium, which are considered far from neutral.

<sup>10</sup> Max Hermann: *Forschungen zur deutschen Theatergeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Berlin, Weidmann, 1914, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Auslander: *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, London – New York, Routledge, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3KiCZDq\\_C4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3KiCZDq_C4) (accessed 6 February 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hermann: *Forschungen*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann: *Die Zauberflöte. Oper und Mysterium*, München–Wien, Carl Hanser Verlag, 2005, 12.

Consequently, Philther's performance reconstructions aim at weaving together the documents left to us through the various media of cultural memory. Although they offer performance analyses, they actually carry out the reflected exploration of documents that is similar to ideological criticism. After all, no matter how many documents are at our disposal, the reconstruction of past and present performances is possible only through intellectual constructs created by the researcher. Therefore, Philther provides "mental revivals" of theatre productions, not disguising the fact that it is not the performance that can be reconstructed, but only the "whole" of its memories in the researcher's mind. Philther is not motivated by pedantic collection of records without any evaluation, as evaluation already determines the act of selection for analysis, and the series of analyzed performances emphatically calls forth a canon of theatre history. It is not simply a canon of shows that are considered important in some respects, but a canon of productions that had the most powerful impact on the future: partly the peak performances of social and psychological realism that have become the vernacular of Hungarian theatre and partly neo-avantgarde and postmodern or postdramatic performances based on initiatives of the historical avant-garde.

While one of the most basic manuals for theatre studies intertwined with theatre practice treats it as an axiom that "theatre history [...] first and foremost explains what theatre is at the moment",<sup>15</sup> the centuries-old practice of writing theatre history tears the past away from the present in the spirit of objectivity, looking at the present as a field of theatre criticism. However, a discourse on theatre that takes Heidegger's claims on the close links of temporality and historicity seriously,<sup>16</sup> also seeks to bring today's theatre into history, bearing in mind that contemporary ways of creation and reception are not independent of theatrical traditions and, in many cases, have a specific intertextual relationship with them. Marvin Carlson shatters the illusion of the separateness of the past and the present by means of the conception of "haunting", underscoring the fact that all elements of theatre (from space and language to bodies) are haunted by the memories of several previous performative moments, so haunting determines both the process of creation and reception.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, Philther defines no end point but brings the series of analyzed performances up to the present and even sets out from contemporary theatre. This helps to demonstrate how theatre events of past decades stretch into the present, and if we move backwards on the traces of these events, we confront a great number of less concrete

<sup>15</sup> Robert Leach: *Theatre Studies. The Basics*, London – New York, Routledge, 2008, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time. A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, 341–369.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Marvin Carlson: *The Haunted Stage. The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, 15.

paths and junctions. That is why Philther oversteps the restricted concept of positivism and includes the analysis of the history of reception and impact, in light of Hans-Georg Gadamer's realization that the (completely never-to-be-known) effect of the "history of effect" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) permeates all understanding, "whether we are expressly aware of it or not",<sup>18</sup> and in this case, it certainly is not just about the reception of a theatre performance. Since Philther lays particular emphasis on the "consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*)",<sup>19</sup> the charge of the teleology of the theatre canon outlined in it, i.e. its understanding as progress, can also be dismissed.

Although Philther places theatre performances of the present and the past next to each other, it distinguishes the course of research in their case. While the analysis of most contemporary productions, usually seen by the researcher (more than once), is largely based on the rewriting of one's own memories, the analysis of theatre productions of the recent and distant past, which cannot be personally experienced, is based on the rewriting (or "weaving together") of memories of various media. However, the researcher can only approach the chosen performance in both cases through his/her own or other people's concretization of meaning(s), and both with reservations. Because of the structure of analysis, the research necessarily has to take into account whether a film or video recording of the chosen performance is available, but Philther also seeks to reconstruct performances with no recording at all and/or with much more sporadic and strenuously accessible documentation. In case of a performance personally experienced, the recording can reinforce or revitalize "semantic memory" as a kind of memory aid and can also refine our "episodic memory". In case of past performances, it replaces the memories of our own experience, and becomes only a necessarily partial document of the performance due to its inability to recall the atmosphere, the "spatial memory", the energy flow between the performance space and the auditorium, etc.<sup>20</sup> Through the reflection of its sources and procedures, and the terminology, theoretical assumptions and strategies of interpretation it uses, Philther also acts as an imprint of contemporary theatre studies. It starts from elements of our historical past and assumes chronology, yet the past is not the basis, since it is approached in accordance with the interpretative practices and (in case of the website) technical possibilities of the present. The set of performance reconstructions, also used as contemporary models of understanding theatre, can be read as separate wholes in a book like this, but

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, Second, Revised Edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer – Donald G. Marshall, London – New York, Continuum, 2004, 300.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Erika Fischer-Lichte: *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, trans. Minou Arjomand, London – New York, Routledge, 2014, 53–54.

they do not necessarily require linear reading on the homepage. The structure of Philther creates a network of analyses that, due to its complexity (the blocks of examination and the several references to each other in them), provides multilayered reading. It allows individual adventures among the blocks, theses, key phrases and names of performance reconstructions, provoking vertical theatre history and offering an appropriate reading strategy for an audience socialized after the so-called “visual turn” (W.J.T. Mitchell). It is by no means to be underestimated during the spectacular decline in the power and effect of the humanities, for Erika Fischer-Lichte’s more than 25-year-old statement has not lost its validity yet: “the debate on the role and function of human sciences becomes broader and more vehement as human sciences necessarily become immersed in narrow-scope research, having no relevance outside their field of study and university faculties”.<sup>21</sup>

Although this book has primary relevance in the field of theatre studies, I hope that the method of Philther (together with its website) will inspire some researchers of other human sciences to restructure and represent their examinations in new ways. This monograph can only give a glimpse of Philther, but it hopefully illustrates how compact and intertwined its separate analyses can be, how wide a panorama their micro-stories can open up. Therefore, I believe that the long forty years of state-socialist theatre in Hungary (1949–1989) can be briefly represented in a dozen performance analyses. They focus on the beginning, the middle and the end of state socialism through the productions of three theatres. The first four chapters examine four shows of the Operetta Theatre right after the nationalization of cultural institutions. The next six chapters deal with six performances of the National Theatre (produced between 1964 and 1985) during the consolidation of the Kádár regime and the last two chapters present two productions of the Katona József Theatre shortly before the regime change.

The first group of analyses studies the refashioning of a popular genre at the Operetta Theatre between the nationalization (1949) and the revolution (1956). They address the question of adaptation: the rewriting of stories and texts, the rearrangement of music, and the renewal of acting styles according to new expectations and principles. The first chapter examines *Students of Vienna* (1949), a musical play set in the fall of 1848 and affirming the reevaluation of the 1848–1849 events, carried out in 1948 by officials of the Hungarian Communist Party, before the centenary of the former bourgeois revolution was celebrated. In spite of its forced revolutionism, the production was characterized by the mood of the *belle époque*, but it could still signal the beginning of a “new era”. The chapter shows how the first creation of the

<sup>21</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte: Theater als kulturelles Modell. Theatralität und Interdisziplinarität, in Ludwig Jäger (ed.): *Germanistik – disziplinäre Identität und kulturelle Leistung*, Aachen, Beltz Athenäum, 1995, 166.

Working Community of the Operetta Theatre (based on music by Johann Strauss Jr. and his time) became a pillar of the three-way program structure of the nationalized theatre and launched the institution to become the Hungarian counterpart of Komische Oper, focusing on the genre of operetta, certainly politically justified.

The following chapter details the first performance of a Soviet musical play at the nationalized Operetta Theatre, described by critics as a “breakthrough in our cultural policy”. Since it was a Soviet work, the Operetta Theatre handled *Free Wind* with extreme care, but its lyrics and music were as much reworked as any other operetta’s. Dunayevsky’s play, born in 1947 and a Stalin Prize winner, received a large-scale dramatic structure, well-planned intersections of music and drama, and grandiose finales made into highlights of musical dramaturgy at the time of its Hungarian adaptation. But critical discourse openly launched cold war propaganda and transformed the play into a simple message by giving a rather tendentious summary of the plot. Although the Operetta Theatre created a brilliant grand operetta from *Free Wind* (1950), full of lavish melodies, the ideological chains which criticism forced it into cannot be removed now.

The next two chapters show two ways of adapting classics of operetta. *Orpheus* (1952), a rewriting of *Orphée aux Enfers*, was born from the political zeal of the Operetta Theatre to comply with the expectations of “state-religious culture”, but it ended up as an obvious failure. Despite comprehensive musical arrangement and re-orchestration, the production could not master the tension of the renewed libretto about the lofty story of fighting for peace and the score, i.e. Offenbach’s frivolous music. But probably the most daring experimental venture of the Operetta Theatre led by Margit Gáspár provided a lasting lesson in dramaturgical work. The authors of the new version of Lehár’s *Der Graf von Luxemburg* already tried to avoid this trap and set a good example of appropriating the revitalized tradition of operetta in such a brilliant way that it was acclaimed by critics not only as a theatrical, but also as a cultural act. István Békeffy and Dezső Kellér wrote a “sound comedy” of fighting for freedom through love, and although the 1952 production of *The Count of Luxembourg* at the Operetta Theatre gave a strong Marxist reading of the plot, the revised play lacked the textual acquiescence to the regime and remained popular even later. However, the critical potential of the story was exploited in the much-increased dialogues and serious cuts had been done in the composition. *The Count of Luxembourg* has been part of the Hungarian tradition of playing operettas ever since in this textually enhanced but musically mutilated form.

Topicality was a key issue at the Operetta Theatre between 1949 and 1956, yet it became rather ambiguous in the productions of the National Theatre during the next decades. First I explore *King Lear* (1964), which

can be interpreted today as an homage to the past, while contemporary critics cheered it for “opening inspiring vistas to the future”. In a decade of abortive attempts at “socialism with a human face”, the production tackled the relationship between man and tyrannical power so cautiously that it had remained virtually invisible. The director avoided subtexts that would make possible any allegorizing on the theme of the fall of the old order. Moreover, it was this performance with which actors and spectators said goodbye to the old building of the National Theatre, and the memory of the event is still vivid today. In spite of its somewhat ambivalent innovations in stage design, the performance became the summary of a bygone era of theatre, with a star casting.

Then I survey *The Death of Marat* (1966), which raised the problem of revolution (abstractly, of course) less than 10 years after 1956, avoiding the possibility of reference to recent events. However, this was only possible by the critics’ keeping the range of interpretations under control. The revolution had to be understood as the one that started in 1789 or at most it could be associated with 1917, but only as an uprising whose historical consequences all mankind must face, not as an event the ideals of which were gradually desecrated in the decades that ensued. Yet Endre Marton’s *mise-en-scène* was not necessarily determined by the complete and clear-cut message that critics had inferred from the supposed outcome of the debate between Marat and de Sade, and it advocated the purified myth of socialist revolution. Hinting at the historical confrontation of intent and achievement, it sought to restore the pure ideal of revolution without the vehemence of questioning the consequences of 1917 or 1956. Since *The Death of Marat* directly leads us to *Chapters on Lenin* (1970), I also analyze this production of the National, which honored the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lenin’s birth and made an icon of the public sphere out of the image that was created with iconoclastic intent during the sixties by leftist thinkers and non-mainstream theatre workshops. László Gyurkó’s play and its former production by the Universitas Együttes (a well-known company of university students) presented an alternative image of Lenin compared to the one established two decades before, and although it was not directly oppositional, it was still saturated with dissenting activism. When the National Theatre’s premiere made this image quasi-official, it defanged its dissenting nature, and contributed to building a “human-faced idol”, lessening the subversive power of the iconoclastic gesture.

The next chapter deals with *The Government Inspector*, staged by Georgy Tovstonogov at the National Theatre in 1973, as an example of the forced friendship between the Soviet and the Hungarian people. But the premiere achieved enormous success and started a dialogue with further *mises-en-scène* of Gogol’s comedy up to the new millennium. The director’s reading broke and created a tradition at the same time when it tried to discover a certain “plus”

that can be set against the well-known interpretation of the play as a simple farce and a satire of country life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Tovstonogov saw this “plus” in global and cosmic fear as well as in fantastic realism conceived as the principal characteristic and the main style of the production. Turning up as a manifestation of the Mayor’s and his corrupt officials’ viewpoint obscured by utmost fear, the strange and the visionary thrust the play into infernal circles and presented the plot as the dance macabre of conscience. However, fear in the background of an autocratic regime made different interpretations possible, and the production involuntarily let spectators experience the unbearable anxiety of the 1970s in Hungary too.

The following chapters examine two *mises-en-scène* by Imre Kerényi. In his 1984 *King John* Dürrenmatt’s historical pamphlet came to life as the drama of losing political ideals, both mockingly exaggerated and tragically deepened. Although it was full of farcical overtones, the performance did not diminish the tragic outcome of the story: death and total disillusionment. These made the realization, stemming from the reference to the spectators’ own situation, even more insufferable: the loss of hope for any kind of betterment of the state and the social order. “This shameful tale of history” became poignantly amusing denial of the possibility of any reforms in the 1980s (said to be a second period of reform in Hungary), in short, dismay at the feasibility of socialism.

The 1985 production of *Stephen the King* raised the topic of patriotism, already important in *King John* as well, and turned it into social issue. Two years after the “theatrical folk festival” or “open-air demonstration” on which the extremely popular film (at least in Hungary) was based, the National’s production was the first *theatre* performance of the rock opera. The *mise-en-scène* approached the work from the issues in Shakespeare’s history plays and focused on the struggle of the title hero, in whom “the moral being confronts the man of realpolitik”, in order to make an allegory out of the situation displayed by the rock opera, not so much to connect it with the present, but rather to show it as the fate of Hungarian national history. But the uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of Stephen’s underscored sacrifice made for the consolidation of power also confronts us with ambiguous topicality.

The last two chapters focus on productions of classical plays at the Katona József Theatre, which became the leading theatre company in the 1980s. Its paradigmatic *Three Sisters* (1985) powerfully conveyed the feeling that “we cannot live here”, and while Olga, Masha and Irina were mentioning Moscow all the time, the overriding plainness of this feeling did not really make the audience associate with their neighboring country in the East. This highlights the paradox that Tamás Ascher and some other directors frequently made hidden criticism about the Kádár regime through Russian dramas that were otherwise preferred by the regime. In this case, through the present-day social sensibility of Chekhov’s play, Ascher’s staging had become an achievement of

the brilliant retuning of psychological realism too, which created a sumptuous illusion of life, not devoid of some cruelty (in the Artaudian sense of the word) that provided its topical and political character.

Finally, I examine *The Misanthrope* (1988) as a good example of the professional perfectionism of the Katona's productions staged in the "Székely era" and the determination of a company which dared to analyze social problems in the public sphere, as sensitively as possible, to influence collective thinking about them. Shortly before the regime change, at the end of a decade far from revolutionary, Gábor Székely's *mise-en-scène* made moral corruption going hand in hand with social degradation the subject of "doublespeak", judging our common conditions through a tolerated classic, in the robe of historicist staging. The disgust erupting in the performance in an undisguised way thanks to György Petri's congenial translation, among other things, expressed the intolerable nature of life in the shadow of "the court" (the phrase used like Hungarian people referred to "the system" in terms of state socialism) with the same power as *Three Sisters* some years earlier.

These twelve analyses do not wish to mould the aspirations of Hungarian theatre between 1949–1989 into *one* story. They outline a picture that can never be seen in its entirety, yet its numerous vivid details shed light on several larger parts. The picture is necessarily partial, as it lacks, for example, performances made in the increasingly important theatre workshops in the countryside (in Kaposvár, Kecskemét and Szolnok), or works ostracized from the public realm of officiality. However, the analyses touch on a great number of subjects (such as issues of the history of institutions, building a repertory, directorial attitudes, careers of actors and actresses, etc.) that nuance the understanding of how theatres and theatre culture functioned in times of state socialism. Footnotes contribute greatly to this nuance, as they write further and sometimes add particularly important details to the main text, which has been made as concise as possible. Although their bulkiness sometimes stalls the reader, I hope that the unrelenting illumination of the essential particulars, while always unfolding larger arcs, is meticulously accomplished by them.

Benevolenti lectori salutem!



A REFASHIONED IMAGE OF REVOLUTION  
AS MUSICAL THEATRE  
ENDRE MARTON: *STUDENTS OF VIENNA*, 1949

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*Title:* Students of Vienna. *Date of Premiere:* 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1949. *Venue:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Endre Marton. *Author:* Working Community of the Operetta Theatre (Margit Gáspár, Ernő Innocent Vincze, Ferenc Katona, Endre Marton, Jenő Semsei). *Composer:* Aladár Majorossy, relying on works by Johann Strauss Jr. and music of his time. *Set designer:* Zoltán Fülöp. *Costume designer:* Tivadar Márk. *Choreography:* Karola Szalay, Ágnes Roboz. *Conductor:* László Várady. *Company:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Hanna Honthy (Jetty Huber, prima donna), Kálmán Latabár (Gerzson Torlai, astronomer), Zsuzsa Petress (Erzsi, adopted daughter of Torlai), Andor Ajtay (Johann Strauss the Elder), Zoltán Szentessy (Johann Strauss the Younger), Mária Mezei (Mme Dommayer, Brigitta), Tivadar Bilicsi (Tóbiás Tillmann, fiacre carriage driver), Teri Fejes (Léni Körner), László Hadics (Gábor, Hungarian student), József Antalfy (Pista, Hungarian student), Róbert Rátonyi (Spott, imperial spy), Ilona Dajbukát (Council woman), Pál Várady (Court Councillor), Pál Homm (Latour, Minister of War), Lajos Gárday (Thomas Huber), János Bagyinszky (Havranek), István Balázs (Imperial Officer), Lili Murányi (Market woman), Gusztáv Vándory (Head Waiter), Éva Thury (Server Girl).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

*Students of Vienna* was the opening performance of the nationalized Operetta Theatre in Budapest and the first achievement of its dramaturgs' working community. It made an odd attempt to create a "socialist operetta" as part of Margit Gáspár's rescue action of a genre.<sup>22</sup> During its rehearsal process,

<sup>22</sup> Margit Gáspár (1905–1994) was the first manager of the nationalized Operetta Theatre. The term "socialist operetta" was used by her in "The Theatre Manager", a script written by Tibor Bános. (The script is believed to have been made at the turn of the 1980s and '90s to film a two-part, eventually unrealized gala performance. In addition to Bános's typed text, it contains Margit Gáspár's sometimes page-long remarks with a blue felt-tip pen.) In this script, we can read that after Gáspár's idea of getting money from cinema performances at the semi-ruined Városi Theatre in the spring of 1945 had proved successful, "my new idea was to create the so-called socialist operetta at the Magyar Theatre. There was money for it:

the Sovietization of Hungary as well as the construction of the autarchy of MDP (the Hungarian Working People's Party, brought to life on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1948 by the fusion of the Social Democratic Party and the Hungarian Communist Party) was in full swing.<sup>23</sup> Its run took place "in the shadow of the gallows": its soon-to-be popular dance quintet ("A funny tip doesn't hurt") was first intoned on 16<sup>th</sup> September, when the show trial of László Rajk and its broadcast from the courtroom on Kossuth Radio began.<sup>24</sup> The last performance took place on 26<sup>th</sup> December, when the decision taken by the MDP's Committee on State Protection on Christmas Eve (!) was finalized in order to call the State Protection Authority (ÁVH) into being, made independent of the Ministry of

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the significant extra income of the Városi. From that we had already supported the capital's prosaic theatre, the Belvárosi Theatre. But it was also needed for the Magyar Theatre!" (Tibor Bános: *A színigazgató*, Typed manuscript, 7. Location: The Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Margit Gáspár's heritage, 01.64.2011.) Gáspár was working at the press office of the town hall after World War II. In 1947–48 she became manager of the Magyar Theatre, where Hervé's *Lili* (with Gizi Bajor and János Sárdy) as well as *Spring Sounds* soon became hits. After the Magyar Theatre was annexed to the National, she was invited to set up an operetta studio at the College of Theatre and Film Arts, "where young talents learn not only how to sing, dance and present themselves, but also how to portray people in an authentic way." (Ibid., 13.) The first Soviet operetta staged in Hungary, *Captain Bought on Tobacco* by Nikolai Aduyev and Vladimir Shcherbakov was finally staged as an exam at the Magyar Theatre on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1949, when it was the chamber theatre of the National.

<sup>23</sup> We are only a few months after the "forced vote" on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1949, when only one list could be voted on and the candidates of the Hungarian Independence People's Front (headed by Mátyás Rákosi) won 95–96% with a 95% turnout. (Cf. György Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak. Rendszerváltó fordulatok évtizede Magyarországon, 1945–1956*, Budapest, ABTL – Rubicon, 2011, 138.) The series of arrests that started the Rajk case began on the day after the one-list election. When the actors were rehearsing the songs of *Students of Vienna*, the parliament of the People's Front adopted the country's new constitution, which came into force on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1949. The preamble declared that Hungary "has begun to lay the foundations of socialism, and our country is advancing towards socialism on the path of people's democracy with the support of the Soviet Union". Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> "Verdicts were returned in accordance with Rákosi's instructions, agreed in Moscow in advance. László Rajk, Tibor Szőnyi and András Szalai were sentenced to death and executed. Lazar Brankov and Pál Justus were sentenced to life in prison, and Milan Ognienovich was sentenced to nine years in prison. To make the conspiracy to overthrow the state order with a military force more credible, the cases of two other generals, György Pálffy and Béla Korondi, also communists, were transferred to the court martial. They were sentenced to death there a few days later." (Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 153.) "In the related so-called background lawsuits – 30 more – more than 100 civilians and military officers were put behind bars. Of these, 15 were executed, 11 sentenced to life in prison and more than 50 to more than five years in prison. Several fled to suicide, others died as a result of brutal interrogations or after conviction in prison. And those against whom not even a weak indictment could be put together were interned for an unpredictable period of time." Ibid., 155. – In view of all this, some passages of the libretto, such as the second act's espionage burlesque or the comment of Torlai, released from prison, have an eerie effect: "I was interrogated. They were listening and I was wailing. I'm blue and green from all that, my body looks like an orographic map." (*Bécsi diákok. Promptbook*, Typed manuscript, 58. Location: Budapest Operetta Theatre.) What certainly provoked laughter with Kálmán Latabár's comic accents was a painful reality at 60 Stalin Road, a few hundred meters away.

the Interior, and functioning hereinafter as a Quasi-Ministry in itself.<sup>25</sup> In the meantime, a proposal for the Hungarian Stakhanovite movement was accepted, the first five-year plan (1950–1955) was drawn up, and a series of celebrations for Stalin’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (21<sup>st</sup> December, 1949) was prepared. Different fields of education, culture and science were transformed, and the nationalization of theatres took place as part of the process of directing all social spheres under party control.<sup>26</sup> According to Margit Gáspár’s recollection, when she took over the management of the Operetta Theatre from Szabolcs Fényes, a famous composer as well as her predecessor and the renter of the theatre, “there was hardly any area of theatrical life which [...] would have had as much contact with the underworld as the Operetta Theatre”,<sup>27</sup> and officials referred to it as “a nest of the reaction of the petite bourgeoisie.”<sup>28</sup> According to György Szirtes, who became artistic secretary of the Operetta Theatre in 1949 and later its technical director, the theatre had “a tax debt of more than one million [Forints], and one and a half months’ salary of the relatively small company had to be paid by the ministry”.<sup>29</sup> However, the daily newspaper *Szabad Nép* reported soon that a “new spirit had moved” into the building,<sup>30</sup> and the Operetta Theatre was the first to give the title and the cast of its opening performance among state-owned theatres.<sup>31</sup>

The premiere was preceded by extraordinary preparation: Margit Gáspár traveled to the countryside for talent research, made contracts with leading comedians and singers, and coordinated the signing of 32 actors, 16 choir

<sup>25</sup> Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> “By decision no. 53/1949 of The People’s Economic Council dated 21<sup>st</sup> July 1949 and the decision of the Council of Ministers dated 29<sup>th</sup> July 1949, the Operetta Theatre, the Művész Theatre, the Kis Kamara Theatre, the Pest Theatre and the Belvárosi Theatre were brought under public ownership. [...] According to these decisions, the institutions operated as state theatres from 1<sup>st</sup> August 1949.” Zsuzsa Korossy: *Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében*, in Tamás Gajdó (ed.): *Színház és politika. Színháztörténeti tanulmányok 1949–1989*, Budapest, OSZMI, 2007, 52. – Their superior institution was the Ministry of Culture, which was formed on 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1949 and headed by József Révai. “Theatres were not allowed to hold any performances without the permission of the Ministry’s Department of Theatre.” *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Sándor Venczel: *Virágkor tövisekkel. Beszélgetés Gáspár Margittal*, Part 1, *Színház* 32:8 (1999), 16. – Cf. “When I became the manager, I was shocked to find that a famous match-maker of the Hungarian Broadway went to the theatre in the evenings and settled with girls from the chorus or the dance choir.” *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *A múlt színházi évad vázlatos értékelése*, Typed manuscript, 15. Location: The National Archives of Hungary, XIX-1-3-n 1950.VI.8.

<sup>29</sup> Speech by György Szirtes, in *Az operett kérdéseiről. A Fővárosi Operettszínház ankétja 1954. december 14-15-én*, Budapest, Magyar Színház- és Filmművészeti Szövetség, 1955, 77–78.

<sup>30</sup> (L.J.): „Bécsi diákok”. *Az Állami Operettszínház kapunyitása*, *Szabad Nép*, Vol. 7, No. 226, 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1949, 6.

<sup>31</sup> The powerful influence of this “new spirit” is also revealed in an entry written inside on the cover of the promptbook by pencil: “First opening play at the Operetta Theatre. Freedom! Mihályné Szombathelyi”. *Bécsi diákok. Promptbook*, Typed manuscript, Location: Budapest Operetta Theatre.

members and 24 orchestra members who made up the new company.<sup>32</sup> In the spirit of the socialist ideal of work, an hour-by-hour agenda fixed the tasks of all artists and technicians from the first rehearsal to the premiere. However, the extremely high expectation was not solely “for the introduction of a theatre”, but “for the fate of operetta itself”, since the press posed the question whether “we can save the values of classical operetta into our better and purer world, forget the ‘traditions’ of Hungarian operetta, i.e. tastelessness, levity and cheap, contentless *coups de théâtre*. Can we offer human feelings and art instead of sentimentalism and kitsch?”<sup>33</sup> The prelude to this question of life and death of a genre was the “show trial” initiated against operetta, while the preparation of so many *justizmords* was carried out on a sample used in the USSR for nearly two decades, and typical phrases of the accusation appeared in the reviews of the first productions of the nationalized Operetta Theatre as well. The newspaper of the Party blamed operettas for being made on a one-size-fits-all basis so far, and even if their title changed, the same trite record was played by the “crappy gramophone” of the Operetta Theatre. “This bleakness was particularly striking in the last years”, until “the ship of operetta sank into the swamp of low standards and adverse messages”.<sup>34</sup> Such trumped-up accusations between 1945 and 1949 created a hostile atmosphere, in which the Operetta Theatre “was tumbling, Szabolcs Fényes did not produce bad performances, but both officials and critics spiked his guns”.<sup>35</sup> To avoid the death sentence of the genre,<sup>36</sup> Margit Gáspár began a rescue action aimed at integrating operetta into a theatrical ideal that matched communist salvation history and creating “a myth of origin” for operetta in the spirit of Marxist historiography. The very first summary of this was published in the year of *Students of Vienna*, and the 15-page booklet argued that operetta was not a product of capitalism, but a genre with a history of 2,000 years, dating back

<sup>32</sup> Over the next five years, the number of actors (supported by 21 assistant actors) rose to 41, choir singers to 44, dance choir members to 26, and orchestra members to 40. Cf. Szirtes, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 77–78.

<sup>33</sup> István Fejér: Kapunyítás az Állami Operettszínházban, *Színház és mozi*, Vol. 2, No. 39, 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1949, 6.

<sup>34</sup> (L.J.): “Bécsi diákok”, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Emil Sivó: Kár volt államosítani?, *Színház* 23:9 (1990), 10.

<sup>36</sup> There was “a people’s democracy” where this judgment was made. Cf. “Last year the manager of the Bucharest operetta theatre and a composer named Kirkulescu visited us [whose *There Was No More Beautiful Wedding* premiered at the Operetta Theatre in Budapest on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1953 with moderate success] and they said that they were not allowed to play operettas for years, since operetta was expelled from Romanian stages.” Speech by Jenő Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 2.

to the ancient mime theatre and merely becrippled by the bourgeois era when “the humorous genre of folk truthfulness began to lie under the command of its new protector”.<sup>37</sup>

The new regime tried to get a mountain out of the way in the field of theatre, since at the time of the accusations against the genre, “nearly 80 percent of the repertory was operettas, and the proportion of Soviet plays was dwarfed, about 5 percent. According to statistics from the 1948–1949 season, [...] out of 4,275 performances in the countryside were 3,208 operettas [...]. In the new season, the ratio of prose to operetta had to be drastically changed, so that it would be two-thirds to one-third.”<sup>38</sup> Market conditions were overridden in order to make room for Soviet plays, which was supported by the sharpened contrast between “the frivolity of our operettas” and “the healthy, upbeat optimism and revolutionary romanticism of Soviet operettas”,<sup>39</sup> distilled mainly from *Captain Bought on Tobacco* and some musical films.<sup>40</sup> However, the nationalized Operetta Theatre did not take a complete turn. It did not open with a Soviet operetta, but rather with a musical play saturated with revolutionary heat (*Students of Vienna*),<sup>41</sup> followed by a classic updated from a political point of view (*The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*). They prepared the ground for *Free Wind*, the first Soviet play at the Operetta Theatre, set on stage only towards the end of the season.

Set in the fall of 1848, *Students of Vienna* affirmed the refashioning of the 1848–1849 events, carried out in 1948 by officials of the Hungarian Communist Party, before the centenary of the former bourgeois revolution was celebrated.<sup>42</sup> When Margit Gáspár’s refashioned idea of operetta condemned

<sup>37</sup> Margit Gáspár: *Az operett*, Budapest, Népszava, 1949, 8. – This “myth of origin” was detailed in some 500 pages in Margit Gáspár’s book, *A múzsák neveletlen gyermeke. A könnyűzenés színpad kétezer éve* (Budapest, Zeneműkiadó, 1963).

<sup>38</sup> Korossy: *Színházirányítás*, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyítás*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. “We got acquainted with the first forms of Soviet operetta through musical films. The artistic possibilities of operetta were first demonstrated by the operetta-like musical films that came to us: *The Ballad of Siberia*, *Volga-Volga*, *They Met in Moscow*.” Margit Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, Typed manuscript, 10. Location: Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Margit Gáspár’s heritage, No. 229/1994.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. “Our revolutionary traditions mostly date back to 1848, and we wanted to pay homage to these traditions with this play.” Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. “The communist party was already preparing for autocracy and the political choreography of the celebrations was aimed at the party’s placing itself in a historical context and demonstrating that it is the only reliable custodian of revolutionary and freedom-fighting traditions. [...] It attempted to turn the former bourgeois revolution into a ‘people’s democratic’ revolution and to mask the struggle for freedom as a people’s rebellion against foreign (i.e. Habsburg, topically German) oppression. The leaders of the past events, mostly of noble birth (István Széchenyi, Lajos Batthyány, Bertalan Szemere, Ferenc Deák, László Teleki) were tried to be ‘replaced’ and consigned to oblivion by emphasizing the role of personalities of popular origin (Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Táncsics). It was claimed that the revolutionary transformation, conducted by the communists,

the “operetta-kitsch” because of “rooting the faith of the eternity of the feudal-capitalist order in the spectators of the oppressed class, [...] paralyzing them into idle waiting for the jackpot” and “assisting in the atomization of the masses”, the revolutionary story wanted to act against it.<sup>43</sup> Although *Students of Vienna* relied on an old comedy and music of the Strauss family, it was a new play, and producing new Hungarian plays was encouraged by cultural officers of the Party as much as the premieres of Soviet plays. In spite of its forced revolutionism, the production was characterized by the mood of the *belle époque*, but *Students of Vienna* was indeed the beginning of a “new era”.<sup>44</sup> Not only did it become a pillar of the three-way program structure of the nationalized Operetta Theatre,<sup>45</sup> but it also launched the institution managed by Margit Gáspár to become the Hungarian counterpart of Komische Oper (the best musical theatre in the Eastern Bloc, founded by Walter Felsenstein in 1947), focusing on the genre of operetta, certainly politically justified, instead of opera.<sup>46</sup>

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Playwriting in the spirit of collective authorship did not intend to Sovietize operetta, but to create a “sound comedy” full of great roles for renowned actors.<sup>47</sup> Since Margit Gáspár had only six weeks to create the opening performance after the nationalization of the theatre in the summer of 1949, she decided to write a libretto collectively and to fill it with available music

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was about to achieve the – unfulfilled – objectives of 1848. [...] The politically motivated reinterpretation of 19<sup>th</sup> century events was carried out and directed by József Révai, chief ideologist of the communist party. The first and last points of the political catechism he produced on the subject sum up the essence of this updated salvation history. ‘1848 must be listed as a precursor to Hungarian people’s democracy. [...] The working class, united with the peasantry, completes the work of 1848 and leads the country towards socialism on the path of a people’s democracy.’” Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 120–121.

<sup>43</sup> Gáspár: *Az operett*, 9–10.

<sup>44</sup> In the first season following the nationalization of theatres (1949–50), eight new Hungarian dramas were played, only two of which “dealt with the events of the national past”. Korossy: *Színházirányítás*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyítás*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, “new operettas had to be created”. On the other hand, “serious achievements had to be showed: first and foremost, the operetta culture of the Soviet Union and all that can be linked to it, i.e. musical plays of the people’s democracies”. Thirdly, “it was necessary to show in exemplary productions not only the classics of Hungarian operetta but those of the world as well”. Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> According to Margit Gáspár, the Operetta Theatre showed plays condemned as “utterly bourgeois in a completely different way” between 1949 and 1956. Old plays were rewritten “without [...] vulgarizing them to party principles. They were transformed into well-made, sound comedies instead.” Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 16.

powerfully laced together.<sup>48</sup> The poster named the Working Community of the Operetta Theatre as an author, and besides Gáspár, the community included Ernő Innocent Vincze, Jenő Semsei, Endre Marton and Ferenc Katona, who were assisted by László Szűcs.<sup>49</sup> Innocent Vincze was the only one with (fairly significant) experience as a lyricist, so probably it was him who wrote the lyrics.<sup>50</sup> (Their model for collective playwrighting was followed by the working community formed from the members of the National Theatre, the Madách

<sup>48</sup> Cf. “We were nationalized on 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1949, and Antal Berczeller, Head of Department in the Ministry of Culture, said that we should start rehearsing on 1<sup>st</sup> August. ‘Good’, I replied, ‘but what?’ You can’t get an operetta off the nail like a play, you have to make it first. He gave a typical answer: it didn’t matter if actors had to do wrist and knee exercises, just let rehearsals begin on 1<sup>st</sup> August. Well, we got together and formed the Working Community of the Operetta Theatre, which wrote the first play as a collective author. Many were outraged and mentioned a leftist deviation, but it was born out of terrible historical compulsion...” Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup> Innocent Vincze, Semsei and Marton are mentioned in an interview with Margit Gáspár (cf. Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 16.), who also added Katona’s name into the script written by Tibor Bános (Bános: *A színigazgató*, 7.). Jenő Semsei was assigned to the Operetta Theatre by the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Culture in 1949. Ferenc Katona, with two years of practice at the Madách Theatre, was placed at the Operetta Theatre as a freshly graduated director, but he did not stay long and did not receive a significant task. Endre Marton, who made a name for himself in the Víg Theatre from 1945 to 1949 and became its principal director at the age of 29, was placed at the National Theatre after nationalization, where he played a decisive role until his death, even as a manager. His employment as director of the opening performance of the nationalized Operetta Theatre was probably intended to implement the “general directive” mentioned in a newspaper clipping taped into the 1949 commemorative album of the famous buffo, Róbert Rátónyi: “to cultivate the noble and classical traditions of operetta in the field of realist acting”. László Szűcs was married to Margit Gáspár and became the principal dramaturg of the National Theatre led by Antal Németh from 1935. Later he was dramaturg of the National Theatre of Miskolc and the Opera House in Budapest. A comment by Margit Gáspár refers to his contribution to writing *Students of Vienna*: “It is unspeakable what we laughed with Bandi Marton and my husband, László Szűcs, at this kind of collective writing at night, but the play was put together in the end.” (Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 17.)

<sup>50</sup> One of the two scripts in the archives of the Budapest Operetta Theatre is the promptbook with the text of the production, and the other is presumably a version created by the working community, containing more text than the promptbook. The promptbook is full of red pencil swipes as well as black pencil rephrases and entries that record changes made during rehearsals. Lyrics are taped into it on separate sheets, so they may have been made separately. It even includes a reference to a song that has no trace either in the promptbook or in the score. It is Torlai’s *entrée* (played by Kálmán Latabár), whose title is also indicated: “Cseberből vederbe” (“Out of the frying pan and into the fire”). The fact that it was not written in the end may have had a dramaturgical reason: the genre and the actor’s status required it, but the situation did not. Torlai is fleeing from his persecutors, who appear soon: the song would have cut the lively scene in half and retarded it in an unrealistic way. Some minor cuts in the promptbook may have been results of the acting style. We can sense the importance of the director, Endre Marton’s considerations and presume that the actors used metacommunication to replace dropped passages.

Theatre and the College of Theatre and Film Arts. “As a result of its activities, the first youth performance, *The Young Guard*, intended to be a sample, was staged in the Magyar Theatre, chamber of the National.”<sup>51</sup>)

The starting point for the creation of *Students of Vienna*, a three-act romantic grand operetta was Károly Obernyik’s political farce from 1848, “the best comedy of the war of independence”.<sup>52</sup> *A Hungarian Emigrant in the Vienna Revolution* was performed only once in Pest on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1849, and it came out in print in 1878, nearly thirty years later. The working community borrowed only a few figures and places from the play and moved the plot in a different direction. The protagonist of *A Hungarian Emigrant* is Torlai, the rich landowner, “full of weakness”, but having “a beautiful, enthusiastic daughter, as beautiful as the idea of freedom”,<sup>53</sup> and the play follows his adventures. There is also a subplot of love between Torlai’s daughter, Klára and Ödön, a member of the Legion of the Vienna Academy but this subplot is subordinated to Torlai’s adventures. In contrast, *Students of Vienna* concentrates on young people and revolutionary events, with the love complication made more emphasized, according to the genre of operetta.<sup>54</sup> Not so much between Gábor and Erzsike (to whom Ödön and Klára were transformed), but rather between

<sup>51</sup> Korossy: Színházirányítás, 362. – *The Young Guard* (written from a novel by Alexander Fadeyev) premiered on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1949, directed by Tamás Major. “The planned work of dramaturgs’ working communities in theatres was mainly aimed at creating new Hungarian dramatic literature.” Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ferenc Kerényi: Színháztörténet a polgári forradalomban és a szabadságharc idején (1848–1849), in Ferenc Kerényi (ed.): *Magyar színháztörténet 1790–1873*, 362.

<sup>53</sup> Károly Obernyik: Magyar kivándorlott a bécsi forradalomban, in Ferenc Kerényi (ed.): *Színművek 1848–1849-ből. A magyar dráma gyöngyszemei*, Vol. 9, Budapest, Unikornis, 1999, 142. – Obernyik’s farce was set on stage only once in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reworked by Levente Osztovcics, with music by Ferenc Darvas and lyrics by Szabolcs Várady, the musical comedy premiered at the Theatre of Nyíregyháza at the beginning of the 1989–90 season as *Turmoil in Vienna* and was directed by András Schlanger.

<sup>54</sup> The history of Obernyik’s farce is vividly summed up – with emphases of the 1950s – by Béla Osváth’s essay (Színészetünk és drámairodalmunk helyzete a szabadságharc idején, *Irodalomtörténet* 43:4 [1955], 465–484): “Since Tarlai [correctly: Torlai], a wealthy Hungarian who fled to Vienna before the revolution, is a comic character, he gets into a whole series of comic situations. Tarlai hates the revolution and he is going to Vienna with his daughter because he believes that the revolution cannot reach the emperor’s city. He looks for calm but finds upheaval. He asks one of his relatives, Ödön, who lives in Vienna, to get an apartment for him. Ödön is a Jacobin-like revolutionary official with close connections to the university youth of Vienna. When Tarlai learns that Ödön has become a revolutionary, he no longer wants to stay with him. He drives to his apartment but tumbles into the protesting people and his carriage is knocked over and used as a barricade. The old man gets stuck in his carriage and incidentally hears the conversation of two Austrian officers, who want to attack ‘the aula’ by art. Tarlai believes that ‘the aula’ means the royal court and not the association of revolutionary youth in Vienna, and is outraged by the evil way in which the imperial court is under siege. He fantasizes about how to save the imperial house, when he hears some young people talking about the protection of ‘the aula’ by all means. He tells them his great secret, the plan of the imperial officers, and thus he promotes the victory of the revolutionary youth in Vienna against his will.” (480).

Jetty Huber, a *prima donna* and Johann Strauss the Younger. The rewriting incorporated a strong interpretation of the comedy, adjusted to the “official image of 1848”: “the clear and stark opposite of the Hungarian people and the Habsburg dynasty with its alliance of lords and magnates”.<sup>55</sup>

There were two important models for preparing the script: the productions of *Captain Bought on Tobacco* and *Spring Sounds*. The former became a model in the boldness of transforming the *pretext*. While the libretto needed only minor modification, Margit Gáspár found the music of *Captain Bought on Tobacco* “useless in its original form” and asked Ferenc Farkas to recompose it.<sup>56</sup> (The famous Song of Liberty, Iván’s air, was born at that time from a quartet of the angry boys.<sup>57</sup>) The latter was a model in using familiar melodies, since *Spring Sounds*, premiered at the Magyar Theatre in 1948, was based on music by Johann and Josef Strauss. Moreover, members of the Strauss family became characters of the play (besides Johann and Josef, their younger brother, Eduard as well), just like in *Students of Vienna* (Johann Strauss the Elder and the Younger). *Spring Sounds* was based on *Die Straußbuben*, an operetta premiered in Vienna in 1946. Its Hungarian adaptation was made by Ernő Innocent Vincze and its music was reworked by Aladár Majorossy, who both played key roles in the creation of *Students of Vienna*.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of playwriting and musical selection, the classical practice of creating operettas was taken into account, i.e. “Latyi [Kálmán Latabár], Honthy, Teri Fejes, Bilicsi, [and even Rátonyi, Mária Mezei, Andor Ajtay] all needed a role and we had to start introducing young people. This is how Zsuzsi Petress got a role, [...] and it became her first role.”<sup>59</sup> For this reason,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 479. – According to Marxist interpretation, *A Hungarian Emigrant* “seizes a historic moment when the old order, not foreseeing its destruction, prepares for further domination, but receives a final blow from new social forces and acts in a rather comic way during its downfall”. Ibid., 472.

<sup>56</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>58</sup> *Die Straußbuben* consists of 11 scenes, written by Herbert Marischka and Rudolf Weys, and set to music by Oscar Stalla. According to Ulrike Petersen, “Vienna’s first postwar Singspiel, a trusty Strauss pastiche that became the touchstone for a recovering Austrian national pride, and likewise proved a last – missed – chance to find operetta a new lifeline.” Ulrike Petersen: *Operetta after the Habsburg Empire*, PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013, 1. – *Spring Sounds*, as well as *Students of Vienna*, became parts of a considerable tradition, since music of the Strauss family inspired at least twenty-five operetta-pasticcios between 1899 and 1949. Cf. *ibid.*, 164–165, [http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Petersen\\_berkeley\\_0028E\\_13191.pdf](http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Petersen_berkeley_0028E_13191.pdf) (accessed 26 May 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 17. – Margit Gáspár always emphasized the attention she paid to putting “budding actors” in position. Therefore “I had Petress have a hit already in *Students of Vienna*” (Bános: *A színigazgató*, 18.) It was No. 9. “Táncra kér, táncra várj” (“Asked for a dance, wait for a dance”), which was later recorded with Hanna Honthy (playing Jetty Huber in the production) as Anikó’s Song (*A Primadonna álma*. Qualiton, 1967). However, the title is misleading. The copy of the working community lets us presume that Anikó would have been the name of the second *prima donna*’s character in *Students of Vienna*, but it was

the operetta features a large cast and offers excellent opportunities for actors of smaller roles as well, even if not all of them have songs. In terms of music, its “ancientness” was an ideological advantage, since the implicit objective of the first nationalized season was to be inspired by “the age of Offenbach and Johann Strauss” and to create something new from and by them. The return to “the Golden Age of operetta”<sup>60</sup> was motivated by the aversion to the era of Emmerich Kálmán and Franz Lehár, when “capitalist society” made operetta a “salable product” and launched its “mass production”.<sup>61</sup> Critics appreciated the divergence from musical comedies of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>62</sup> and projected an image reserved for Soviet operettas on *Students of Vienna*.<sup>63</sup> They also praised the “modern retouch” of Aladár Majorossy, who put together the operetta’s musical material from the works of Johann Strauss Jr. and music of his time<sup>64</sup> by “remaining in style but doing his best for the sake of orchestral brilliance and shining colors”.<sup>65</sup> With the help of Blanka Péchy, then cultural attaché of the Hungarian Embassy in Vienna, Margit Gáspár acquired “from the Vienna Archives Strauss’s lesser-known, Hungarian-related songs, born around 1848”, which were also included.<sup>66</sup> While waltz recurred in the music from time to time and even Kaiser-Walzer (Emperor Waltz) was inserted as a ballet at the beginning of the second act, those passages became highlights that were made structurally and rhythmically similar to popular marches and mass songs of the late 1940s. E.g. No. 2., with its alternating passages of solo and chorus (Gábor and the students’ vocals) and lyrics from Sándor Petőfi’s poem *Italy*, the first finale with a similar structure (“Now swing the flag”), the second finale with the contrast of Radetzky March and Rákóczi March as the “duel” between Strauss Sr. and Strauss Jr. and the *finale ultimo* with a *grandioso* chorus of the crowd that overran the castle park (“Great times are coming”).

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later replaced by Erzsike. No. 9. appears as “(Aniko’s) song” in the score published at Mihály Preszler’s printing works in 1949, but the name Aniko is placed in parentheses and Erzsike is written above it.

<sup>60</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. – Margit Gáspár had to insert a premiere between *Students of Vienna* and *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* since Péter Szász did not rework Offenbach’s operetta on time and the task had to be delegated to István Békeffy and Dezső Kellér. Ironically, it was *The Violet of Montmartre* by Emmerich Kálmán, refreshed by Iván Szenes. “We produced it by necessity and a bit concealed.” Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. “The performance is a huge step forward from a musical point of view as well. The exalting, purifying wind blew away the lewd melodies of the jazz-rubbish and its flamboyant, penetrant tones. It was definitely a breakthrough.” Dénes Tóth: Kapunyitás az Állami Operettszínházban, *Színház és mozi*, Vol. 3, No. 39, 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1949, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Strauss’s music “sounded the pure, serene and unbiased joy of life, [and offered] a way out of the squalor of bleak, cynical and distorting Broadway spirituality.” *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> For example, *Fiakerlied*, composed by Gustav Pick in 1885, and an essence of Wienerlied in itself, became Tobiás, the fiacre carriage driver’s song (No. 10) and offered Tivadar Bilicsi a hit he had a penchant for, singing it for the rest of his life.

<sup>65</sup> Tóth: Kapunyitás, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 17.

Overall, music was much more appreciated than the play, which *Szabad Nép* considered to have a good plot full of twists and turns, and “permeated with serene, heartfelt glee from the beginning”. But in the spirit of objectivity, *idée fixe* of the time, the daily newspaper also found it essential to reveal a “serious mistake” in the play: “it is wrong to exalt the frivolous Viennese dancer, Jetty Huber at the end”.<sup>67</sup> The critic of *Népszava*, another daily, went further when judging the performance as a fiasco. Based on the difficulty of dealing with revolution in an operetta, since it either “appears undignified, or the glee and vivacity of operetta is lost”, the critic believed that the creators “fell to the ground between two stools. They were unable to bring the events of the Viennese uprising of 1848 on stage and the air of the revolution could not be perceived.”<sup>68</sup> The critic found it problematic that “reactionary figures were belittled” and their opponents, the revolutionaries appeared “too light-hearted”.<sup>69</sup> He also mentioned that the language of the play was “intrusively out-of-date”. The critic involuntarily put his finger on the ambivalence of the performance. With *Students of Vienna* the Operetta Theatre joined a series of artistic achievements fitting the propaganda machine of the Hungarian Working People’s Party, but relying on the power of familiarity, they tried to make up for the lack of political pedantry and communist phraseology with sublime feelings, much wit and fine satire.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> (L.J.): “Bécsi diákok”, 6. – This objection is not fully understandable in the light of the libretto, since the promptbook contains a passage that can be interpreted as some kind of “exaltation”, but it is crossed out. “JETTY: I’d need a whole sea to get clean. GÁBOR *points to the crowd in the alley*: Here’s the sea. [...] Jetty, in a dizzy, almost intoxicated state, lets the crowd sweep her away, as if it were indeed the waves of the sea lifting and dropping her into the depths.” Instead, a sentence was written into one of Jetty’s last utterances by hand: “But my life ended today.” When Strauss Jr. turns to her with an apologetic gesture during the great happy ending, Jetty just says, “It’s too late, Jánoska”, which is followed by an instruction, also handwritten: “Jetty away into the villa”. This is far from suggesting apotheosis, but rather withdrawing and having compunction. As soon as Latour, the Austrian Minister of War is removed, Jetty also disappears so that only the singing, dancing and triumphant crowd would remain onstage, filled with the intoxication of the last sentence: “PISTA: Gábor, the Hungarian troops smashed Jelačić’s army at Székesfehérvár.” (*Students of Vienna. Promptbook*, 65.) This ending illustrates the adjustment to the refashioned concept of the bourgeois revolution and war of independence: the extraction of a moment of history, i.e. only one event among many others and the propagation of the victory of the revolution.

<sup>68</sup> yy.: *Bécsi diákok*, Bemutató az Állami Operett Színházban, *Népszava*, Vol. 77, No. 229, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1949, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> The quasi-obligatory element of the alliance between workers and peasants was included in the operetta only through two supporting characters: private Havranek, a poor soldier from the Hungarian countryside and Jetty’s brother, Thomas Huber, the leader of the workers supporting the students of Vienna.

## STAGING

Spectators' attention was drawn to the *mise-en-scène*, which laid the ground for director's theatre in playing operettas, by its high standard. *Regietheater* became prevalent in Hungarian theatre culture too because of the influence of foreign directors with considerable theoretical and practical work, but it began to influence staging musical comedies only in the 1950s, largely due to the aspirations of the Operetta Theatre led by Margit Gáspár.<sup>71</sup> *Students of Vienna* was conceived in the spirit of a strong concept already made clear in its dramaturgy and the whole performance subordinated to it, while no particular directorial style determined it. However, Endre Marton's name – since he was watching Max Reinhardt's rehearsals in Vienna for a year at the beginning of his career – was a guarantee of *Regietheater*, and he was not considered a simple craftsman of light opera, such as Vilmos Tihanyi, who staged nearly a dozen performances at the Operetta Theatre led by Szabolcs Fényes. Margit Gáspár's attention may have been drawn to Marton by his staging of *Baby Hamilton* in the Víg Theatre in June 1948, a musical comedy (after an American play) with Jenő Horváth's music (compiled similarly to the music of *Students of Vienna*) and by his principles as a director.<sup>72</sup> What critics

<sup>71</sup> An example of Gáspár sheds light on the way *Regietheater* could affect playing operettas. She mentions *Marriage Market*, Victor Jacobi's very popular operetta, which was reworked by Szilárd Darvas and set on stage by György Nagy in Kecskemét in 1954. "There's a scene in act two, where the heroine decides to run away with Tom. According to the reshaped text, she says, there's an island near here, we're going to leave the ship, get in a boat and escape. [...] Then comes the famous song that begins with 'Tele van az élet rejtelemmel' (Life is full of mystery). It is a beautiful piece of music, but it is typically the kind of operetta song, full of untrue sentimentalism, that is difficult to stage so as to have a current meaning. But the director solved the problem. After the young people have decided to escape, the heroine comes on stage alone [...] and brings what she thinks suitable equipment for a desert island: a vanity case, a colorful hat box, a white coat and a tennis racket. Because a millionaire girl can't take a step without a hat box and a tennis racket! Then she puts down the hat box, sits on it and sings, 'Life is full of mystery'. It is a nice idea of a director, since it deprives the situation of all its damnable sweetness. [...] This is an excellent example of how much truth a director can add to an old operetta to set it right." (Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 17.) Displacing a seemingly unambiguous situation, making it unique and playing with its overtones – it all began in the staging of operettas in the 1950s, it became a sophisticated method for "doublespeak" twenty years later, as in the legendary production of *State Department Store*, directed by Tamás Ascher in Kaposvár, in 1976, and it still determines operetta performances of innovative character from István Verebes's *Victoria* (Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok, 2000) to Péter Gothár's *Marriage Market* (Szeged Open-Air Festival, 2013) and Kriszta Székely's *Bluebeard* (Budapest Operetta Theatre, 2018), for example.

<sup>72</sup> Marton "was basically a director. He had learnt what to do as a director. A detailed analysis of the play to determine the task. And to place the performance both in the age in which it takes place and in our own time as well. [...] Marton understood the role of the director in creating a performance at the Víg Theatre, which was based on the practice and traditions so far. The actors understood and knew what they were doing. The director's task is to create the comfortable physical position and environment of the actors on the basis of an accepted

described as “a serious striving for quality” and “outstanding ambition”,<sup>73</sup> i.e. the rendering of characters and situations more realistic, was mainly Marton’s achievement. They also stressed that the *mise-en-scène* “freshly brings human closeness to the ancient territory of droll musical comedies”.<sup>74</sup> Although instead of “the stereotypes of operettas in Pest” Marton’s team created new ones (with reactionists unarmed by the masses), the press considered the performance to be a demonstration of “real, living people”, speaking to the present “in the voice of operetta”.<sup>75</sup> According to the self-assessment of theatre people, it was not “socialist realism” yet, only “the cultivation of revolutionary traditions”, but the performance may have been more realistic than usual, due to its utmost coordination.<sup>76</sup>

Playing operettas meant the application of countless conventions at the time, which were largely abolished in the next decade. Actors may have arrived at the rehearsals of *Students of Vienna* with their “well-established manners”,<sup>77</sup> which Marton could only sift through. Margit Gáspár remembered the positive tension, which vibrated in the rehearsals between the actors with prestigious stage experience and the new manager and the new director watching them with the expectation of a new style of acting.<sup>78</sup> Actors were rather confused for a while, but they were reassured by their roles, their songs and the lyrics as well as by Marton’s way of working. The fact that the *mise-en-scène* is mentioned only succinctly (only with a few adjectives) in the reviews can be explained by this reassurance: actors used proven recipes and Marton adjusted their individual performance. Adjustment was also needed because speech dominated the performance instead of singing. Compared to the length of the play, there were relatively few numbers: an overture, 3 solos, 3 duets, 1 quintet, 1 combination of solo and choir and 3 finales. The “flamboyant dialogues” and the “complicated

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and expected taste. This kind of work was useful. Marton learned to work with actors within a school.” Péter Léner: *Pista bácsi, Tanár úr, Karcsi. Színházi arcképek (Egri István, Marton Endre, Kazimir Károly)*, Budapest, Corvina, 2015, 107–108 and 109.

<sup>73</sup> (L.): „Bécsi diákok”, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Speech by György Szirtes at a meeting of the company in 1959, on the 10th anniversary of the nationalization of theatres. Typed manuscript, 2. Location: Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, 1.70.2011.

<sup>77</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 38.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. “I’ll never forget those rehearsals. There were great artists on stage: [Hanna] Honthy, Teri Fejes, Mária Mezei, Andor Ajtay, Tivadar Bilicsi, [...] Kálmán Latabár. We, the new leaders of the theater were sitting in the front rows. Tension was almost unbearable. I often said that we should thank the orchestral pit to separate us from the stage, like visitors are separated from lions in a zoo... [...] But we laughed a lot during this unusual creation of a performance and the ‘lions’ were having fun with us, understanding and helping us soon. I loved them and they sensed it. I don’t think it’s possible to form a powerful ensemble without a common intellectual and emotional basis.” Ibid., 16–17.

and tedious plot”<sup>79</sup> were criticized, even if they were the result of transforming the play into a compelling comedy. According to György Székely, chief director in the Operetta Theatre between 1952 and 1956, later a theatre historian, “playing operettas before Gáspár was based on short texts that connected songs. [...] But Gáspár said no. There is a story, and from time to time characters must express emotions at a level that far outstrips prose, and then the music sounds.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore the working community tried to elaborate the plot meticulously, which increased the time of the non-musical parts significantly. “We complained that we play two plays every night. A story in prose and some musical numbers added, and it takes three hours altogether.”<sup>81</sup> The period of developing well-made plays in prose, hand in hand with well-thought-out staging, began with *Students of Vienna* at the Operetta Theatre, but it became a burden after a while. On 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1956, in his speech at the “revolutionary meeting of the company”, Székely already considered “long plays, one in prose, one in music every night” a failure and suggested “short, comic librettos full of twists and turns” instead. However, a few hours later Székely followed Margit Gáspár, resigned from his job, and a seven-year period was over.<sup>82</sup>

#### ACTING

Although acting was not free from some arbitrariness, it was thoughtfully coordinated, and *Students of Vienna* became one of the first Hungarian operetta performances to strive for ensemble acting. Young people who had not yet created their individual mannerism were easily able to adjust their acting to their colleagues. Therefore, critics saw “the justification for the theatre policy of our socialist acting” in them.<sup>83</sup> Zsuzsa Petress took part in the performance as a second *prima donna* (besides Hanna Honthy), and although her acting was not found utterly convincing, her voice was judged as helping her fulfil her highest hopes.<sup>84</sup> László Hadics, for whom the theatre asked the Ministry of Culture for the purchase of a winter coat,<sup>85</sup> went from factory worker to *bon vivant*. He started college as a fellow of the Operetta Theatre in 1949, and “impressed audiences not only with his beautiful voice, but also

<sup>79</sup> yy.: *Bécsi diákok*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Tamás Gajdó: „Elég hamar rájöttem, hogy színjátéktörténetet írni nagyon kényes feladat”, Székely György portréja, Part 3. *Parallel*, No. 23, 2012, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Tamás Gajdó’s interview with György Székely on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2011. Typed manuscript, 27. A paragraph cut from the version published in *Parallel* in four parts.

<sup>82</sup> György, Dr. Székely: Operettszínház – 1956. Hozzászólás Cseh Katalin tanulmányához, *Színház* 44:11 (2011), 30.

<sup>83</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyitás*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Ferenc Fendrik: *Bécsi diákok*, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 5, No. 220, 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1949, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Typed letter, Location: The National Archives of Hungary, XIX-I-3-a 02437/1949.

with his realistic way of acting”.<sup>86</sup> Zoltán Szentessy was the second *bon vivant* since he got the role of Strauss Jr. instead of János Sárdy, with whom the theatre failed to agree, and Szentessy “provided a powerful performance burning with revolutionary fire”.<sup>87</sup> Their enormous success made all of them frequently employed artists of the Operetta Theatre. Among members of the young generation, János Bagyinszky’s Havranek was also praised. The character of the peasant boy from Upper Hungary was interpreted as a quasi-Tiborc (from one of the most famous Hungarian dramas, József Katona’s *Bánk bán*), so the reviewer of *Magyar Nemzet* considered “his heartwarming humanity, complaint, outrage and rebellion penetrate the imperial uniform”.<sup>88</sup>

As far as the older generation was concerned, “the best forces of operetta were mobilized”, “but instead of stars – for the first time in this genre – an excellently coordinated ensemble” could be seen.<sup>89</sup> Tivadar Bilicsi, who revived the “joviality of old Vienna”,<sup>90</sup> received as much praise as Hanna Honthy, who played a frivolous *prima donna*. Although Honthy was in a period of crisis,<sup>91</sup> partly at her age (she was 56 years old), partly because of the changed theatrical conditions in which she struggled to find her place, she became “the number one favorite of the new audience” as well.<sup>92</sup> Three years before her successful change of role-types in *The Count of Luxembourg*, she triumphed as the first *prima donna* in *Students of Vienna* with her “brilliant voice, conquering appearance and excellent acting technique”.<sup>93</sup> The working community contributed to her success with an entrée and two long duets among the overall not-so-generously allocated songs.

In contrast, Kálmán Latabár, one of the most popular actors of the time, was very badly treated in the press. He played Gerzson Torlai, the title role in Obernyik’s farce, who was “reduced” to a supporting role in *Students of Vienna*. Latabár’s acting was highly esteemed by some newspapers, but *Népszava* joined the atrocity campaign against him, naming him “the representative of an outdated bourgeois entertainment industry” and trying to forbid him from the stage.<sup>94</sup> The critic scolded the audience’s favorite with the vehemence of

<sup>86</sup> Róbert Rátynyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, Budapest, Zeneműkiadó, 1984, 263.

<sup>87</sup> y.y.: *Bécsi diákok*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Fendrik: *Bécsi diákok*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyítás*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> “[...] which is diminished by the fact that this ‘jovial old Vienna’ was killing Robert Blum and his fellow proletarians at the very same time.” y.y.: *Bécsi diákok*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. György Sándor Gál: *Honthy Hanna. Egy diadalmas élet regénye*, Budapest, Zeneműkiadó, 1973, 578–591.

<sup>92</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyítás*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Fendrik: *Bécsi diákok*, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Gyöngyi Heltai: *Az operett metamorfózisai 1945–1956. A „kapitalista giccs”-től a „haladó mimusjáték”-ig*, Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2012, 89. – “[...] in the beginning they wanted to transform the very genre, namely the Hungarian boulevard operetta, to which he owed his greatest success.” Ibid.

a judge at a show trial, and stated that Latabár made no attempt to approach his character, “just repeated his usual, trite and shameful tricks that made an unworthy, wandering circus from the Operetta Theatre”.<sup>95</sup> Latabár’s acting did include some arbitrary moments,<sup>96</sup> but it was part of the special “mask”<sup>97</sup> that the actor (who was defended by Margit Gáspár in a letter to Rákosi because of the attacks on *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*) created for himself as “a direct descendant of great clowns”.<sup>98</sup> However, Mária Mezei and Andor Ajtay, who were deliberately placed at the time of the nationalization in a theatre that was not “suitable” for them,<sup>99</sup> received no negative criticism at all. According to Margit Gáspár, the two of them “were brought to us out of punishment” and she took them over for “socialist preservation”,<sup>100</sup> but the working community created tasks as worthy and rewarding to them<sup>101</sup> as it did for Teri Fejes and Róbert Rátónyi, who also played supporting roles, but funny and witty ones.

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

While the scenery designed specifically for *Students of Vienna* had the effect of novelty and exclusivity, the orchestral sound had particular richness and consistency. The change in stage scenery is best judged in relation to the

<sup>95</sup> y.y.: *Bécsi diákok*, 6.

<sup>96</sup> According to Róbert Rátónyi, “we had a scene together. [...] I was a spy and wanted to find out under cover of night why the astronomer, played by Latyi, came to Vienna. He was believed to be in favor of the revolution. But the astronomer was trying to unmask the spy too! The scene was planned for two minutes, and we figured we’d both put on beggars’ clothes, similar to each other’s. The director’s instruction was that we should cross the stage, the audience laughs and that’s it. The effect was incredible. Intoxicated by success, we added half a sentence to the original text every night, and after a few days the two-minute scene lasted half an hour. I also convinced a lighting assistant to give more light to the stage to make our scene more effective. But it resulted in the beautiful scenery depicting Vienna at night, designed by Zoltán Fülöp from the Opera House, being fully illuminated. And the set had lost its effect. We continued this game until Endre Marton, the director saw one of the performances and threatened to give us a fine.” Róbert Sugár: *Volt egyszer egy Rátónyi*, Budapest, ROKA-EX Kft. – Telerádió Reklámszerkesztőség, 1993, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Heltai: *Az operett metamorfózisai*, 79–83.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Margit Gáspár to Mátyás Rákosi. Typed manuscript, Location: The National Archives of Hungary, 276. f. 65.cs. 335.

<sup>99</sup> According to Zsuzsa Korossy, it was Tamás Major who condemned “Mária Mezei and Andor Ajtay as greedy money-hunters and expelled them out of prosaic theatres.” Korossy: *Színházirányítás*, 53.

<sup>100</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> Margit Gáspár mentions several times the deep respect she had for the two “displaced” artists. She defended Mária Mezei when, at a meeting in the ministry, Tamás Major said that “Mezei’s case is no longer an artistic one, but a case for the ÁVO”, i.e. the infamous State Protection Authority. (Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 21.) She also offered Andor Ajtay the opportunity of acting as a director too. He staged *The Violet of Montmartre*, the second production of the nationalized Operetta Theatre.

pre-nationalization practice. Operating as a private institution, the Operetta Theatre “had new sets made less often. They worked with permanent walls, which were repainted or wallpapered for each play.”<sup>102</sup> The stage in *Students of Vienna* also included flat-painted elements – a “magnificent, expressive frame”<sup>103</sup> – but as part of a coherent whole, whose artistic character was obvious too. Endre Marton’s later works show that he found “the luxury of sets and costumes, the first-class glow of stage design” indispensable,<sup>104</sup> and instructions in the promptbook of *Students of Vienna* already suggest the deep impact that critics wrote about. The courtyard of the Hirschenhaus (residence of the students) in the first act and especially the park of Jetty’s villa in Schönbrunn in the third act or the beer garden of Dommayer’s casino in Hietzing in the second act were certainly applauded. The latter is described in the promptbook as follows: “first you see the famous old painting [perhaps Richard Moser’s painting from 1907] motionless through a veil curtain, as long as the overture is played. Then the veil curtain runs up, the picture comes to life and the ballet begins.”<sup>105</sup> Since Zoltán Fülöp and Tivadar Márk, designers of the Opera House, were asked to create the sets and costumes, the scenery must have been unique, extraordinary and picturesque. However, the cooperation of the Operetta Theatre and the Opera House was also expected. These two institutions were put together when theatres were grouped in 1949 to raise the quality of their productions,<sup>106</sup> and the decision of The People’s Economic Council on nationalization also called for a “joint workshop (central workshop), and the sets and costumes of the Operetta Theatre and five other theatres had to be manufactured in the workshops of the Opera House”.<sup>107</sup> The liveliness of stage scenery was ensured by numerous extras, who aroused the sense of the mass according to the subject of revolution, including members of “the perfectly-moving dance ensemble”.<sup>108</sup>

*Students of Vienna* also brought a significant change in the life of this ensemble, since the jazzy “chorea” that was scorned a lot at the time,<sup>109</sup> i.e. the performance of girls and boys, playing key roles in revue-operettas, was replaced by Ágnes Roboz’s choreography, based on the elements of waltz and folk dance,<sup>110</sup> becoming “hilarious” in the third finale.<sup>111</sup> The overall impact

<sup>102</sup> Szirtes, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 79.

<sup>103</sup> (L.J.): “Bécsi diákok”, 6.

<sup>104</sup> Péter Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba. Major Tamás, Marton Endre, Várkonyi Zoltán műhelyében*, Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1972, 156.

<sup>105</sup> *Bécsi diákok. Promptbook*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Korossy: *Színházirányítás*, 59.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>108</sup> Fejér: *Kapunyítás*, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Tóth: *Kapunyítás*, 7.

<sup>110</sup> In the spirit of “the deep relationship between operetta and folk dance”, about which Margit Gáspár writes in detail. Cf. Gáspár, *Operett*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> (L.J.): “Bécsi diákok”, 6.

was intensified by László Várady's "sparklingly energetic" musical direction.<sup>112</sup> Várady and some of the musicians came from Szeged, where he had reformed playing operas with Viktor Vaszy. The reputation of the Operetta Theatre was raised by the fact that Várady, its music director, had graduated as a student of Zoltán Kodály and Leó Weiner and gained experience in German opera houses as an assistant to Bruno Walter and Wilhelm Furtwängler. Margit Gáspár's company could set high standards not only because of excellent actors, directors, designers and dancers, but also because of first-rate conductors, mainly Tamás Bródy and Ferenc Gyulai Gaál in addition to Várady. "Such a company worked in the Operetta Theatre neither before nor after."<sup>113</sup>

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Theatres picked up and dropped *Students of Vienna* fairly quickly, but its performance at the Operetta Theatre made the genre and the stars of operetta also popular for a new audience. According to an entry in the promptbook and the cultural statistics of the Ministry of Culture, 95,103 spectators saw *Students of Vienna* in 96 performances held *en suite* until 26<sup>th</sup> December, 1949. At the time of its last performances in Budapest, its premiere took place in Miskolc, and three more theatres (in Kecskemét, Szeged and Pécs) produced it within the next four months. Later it was played only in Kaposvár in 1960 and 1974 (but not in the spirit of Tamás Ascher's politically rather frivolous *State Department Store*), and this fact shows its close connection to the period of communist takeover and to the idea of revolution after World War II. However, it played an important role in 1949 in making operetta beloved of a new audience, as *Students of Vienna* was played for people with a new type of season ticket and for larger groups as well, similarly to other productions in nationalized theatres, so auditoriums were "mostly filled with workers".<sup>114</sup> Old devotees of the genre may have bought a large number of tickets too, but the audience included at least the same proportion of those who had previously known operetta only from hits and not from theatrical performances.

According to the evaluation of the Ministry at the end of the season, the first "experiment of the Operetta Theatre failed, due to concessions to the

<sup>112</sup> Tóth: Kapunyitás, 7.

<sup>113</sup> György Szirtes: *Színház a Broadway-n*, Budapest, Népszava, 1990, 28.

<sup>114</sup> Korossy: Színházirányítás, 91. – Artists of state theatres created brigades to go to factories, hold cheerful shows and sell season tickets themselves. In addition, "cheaper tickets were sold for workers and soldiers, so about two-thirds of the theatres' capacity was filled with organized audiences". (Ibid., 60.) In the 1949–1950 season 140,000 of the approximately 2,100,000 tickets available in theaters in the capital were booked by state agencies, 450,000 were sold as season tickets and 550,000 to groups. (Ibid., 91.)

traditions of bourgeois operetta”,<sup>115</sup> and this opinion was echoed by Róbert Rátonyi’s article in *Színház és Filmművészet* a few years later.<sup>116</sup> The official opinion doomed the performance to failure, but later and without self-criticism it was described by Rátonyi himself as “highly successful”.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Jenő Semsei already assessed *Students of Vienna* in 1954 as “giving the theatre recognition in the first few weeks”.<sup>118</sup> In view of the score full of catchy tunes and the libretto written with impressive finesse (even when incorporating quasi-obligatory elements), it seems unlikely that – except the critic of *Népszava*, verbally abusing Kálmán Latabár – any spectators “looked at [their] shoes with a red face in shame”.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>115</sup> *A múlt színházi évad vázlatos értékelése*, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. “We had not been able to successfully cope with the harmful vestiges of bourgeois operetta yet. Schematic characters, their portrayal according to stereotypes, exhibitionism in acting were all difficult obstacles on our path.” Róbert Rátonyi: *Merre tart a vidám műfaj?*, *Színház és Filmművészet* 3:2 (1952), 68.

<sup>117</sup> Rátonyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, 264.

<sup>118</sup> Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 4.

<sup>119</sup> *y.y.: Bécsi diákok*, 6.



MILITARIZING OPERETTA, OR THEATRE CRITICISM  
AS WAR PROPAGANDA  
KÁLMÁN NÁDASDY AND GÉZA PÁRTOS:  
*FREE WIND*, 1950

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*Title:* Free Wind. *Date of Premiere:* 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1950. *Venue:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Directors:* Kálmán Nádasdy, Géza Pártos. *Authors:* Viktor Vinikov, Vladimir Kracht, Viktor Typot. *Translators:* György Hámos, Endre Gáspár. *Composer:* Isaak Osipovich Dunayevsky. *Set designer:* Zoltán Fülöp. *Costume designer:* Tivadar Márk. *Choreography:* Ágnes Roboz. *Conductor:* László Várady. *Company:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Marika Németh, Lilián Birkás, Teréz Komlóssi (Stella), Erzsí Hont, Ilona Kiss (Klementin, Stella's mother), Pál Homm, László Palócz (Márkó), Tivadar Bilicsi (Filip), László Keleti (Foma), Zsuzsa Petress, Anna Zentai (Pepita Diabolo), Judit Hódossy, Katalin Jánossy (Monna), Éva Rehák, Éva Marton (Berta), Andor Lendvai, András Faragó, László Palócz, Tibor Nádas (Caesar Gall, an actor), Kamill Feleki (Prompter), Lajos Mányay (George Stan), Róbert Rátonyi (Miki), Vera Sennyey, Lili Murányi (Paulette, the marquise), Andor Ajtay (Chesterfield), József Romhányi (Barkeeper), József Antalffy (One-Eyed), István Balázs (Chief constable).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

The first performance of a Soviet musical play at the nationalized Operetta Theatre was meant to be an outstanding event of socialist culture. The critical discourse, which presumably coincided with the experience of the performance only partially, praised *Free Wind* not simply as a “success in a festive mood”,<sup>120</sup> but as a “breakthrough in our cultural policy” and an “act of social importance”.<sup>121</sup> *Free Wind* was also separated from productions of both the previous and the present seasons, so that its unique character could be stressed.<sup>122</sup> Between the

<sup>120</sup> Dénes Tóth: *Szabad szél*. Dunajevszkij nagyoperettjének bemutatója, *Színház és mozi*, Vol. 3, No. 24, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1950, 7.

<sup>121</sup> Speech by György Sebestyén, in *A Színház- és Filmművészeti Szövetség és a Zeneművész Szövetség vitája Dunajevszkij Szabad szél c. operettjével és az Operett Színház előadásával kapcsolatban 1950. május 20-án (= Szövetségi vita)*, Typed manuscript, 13. Location: The National Archives of Hungary, 2146.62.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. “It is a huge artistic endeavor that cannot be compared to the rather weak productions that were seen at the Operetta Theatre last year.” Speech by Endre Székely, *Ibid.*, 4.

beginning of 1948 and June 1949, the Operetta Theatre, still led by Szabolcs Fényes, came up with a new production almost every month, some of which were remarkable (*Ball at the Savoy*, *La Belle Hélène*, *Rip van Winkle*), but none of them could be played as long as they deserved because of the press attack on their genre. In contrast, the nationalized Operetta Theatre held only four premieres in the 1949–50 season, which were all successful – e.g. *Students of Vienna* with 96 performances and *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* with 130 –, but the “official assessment” labeled the first three unsuccessful to highlight the fourth, stating that on the way to *Free Wind*, “the company had significantly evolved both politically and artistically”.<sup>123</sup> So *Free Wind* was seen, on the one hand, as evidence of the nationalized Operetta Theatre’s capacity for development,<sup>124</sup> and on the other, an important stage of progress in the field of musical theatre in Hungary.<sup>125</sup> The performance proved to be decisive and meant an acquittal for the genre of operetta, which had come under fire in previous years, silencing those “who claimed that ‘operetta was doomed’”.<sup>126</sup> At the same time, a systematic campaign was launched in the press to legitimize *Free Wind* and its renewed genre in socialist theatre culture and reviews of the production virtually outlined a thorough briefing.

The main argument (1) was that in its Hungarian production, Dunayevsky’s work “restores the credibility of operetta”,<sup>127</sup> as it eliminates all the flaws of revue-operettas, which – according to the story constructed for the genre in the 1940s – had taken advantage of the corruption of Viennese operetta and flooded stages between the world wars. “If operetta is the daughter of opera – the music critic of the daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* argued –, jazz operetta is at best the sluttish daughter of opera”, but it is cleansed now by Soviet operetta, which leads her back to “the source, to opera”.<sup>128</sup> When ideologues of the Hungarian

<sup>123</sup> *A múlt színházi évad vázlatos értékelése*, 15. – Béláné Fogarasi (wife of the philosopher who laid the foundations of Marxist logic) evaluated the productions similarly. “After a promising start” (*Students of Vienna*) “the new Operetta Theatre went on the wrong track” when modernizing Offenbach’s operetta, and *The Violet of Montmartre* “proved to be a cul-de-sac.” But “it has recently reached the height of artistic work with Dunayevsky’s operetta”. Béláné Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*. Bemutató a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Fórum* 5:7 (1950), 483.

<sup>124</sup> Both critics and theatre people agreed on it. Cf. “The Operetta Theatre has achieved much more in only one year in genre and production alike than any other theatre in Budapest.” Speech by László Keleti, *Szövetségi vita*, 11. – “Among redevelopments of all kinds, making the cultural life of Budapest more beautiful and enriched in this season, perhaps the refashioning of the Operetta Theatre is considered to be the most daring, the most courageous.” Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 483.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. “When we caught up with the Soviet Union during the development of our theatre culture, *Free Wind* was produced after *Captain Bought on Tobacco*”. István Fejér: Három tengerész és egy sűgő, *Színház és mozi*, Vol. 3, No. 22, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1950, 26.

<sup>126</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 3.

<sup>127</sup> István Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 6, No. 109, 12<sup>nd</sup> May, 1950, 5.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

Working People's Party were rewriting history in a rather selfish way,<sup>129</sup> a new, mythical past was created for operetta,<sup>130</sup> with a Russian line invented in addition to the French and Viennese lines of the genre.<sup>131</sup> At the same time (2), *Free Wind* was proclaimed to be the 1917 of light opera, since it "radically revolutionizes the decrepit genre of operetta", and although it retains the old frames, it renews the content "already fallen into the squalor of kitsch".<sup>132</sup> This renewal (3) is achieved by "its style, way of expression and outlook turning to reality",<sup>133</sup> and similarly to other Soviet works, by "demonstrating the struggles of the working people, the problems of the present".<sup>134</sup> The seamen's resistance at the end of the production (i.e. the refusal to load weapons into the ship) was almost compared to the rebellion in *Battleship Potemkin* and associated with current political events.<sup>135</sup> The approach to reality (4) was hailed as an active resolution and contrasted with the attitude of "bourgeois decadence", i.e. with the "passive weapons of mocking".<sup>136</sup> Authors like Offenbach had only ridiculed the maladies of society, but their weak opposition and criticism "cannot be the genre of liberated people in spite of all its progressive bourgeois tendencies".<sup>137</sup> *Free Wind* was supposed to exceed *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* since it "directly and actively made a stand for a great idea, with the most serious weapons at its disposal."<sup>138</sup> The duality of mocking and support was also revealed in Dunayevsky's oeuvre, and it was made more underscored by showing that *Suitors*, his first operetta from 1925, was merely "satirical and parodistic", but criticism and self-criticism helped the composer to get over

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 242.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Gábor Gyáni: Mítoszban, folklórban és történelemben elbeszélte múlt, in Ágnes Szemerkényi (ed.): *Folklór és történelem*, Budapest, Akadémiai, 2007, 7–17.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. "It is lesser-known that in the field of musical comedy, Russian theatre had its own significant tradition of operetta until the middle of the last century. The highlights of this genre are *Natalka-Poltavka* with a Ukrainian story and *Beyond the Danube*. These works belong to the standard repertory of Russian operetta theatres and audiences love their abundant melodies, folk humor and conviviality in all Soviet republics." Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 484.

<sup>132</sup> Tóth: *Szabad szél*, 7.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Sándor Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*. Nagysikerű szovjet operett bemutatója a Fővárosi Operett Színházban. *Népszava*, Vol. 78, No. 111, 14<sup>th</sup> May, 1950, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. *Free Wind* propagates "reality that can be checked in newspaper articles telling the driest facts almost at the moment of their happening. Port workers are still on strike on Europe's shores and this Soviet operetta can already tell you something about them: the serious truth in a light-hearted way. That imperialism is preparing for evil things, that potentates of money are ruthless in politics and love alike, that [...] ordinary and poor people want peace, they want freedom and jobs, and they can hinder the venom of weapons and corrupting ideas from permeating the whole world." Béla Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*. Szovjet nagyoperett a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 6, No. 109, 12<sup>nd</sup> May, 1950, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

<sup>137</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>138</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

its weakness, and “strive for a modern way of expression”.<sup>139</sup> The composer’s activism was praised (5) since *Free Wind* was considered as a solution to the re-politization of operetta, which had been a “politicized genre” anyway, until the “withered social content” of bourgeois operetta began to prevail.<sup>140</sup> It was a new aspect added to the contrast of old bourgeois operettas vs. new Soviet operettas, brought up a year earlier, after the opening of *Captain Bought on Tobacco*. According to the Marxist history of the genre, operettas of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were deliberately made apolitical and used as parts of “ideological state apparatuses” (Louis Althusser) that deceived audiences.<sup>141</sup> The merit of Soviet operetta (6), promoted as their antidote, was said to be its plainness, optimism and “life-affirming music”,<sup>142</sup> which “stimulate deeds [...] from the point of view of socialist progress”, instead of sustaining submission.<sup>143</sup> This recognition has contributed to the operetta’s being not only tolerated, but found as specifically suitable for the one-party system “by conveying serious political messages in the flattering language of the most popular genre of the masses”.<sup>144</sup> The task of *Free Wind*, the sum of all these characteristics and goals (7), was intended to be an example: to show “composers in our country the way of the genre’s improvement” by “aria-like songs, duets, generously constructed finales, symphonic interludes, the conduct of the choir, and even by cheerful musical numbers indispensable in an operetta”.<sup>145</sup> But Hungarian musicians were not interested in the guidance. The joint debate organized by the Association of Theatre and Film Arts as well as the Music Association two weeks after the premiere did not step in the limelight. Endre Székely resignedly said that “our musicians [...] still underestimated this genre”.<sup>146</sup> He

<sup>139</sup> Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 483–484. – Hungarian spectators knew the “red Mozart of Soviet cinema” from one or two songs, marches and film scores at the time. (Cf. Vadim Goloperov: Isaak Dunayevsky: The Red Mozart Of Soviet Cinema, *The Odessa Review*. 8<sup>th</sup> August, 2017, <http://odessareview.com/isaak-dunayevsky-red-mozart-soviet-cinema/> (accessed 14 April 2018). Dunayevsky composed the music of Ivan Pyryev’s film, *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1949), which reached Hungarian cinemas when *Free Wind* opened at the Operetta Theatre. According to Margit Gáspár, “his film score of *Circus*, with its famous waltz and lively march, was already part of our daily music consumption” (Bános: *A színingazgató*, 25.), and it could also inspire the tension of waltz and march in *Students of Vienna* a year earlier.

<sup>140</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4. – But “Soviet artists were not deceived by the desolated conditions of the genre. They did not search what it had become, but where it could get, where it could be orientated.” Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. “After a boom in the sixties of the last century, operettas became more and more boring, monotonous and unrealistic. Under cover of glitter, they tried to entertain people in a pleasant, eye-catching way, but in fact they had evolved into a consciously used means of depriving the masses of politics.” Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 483.

<sup>142</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

<sup>143</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>144</sup> Speech by György Hámos, *Szövetségi vita*, 22.

<sup>145</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

<sup>146</sup> Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 1.

himself, however, was apt to be a disciple and his musical play, *The Golden Star*, became the next production of the Operetta Theatre six months later, based on a libretto by György Hámos, who translated and reworked *Free Wind*.

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Since it was a Soviet work, the Operetta Theatre handled *Free Wind* with extreme care, but its lyrics and music were as much reworked as any other operetta's. György Hámos was listed only as a translator on the playbill, but he also made large-scale modifications.<sup>147</sup> Following Margit Gáspár's ideas, he improved the libretto significantly and applied the well-tryed practice of writing operettas: he adjusted the play to the company and created a new role for the formerly neglected Kamill Feleki.<sup>148</sup> Dunayevsky's operetta, born in 1947 and a Stalin Prize winner, received a "large-scale dramatic structure",<sup>149</sup> "well-planned intersections of music and drama"<sup>150</sup> and grandiose finales made into highlights of musical dramaturgy at the time of its Hungarian adaptation.<sup>151</sup> Although Margit Gáspár was exaggerating when she stated that

<sup>147</sup> There is no reference to the fact (either on the playbill or in the press) that the text and the music were revised. In any case, the cooperation of the Operetta Theatre with György Hámos began with *Free Wind*. It was followed by the elaboration of the libretto of *The Golden Star* and then the complete rewriting of *Orpheus*. Margit Gáspár recalled Hámos entering the Operetta Theatre: "Kálmán Nádasdy, then director of the Opera House, was our guest director. [...] When I said that I wanted to include a humorous character in the play for Kamill Feleki, he asked worriedly: 'Yes, but who can do it?' 'You'll see', I replied mysteriously. I remember his surprise when a smiling young police officer, who ran the child protection department, entered the theatre the next morning and I said, 'Here's the adapter'. It was György Hámos, an excellent writer in civil life and our colleague from then on. He received the Kossuth Prize a year later." Bános: *A színiigazgató*, 26–27.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. "I told Nádasdy, 'Listen to me, Kálmán, there's this singer, Caesar Gall, who's doing the Freedom Song, and then he's fooling around all the time, so these two don't fit. I'm going to have this part cut in half. Caesar Gall is coming and going like the storm of the revolution. He will be played by an opera singer, and we're going to make a separate role for Kamill from all that's comical in the original character.' This is how the figure of the theatre prompter was born, which Gyuri Hámos wrote for him brilliantly. Kamill counted the length of his presence onstage in *Free Wind* and he had a total of five minutes. But with those five minutes he got to the top." Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 17.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> "[...] after which you can no longer continue the conversation in prose, so you must sing." Speech by Imre Apáthy, *Szövetségi vita*, 16.

<sup>151</sup> To see the awe-inspiring work of the adapters, one should compare the production conceived by means of the promptbook and the score at the archive of the Budapest Operetta Theatre with the film from 1961 by Leonid Trauberg and Andrei Tutiskin, which pressed Dunayevsky's operetta into 82 minutes and shed light onto its poor dramaturgy.

the version of the Operetta Theatre “had little to do with the original play”,<sup>152</sup> it is fair to say that they created an effective operetta out of *Free Wind*, which indeed called for stage.<sup>153</sup>

However, critical discourse, cut adrift from the production, transformed it into a simple message by giving a rather tendentious summary of the plot.<sup>154</sup> By stressing that *Free Wind* shows that “an operetta can also have sense”,<sup>155</sup> the production was described as an advocate of serious truths and a promoter of communist principles.<sup>156</sup> Reviewers militarized *Free Wind* significantly: its last act was called the “beginning of open combat”, the cause of which is the seamen’s realizing that “their ships, stranded for a long time and preparing to travel now do not transport tropical fruits, but American weapons”.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Venczel: Virágkor, Part 1, 17. – Cf. “We travelled to Czechoslovakia with a delegation in 1951 and decided to see a production of *Free Wind* there. Pista Horvai, who was also a member of the delegation suddenly told me: ‘Margit, this is not the same play’. ‘Yes, it is’, I replied. ‘But it’s about something else’. ‘You know we’ve revised it a bit, don’t you?’, I said. But everybody agreed that our production in Budapest was much better.” Ibid., 18.

<sup>153</sup> In connection with a production of *Free Wind* in Szolnok, in 1983, Judit Csáki noted that “not only its roles, but also their relationships are adjusted to the classics: updating is all in all consistent and comprehensive. In addition to class interests seen in classical operettas, ideological-political conflicts also put lovers to the test. Among complications and intrigues of the plot, the combat of the defenders of the revolution, the former partisans and the counter-revolutionaries, the devotees of the old system come first.” (Judit Csáki: „Hajhó! Zengj, te szabad szél!”, *Színház* 17:2 (1984), 38.) It was the result of the thorough revision in 1950 that the play and the updating of classical traditions of operetta seemed nearly spotless for the critic even more than thirty years later.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. “[...] there is this Mediterranean town. No matter which one, the important thing is that its bright life is severely eclipsed by the shadow of imperialism. Its seamen, who were born for freedom and for work, and who fought a heroic partisan battle against the Germans during the war for the freedom of their work, are sitting on the piers for months now in the stocks of unemployment, because there is no boat from the port. Finally, there’s one, George Stan’s. It should be transporting somewhere the tropical fruits of a man called Chesterfield. But what are these tropical fruits like? What kind of fruits do Chesterfields produce? What kind of fruits does imperialism produce? Bombs, grenades and machine guns. They are packed in fruit crates. The addressee of the shipment is the tyrannical government of a small people in a war of independence. And when the seamen recognize what it is at stake, they refuse to work, on Márkó’s advice, who is one of their mates hunted because of his fight against foreign oppressors. [...] They won’t let the sea created to be free transport the means of oppression, the weapons of imperialism against peoples created to be free too. They continue to sit on the pier, with their heads huddled together, looking out at the endless waves and humming the forbidden song of freedom, the march, which is increasingly reverberated all around the shores of the seas by peoples of the world held captive by money, interest, profit and power: ‘Wind, wind, fly to us from the east, / Wind, wind, bring us a new world...’” Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*, 5.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. “Truth is so stable and manifold that it can be danced, sung, even told in a funny way. [...] Truth can also be lit with gentle lanterns, not only with bright headlights. *Free Wind* proves the fact that a genre, already run dry, swells again healthily when it is fed by clear springs.” Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. “An operetta, which can tell serious things with its lighthearted methods. [...] An operetta, which talks about love and cries for freedom yet.” Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*. Dunajevszkij-operett bemutatója a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Szabad Nép*, Vol. 8, No. 109, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1950, 6.

While the review in *Szabad Nép*, the daily newspaper of the Party, repeated the adjective “American” four times to incite hatred against “imperialist colonizers”, weapons were not said to be American in the Operetta Theatre and no reference was made to the United States, according to the promptbook.<sup>158</sup> Dialogues did not make it clear that “war materials disguised as tropical fruits were being delivered to the oppressors of a people fighting for freedom against colonial submission.”<sup>159</sup> In fact, the port city where the plot took place was not named in the production, yet several reviews mentioned Trieste. The city, which was freed by Yugoslav partisans five years earlier and annexed to Italy in 1954, was divided into zones, controlled by British and American as well as Yugoslav forces, and was claimed by Tito and his people. When we consider that the government of the unnamed country where *Free Wind* takes place makes common cause with “Chesterfields”, we recognize that by naming it Trieste, the press helped spectators associate it with Tito’s Yugoslavia, mocked as “the chained dog of imperialists” at the time.<sup>160</sup> In other words, the press tried to arouse hatred against a neighbor, who had just been declared an enemy and expelled from Cominform a few months earlier, while Hungary had become “front country for war preparation against Yugoslavia”.<sup>161</sup> Just a few weeks after the Hungarian Working People’s Party published its booklet, *The Tasks of Our Fight for Peace* (for an event focusing on *The Principles of Fighting for Peace* between 18–25 June, 1950), criticism paradoxically launched cold war propaganda when it called *Free Wind* a “mirror of an age” in which “international solidarity acted with huge, anti-war protests against those who incited a new world war.”<sup>162</sup> Or when a critic roughly stated that “the subject of the play is as topical as possible: [...] resistance, defense and counterattack of the peace front.”<sup>163</sup> Reviewers subordinated the description of the aesthetic character of the play to this propaganda, when they detailed the particular “operetta realism” of *Free Wind*,<sup>164</sup> its “living and real” characters instead of

<sup>158</sup> “The hit, the Free Wind Song” was considered in *Népszava* “as the combative message of free peoples defending their peace and giving voice to proletarian solidarity. [...] It becomes a vivid symbol of freedom”. Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>159</sup> Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 484. – According to the promptbook Márkó, a partisan in the past, now wanted for incendiary behavior, only said that “ships carry weapons to suppress the freedom of a small people. To kill partisans with them, workers and peasants like you.” *Szabad szél, Promptbook*, Typed manuscript, 75. Location: Budapest Operetta Theatre.

<sup>160</sup> This association was helped by the Hungarian version of *Free Wind*, in which the main character is called Dusán/Márkó (Stefan/Janko in the original), and Gregor Stankovich’s name is changed to George Stan. It was certainly György Hámos who grounded all in the libretto that made it possible for the press to incite hatred against Yugoslavia.

<sup>161</sup> Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 155.

<sup>162</sup> Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 484.

<sup>163</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. “The realism that this operetta strives for in its story and music does not mean the same style as the realism of dramatic theatre, comedy or opera. We are talking about operetta realism, which is similar to a fairy tale.” Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 1–2. – György Sebestyén

“the wax figures of bourgeois operettas wearing different evening dresses but being the same”<sup>165</sup> and also its focusing on the people itself.<sup>166</sup> According to the idea of operetta’s being a political genre, they also projected a new canon behind *Free Wind*, based on musical plays said to be “expressions of their time”.<sup>167</sup>

All these things were attributed to Dunayevsky’s outstanding merit, but the music, which was actually his product, but also reworked, received less attention. The 1947 Soviet radio recording of the operetta does not confirm Margit Gáspár’s remark that *Free Wind* was a “real jazz operetta” that could not be staged in its original form because “jazz was considered extremely bad at the time” and “classified along with Coca Cola as harmful capitalist excise goods”.<sup>168</sup> There is no record in the archives either that the re-orchestration was “made at the request of the Music Association”.<sup>169</sup> However, the piano-vocal score of the production at the Budapest Operetta Theatre makes it clear that the music was also adjusted to the reworked play, and this musical adaptation was carried out by Tibor Polgár.<sup>170</sup> The theatre advertised *Free Wind* as a grand operetta and the orchestra certainly played it as such, so Endre Székely could

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added “operetta romanticism” to this not so well-defined term, and he found it harmful in its old form, because “it stood for a pile of illusions behind which there was no content. It consisted of false passions, behind which there was no heroism. It included gaiety behind which there was no humor.” (Ibid., 12–13) However, he found it acceptable in *Free Wind* in its new form, full of ideas and optimism.

<sup>165</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6. – What the article called the creation of “living and real” characters was in fact the substitution of old stereotypical figures with new ones, who do not offer more opportunity for acting than characters from other/previous operettas.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. “The tale is not about the frivolous adventures of fatigued counts and grand duchesses in love, but about the people of a port, brave sailors willing to fight. We care about their fate, because they are like us, because they feel, think and love like ordinary people really do.” The scenes where port people are hiding Márkó from the police give “a magnificent picture of folk humor and solidarity of workers ready to fight”. Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. “Offenbach ridiculed French colonial exploitation in his ‘Perocola’ [i.e. *La Périchole*, 1868], Suppé’s ‘Donna Juanita’ [1880] aroused sympathy for the Spanish freedom fighters, Lecoques [i.e. Charles Lecocq] depicted the ‘heroes’ of Thermidor satirically [in *La Fille de Madame Angot*, 1873]. The classics of operetta were not afraid of politics, they did not put their heads into the sand and their hits always came from feelings that everyone shared and understood. They spotted the weakness in the structure of society and politics, and their best examples gave distorted mirrors of their time. [...] Dunayevsky does the same: his operetta is an anti-imperialist play, a flag in today’s anti-war protests.” Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 484–485.

<sup>168</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 26.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Tibor Polgár is mentioned only by Margit Gáspár (Ibid.), his name cannot be found in any documents related to *Free Wind*. His first work was the re-orchestration of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* in the nationalized Operetta Theatre. It was followed by the musical adaptation of *Orpheus*, another operetta by Offenbach. He also set Vernon Beste’s *An American in London* to music in 1956. The successful hit composer first worked with Margit Gáspár in 1946 on the production of her play, *New God in Thebes* at the Belvárosi Theatre. Cf. Tamás Gajdó: *Théba vagy Verona? Gáspár Margit politikai revüje 1946-ban, Irodalomismeret* 26:3 (2015), 40.

claim that the work “does not spring from the post-World War I tradition of operetta. But it does spring from a tradition, from a much more valuable and significant one, the tradition of classical operetta”, his claim aimed to give an example of raising it to a socialist standard.<sup>171</sup> Dunayevsky’s music was praised for its extensive and dense texture, the ambition of its dramatic expressivity, its operatic heights and the wide range of moods in its score. It was admired as it “lasts more than a full two hours, so it is as long as *The Bat* or *The Gypsy Baron*”, yet the music never stops the plot and can even become action itself.<sup>172</sup> Therefore it shows that operetta music is also capable of conveying serious drama, as “songs continue dialogues, and [...] most questions are resolved in the musical parts, which reach the culmination of the operetta”.<sup>173</sup> That’s why it gets close to opera at certain points, especially in recitatives accompanied by the orchestra and in lyrical parts too, but even “where the author composes a mass song”.<sup>174</sup> Besides summoning the language of old grand operettas, “bouncing marches, melodic waltzes and fiery rhythms of Italian group dances alternate with choral moments constructed impressively”,<sup>175</sup> and “intimate expression” (Klementin’s song) is followed by “poetic warmth” (the duet of Márkó and Stella), “heroic feelings” (Márkó’s partisan ballad) and “exuberantly high spirits” (duets of Pepita and Miki).<sup>176</sup> The easy-to-remember, colorful and dynamic nature of melodies, as well as the “popular internationalism” of *Free Wind* were also appreciated,<sup>177</sup> i.e. the fact that the composer did not give his music “overemphasized Russian character”, only when the ideological content of the events came to the fore,<sup>178</sup> and that he incorporated folk elements from the music of the Mediterranean. Even if it was not exactly the “little task of eliminating jazz”<sup>179</sup> that musical adaptation accomplished, it sought to increase the sense of the exceptionally monumental character of the work in the “spectauditeur” (Patrice Pavis).

<sup>171</sup> Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 1.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Sebestyén, *Szövetségi vita*, 12.

<sup>174</sup> Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 3. “It’s worth taking a closer look at the Free Wind Song. It has a much wider form of music than mass songs, which are usually based on a simple form: there is a ‘verse’, there is a refrain, then comes a ‘verse’ again and the refrain with the same text. But we see a very different form here. There are three variants of a theme with an introductory recitative before them, which is an integral part of the whole song. Then we have two ‘verses’ and the refrain is the third, each beautifully unfolded, with a very nice soaring melody. This song could be an example for composers and lyricists alike of how to write a popular mass song in a grandiose form.” *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>176</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>177</sup> Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 3.

<sup>178</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>179</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 26.

## STAGING

Similarly to the first three productions of the nationalized Operetta Theatre, the directors of *Free Wind* did not come from the tradition of playing operettas. Both Endre Marton, who staged *Students of Vienna* and *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* and Andor Ajtay, who was responsible for *The Violet of Montmartre*, had previously worked at the Víg Theatre. (Except for a short period at the National Theatre, Ajtay was an actor at the Víg from 1932.) Margit Gáspár asked an acclaimed opera director and a young prosaic theatre director to stage *Free Wind*. The latter, Géza Pártos had started his career at Ferenc Hont's Független Színpad (Independent Stage), then practiced his *métier* at the National after the war and become chief director at the Madách Theatre. He was co-director of *Captain Bought on Tobacco*, the first Soviet operetta staged in Hungary, in the rehearsals of which Kálmán Nádasdy, *metteur-en-scène* of the Opera House and occasionally employed at the National as well, also took part. Their invitation to the Operetta Theatre was certainly due to the qualities of *Free Wind* and the intent to elevate the rank of the production. The directors' cooperation proved to be fruitful: Pártos and Nádasdy staged the adaptation of *Relations*, a seminal novel by Zsigmond Móricz at the Madách Theatre a year later. The temporary employment of the directors of the Víg, the National and the Opera came up to Margit Gáspár's expectations and resulted in a considerable increase in standards. In case of *Free Wind* there ensued "a demanding production" "that was worthy of eliminating or knocking down the walls and barriers that still existed between so-called light and serious genres".<sup>180</sup>

While reviews usually referred to the *mise-en-scène* with no more than an adjective at that time, not only did critics of *Free Wind* emphasize the "momentum and persuasive power of the work of Nádasdy and Pártos, unique on the Hungarian operetta stage",<sup>181</sup> but also recorded what caused this "revolutionary breakthrough".<sup>182</sup> Most of all, "the harmonious unity of music and prose",<sup>183</sup> the meticulous elaboration of dialogues stressing the *through-line* of action and their fusion with musical parts, gaining dramatic force. Furthermore, the integration of all elements and their subordination to the concept of the production, which critics called "attentiveness to every detail",<sup>184</sup> and last but not least intense working with the actors. The latter resulted in truly collective work, i.e. the development of an ensemble

<sup>180</sup> Apáthy, *Szövetségi vita*, 15.

<sup>181</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>182</sup> Speech by István Horvai, *Szövetségi vita*, 25.

<sup>183</sup> Tóth: *Szabad szél*, 7.

<sup>184</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*, 5.

(temporarily) turning its back on the star system,<sup>185</sup> and in the convergence of realist acting and the tradition of playing operettas. Reviewers also noticed “the nuanced art of some actors’ skills”, and appreciated the avoidance of old manners, which helped the directors make people “live on stage”.<sup>186</sup> However, they still found plenty of “old theatrical tricks, especially in the bar scenes”.<sup>187</sup> The “great and realistic movement” of the choir, i.e. the development in handling the crowd, which had not been seen before, was said to be a merit of the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>188</sup> Four actresses also initiated a “movement” in order to make the crowd live. Having recognized the importance of the crowd, they wanted to be part of it to provide assistance to extras.<sup>189</sup> However, the critic of *Szabad Nép* still felt this effort insufficient and reproached the crowd for “not living on stage, but remaining a group of static extras.”<sup>190</sup> In any case, the work of the two directors could indeed be focused on the coordination of those scenes that required considerable human resources, as it was the main virtue of both Nádasdy and Pártos. In addition, critics’ attention was drawn to the elimination of “sweet sentimentalism” and cheap humor.<sup>191</sup> They also appreciated the strong atmosphere,<sup>192</sup> but valued “the impressively underlined political message” much more than the sensual experience of the production.<sup>193</sup> It was this “underlining” that the Soviet conduct, to which we find several references in the press, could have influenced.<sup>194</sup> However, given the text and music tailored to domestic conditions, it is difficult to imagine what this conduct helped to do except performing a compulsory task.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. “I saw a slice of life on stage, the characters were living people. The *prima donna* had no entrée, it was something out of the ordinary, and there was another great advantage of the play: I didn’t see any stars in it. I saw an operetta ensemble with actors playing the smallest, silent parts as enthusiastically as any of the protagonists. It is certainly an important achievement of the *mise-en-scène*.” Speech by Kálmán Perényi, *Szövetségi vita*, 8.

<sup>186</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>187</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>188</sup> Horvai, *Szövetségi vita*, 25.

<sup>189</sup> As the crowd plays an active role in *Free Wind*, Ilona Dajbukát, Jolán Mátyás, Lili Murányi and Fili Rajnai wanted to overcome the limitations of the production of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*. “The crowd had been standing still there and accepted the fact that they would not get bread because it was a holiday. There had been no protest at all.” Speech by Lili Murányi, *Szövetségi vita*, 18.

<sup>190</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>191</sup> Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 484. – “While we had been frequently immersed in endless dialogues of the comedians, full of old and older jokes in previous shows of the theatre, this time you could enjoy the work of artists who used their talent with vigor and enthusiasm for the success of the production.” Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> E.g. “you can feel the suppressed mood of revolution in the first scene, foreshadowing the rest of the plot.” Speech by Jenő Krausz, industrial worker, *Szövetségi vita*, 13–14.

<sup>193</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*, 5.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. “We received a lot of advice on several phone calls from the Moscow director of the play and felt that we took another step forward with the help of the Soviet Union.” Rátonyi: *Merre tart a vidám műfaj?*, 68. – When the Soviet composer, Yuri Milyutin visited the Budapest production of *The Count of Luxembourg* three years later, Margit Gáspár also referred

## ACTING

The critics of *Free Wind* evaluated acting according to its planned nature, the progress of actors and the perceptibility of the difference between old and new styles. In the year of the start of the first five-year plan, “the effectiveness of socialist, planned work” was perceived not only in raising the choir and the orchestra to a high standard, but also in transforming the company into an ensemble, in uniting older and younger actors.<sup>195</sup> In terms of individual development, Kamill Feleki was mentioned first, whose progress was said to be rooted not so much in his “undoubted talent” as in “his absorption in realistic acting”.<sup>196</sup> In the role of the Prompter, inserted into the play specifically for him, he was able to “make a real change in his career”<sup>197</sup> and set off for the Kossuth Prize, given to him in 1953. He became an artist quasi-identified with the Operetta Theatre soon. Although he did not get a song and his role enriched only the humor of the play, it offered a good opportunity to overcome the buffo role-type and show the actor’s versatility. Compared to Feleki’s previous comic roles, all said to be rather flat, reviews highlighted the diversity of the character he created now: that he could be “playfully kind and cheerful”, but “shockingly human” as well,<sup>198</sup> when he “behaved like a revolutionary, [...] a neglected and oppressed man whose heart is burning with the fire of heroes”.<sup>199</sup> In fact, it was this behavior that was assessed to be the result of “deep human understanding” instead of some manners,<sup>200</sup> and the demonstration of “a considerable progress towards representing living people”.<sup>201</sup>

Critics also spoke in superlatives about Tivadar Bilicsi and László Keleti in the roles of Filipp and Foma, the “merry and joyful sailors, showing solidarity and revolutionary faith”.<sup>202</sup> The two actors made spectators laugh from time to time and formed a splendid duo from “roughly written roles, whose schematic

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to “our keeping in touch with the Moscow Operetta Theatre and Comrade Tumanov, the excellent Soviet director, whom we had often asked for advice on phone when preparing for *Free Wind* and *Trembita*.” Margit Gáspár: Napló Miljutyin elvtárs látogatásáról, *Színház- és Filmművészet* 4:4 (1953), 164.

<sup>195</sup> Tóth: *Szabad szél*, 7. – “Conductor László Várady excellently bands the ensemble together. Both young and old actors, the latter still unversed in music of higher demand [sic], are admirable.” Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Fejér: *Három tengerész*, 26. – Feleki held a speech at the Conference of the Association of Theatre and Film Arts on 13–14<sup>th</sup> December, 1952, backing Stanislavsky’s system in the actor’s work in operettas.

<sup>197</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 26.

<sup>198</sup> Fejér: *Három tengerész*, 26.

<sup>199</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*, 5.

<sup>200</sup> Fejér: *Három tengerész*, 26.

<sup>201</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>202</sup> Fejér: *Három tengerész*, 26.

nature was also pointed out by Soviet critics.”<sup>203</sup> They appeared like Laurel & Hardy at the Operetta Theatre<sup>204</sup> and embodied pure optimism, not to mention the fact that spectators were humming their “Duli-duli” song after the show. Given their jokes in the promptbook, they must have used familiar tricks, but they were still considered to be creators of new types of comic characters, who “sided with truth and fought consciously to be heroes”, who were “realistic figures, not clowns and complete idiots bourgeois operettas abounded in”.<sup>205</sup> They were represented without awkward exaggerations,<sup>206</sup> so that Bilicsi and Keleti were able to become engines of the show, forming a bridge between the protagonists and the chorus (the crowd) as “the children of the people”.<sup>207</sup>

Compared to these three actors, the couples of *prima donna* and *bon vivant* as well as soubrette and buffo were somewhat sidelined, and critics discussed how Soviet operetta would transform these role-types. Stella and Márkó were more determined than usual, and unlike his female companions, Pál Homm was able to adapt to this change. His rigid features condemned by some critics were thought to be crucial by others, foreshadowing that “this tougher, chunkier and more cornered man will be the hero of new operetta.”<sup>208</sup> The characterization of the “ardent partisan”, the “strong-willed warrior” with “flaming passion” and “amazing empathy”<sup>209</sup> helped to avoid being syrupy,<sup>210</sup> but it did not benefit scenes of love and tenderness. It could not be directly attributed to Homm’s portrayal, but despite toughness and audacity, the *bon vivant* began to be more and more weightless in playing operettas at that time. Lilián Birkás and Marika Németh had more difficulties playing the positive heroine, and Géza Pártos considered this role the most challenging to play in new plays, either prosaic or musical.<sup>211</sup> Lilián Birkás, whose participation was requested by her husband, Kálmán Nádasdy,<sup>212</sup> sang as a guest from the Opera House, and could only get close to Stella with her

<sup>203</sup> Margit Gáspár: *Szabad szél*. (A Miskolci Nemzeti Színház előadása), *Színház- és Film-művészet* 2:11 (1951), 364.

<sup>204</sup> Cf. “One of them is tall, the other is short and stocky. Their eyes laugh cheerfully at the world.” Fejér: *Három tengerész*, 26.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> According to the actor playing Foma, “it is an extraordinary achievement in the genre of operetta that we make you laugh within limits and resolve the tension in the end.” Speech by László Keleti, *Szövetségi vita*, 11.

<sup>207</sup> Csáki: “Hajhó! Zengj, te szabad szél!”, 40.

<sup>208</sup> Apáthy, *Szövetségi vita*, 17.

<sup>209</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. Speech by Alfonso, *Szövetségi vita*, 11.

<sup>211</sup> Speech by Géza Pártos, *Szövetségi vita*, 19.

<sup>212</sup> “[...] Lilián, who had originally been a *mezzo*, moved on to soprano roles, and Kálmán thought operetta would make it easier for her. [...] Honthy taught her and helped her a lot.” Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 18.

“flatteringly soft, warm voice”,<sup>213</sup> but her acting remained puppet-like, lifeless and mannered.<sup>214</sup> Marika Németh was able to “immerse herself in her role”,<sup>215</sup> and she was “more natural and sincere” than Birkás.<sup>216</sup> However, according to the chief director of the Operetta Theatre, her performance was not free from “all the frills of the past”, and she remained the same “sweet, naïve type of woman” in different dramatic situations.<sup>217</sup>

As far as members of the second couple were concerned, Zsuzsa Petress received a more positive assessment, but her acting was described with only a few adjectives (“authentic, fresh and temperamental in her role as a waitress awakened to class consciousness”<sup>218</sup>), and sometimes criticized as “being not yet free from the old, exhibitionist soubrette style”.<sup>219</sup> On the other hand, Róbert Rátonyi received the most severe criticism of his career so far for the use of “buffo stereotypes”<sup>220</sup> and “familiar garbage”<sup>221</sup>, for “hunting for cheap success”,<sup>222</sup> but the reason for the problems of his acting was said to be the insurmountable “internal contradictions” of Miki’s character.<sup>223</sup> Only Géza Pártos appreciated Rátonyi’s acting as a “decisive turn in his artistic career”, noting that the partly successful attempt for stripping his mannerism had to be recognized.<sup>224</sup> In addition, Lajos Mányay’s portrayal of George Stan and József Antalffy’s One-Eyed were praised, since the actors did not underestimate the enemy and did not show them too stupid and harmless.<sup>225</sup> Vera Sennyey was also highlighted for providing a lot in the “short role of

<sup>213</sup> Tóth: *Szabad szél*, 7.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6. – Cf. also “Concerning realist acting, the Operetta Theatre had improved far more than the Opera House. These two singers [i.e. Lilián Birkás and Andor Lendvai] were extremely operatic in the Operetta Theatre. [...] I wouldn’t have worked with opera singers since Marika Németh proved to solve the task better than Lilian Birkás with her immense musical knowledge and ability. And in spite of Lendvai’s amazing singing skills, that young actor [Tibor Nádas] played the role [of Caesar Gall] better on Wednesday. Lendvai’s singing could not be understood, I didn’t grasp the lyrics. He forced his voice, he tried to get results with excessive accents, but remained ineffective.” Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 5.

<sup>215</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

<sup>216</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>217</sup> Apáthy, *Szövetségi vita*, 15–16.

<sup>218</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>219</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>220</sup> Apáthy, *Szövetségi vita*, 15–16.

<sup>221</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>222</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. Gáspár: *Szabad szél*, 364. – Cf. also “Rátonyi has to play three types of figures, which is extremely difficult. The first is a clumsy, gawky fop, the second is a man on the right track, and the third is a fighting character, who confronts the enemy, if necessary. These three figures must be united by the actor even if the role is just thrown at the audience in the first act by the author.” Alfonso, *Szövetségi vita*, 10.

<sup>224</sup> Pártos, *Szövetségi vita*, 18–19.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. Gáspár: *Szabad szél*, 364.

The Marquise. The audience made her repeat her song”,<sup>226</sup> however, this fact, the remnant of the “old” style of playing operettas that ignored realism was strangely not reproached.

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

The richness of sound proved to raise more attention than the picturesque stage setting. At the professional discussion of the production Endre Székely considered the results achieved in the field of music to be the most important,<sup>227</sup> and Margit Gáspár’s recollections confirmed his opinion: “*Free Wind* was one of our musically best shows”.<sup>228</sup> The orchestra was significantly expanded and László Várady oversaw its work “with precision worthy of his past as an opera conductor” for a “surprisingly coherent production, gaining revolutionary momentum”.<sup>229</sup> The orchestra “expressed its gratitude for instruction with soft tones” and its performance excelled not only in great ensembles and grandiose finales, in which the choir, also augmented, took part, but in “moments full of gentle sounds or fresh dynamics” as well.<sup>230</sup> Setting unreasonable demands in every aspect, it was only the review of *Szabad Nép* that missed “some more energy and passion” from Várady’s conducting, despite the fact that Várady had been employed as an assistant by the most influential maestros of the era (Bruno Walter and Wilhelm Furtwängler) about a decade earlier.<sup>231</sup> However, the maximization of quasi-operatic sound caused problems in the balance of the stage and the pit. The musicians tried to avoid “covering the stage”,<sup>232</sup> but the orchestra was felt “too strong when accompanying songs” and “suppressing the lyrics” at times, the understanding of which would have been fundamental, as “the lyrics were strictly united with the prosaic text” here.<sup>233</sup>

Scenography, designed by the team of *Students of Vienna*, aimed at representing the places required by the libretto, combining scenes revealed by painted backdrops with built elements in front of them in a *trompe l’oeil*. Namely, a small square of a southern port city with multi-storey houses on its sides, a steep lane further away and a lamppost, a gas station and power lines, which gave a realistic touch to the fairytale-like image, full of slanting

<sup>226</sup> Alfonso, *Szövetségi vita*, 10. – Since Margit Gáspár wanted Mária Mezei to play The Marquise, she had Tibor Polgár insert a song for her. However, during the rehearsal process, “when posters had already been printed”, Mezei gave the role back so that she could go to Pécs instead to play Anna Karenina. Cf. Bános: *A színigazgató*, 30.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 5.

<sup>228</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 26.

<sup>229</sup> Szenthegyi: *A Szabad szél zenéje*, 5.

<sup>230</sup> Jemnitz: *Szabad szél*, 4.

<sup>231</sup> L. J.: *Szabad szél*, 6.

<sup>232</sup> Tóth: *Szabad szél*, 7.

<sup>233</sup> Perényi, *Szövetségi vita*, 8.

lines and sinuous shapes. Then the sailors' bar, addressed to the Seventh Heaven, with massive vaults, a fishing net and lampions high above and an illuminated mermaid as a decoration at the top of the bar. Zoltán Fülöp's sets, creating a "spacious, cozy frame" for each scene,<sup>234</sup> and Tivadar Márk's costumes, matching all characters and becoming slightly exaggerated only on figures involved in intrigues, gave nice examples of "operetta realism", mentioned at the professional discussion of the production, though not clearly defined. In addition, lighting was highly appreciated as an essential element of scenography, which had operatic richness too, but lacked ostentation and fully served the *mise-en-scène*. So did dance, culminating in the wedding preparation of the second finale, and full of movements proving that "operetta was suitable for bringing folk dances to the stage".<sup>235</sup> *Free Wind* was Ágnes Roboz's thesis project in choreography at the College of Theatre and Film Arts, and concerning dances in an operetta, she really made a difference in the production, even though the initiative was already there in *Students of Vienna*. According to her distinction, "songs were followed by dance [in the past], regardless of the lyrics, the essence of the songs and their participants. It was a necessary and inevitable constituent. On the other hand, it was a separate show performed by a team of boys and girls."<sup>236</sup> However, this "dull group no longer shows off, but the people dance and look into their future with joy and confidence".<sup>237</sup> That's why she considered the "appearance of folk dance on our operetta stage" so significant, and gave many fine examples of it in later productions of the Operetta Theatre.<sup>238</sup>

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Despite the fact that the adaptation made Dunayevsky's play as effective as the operettas of Lehár and Kálmán a few years later, *Free Wind* did not become part of the standard repertory of Hungarian theatres, unlike the new versions of *The Count of Luxembourg* and *The Csárdás Princess*. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Culture, *Free Wind* was performed 87 times in 1950 and 22 times in the next three years for a total of 74,563 spectators.<sup>239</sup> The production had completed the endeavor to stage nine new Soviet plays (plus two revivals) in the prosaic theatres of Budapest in the

<sup>234</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Szabad szél*, 5.

<sup>235</sup> Székely, *Szövetségi vita*, 5.

<sup>236</sup> Speech by Ágnes Roboz, *Szövetségi vita*, 19.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> The National Archives of Hungary, MNL OL XXXII. 20.

1949–50 season,<sup>240</sup> targeting a “new audience of predominantly workers”.<sup>241</sup> They were drawn into theatres with season tickets and group visits, and at the professional discussion of *Free Wind* one of their representatives gave voice to his receptiveness to a simple referential reading of the play stressed by critics.<sup>242</sup> However, some theatre people also had a naïve conception of the impact of *Free Wind*, when stating that “it steered young people’s desires for tales and adventures in a direction favored by the party”, and it “enhanced productive forces in spectators, who left the theatre as better people, who could work more and solve their own questions easier”.<sup>243</sup> Therefore the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Society published an abbreviated version of the operetta and its piano-vocal score for small theatre groups still in 1950. The adaptation of Gyula Kolozsvári and György Behár was published several times, and the songs became available in various collections. Thanks to its wide dissemination, *Free Wind* was well-known even decades later.<sup>244</sup>

However, having done the job of political mobilization, Dunayevsky’s work appeared less and less often on Hungarian stages. Although it was staged in Miskolc already two weeks after its opening at the Operetta Theatre, and altogether more than 500 performances were held in Kecskemét, Debrecen, Pécs, Szeged, Győr, Szolnok, Eger, Békéscsaba and at Déryné Theatre, only five new productions were produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Later even fewer. After a modest renaissance in the 1980s, when it re-appeared in the theatres of Szolnok, Debrecen and Békéscsaba, only Csaba Tasnádi staged it in Kecskemét in 1999 with loads of irony. Reviewing the 1983 production in Szolnok, Judit Csáki had already put *Free Wind* in a historical context and considered “its revival in a changed socio-spiritual aura” justified as “an important document of an era”.<sup>245</sup> Director Tibor Csizmadia did not apply parody or exaggeration: he reflected the work and the historical era in it by showing them in their purity, trusting the spectators’ ability to “draw the necessary conclusions”.<sup>246</sup> At the same time, Dunayevsky’s work became more

<sup>240</sup> Cf. Korossy: Színházirányítás, 86.

<sup>241</sup> Fogarasi: *Szabad szél*, 483.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. “The newspapers wrote about the long and toilsome struggle that Italian and French port workers were fighting when they wouldn’t unload weapons. We know they would lay down their lives for continuing the fight for peace. This fight was well expressed in the play by the behavior of the sailors when Márkó informed them and they refused to board collectively in the last scene.” Krausz, *Szövetségi vita*, 14.

<sup>243</sup> Sebestyén, *Szövetségi vita*, 13.

<sup>244</sup> Csáki: “Hajhó! Zengj, te szabad szél!”, 39.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. – “*Free wind*, which previously mobilized audiences with its heroism, shows us the same heroic deeds in windless conditions now.” Although it had been topical and its “romantic-revolutionary music had incited actions” thirty years earlier, it had already become statuesque and Csizmadia’s ideas referred to this state in this show. But in the end “the goodies have an overwhelming victory. Intrigue is unveiled and though the sailors crave

and more *passé*, similarly to the whole set of doctrines in its background after the regime change in 1989. Although the Operetta Theatre created a brilliant grand operetta from *Free Wind*, full of lavish melodies, the ideological chains which criticism forced it into cannot be removed now.

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the high seas, they won't sail against the freedom of a small country. They celebrate their triumph and their enemy's ugly downfall with an enthusiastic beach party. They all put on swimsuits to sing the finale." Ibid.

A CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTION  
BECOMES A LASTING LESSON  
IMRE APÁTHY: *ORPHEUS*, 1952



*Title:* Orpheus. *Date of Premiere:* 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1952. *Venue:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Imre Apáthy. *Authors:* György Hámos, József Romhányi. *Composer:* Jacques Offenbach. *Musical arrangement, re-orchestration:* Tibor Polgár. *Set designer:* Zoltán Gara. *Costume designer:* István Köpeczi Boócz. *Choreography:* Eugenius Papliński. *Conductor:* Tamás Bródy. *Company:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* László Hadics, László Palócz (Orpheus), Zsuzsa Petress, Marika Németh (Eurydice) Lili Berky (Hermina), Pál Homm, György Dénes (Pluto), Kamill Feleki (John Styx), Gábor Agárdy (Jupiter), Róbert Rátonyi (Mars), László Keleti (Vulcan), József Antalffy (Mercury), Judit Hódossi (Cupid), Magda Mindszenty (Juno), Ilona Kiss (Venus), Éva Fenyvessy (Luna), Teréz Komlóssi (Diana), Magda Gyenes (Minerva), Hugó Csák (Helios), Gusztáv Vándory (Asclepius), Lajos Gárday (Augeas), Kálmán Rózsahegyi (Kronos), Sándor Tekerés (Apollo), Erzsi Hont (Hecate), György Dénes (High Priest), György Pálos (Glaucos), József Gyurián (Poponrugos), Elli Rajnai, Erzsi Saághy, Éva Marton, Margit Kelemen (Drusilla, Charis, Arsinoe, Cipris: Eurydice's friends), Pál Décsi, Sándor Novák, Pál Juhász (Amphion, Sosias, Zeno: Disciples of Orpheus), Éva Thuri (Postman angel), Ilona Novák (Doorman angel), György Bikády, György Simonffi (Underworld servant 1), László Csihák (Underworld servant 2), István Albert (Lion).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

Although spectators liked it, *Orpheus* came under scathing attack in the press. Trying to adapt to the expectations of “state-religious culture”,<sup>247</sup> the production rooted in the political zeal of the Operetta Theatre, but ended up as an obvious failure according to its creators’ self-assessment. Critics appreciated the “brave and noble intention” to come up with a play that

<sup>247</sup> The term is used by Ákos Szilágyi in his study on films during Stalinism. Cf. Ákos Szilágyi: A sztálini idők mozija 1, *Filmvilág* 31:9 (1988), 36. The term also comes in handy for the theatre of the Rákosi Era, when theatres were expected to propagate not only anticlericalism (significant in case of *Orpheus*) but also the omnipotence of the one-party system with its ideology.

“encourages people to fight for peace and uses the means of satire to expose the hypocritical lies and desperate manipulations of Western imperialists”.<sup>248</sup> Focusing on Orpheus, who makes the earth sing and causes the twilight of gods and the underworld alike, the production had a current political purpose: it joined the peculiarly distorted trend of the international peace movement, which began at the World Congress of Partisans for Peace in Paris in April 1949, and was transformed into a myth of communist fight for peace.<sup>249</sup> This trend was driven by extensive armament that Hungary had to carry out on Soviet orders, subverting all preliminary economic calculations.<sup>250</sup> While leaders of the Hungarian Working People’s Party tried to transform Hungary into “the country of iron and steel” within a few years, “the wasteful draining of resources for armament caused perpetuating deprivation for almost all of society”.<sup>251</sup> Therefore, propaganda was desperately needed in all media, and the premiere of *Orpheus* became part of it “in the current Cold War milieu”.<sup>252</sup>

In terms of its socio-political context, it was linked to two more campaigns. The press found the miscarried goal of the unveiling of “a naïve, benevolent but objectively harmful pacifism” inherent in the production, and made it clear that the pact between the Olympus and the Underworld “was mocking the relationship between death factory workers [i.e. fascists] and right-wing Social

<sup>248</sup> Péter Bacsó: *Orfeusz*. Bemutató a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, Vol. 3, No. 11, *Irodalmi Újság*, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1952, 5.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. “The phrase *fight for peace* must have appeared in Hungarian in 1950, after the World Congress of Partisans for Peace in Paris.” András Kicsi Sándor: A békeharcról, *Holmi* 3:5 (1991), 604. – *Fight for peace* became the central term of a book published in 1950, including the writings of Mátyás Rákosi and József Révai. *Harcolunk a békéért. A nemzetközi békemozgalom útja* (We Fight for Peace. The Way of the International Peace Movement) projected the history of the movement back to the early 20th century in order to give Lenin and Stalin key roles in it. At the second Congress of the Hungarian Working People’s Party in March 1951, Rákosi described the international situation in terms of “our defending peace and fighting against imperialist war arsonists”, and said that the communist parties of the Soviet Union, the people’s democracies and some capitalist countries came to the fore in this fight. Cf. <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=10779> (accessed 18 February 2021).

<sup>250</sup> Cf. “In early January 1951, Stalin invited the communist party leaders of the allied states. At this meeting in Moscow, the lord of Kremlin demanded the immediate launch of an arms program of a volume and speed that all leaders considered unworkable by the scheduled time, until the end of 1953. [...] Having returned from Moscow, under the supervision of Soviet advisers in Budapest, they started to raise the appropriations for the first five-year plan already underway at a rapid rate. [...] Historiography refers to this plan, corrected in early 1951, as an ‘elevated’ or ‘intensified’ plan, primarily aimed at increasing the already preferred military development. [...] Stalin’s new directive, which was almost dated to the supposed outbreak of The Third World War – and the vehement propaganda associated with it – demanded an absolute priority for arms industrial development.” Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 168 and 170.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 171 and 209.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

Democrats”.<sup>253</sup> So *Orpheus* became involved in the campaign against pacifism, which used to be a swear word at that time: against the “bourgeois attitude” of those who also wanted peace, but refused to fight. However, the production was reproached for getting stuck in just “dreaming of peace”, in spite of some sentences about “the importance of fighting for peace”.<sup>254</sup> On the other hand, *Orpheus* was also implicated in the anti-Social Democrat campaign of the Hungarian Working People’s Party, which systematically destroyed its internalized enemy between 1950 and 1952.<sup>255</sup> All in all, ten days before the country celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of “Stalin’s best Hungarian disciple”, i.e. Mátyás Rákosi with much ado on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1952, the production, written with remarkable ingeniousness despite its schematism, was interpreted as an example of the Operetta Theatre’s willing to comply. Ultimately, its creators could get over everything the superior institutions expected. Since “the dramatic literature of the 1948–1949 season had been condemned to be politically uncertain”, Hungarian playwrights had to “commit themselves firmly to socialist realism for the following season. Nevertheless, [...] anti-imperialist themes as well as the ‘fight for peace’ were missed and anti-church propaganda was found too weak.”<sup>256</sup> *Orpheus* focused on these shortcomings and weaknesses, even more diversely than promised by the central season planning for 1951–1952, when it was only mentioned that its “new text would satirize the relationship of the White House and the American underworld”.<sup>257</sup>

As a tendentious refashioning of a classic, *Orpheus* became the season’s second premiere between *The Women of Szelistye* and *The State Department Store*, two new Hungarian operettas with a historical and a contemporary story, respectively. It was based on the lesson learned from the rewriting of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* two years earlier, and sharply distanced from the profile of the Fővárosi Víg Theatre, which started at the beginning of that season and was “planned to be transformed into a theatre of operettas from an unspecified revue theatre”.<sup>258</sup> Although some of the productions staged under the management of Margit Gáspár so far failed in official judgement,

<sup>253</sup> Gábor Antal: *Orfeusz*. Hámos György operettje a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 8, No. 64, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1952, 7.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. – “When planning the 1950–1951 season, Brecht’s classic, *Mother Courage and Her Children* from the German Democratic Republic was considered to be staged [certainly not in the Operetta Theatre]. However, it was treated with caution, since objections were raised to the ‘alleged pacifist’ tendencies of the work. As a result, it was only in March 1968 that this play could be staged.” Korossy: Színházirányítás, 100.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. “Social Democrats could not be forgiven for agreeing with [István] Bethlen in 1921 and operating within a legal framework and often in alliance with the various bourgeois parties throughout the Horthy Era.” Ignác Romsics: *Magyarország a XX. században*, Budapest, Osiris, 2010, 229.

<sup>256</sup> Korossy: Színházirányítás, 86.

<sup>257</sup> The National Archives of Hungary, M-KS 276. f. 89.cs. 399.

<sup>258</sup> Korossy: Színházirányítás, 109.

“all the eight operettas were highly successful”.<sup>259</sup> So was *Orpheus*, even though the press called the adaptation a fiasco: its subject was considered to be outstanding and exciting, but to lack a “worthy form”.<sup>260</sup> It was found abortive *ab ovo*, since revivals and adaptations of the play, intended for political satire by Offenbach, “had always mocked the repressive regime”, and the allegorical form of persiflage had allowed “well-known politicians, hidden in tunics, to be scorned in an unharmed way”.<sup>261</sup> As critics of the Rákosi Era did not find a repressive regime in Hungary in the early 1950s, they believed that “the author should have said what he had to say freely, without tunic, with open helmet, in a satire on a current subject”.<sup>262</sup> They considered it a serious mistake that “our writer, Comrade György Hámos, who had been honored the Kossuth Prize by the state of the people for the creation of the first socialist operetta, the highly successful *Golden Star*” did not choose this path.<sup>263</sup> The management of the Operetta Theatre also declared the experiment “inadequate”,<sup>264</sup> as it could not master the tension of the renewed libretto and the score, despite comprehensive musical arrangement and re-orchestration.<sup>265</sup> Although the auditorium was packed every evening, the press could not get rid of the doctrine that “success does not always give justification, and it gives false justification every now and again”.<sup>266</sup> The creators of *Orpheus*, however, gained important lessons from their misstep soon.

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Since the adaptation far exceeded the boundaries of updating, it was severely criticized. Although the 1950 production of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* was a direct antecedent, the adaptors worked differently. *The Grand Duchess* was about “the satirical unveiling of the ruling cliques behind ‘Napoléon le Petit’, and social critique was enhanced to scorn today’s Napoléons”<sup>267</sup> by

<sup>259</sup> Rátonyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, 289.

<sup>260</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>261</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> No author: Írói magatartás, *Világosság*, Vol. 9, No. 88, 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1952, 6.

<sup>264</sup> Semsei, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 73.

<sup>265</sup> Cf. *Orpheus* “didn’t work out at all. It was an unfortunate case. Gyuri Hámos wrote a beautiful play, full of lovely details, but it had nothing to do with the music. The music was about the opposite. Certainly, it was our fault. We were planning a large-scale production with the message that people wanted peace, only the arms manufacturers were instating wars, and it was excellently written, but it was in stark contrast to Offenbach’s hot, frivolous and perfumed music. We played it ninety-eight times [in fact eighty-four times], thanks to the brilliant music, [...] but I hated it all along.” Sándor Venczel: Virágkor tövisekkel. Beszélgetés Gáspár Margittal, Part 2, *Színház* 32:9 (1999), 39.

<sup>266</sup> Speech by Béla Mátray-Betegh, in *Az operett kérdéseiről*, 38.

<sup>267</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

the adaptors, István Békeffy and Dezső Kellér, who followed Margit Gáspár's guidelines. However, in order to give raging topicality to the less direct satirical aspects of *Orphée aux Enfers* and, in addition to mocking the enemies of peace, to exalt the lofty ideals of fighting for it, György Hámos "had to add and remove a lot", as a result of which "only the buttons remained from the old coat".<sup>268</sup> Offenbach's *opéra bouffon*, set in three places (heaven, hell and the earth), was refashioned to such an extent that it is pointless to compare the two versions exhaustively. There are reminiscences of situations, motifs and melodies from the old play, and there are some considerable overlaps, but the 1952 *Orpheus* of the Operetta Theatre takes a completely different path, with music completely adjusted to it, than the 1858 Parisian version. The fact of rewriting was acknowledged and legitimized by the press: it was considered necessary from the point of view of the myth and the political purpose alike. On the one hand, it was stated that "all myths and legends must change constantly, enrich themselves with new and new colors and develop their contents together with the age".<sup>269</sup> On the other hand, the libretto was thought "to have lost its bold message, [and] as it had moved further away from France and its original era, its references, characters, twists and turns had become greyer, less understandable and meaningless".<sup>270</sup> This instrumental conception of myth and drama provided both the evocation of the hinted-at end goal (communist salvation history) – i.e. "how modern man sees the hero of the ancient legend progressing towards ever wider horizons"<sup>271</sup> – and the idea of a return to a supposed origin – i.e. to the initial progressive spirit of the play".<sup>272</sup> It also allowed the construction of an *ars poetica* for the socialist artist, "who fights with the forces of darkness", since (as the daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* wrote) "today's authors hold the torch of a struggle for the world of freedom instead of the world of limitations".<sup>273</sup>

As an example of the playwright's inventions, the "beautiful and promising" beginning of *Orpheus* was highlighted,<sup>274</sup> which steered the plot in opposite direction as the opening of *Orphée aux Enfers*. In the libretto of Hector Crémieux and Ludovic Halévy (after the introduction of the personification

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> d.sz.: Isteneknek álcázott gonosztevők. Az új *Orfeusz* próbája a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Világosság*, Vol. 9, No. 33, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1952, 6.

<sup>271</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>272</sup> d.sz.: Isteneknek álcázott, 6. – "The spectator quickly comes to know who are behind these Greek gods, defending their declining rule with tyrannical terror. Jupiter, who constantly threatens the world with his lightning, [...] is extremely familiar to today's spectators, similarly to Jupiter's underworld vassals, with whom he conspires to prevent the Orphean song of peace that 'tames even the beasts.'" Therefore, the play is suitable to "unmask the enemies of humanity and peace in the mirror of caricature". Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>274</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

of Public Opinion), Eurydice is creating a garland of flowers collected during her song and then she is placing it on the door of the shepherd Aristaeus' hut. The couplet is extremely frivolous, as she does not want to hear from her husband, Orpheus ever again – “N'en dites rien à mon mari, / Car c'est pour le berger joli / Qui loge ici.” –, but she welcomes the shepherd's courtship, in whose disguise, without her knowing it, Pluto, the master of the underworld, woos her. Later she has a duet with Orpheus, director of the Orphéon in Thebes,<sup>275</sup> emotionally unstable too, and chasing a nymph now, which duet becomes a family quarrel, including the husband's violin concerto, since he knows that her wife cannot stand it. In the adaptation made by György Hámos (after the girls' wedding song and dance) Eurydice's song is full of deep feelings for her fiancé: “My heart trembles when I see you, / It beats so fast, / My troubles melt into a soft smile / When I think of you”. Her duet with Orpheus is the mutual expression of love until the grave, after some bantering, in which the violin solo sounds conciliating. According to critics, this opening, indeed an inverse of the original, showed that Hámos “had recognized and improved the beautiful poetic values of the authentic myth of Orpheus with its ideological power, which still has an impact today”.<sup>276</sup>

In addition to the lofty and heroic plot, which culminated in the repeated and increasingly resilient singing of Orpheus' song for peace,<sup>277</sup> some well-written characters were also appreciated. Vulcan, for example, who is “the type of right-wing Social Democrat, referring constantly to his non-existent masses and workworn hands until he is exposed and beaten by self-conscious workers”.<sup>278</sup> Or “the progressive, little Cupid, who bravely opposes the Olympus for the sake of the lovers, then leaves the gods and sides with the people, because she understands that true and happy love can only flourish in a country of peace and freedom”.<sup>279</sup> The third act was also praised for making

<sup>275</sup> Cf. “The French word *Orphéon*, deriving from the name of Orpheus, referred to the art lover's choir movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose society was formed in Paris in 1833, in the year of Offenbach's arrival at the French capital. [...] Similar choral groups were formed throughout France later, and the Orphéon in Paris was also responsible for overseeing music education at schools. [...] Several French composers were active in this movement, for example Charles Gounod, who was director of the Orphéon in Paris from 1852 to 1860 – i.e. at the time of the premiere of Offenbach's operetta – and wrote choir works for men, two masses and some smaller choral works.” Péter Bozó: „Orphée à l'envers”. Egy idézet a francia zenés színpadi hagyomány kontextusában, Part 1, *Muzsika* 53:10 (2010), 13.

<sup>276</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>277</sup> There was a critic who tried to decipher the meaning and symbolic content of this song. Cf. “György Hámos's Orpheus is singing not only to beasts and rocks, but also primarily to the people. His song embodies human understanding and creativity, which fights against the blindness of power. It represents the awakening human consciousness, which fights tyranny that crushes humanity. It symbolizes the human will for peace and happiness, which is capable of controlling violence and wars.” *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

the most of both satire and plot and “demonstrating the internal conflicts of two imperialist powers, struggling for sources of raw materials, and forming an alliance nevertheless against the country of Prometheus and peace”.<sup>280</sup> The ending was found outstanding too, since not only did Orpheus get his lover back, but “the far-sounding peace song of the people also swept away the high justice, which condemned lovers to death, and made the underworld tremble. The finale beautifully and poetically stood for the overwhelming power of ordinary people fighting for peace and defeating pro-war attitude.”<sup>281</sup>

However, the list of defects was much longer, and although *Orpheus* was an operetta, the lack of depth stood in the first place.<sup>282</sup> Superficiality and the underestimated danger of the enemy was mainly pointed out in some figures, such as Jupiter, whose “hypocritical willingness for peace” is exposed in the play, but “the overall image of this hostile chief deity is not deep and typical enough. He resembles a cranky, slightly senile old gentleman instead of a resolute and perilous tyrant. Mars, the god of war is a bellicose drunkard, and Venus is a swinging, tipsy baroness.”<sup>283</sup> Satire was widely welcome, but overpoliticization<sup>284</sup> and the misinterpretation of humor were considered as mistakes. Although the humor of *Orphée aux Enfers* had always come from anachronisms, and Hámos “only” refreshed them, critics found it disturbing that the humor “primarily stemmed from jokes and witty remarks instead of satirical characters and situations”,<sup>285</sup> and “the author took some of the anachronisms from our phraseology”.<sup>286</sup> At the same time, they considered some of the elements aimed at laughter too sophisticated for a spectator “who is not an expert but wants to learn and have fun.”<sup>287</sup> The weakness of the

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. “György Hámos makes a successful attempt at the beginning to unfold the problem of art striving for the happiness of the people from Orpheus’ tale, but unfortunately he does not go deep enough in the subject.” Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>283</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>284</sup> Cf. “The effect of persiflage is weakened because the author often unduly overpoliticizes what he intends to say. Satire achieves its goal when it reveals types and relationships, not when the author unnecessarily expresses his views on his figures by means of journalism.” Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> “The main source of verbal humor is the all too many anachronisms in the play. [...] Jupiter has acid reflux, [...] another god is preparing for unpaid leave, and old Kronos is installing a dynamo engine on the wheel of time as an innovation.” Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> “The drunken Mars, for example, drinks neither nectar nor Coca Cola, he drinks extra profit. Jupiter talks about schematism and mass songs, [...] Styx, the ex-king, moved into the underworld, has his throne in the commission store [...]. Sometimes the gods call their fellows ‘rogues’, discuss ‘doing in’ and the like.” Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7. – “György Hámos’s play seeks to use the most characteristic motifs of Offenbach’s operetta. [...] Anyone who knows Greek mythology and the libretto of the old operetta appreciates the writer’s skill at matching things that don’t fit together. [...] But despite some truly beautiful poetic scenes, the play is full of failed, vague hints”. Ibid.

parts requiring gravity was said to be the deviation “into unduly sentimental depths”, “the primitively ‘poetic’ means of conveying the message” and the “rudimentary forms of positive symbolism”.<sup>288</sup>

Music, adjusted to the new libretto by Tibor Polgár, a former student of Zoltán Kodály in the 1920s, was also criticized, both for its impact and for the sheer fact that it had been borrowed from Offenbach. Some songs were given to different characters than in the original, and in spite of re-orchestration the music did not always harmonize with the modified verse.<sup>289</sup> Some reviewers felt the power of the song for peace inadequate and deplored its “pleasant music incompatible with the most important and decisive function of the fight for peace brought on stage”.<sup>290</sup> That is why they resented the retention of the French composer’s music, and thought it should have been completely rewritten: “Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld* takes a look at the myth in the world of music halls”, and “only with utterly new music could an operetta about Orpheus express the struggle of the people and the struggle of art faithful to the people today”.<sup>291</sup> The author of the new libretto responded to the rather blinkered criticism in the columns of *Független Magyarország*, listing the objections and his responses to them, bearing in mind the structure of the play and stressing the dramatic function of the elements found problematic.<sup>292</sup> His “boldness” was not tolerated, and the

<sup>288</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5. – “Prometheus’ country is a primitive symbol of the Soviet Union.” Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Tibor Polgár had already carried out the re-orchestration of *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* two years earlier, and at a discussion of the Music Association, Rezső Kókai concluded that “the re-orchestrated music brought the plot closer to the audience than the original did”. (*Jegyzőkönyv az operett és tánczenei szakosztály 1950. február 27-i üléséről*. Typed manuscript, 1. Location: The National Archives of Hungary 2146/62.) Tibor Polgár added that “Offenbach’s orchestration is not refreshing enough for our ears today. [...] Being aware of this shortcoming, I tried to add color and shine, which the music deserves, anyway.” (Ibid. 3.) He also referred to Bartók, who “believed that the arranger should feel free to touch the material. Some figures of the woodwinds are the result of such a bolder touch, but they have not changed the essence of the original music.” (Ibid. 4.)

<sup>290</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7. – “Only the gods are not threatened by József Romhányi’s clever lyrics, and unfortunately the audience agrees with them. When the evil and cynical Jupiter notes that he does not seem to be a tiger, because the song of Orpheus has not changed him at all, the spectator, who is neither evil nor cynical, must agree with him.” Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> According to Hámos, (1) the charge of pacifism arose mainly in connection with the first act, where people pray for peace a lot, but this act should not be regarded separately from the others. The play is about to confirm that “we’re not getting anywhere with pacifism, by only dreaming of peace. To prove this, [...] I had to start with an absolute desire for peace at the beginning of the play.” He calls the interpretation that Orpheus’ peace song is a particular song wrong: “No. It is a symbol of humanity’s desire for peace, which later, in the second act, confronts the enemies of peace and is strengthened into a will for peace.” Seeing the conduct of the gods, Orpheus understands that he has to fight for peace and for his partner by other means. “When we hear the song again in the third act, it sounds very different. It is tougher so to say, more militant and reminiscent of the melody of Marseillaise, which is also featured in Offenbach’s original music. Therefore, this will for peace is revolutionary and

counter-response came in a short article of *Világosság*, which categorically stated that “the play received harsh criticism, because the adaptation did not achieve a useful goal. [...] Comrade Hámos snubbed criticism in his statement, rejecting all the objections plainly. He did not even try to make his claims credible by accepting one. [...] But a writer cannot deny criticism with such superiority, with such aristocratism.”<sup>293</sup> In the era of perpetual self-criticism, the pursuit of rational explanation was not harmless at all, and after *Free Wind*, *The Golden Star* and *Orpheus* Hámos no longer worked for the Operetta Theatre.

### STAGING

Imre Apáthy increased the impact of the text by countless suggestions for his actors, especially in comic scenes, but the *mise-en-scène* was given far less attention than the writer/dramaturg’s work, lashed out in long paragraphs. Apáthy, known for his precise creation of performance texts, came from the legendary Művész Theatre, operating between April 1945 and July 1949. He was placed to the Vidám Theatre and the Kis Komédia after the nationalization, then he became chief director at the Operetta Theatre. He sought to work out both the high and the satirical line of *Orpheus*, but the latter succeeded more, demonstrating that “the director has 100 ideas for the writer and the actors where the libretto provides opportunities for interesting actions and meticulous acting”.<sup>294</sup> This alone would not have been condemned as a mistake, since satire, as a genre and a mode of representation, had come to the foreground at that time. For example, the Ministry of Culture required

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defeats the hellish covenant of the enemies of peace.” Hámos stated that (2) “*Orpheus* is not a ‘key drama’. It is not a satirical copy of real events.” There are hints for real events and real people, “but the play primarily works with symbols representing greater things.” (3) Hámos also responded to the mistake of the underestimated danger of the enemy. “In my opinion, an operetta, by means of its own genre, can only go up to a certain limit in the representation of a dangerous and evil enemy: it provides satire, in which the enemy exposes himself and makes us laugh at them.” (4) He defended allegory, even though some critics objected it, since they found it unnecessary, when events and individuals can already be represented directly. “Allegory is not a thick bush in which the author hides. It is an independent and timeless genre, because it expresses certain things from a different aspect, by means of fairy tale and satire.” And to the charge of (5) failing to represent John Stix’s comic figure in an adequate way, he replied that “in his character, satire brings a silly king, a talentless potentate losing power, to the stage. This character is said to be sympathetic. No, he isn’t. Just amusing.” At the same time, Hámos criticized his critics for “not respecting the new way: the search for a way of satire mobilized for a higher purpose”. No author: Amit a kritikusok kérnek számon a szerzőtől s amit a szerző kér számon a kritikusoktól. Hámos György, az *Orfeusz* szövegírója felel az elhangzott bírálatokra, *Független Magyarország*, Vol. 14, No. 12, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1952, 7.

<sup>293</sup> No author: Írói magatartás, 6.

<sup>294</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

the Vidám Theatre to be transformed into “a satirical theatre, for ‘killing by ridiculing’, instead of playing farces”.<sup>295</sup> Soviet literary criticism also favored satirical literature and “Malenkov suggested at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Party that ‘we need Soviet Gogols and [Mikhail Saltykov-]Shchedrins who burn out of life everything that is negative, rotten and poisonous with the fire of satire’”.<sup>296</sup> However, several reviews disclosed that different parts of the text in *Orpheus* could not be seamlessly interwoven, and although “the components from which the author built the libretto are good in themselves, but having been thrown together, they decrease each other’s impact and value”.<sup>297</sup> According to the requirement of the unit of style, the supposed mixing of genres seemed to be problematic too: “Orpheus and Wall Street, Offenbach and fight for peace, operetta and cabaret, heroism and our familiar jokes from Pest”.<sup>298</sup> Although it was acknowledged that the director had indeed had a difficult job with the revised *Orpheus*, Apáthy’s achievement was deemed as unsatisfying as that of Hámos.<sup>299</sup> Decades later Margit Gáspár declared that the management of the theatre had had no intention of giving the production “an anti-religious tone”, but Apáthy “had started a counter-action”: “When I saw Jupiter in a white shirt with a halo around his head at the dress rehearsal, I started to scream and made him take it off. I was to blame too, of course, because I hadn’t watched it before.”<sup>300</sup> The disappointment about the *mise-en-scène* may have been increased by those phrases that allowed as much reference to the contradictions of the Communist regime as they advertised from its ideology.<sup>301</sup> Obviously, “doublespeak” could not have

<sup>295</sup> Korossy: Színházirányítás, 102.

<sup>296</sup> Péter Hámos: Gondolatok a proletkult nevetéshez. Gertler Viktor Állami áruháza és kora, *Hítel* 29:3 (2017), 73. – Source of the words by Georgy Maksimilianovich Malenkov: A Központi Bizottság beszámolója az SzK(b)P XIX. kongresszusának, 1952. október 5. Budapest, Szikra, 1952, 72.

<sup>297</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> Cf. “[...] we are not satisfied with the *mise-en-scène* either. It does not have an easy job, as it has to move a series of identical figures in an operatic Greek landscape in the first act, in a Wall Street-Olympus cabaret in the second, and in a spectacular Underworld operetta in the third.” *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> Venczel: Virágkor, Part 2, 39.

<sup>301</sup> For example, the minister of the underworld asks if Jupiter will not find out that some of the brimstone mines are being kept from him. After all, he is omniscient. But Pluto replies, “It’s just propaganda.” (Act 2, Scene 8) When their secret is revealed, the minister repeats, “I told you he was omniscient!” Pluto says, “Hell, he isn’t omniscient. He’s got spies.” (Act 2, Scene 18) When John Stix writes a petition for Jupiter, but the chief god does not respond, he notes that he does not understand why the creator of the world is so proud when “between us, the result is not very successful. It’s full of schematism.” (Act 3, Scene 1, 7.) When Jupiter announces that the captured Orpheus and Eurydice will be judged by an “independent court”, Pluto asks, “Who will that court be made up of?” And Jupiter says, “Of the two of us.” (Act 3, Scene 2, 2.) In: *Orpheus. Promptbook*, Typed manuscript, Location: Budapest Operetta Theatre. Since page numbering in the promptbook starts again per scene, the numbers in parentheses after the citations apply to acts/scenes/page numbers.

been the goal of the creators, and it was rather risky too, but some moments – perhaps stressed by acting (by an emphasis, a gesture) – may have had such an effect. Strictly unspoken, it may also have contributed to the devaluation of Apáthy's *mise-en-scène*.

#### ACTING

Neither the participants' individual nor their ensemble acting was considered outstanding, and only Kamill Feleki's achievement was found memorable. His John Styx was overshadowed by his legendary series of roles spanning from the Prompter in *Free Wind* (1950), Menyus in *The Palace Hotel* (1951) and Glauzius in *State Department Store* (1952) to Sir Basil in *The Count of Luxembourg* (1952), which were honored by the Kossuth Prize in 1953, yet he shone out of the production of *Orpheus*, even if the role had posed some challenges for him. Critics noted that John Styx, a servant of Pluto, "had nothing to do with the plot, and had only been brought to the Underworld of this 'peace fighting' operetta out of respect for Offenbach".<sup>302</sup> It presented difficulty for the actor, who did not wish to rely on trite comic patterns. Refusing to create the figure only out of jokes and witty remarks, he intended "John's stupidity to be his main negative characteristic".<sup>303</sup> Although no one referred to Stanislavsky in this case, Feleki brought "lots of funny ideas, lots of colors" into the foolish ex-king craving his throne, and became the comic engine of the production.<sup>304</sup>

In contrast, Gábor Agárdy, who made his debut as Jupiter in the capital after his career in Szeged and Miskolc, mostly used familiar tricks as the protagonist of the satirical line of action. The audience loved him in his many burlesque situations, but he was criticized for misplaying "the angry father of lightning".<sup>305</sup> Jupiter was originally intended to be played by Tivadar Bilicsi, and *Orpheus* became memorable for theatre people chiefly because

<sup>302</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>303</sup> György Sas: *Kamillka. Lírai mese egy nagy művésze-ről*, Budapest, Háttér-Editorg, 1988, 116.

<sup>304</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>305</sup> Cf. The actor "would have some opportunities to make us also feel Jupiter's fear shrouded in fearful acts, his cruelty of lightning behind the mantle of graciousness, the characteristic qualities of the classes of history so far. But Agárdy insists on proving how brilliant he is as a buffo, how well he can thunder and buzz, make faces and climb walls. He is less insistent on showing his acting skills this time." Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7. – "Gábor Agárdy, who is introducing himself in Pest now, reveals some of Jupiter's characteristics, his hypocrisy and cowardice with talent. He must strive to capture the figure's determination and cunning in an equally effective way." Péter Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5. – It is interesting to note that there was a production of *Orpheus* not only at the beginning but also at end of Agárdy's career in Pest. His last role before his death in January 2006 was John Styx in *Orpheus in the Underworld* staged by István Iglódi at the Magyar Theatre in 2005.

of the tension caused by his returning his role. At the first rehearsal Bilicsi announced that he would not play Jupiter, because he was deeply religious and did not want to “say some twenty sentences that disrespect God and are highly profane.”<sup>306</sup> Although scandal and punishment could be avoided,<sup>307</sup> “Bilicsi had only been given an undeservedly small role in the next show [Uncle Bezzegh in *State Department Store*] and got into such a situation that he left the theatre soon”.<sup>308</sup>

In addition to highlighting Feleki and Agárdy, reviewers only noted that “the actors’ work is influenced and determined, even more than the director’s, by the shortcomings of the libretto: the vagueness of the message and the shifting from one genre to another”.<sup>309</sup> Therefore, other actors were mentioned rather briefly. “Zsuzsa Petress, with a beautiful voice, played her role charmingly and gracefully”, “the two ‘positive’ gods, old Kronos (Kálmán Rózsahegyi) and young Cupid (Judit Hódossy) gave us pleasant moments”, “Lili Berky played very nicely in the role of a Thracian mother who had lost a son”, “Ilona Kiss as swinging Venus and József Antalffy as roller skating Mercury were amusing, but they had no revealing power either, and the fairly interesting Pluto (Pál Homm) resembled a fascist only in a very indirect way”.<sup>310</sup> Even the premiere’s Orpheus, László Hadics was discussed only in a nutshell: he “sang beautifully, but there was still a lot of rigidity and embarrassment in his acting”.<sup>311</sup> The description of the progress in his acting, parroted continuously, was also replaced by a doctrinaire question: “his building a character is hindered by the dilemma: is Orpheus a hero fighting for peace, or is he a dreamy pacifist?”<sup>312</sup>

<sup>306</sup> Rátónyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, 289.

<sup>307</sup> Cf. “And then [István] Pánczél from the Ministry said that an example had to be made, that Bilicsi had to be punished. Unfortunately, Hámos was also to be blamed, since he had run up to the headquarters of the party out of offended vanity [because he wrote the role for Bilicsi]. And I turned to the head of department at the Ministry, István Kende [...]. He immediately came to the theatre and said that everyone had the right to return a role, there was no way someone should be fined for that, let’s give the role to another actor. That’s how Gabi Agárdy could play Jupiter. He had come from Miskolc and later signed with us.” Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 2, 39.

<sup>308</sup> Rátónyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, 289.

<sup>309</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>312</sup> Antal: *Orfeusz*, 7.

## STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

Contrary to the stage directions of the 1858 libretto, the scenography of the 1952 production of the Operetta Theatre did not facilitate visual humor. The reviews do not help us imagine sets and costumes, but photographs of the actors show antique columns, meander patterns and tunics in various compositions. If we compare these few photos with the stage directions in György Hámos's libretto, we can draw the conclusion that the scenery contained anachronistic elements only in the scene of the Olympus. Although the doorman's small booth, mentioned in the script, is missing, Cupid's desk is visible with a phone and stamps on it among two-dimensional clouds that may have been movable, since the promptbook requires "curtains of clouds to go up" (Act 2, Scene 10), when the sleeping gods become visible. On the other hand, the set of the first act showed nothing more than the "classic Greek landscape" with a "tree-lined clearing" (Act 1, Scene 1), so it created an antique milieu, slightly stylized, nevertheless serious, as opposed to the "original" French libretto, the beginning of which is filled with cheeky visual references. (For example, Aristaeus' hut on the left has the inscription "*fabricant de miel, gros et détail, dépôt au mont Hymette*", and the one on Orpheus' hut on the right reads "*directeur de l'orphéon de Thèbes, leçons au mois et au cachet*".<sup>313</sup>)

According to the Hungarian tradition, the so-called "operetta stairs" rose on stage in all three acts, even behind the complex grid dividing the space in the last act. Exaggerations could only be discovered in case of some figures, e.g. on the face mask of Mars (Róbert Rátónyi, being almost unrecognizable in the photos), or on the slightly court jester-like costume of Kamill Feleki with wide-drawn eyebrows. Overall, neither Zoltán Gara's sets nor István Köpeczi Boócz's costumes had transcended the scenic conventions of productions of musical plays set in ancient Greek times, familiar from both Hungarian and foreign stages, but only crossed with some ornaments. However, the choreography was special indeed, produced by a Polish guest artist, Eugeniusz Papliński, who was just working in Budapest on the production of Stanisław Moniuszko's *Halka* at the Opera House. The Operetta Theatre sought to distinguish his work by mentioning the dances even on the poster: the spectacular swirl of fire and water fairies unleashed by Pluto on Orpheus at the end of the first act, the hilarious cancan that closed the second act, and the bacchanalia inserted into the third act. (In addition, Tibor Polgár's score implies samba and rumba, among others, for dances accompanying some

<sup>313</sup> Jacques Offenbach: *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858), Livret de la première version, <https://mediterranees.net/mythes/orphee/cremieux.html> (accessed 20 December 2020).

musical numbers.) The notorious cancan was not sought to be a climax of frivolity,<sup>314</sup> but it became so, and although spectators certainly loved it, some bureaucrats considered it incompatible with socialist morality.<sup>315</sup>

### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

*Orpheus*, one of the most daring experimental ventures of the Operetta Theatre led by Margit Gáspár, provided a lasting lesson in dramaturgical work. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Culture, 84 performances were seen by 93,423 spectators: in terms of numbers, it was not much behind other shows. However, it provided an easy target at a time when the outbursts against the genre of operetta seemed to be permanently calmed down by the theatre's previous productions. Reviewers denounced *Orpheus* with no exception, questioning the gravity of operetta with some regret, saying that the play needs "clearer ideological elucidation", "stricter consistency of genre", "more profound representation of characters" and "a more demanding, poetic grasp of the subject".<sup>316</sup> Although "there was never a single seat left empty in the auditorium", only "the ballet choir and the instructor of the dances, the Polish national prize-winning choreographer Eugeniusz Papliński" achieved undisputed success.<sup>317</sup> In her report on the season, a month after the last performance, Margit Gáspár herself called *Orpheus* a *faux pas*, admitting that "the task was unusually difficult because the original work was only a distorted mirror, but the writer attempted positive guidance in addition to satire".<sup>318</sup> In fact, she acknowledged that their attempt to overcome *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* was unsuccessful, even if, unlike all critics, she did not consider the development of the play's humorous facet a failure. After all, she found Offenbach's music "corrosive acid", to which we must "add in lyrics that we want to burn with music".<sup>319</sup> Two years later, however, she identified the cause of their misstep in the conflict of the music and the rewritten text. "The Operetta

<sup>314</sup> According to Margit Gáspár, who insisted on the appearance of folk dance in productions of operettas from *Students of Vienna* onward, "cancan, now called such a foolish stage dance, is also of 'folk' origin", just like waltzes and polkas. Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 7.

<sup>315</sup> Cf. Margit Gáspár's anecdote: "Jesus Christ, what we had received for the cancan, which was the only good thing in *Orpheus*! At the opening, poor Anna Ratkó [Head of the Ministry of Health] shouted to the minister sitting in the opposite box, 'How about this indecency?'" Sándor Venczel: Virágkor tövisekkel. Beszélgetés Gáspár Margittal, Part 3. *Színház* 32:10 (1999), 47.

<sup>316</sup> Bacsó: *Orfeusz*, 5.

<sup>317</sup> Rátónyi: *Operett*, Vol. 2, 292–293.

<sup>318</sup> GHS: Az idei évad mérlege – a jövő év tervei. Beszélgetés Gáspár Margittal, a Fővárosi Operettszínház Kossuth-díjas igazgatójával, *Független Magyarország*, Vol. 14, No. 25, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1952, 7.

<sup>319</sup> *Jegyzőkönyv az operett és tánczenei szakosztály...*, 5.

Theatre learned from this huge artistic mistake that we should make both ends of the text and the music meet, so to say, when refashioning a classic”.<sup>320</sup> The lesson produced bright results soon in *The Count of Luxembourg* and *The Csárdás Princess*, which triumphed over decades. Consequently, *Orpheus* had a much greater impact on the ensuing adaptations of classical operettas than any other productions in the history of the nationalized Operetta Theatre. Hámos’s version had only one more premiere, in Szolnok in May of the same year, directed by György Székely, who became the successor to Imre Apáthy as chief director of the Operetta Theatre, following his staging of *The Count of Luxembourg*. And after *Luxi*, as they called it informally, Margit Gáspár no longer called Lehár’s music “sugar water”.<sup>321</sup>

<sup>320</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 7.

<sup>321</sup> *Jegyzőkönyv az operett és tánczenei szakosztály...*, 5.



FREEDOM FIGHT FOR LOVE, AN EXCELLENT FARCE  
AND SOME MUSIC BY LEHÁR  
ANDRÁS MIKÓ AND GYÖRGY SZÉKELY:  
*THE COUNT OF LUXEMBOURG*, 1952

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*Title:* The Count of Luxembourg. *Date of Premiere:* 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1952 (revived on 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1957 and 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1963). *Venue:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Directors:* András Mikó, György Székely. *Authors:* Alfred Maria Willner, Robert Bodansky. *Adaptation:* István Békeffy, Dezső Kellér. *Lyrics:* Andor Gábor, Iván Szenes. *Composer:* Franz Lehár. *Musical arrangement, re-orchestration:* Miklós Rékai. *Set designer:* Tibor Bercsényi. *Costume Designer:* Teréz Nagyajtay. *Choreography:* Viola Rimóczy. *Conductors:* László Várady, Ferenc Gyulai-Gaál. *Company:* Operetta Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Zoltán Szentessy, Árpád Baksai (René), Marika Németh, Teréz Komlósi, Zsuzsa Petress (Angèle), Hanna Honthy (Fleury, Angèle's friend), Róbert Rátonyi (Brissard), Anna Zentay, Magda Gyenes, Judit Hódossi (Juliette), József Gyurián, Pál Juhász, Sándor Puskás (Marchand, Saville, Croisier: René's friends), Elli Rajnay, Éva Thury (Sidonie, Coralie: Angèle's friends), Kamill Feleki (Sir Basil, Governor of Ugaranda), György Dénes (Lord Lanchester), István Balázs (Lord Winchester), János Bagyinszky (Lord Worchester), László Keleti (President of the Tribunal), Sándor Suka (Notary), Pál Décsi (Lackey), György Mátrai (Registrar), Miklós Ormai (First Judge), Rezső Kárpáti (Second Judge), Sándor Novák (Maître d'Hotel), Hugo Csák (Head waiter), Gusztáv Vándory (Doorman), István Fenyvessy (Minister), Margit Vándory (Wife of the Minister), Éva Marton (A lady), Géza Forró (Gentleman), Bálint Balázs (Baptiste, Petty Officer), László Bihari (Scrivener).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

Although two operettas by Offenbach, one by Kálmán and even a play with Johann Strauss Jr.'s music had been staged at the nationalized Operetta Theatre before 1952, the "new cult of classical operetta"<sup>322</sup> started with *The Count of Luxembourg*, coinciding with the creation of new socialist musical plays. In 1954 Margit Gáspár declared that "a few years ago many people still claimed that operetta had been dead and could not be resurrected. No one's talking about it anymore. Operetta is resurrected, alive and more vigorous than

<sup>322</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 3.

ever.”<sup>323</sup> *Luxi*, as theatre people called it, which had 278 performances and was revived twice, became convincing proof of the vigor of operetta after the theatre had successfully fought those who wanted to bury the genre and proved them wrong with ten shows. The turn towards Lehár came from the realization that the “progressive tradition” of operetta, which had been “badly neglected for years”, had to be nurtured. “We misjudged the operettas of Lehár and Kálmán. We only considered their bad lyrics, and although our heart was bleeding for their music, [...] we thought they could not be saved. We were wrong. We denied the tradition of Lehár and Kálmán, even though we should have continued to develop it, we should have cleaned it from the dust.”<sup>324</sup> Misjudgment, mentioned by Gáspár, had characterized the statements of the Association of Music too, which had emphasized the contemporary unviability of plays born in the so-called “Silver Age” of Austro-Hungarian operetta.<sup>325</sup> In 1950, for example, the composer Ferenc Szabó said that “the heritage of Kálmán and Lehár had completely failed. This line could be furthered now in the form of a caricature at best.”<sup>326</sup> Endre Székely, the composer of *The Golden Star*, also claimed the inability of reviving Lehár and Kálmán, since “there are two traditions that we can appreciate: a positive stand in a positive age or a critical stand in a reactionary age. Lehár and Kálmán were negative in reactionary times, so we cannot appreciate them.”<sup>327</sup> Certainly, members of the Association of Music were well aware of the fact that had provided embarrassing experience for the Operetta Theatre in the three seasons preceding *The Count of Luxembourg*, namely that “we lack new operettas. There is no new foreign operetta either. We have to turn to older ones.”<sup>328</sup> Nevertheless, Sándor Fischer considered Lehár to be indefensible because “it is not possible to write progressive text for his reactionary music”,<sup>329</sup> and Zdenkó Tamássy did not regard “Lehár’s bourgeois operetta style” as fit for modernization either.<sup>330</sup>

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>325</sup> The works of Emmerich Kálmán and Franz Lehár, along with the works of Oscar Strauss, Leo Fall and others, were already canonized between the world wars as masterpieces of the “Silver Age” of Austro-Hungarian operetta after the “Golden Age” of works by Johann Strauss Jr. and Karl Millöcker, among others. Cf. Viktor Lányi: Az operett, in Bence Szabolcsi – Aladár Tóth (eds.): *Zenei lexikon. A zenetörténet és a zenetudomány enciklopédiája*, Vol. 2, Budapest, Győző Andor, 1935, 278–279.

<sup>326</sup> *Jegyzőkönyv az operett és tánczenei szakosztály...*, 2.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Comment by Tamássy Zdenkó, *A Magyar Zeneművészek Szövetségének 1950. március 13-án megtartott operett és tánczenei szakosztály IV. üléséről*, Typed manuscript, 3. Location: The National Archives of Hungary, MNL OL 2146/62.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid. Cf. also “Only progressive, revolutionary and realist plays are allowed to be revived. Lehár is not a realist author. [...] Even if we put his plays in today’s environment, his music is not modern.” Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Two years later, *The Count of Luxembourg* disproved the contemporary invalidity of an operetta from the Silver Age, because it was partially freed from the “dust” mentioned above by Margit Gáspár in relation to misjudgment. This “dust” was the byproduct of the tradition of playing operettas. *The Count of Luxembourg* had been last staged at the Operetta Theatre before the nationalization, in May 1944, and Margit Gáspár said that it was necessary to wait a long time for new premieres of Lehár and Kálmán for acting-pedagogy reasons too. She blamed actors for “the reign of routine and *idées fixes* of acting when these operettas were played”, so “the actors’ approach had to be reformed first by new works”.<sup>331</sup> While *Luxi* in 1952 mainly “differed from any other shows because it replaced the silly, old jokes with French humor and character comedy”, so operetta was “brought closer to comedy as a literary genre”,<sup>332</sup> acting was sought to be reorganized by means of current developments in prosaic theatre. Kamill Feleki’s acting, for example, was considered by the daily newspaper *Szabad Nép* to be the evidence that “Stanislavsky’s method could be used to stage all dramatic genres”,<sup>333</sup> and efforts were made to demonstrate it by other actors too. Overall, acting became realistic only partially, but the illusion of realism was increased by the *mise-en-scène*,<sup>334</sup> so the staging of a classical operetta could be based on a new mode of performance. The theatre wanted to create something exemplary in this way too, with an important lesson and a series of bad experiences in the background.

The lesson they learnt was that “reworking a classical operetta is much more difficult than writing a new one. Both acting and staging are more challenging than in case of a contemporary play.”<sup>335</sup> On the one hand, Margit Gáspár did not believe in staging the classics without rewriting, and thought that “unscrupulous revivals [in rural theatres and on the radio], which we are currently witnessing”, were unhealthy, because “they are not artistic, because

<sup>331</sup> Bános: *A színigazgató*, 38. – Cf. also “[...] we had to get rid of very bad traditions in this field. Musical theatre was not considered a real, serious and mature art. It was often the actors who repeated mechanical movements a lot, only joking was important to them, and jokes were gathered from a wide variety of collections.” *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–39.

<sup>333</sup> György Sebestyén: Egy kiváló színészi alakításról, *Szabad Nép*, Vol. 10, No. 317, 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1952, 3.

<sup>334</sup> It was also highlighted by Yuri Milyutin, the composer of *Trembita*, when he visited Hungary: “When I came here, I thought I was going to see an old-fashioned performance of an operetta, the continuation of the Viennese tradition. I was surprised when the curtain went up and I felt the air of real life on stage, right from the start. I saw figures that reminded me of Labiche’s temperamental figures. This is also a great merit of the revision of the text. The reality of stage events was enhanced by the fact that, thanks to the directors, the stage crowd lived an organic life in the play and was not just a singing group. [...] The greatest virtue of the production is that it is tasteful, ambitious in acting and has a very high musical quality in every scene.” Gáspár: *Napló Miljutyin elvtárs látogatásáról*, 164.

<sup>335</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 13.

they derail operetta and spoil the taste of the audience”.<sup>336</sup> The damaging impact of recklessly abbreviated but not rewritten plays was also reported by public organizers, who detailed “what a dreadful destruction is going on in the countryside. Terrible brigades reach out to state farms and farming cooperatives, they get to places that even Faluszínház [which went to small villages to make theatre] has not reached yet. [...] *The Count of Luxembourg* is produced by four or five actors at such events for 4–8 Forints.”<sup>337</sup> On the other hand, Margit Gáspár did not prefer adaptations that refashioned old operettas according to present-day directives, such as a production of *Eve* in Szeged, in which Lehár’s operetta was “set in a factory [and] was about a working girl, whom the factory manager married at the end”.<sup>338</sup> She considered the juxtaposition of text and music as another form of bad revision, and mentioned the 1952 production of *Orpheus* in the Operetta Theatre with Offenbach’s frivolous music arranged to the lofty plot of fighting for peace.<sup>339</sup> *Luxi* tried to avoid these extremes and to set a good example of appropriating the revitalized tradition of operetta, and it was acclaimed by critics not only as a theatrical, but also as a cultural act.<sup>340</sup> Moreover, this time they appreciated Lehár’s “upbeat and optimistic” music, “flowing broadly and full of melodies”, which “today’s audience also likes”,<sup>341</sup> as a significant contribution to the construction of socialism.<sup>342</sup> It was necessary indeed, because the year of *Luxi*, at the height of the terror of Rákosi’s regime, presented the inhabitants with a serious challenge in a process for four years then, which was “nothing more than forced experimentation in the laboratory of a whole country with people who had little or no knowledge of the essence of socialism”.<sup>343</sup>

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>337</sup> Anonymous comment, Ibid., 19–20.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>339</sup> Cf. “Beautiful music is given, let’s write a new text, put the two together, and a good new operetta is going to be born. It’s a misleading way of thinking! We tried it once in *Orpheus* and failed so much as I hope we would never again. György Hámos started to rewrite *Orpheus* with great enthusiasm, and the text became highly poetic, but completely independent of the music.” Ibid., 13.

<sup>340</sup> Cf. “The extraordinary production of the Operetta Theatre has reshaped an old operetta and made it truly enjoyable. It has even done more than that. It has taken another step forward to strengthen our culture of playing operettas.” Sándor Balázs: *Luxemburg grófja, Színház és Filmművészet* 3:12 (1952), 564.

<sup>341</sup> László Gombos: *Luxemburg grófja, Népszava*, Vol. 80, No. 305, 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1952, 4.

<sup>342</sup> Cf. “After such a production, people go whistling to the factory, to the office and work more cheerfully the next day.” Balázs: *Luxemburg grófja*, 562.

<sup>343</sup> Gyarmati: *A Rákosi-korszak*, 200. – Cf. also “1952 was a black year for both economy and society. Forced industrialization and the vast development of the army in the early 1950s had predicted a supply catastrophe, aggravated by an unprecedentedly poor harvest in 1952 and uneven and disorganized distribution. [...] even industrial production fell by 10%, almost exclusively at the expense of light and consumer industries. [...] in winter there were already 800,000 rural families (and no longer just ‘kulák’, but middle peasant families) without supplies. It is estimated that the consumer price index increased by 38% in a single year:

## DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Posters were slightly exaggerating, when they advertised the revised *Count of Luxembourg* as a grand operetta. Its refashioning into a farce, mostly enriched with solos and duets, resulted in a serious cut of its musical texture, especially the numbers that made music dramatic expression more complex.<sup>344</sup> The revised version of Lehár's 1909 operetta still revokes certain actors and it has become a commonplace of theatre history that the new libretto of Békeffy and Kellér was made for the Operetta Theatre, specifically for Hanna Honthy and Kamill Feleki. Although the adaptors may have kept in mind these two stars, the new version had premiered in Miskolc in April 1952, and had also been staged in Szeged and Szolnok before the production of the Operetta Theatre opened at the end of November.<sup>345</sup> According to György Székely, one of the two directors in Budapest, their production was a world premiere for a single reason: for Hanna Honthy's change of role-types. The new libretto, already tested in Miskolc, contained no entrée for Fleury, but they created one for her, i.e. for Hanna Honthy,<sup>346</sup> whose

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pork, for example, was only HUF 11.90 per kg in 1949, HUF 16 in 1951 and HUF 28.90 in 1952! But it was not only the village that was starving: wages paid in factories and plants did not increase, and sometimes even decreased. People defended themselves as best as they could: hiding crop and commodities and, especially in cities, illicit hoarding and black trade flourished." Hámori: Gondolatok a proletkult nevetéshez, 87.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. "Thanks to [Békeffy and Kellér] we receive an excellent farce instead of an emotional and romantic story." Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 562.

<sup>345</sup> According to Margit Gáspár, "dramaturgs of our theatre were working with the writers for at least one year to adapt a classical operetta, e.g. *The Count of Luxembourg*". (Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 14.) She also claimed that, "I invented everything, the structure, the ideas, the whole synopsis for *The Count of Luxembourg* and *The Csárdás Princess*. Békeffy and Kellér wrote it divinely, but the frame was mine." (Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 1, 20.) We can assume that *The Count of Luxembourg* was revised at the Operetta Theatre at the turn of 1951 and 1952 for a production there, and it was transferred to Miskolc by László Szűcs (Margit Gáspár's husband, who was a dramaturg there at that time) to have a quasi-test run, as well as in the other two towns.

<sup>346</sup> György Székely's recollections may give rise to a misunderstanding, as he seems to be implying that Fleury's entrée was put into *The Count of Luxembourg* as a new song. Cf. "We had to invent how the legendary artist would enter the stage. She played an older character, but her entrance was as important as before. She had to come down the stairs. There is no Honthy without the stairs and no Hungarian operetta either! I sat down with Ernő Innocent Vincze, dramaturg of the Operetta Theatre, and we started discussing what the entrée should be about. It is set in Paris, Paris... Let's say Fleury's coming to Paris, looking around and saying, well, this is Paris. What a woman is like here?! 'At times she errs like a chick, and it's all very chic!' *Ernő had a very close relationship with Franz Lehár, so he easily arranged for Hanna to get a new entrée*. And Hanna was great! She entered at the top of the stairs, looked around and said, 'So many people!', then she started her entrée. And the audience burst into applause! She immediately made contact with the spectators. 'So many people' did not refer to those waiting for her onstage, but to her dear audience. [...] It turned out that she could succeed in this role-type too, and she was happy to play it." Tamás Gajdó: A falusi színpadoktól a Nagymező utcáig. Székely György portréja. Part 2, *Parallel*, No. 22. 2011, 10. (My italics – Á.K.K.) – However, Lehár had been dead for four years, so he could not write a new song. Fleury's entrée was, in fact, taken from the

acting became so brilliant that some reviewers did not deduce the figure of Fleury from Honthy, but deduced the adaptation itself from Fleury. (Even if Fleury is missing from both the 1909 Vienna and the 1937 Berlin versions of the operetta made under Lehár's supervision.) From Fleury, who feels disdain for "the whole progress, regarding all that fly towards the future, [...] all that change, accelerate and move forward, as a fantasy. [...] What was a frivolous and dizzying moth dance in the 1910s is all whirling now in Madame Fleury's words."<sup>347</sup> As usually, e.g. in the *Students of Vienna* and *The Csárdás Princess*, Honthy played "herself": a *prima donna*. But in the role of the matchmaker she became a key figure in reviews now, since Fleury/Honthy was thought to embody the critique of an era, considered very important from an ideological point of view.<sup>348</sup> This critique, in turn, proved to be crucial for theatre people too, as they regarded *The Count of Luxembourg* as not suitable for stage production without it.

Since it had been originally missing from the play, György Székely claimed that the libretto had been the main obstacle of bringing Lehár's music closer to an audience of workers.<sup>349</sup> Among Lehár's operettas, however, the text of *The Count of Luxembourg* provided the best opportunity for "a healthy and correct script built on a satirical core", as they had learned the lesson from *Orpheus*, in which they "had tried to update a play beyond the boundaries of music, but got embroiled in a contradiction that could hardly be solved".

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1937 Berlin version of *Der Graf von Luxemburg*. Lehár composed the couplet "Was ist das für'ne Zeit, liebe Leute?" in the third act for princess Anastasia Kokozeff, which gave Ernő Innocent Vincze sufficient inspiration in terms of lyrics too. Consequently, Fleury's entrée is princess Kokozeff's couplet, transferred to act one. Unlike Fleury, the princess is preserved not by "modesty and good manners", but by vodka and cigar smoke, and she had no musical number in the first version of the operetta, just in the second. She, the princess, who appears only in the last act as a *dea ex machina*, was transformed into Fleury, Angèle's friend in the adaptation of Békeffy and Kellér, playing an important role in all three acts. In addition, she was credited with two more numbers: a medley in the second act, arranged from songs of *The Merry Widow*, and also a duet (the popular "Polka dancer" duet) with Sir Basil, which he originally sang with Juliette.

<sup>347</sup> Béla Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*. Lehár operettje a Fővárosi Operettszínházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 8, No. 302, 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1952, 5.

<sup>348</sup> Cf. "The authors of the original play [...] only wanted to write a romantic, more or less efficacious, action-packed and entertaining libretto for the music of Franz Lehár, and they did not realize what the adaptors did, namely, how much they could entrust to this actress, Madame Fleury. The whole critique of the age." Ibid. – However, the role of Fleury was not devoid of arbitrary moments, as shown by her musical medley in the second act. Milyutin, who visited the Operetta Theatre, also referred to this fact when he stated that "Hanna Honthy's number in Act II seems to stall the plot. I know it was right to insert her number for the stage effect, because Honthy is a very great artist and she sings this song delightfully. But from a dramaturgical point of view, I do not approve the insertion of such numbers." Gáspár: Napló Miljutyin elvtárs látogatásáról, 165.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. A Luxemburg grófia című darab ismertetése. Gyorsírói feljegyzés a Fővárosi Operettszínháznak 1952. szeptember 17-én tartott társulati üléséről (= Társulati ülés), Typed manuscript, 2–3. Location: The Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, 2010.105.1.

<sup>350</sup> What Székely pointed out had become the cornerstone of rewriting in the dramaturgical activity of the Operetta Theatre by that time. According to Margit Gáspár, who was constantly reflecting their work theoretically, “a libretto or its good core, if this core is viable, must be grown. It is therefore necessary to carry out reworking in such a way that the play would be reborn from its own material.”<sup>351</sup> Gáspár specified “the good comic core, the ancient comic idea” they found in the original script as: “the Grand Duke of Russia (Sir Basil, an English magnate in the adaptation) wants to buy a woman”.<sup>352</sup> In the version of Békeffy and Kellér, Basil Basilowitsch<sup>353</sup> was transformed into the governor of Ugaranda – since in 1952 a Russian, even a grand duke, could not be a laughing stock –, and the amusing trio around him (a clerk, an embassy counselor and an official, all Russians) became three capitalists, English lords hunting for concessions. This illustrates the intentions of the adaptation: to remove the operetta from “bourgeois kitsch”, from “the frivolous presentation of heroes” and to create “truer figures, truer situations and a more credible environment” instead.<sup>354</sup> (It is interesting to note that René, the Count of Luxembourg becomes penniless because of his bohemian way of life in the original, but in the libretto of Békeffy and Kellér he inherits the title of Count only at the beginning of the play, without wealth, thanks to his irresponsible ancestors. In the original, Angèle herself undertakes a marriage of convenience with René, which she is persuaded to do by Fleury in the adaptation.)

As in previous Hungarian productions “mostly the struggle of youth against old age had been complicated without any social conflicts”,<sup>355</sup> these conflicts were intended to be created in the 1952 adaptation, and the third act was changed most profoundly. This act was moved from the lobby of the Grand Hotel in Paris to a courtroom in order to make a judgment on the representatives of a society branded as liars. That is why Székely named the new text a “partisan adaptation”, exposing a series of phenomena kept invisible so far, and he added that “an objective, impartial representation of this age was wrong”.<sup>356</sup> The majority of critics appreciated the moderate job, i.e. the avoidance of “false updating”, “the projection of today’s political concepts into it”.<sup>357</sup> (This also gives rise to the popularity of the Békeffy-Kellér libretto to this day, i.e. ideological modesty, the lack of utterances that fit political slogans, so the lack of textual acquiescence to the regime.) Nevertheless, they

<sup>350</sup> *Társulati ülés*, 3.

<sup>351</sup> Gáspár: *A könnyű műfaj kérdései*, 15.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> He is called The Grand Duke Rutzinov in the English libretto of Basil Hood and Adrian Ross, first performed at Daly’s Theatre in London in 1911.

<sup>354</sup> *Társulati ülés*, 3–4.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. and 35–40.

<sup>357</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 562.

underscored the “constructive message” of disclosing a society based on lies and seeking lies in art, even though the adaptors could have made positive figures more sympathetic and “the lords advising dishonest counsels and the aristocracy dancing at the party” more satirical.<sup>358</sup>

The legitimate presence of *The Count of Luxembourg* in socialist theatre culture was justified, on the one hand, by the improved play’s “beautiful content that goes through the formulaic story” and proclaims “the right of the heart, the victory of love in the face of the all-conquering, corrupt and vile capital.”<sup>359</sup> On the other hand, the gesture of “belying a lie by its own means” in order to take “sardonic, farcical and hearty revenge” was also stressed.<sup>360</sup> This latter is particularly important because half a decade before Brecht’s reception in Hungary came to the fore, and moreover, in the field of playing operettas, the production had set an example of making a “Fabel” that encouraged both actors and spectators to take critical positions. A few years later, the concept of “alienation” started to be applied for that in professional public discourse.<sup>361</sup> It is foreshadowed by Béla Mátrai-Betegh’s wording: “Lehár’s bribing, soothing and emotionally mesmerizing music” sounds “a wake-up call” this time, and “it evokes some nostalgia too, [...] but from a critical point of view, no one is longing for an age in which love, morality, youth and joy could lie so much in the ringing language of money”.<sup>362</sup>

The critical potential of the story was exploited in the much-increased dialogues, which sometimes replaced certain songs. Partly because of this and partly because of the aim of limiting the length of the production, Miklós Rékai, who arranged the music to the new play, made serious cuts in the composition. While some of the songs were given to other characters (e.g.

<sup>358</sup> Gombos: *Luxemburg grófia*, 4.

<sup>359</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 562.

<sup>360</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

<sup>361</sup> When Béla Mátrai-Betegh sums up the story of *The Count of Luxembourg*, he immediately adds that “it is a fairy tale but only as far as the audience is watching faithfully, dreamily and in an utterly relaxed manner some bohemian counts and bourgeois free spirits, silly girls, plump Romeos and sly matchmakers frisking around. The spectators at the beginning of the century believed this play, empathized with this enchanted company, cherished this mad world and would have been glad to imitate it.” Without referring to either Brecht or his term, Mátrai-Betegh describes, in fact, what Brecht called a carousel-type theatre. This encourages unconditional identification with stage figures and events. He contrasted it with the planetarium-type theatre, which encourages distance, and that’s what could be recognized in the production of the Operetta Theatre. “They managed to cock a snook at this world [...]. *They reproached this world, delighting in the mood of operettas, by its own means, by the mood of operettas itself.* Consequently, today’s spectator is no longer watching this flirtatious carnival dreamily and utterly relaxed, but also [...] critically and genuinely amused by the credulity which believed it to be true, and also willing to judge the reality flashing from under the bourgeois fairy tale. *This realization, this sobering up*, which does not ruin entertainment at all, but makes it more pungent and complex, is due to reworking, staging and acting.” Ibid. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

Juliette's chanson "Pierre, der schreibt an Klein-Fleurette" became Angèle's entrée and Fleury took Juliette's place in her duet with Sir Basil), quite a few numbers were completely omitted. As for the 1937 version of the operetta, six numbers – two solos, a duet, two trios and a quintet – were cut, among them all the new musical units of the third act, where only short reminiscences of former songs remained. Although numerous parts of Lehár's operetta meet the requirements of a serious music drama as well as the genre of operetta's focusing on hits,<sup>363</sup> Rékai's musical arrangement damaged the network of leitmotifs created around the play and decreased the number of ensembles. Therefore, the production of the Operetta Theatre could not shed light on the comic opera qualities of *Der Graf von Luxemburg*,<sup>364</sup> and it got much closer to the genre of comedy, instead of the opera.<sup>365</sup> It gave some stars the opportunity to shine instead of the whole company to illustrate the complexity of the musical material.<sup>366</sup> *The Count of Luxembourg* has been part of the Hungarian tradition of playing operettas ever since in this textually enhanced but musically mutilated form.

#### STAGING

Although not in a reflected and purposeful way, staging took a decisive step towards Brechtian theatre, but it was stuck in relying on the power of the rewritten text. Rehearsals began with watching archive footage of Paris between 1900 and 1914 together, since the directors were interested in how this age could be made palpable for the audience. This issue grew from the realization that "the decades that *The Count of Luxembourg* is set in represent a very specific chapter in the history of the world. They represent the era which Comrade Lenin called the era of imperialism in his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* in 1916, and this is of great importance to

<sup>363</sup> Cf. Oliver Binder: Zwischen Karneval und großer Oper: Franz Lehárs *Graf von Luxemburg*, Program for a concert performance of Kölner Philharmonie on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2016, 9, <https://www.koelner-philharmonie.de/media/content/veranstaltung/programmheft/2016-01-05.pdf> (accessed 22 June 2018).

<sup>364</sup> Cf. Stefan Frey: *Franz Lehár oder das schlechte Gewissen der leichten Musik*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1995, 94–122.

<sup>365</sup> Margit Gáspár claimed that "the new *Luxi* [...] could be played without music as well". Bános: *A színigazgató*, 39.

<sup>366</sup> All protagonists, except Honthy and Feleki, came off worse. Angèle and René had been musically the most marginalized, their roles reduced almost to a second *prima donna* and second *bon vivant* (behind Fleury and Sir Basil). They lost a solo each, a duet and a trio. Juliette lost a solo, a duet and a trio, and Brissard a trio and a quintet. Although Basil also lost two trios and a quintet, Feleki was amply compensated with scenes reinforced in text and humor as well.

the life, further development and history of all mankind.”<sup>367</sup> In order to make this notable thesis of Marxist historiography more understandable, György Székely gave a meticulous analysis of the age before the read-through, detailing a great number of phenomena, from colonialism and the changes of the financial world to social tensions. In relation to the latter, he highlighted the historical role of *les bohèmes*, who “wanted to turn against all that this society involved” and “proclaimed war against bourgeois morality”.<sup>368</sup> Therefore, he projected the image of a rather militant world of the bohemians behind the events of Lehár’s operetta. His aim was to make the production reflect specific factors of the period, such as the forms of social interaction and good manners, the conventions of social behavior, the characteristics of architecture, the way in which people had been dressed. Székely made it clear that they could get close to the period “in fashion, costumes, manners and dances” to display “the forces that had prevailed at the time”.<sup>369</sup> This illustrates the realist maximalism of the *mise-en-scène*, which scenography and acting were not able to reach utterly.

Historicization, i.e. the historical attitude towards all figures and events, the emphasis on the changeability of the way of the world instead of the absolutization of the *belle époque*, converged with Brecht’s ideas of performance put into practice in East-Berlin at that time. Moreover, one of the questions of András Mikó, the other director came particularly close to the Brechtian understanding of theatre, namely “how can we make staging and acting reflect the ambiguities of this world?”<sup>370</sup> Highlighting contradictions instead of clarity and consistency became a goal especially in case of phenomena found rather negative. Consequently, the power embodied by Sir Basil and the members of the society at Angèle’s *soirée* were analyzed painstakingly, as well as the capital represented by the three English lords hunting for monopolies and concessions, and “the merging of power and capital” in the lords’ dancing attendance on Sir Basil.<sup>371</sup> They also found contradictions in the law unveiled in the third act only to see that “not all people are equal before it”, and in the behavior of the average citizen, i.e. in Fleury’s opportunism, “who changes her positions from the point of view of utility”.<sup>372</sup> However, they did not forget “positive forces” either, such as “the power of the collective, the power of a group of artists who are happy to help each other” and also “the revolutionary nature of love”.<sup>373</sup> This nature was considered particularly important by Székely, and connected with “the ideological content” of the play. It is worth

<sup>367</sup> *Társulati ülés*, 5–10.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–40.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

quoting his argumentation because, on the one hand, it makes us understand the socio-political reading of Lehár's operetta, following in Brecht's footsteps unintentionally. On the other hand, it gives a fine example of the (narrow-minded yet impressive) theoretical integrity of the work taking place in the nationalized Operetta Theatre.

According to Székely, "*The Count of Luxembourg* is about two young people in love and unwilling to ruin their lives because of bad and dishonest social conventions".<sup>374</sup> Love becomes a "revolutionary force [and it has become such] since the emergence of capitalism" because of this unwillingness.<sup>375</sup> In order to prove this, Székely quotes Engels, who claims that "the total freedom to marry [...] can only prevail in general, if the abolishment of capitalist production and the conditions of ownership it has created results in the elimination of the economic side aspects which still have such a huge influence on the choice of a partner".<sup>376</sup> Following this thesis, Székely claims that "the first half of the play is about removing marital barriers commercially and about the strange, conflicting improvement and equalization of an unequal marriage according to class considerations. Even at that time, the freedom of love meant a certain opposition, a revolution."<sup>377</sup> So René and Angèle have to fight their own class struggle, but

until they fall in love, until they come face to face with each other, they behave in the same way as the rest of the society around them. They are both involved in pretty dirty deals; [Angèle] by marriage of convenience and [René] by marrying for money. They are part of, and no better part of the society in which they live. However, from the moment they see each other face to face and fall in love and love decides their fate, they are confronted with the environment around them. They break the rules of convention, habit and generally accepted manners, and fight for their own freedom in a revolutionary way.<sup>378</sup>

Love becomes a factor of social transformation, making the second finale rather scandalous, "when these two people [...] step out of the usual frames and set out freely".<sup>379</sup> Székely's conclusion, namely that René and Angèle "fight for their freedom in this way",<sup>380</sup> suggests the lofty subject of freedom and freedom struggle, underscoring the aspirations of the Operetta Theatre from *Students of Vienna* on.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

However, in spite of the intense analysis of *The Count of Luxembourg*, Székely and Mikó did not change the staging so much that it could take shape in subtle but essential modifications similar to Brecht's ones, and did not get beyond historical realism and the nuanced recreation of *couleur locale*. The phenomena analyzed in the directors' exposé were also highlighted by the press, but critics wrote about them only in reference to the adaptation and Kamill Feleki's acting. The *mise-en-scène* could display the ambiguities András Mikó mentioned mostly by the contextualization of the text, which was appreciated by critics, similarly to the rejection of some conventions of staging operettas<sup>381</sup> and the setting of romanticism in the shade of amusement, raging from scintillating glee in the first act to extravagant clowning in the last one.<sup>382</sup> The directors' work was called "bold and dashing", even "brilliant", because they kept reality in mind and let "the incredible become believable".<sup>383</sup> For example, by means of treating scenes with music and dance not separately from dialogues, but making their transitions as smooth as possible. So from the point of view of communication they made the vocals a logical continuation of speech.<sup>384</sup> That is why they deployed singing in dramatic (and of course stage) situations at all times.<sup>385</sup> Reviews also draw attention to the chorus and the crowd, whose vivacity had already been noted in previous productions of the nationalized Operetta Theatre, but the chorus was "really integral to the show now, for the first time in playing operettas", and extras played "active roles in the fate of the main characters".<sup>386</sup> This was mainly Mikó's achievement, who was just doing his first jobs at the Opera House as a disciple of Kálmán Nádasdy and Gusztáv Oláh, and had already worked as co-director of *The State Department Store* at the Operetta

<sup>381</sup> Cf. "The two directors [...] showed us that it was possible to take a stand in a classical operetta too, if they get rid of the boring templates of operettas. [...] It was an old habit of directors to leave rough and ready the first scenes following the overture. In the middle of the second act, however, it was necessary to go the whole hog, to use all the spotlights and the whole chorus, to let the audience remember it dazzled. That was the template. Mikó and Székely do it the other way around, not out of eccentricity, but because they feel the need to take a stand. [...] The two directors are right to work out the swirling, boisterous joy of the street more meticulously [at the beginning], with their ideas and heart seemingly supporting the people's celebration, more cheerfully and with greater love than the ceremonial world of palaces." Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. "It has harmed the nature of the genre, which tends to emphasize the emotional part." Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 562.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 564.

<sup>384</sup> Cf. Gombos: *Luxemburg grófia*, 4.

<sup>385</sup> Cf. "The song 'Gyerünk, tubicám, se kocsink, se lovunk' [Come on, sweetie, we neither have a carriage nor a horse] begins with sadness [Juliette and Brissard are comforting each other], expressing the hopelessness of a young couple in financial trouble and destitute. The song becomes happier and happier until it swells into life-affirming melodies of youth." *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

Theatre.<sup>387</sup> Mikó placed great emphasis on the development of mass scenes. To this end, Miklós Ormai, called group supervisor on the playbill, dedicated special days to “the elaboration of each member’s story in crowd scenes: why he/she appears on stage, how he/she takes a position in a situation and in a series of actions”.<sup>388</sup> Certainly, the mapping out of the lives of people in the background, the determination of the *through-line* of action,<sup>389</sup> the phases of events, the objectives and tasks to be carried out in them – all these call Stanislavsky to mind. Although the desire and the need for a critical stand led theatre people to the way Brecht had started, they were still busy meeting the requirements distilled from Stanislavsky – at least as much as they could.

### ACTING

While the application of socialist realism became a key issue of character impersonation, first time with such an emphasis at the Operetta Theatre, reception was mostly influenced by the complexity of portrayal. When the meeting of the company at the beginning of the rehearsal process concluded in a debate on the way of acting because of László Keleti’s incomprehension about how to play the President of the Tribunal, the directors and theatre managers were nearly bidding against each other to define “critical representation” and “partisan rendering” of a character. In order to allay the fears of the actors, Margit Gáspár stated that they would neither have to “quote” characters nor draw distorted images (caricatures). Referring to Toporkov, whose *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal* was published in Hungarian that year, she made a clear distinction between “displaying an age with criticism by creating caricatures”, on the one hand, and “expressing criticism by displaying an age realistically”, on the other.<sup>390</sup> She called the latter approach “the right solution”, involving “a stronger emphasis on certain habits, on certain characteristics”, and belonging “to the working methods of socialist realism and to portrayals by socialist realist actors”.<sup>391</sup> György Székely also argued that “the kindness and healthy feelings” of positive figures (e.g. Juliette

<sup>387</sup> György Székely said that “Bandi Mikó helped me adjust the movement of the choir in *The Count of Luxembourg*, and I was more concerned with the characters and the new text.” Gajdó: A falusi színpadoktól, 10.

<sup>388</sup> *Társulati ülés*, 57.

<sup>389</sup> Cf. “Basil wants to get Angèle, and René wants to make money for lack of inheritance. These are the two threads from which the main line of action starts, then these two threads meet, René and Angèle fall in love with each other and fight for happiness by putting all conventions aside. The turning point is consequently the personal encounter of the two lovers. Before that, they are no different than the others, but then they turn against all lies around them.” *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52.

and Brissard) should be underlined with “playfulness, emphasis and tone”, and the same should be done in case of the comic rendering of characters “thinking in an unnatural and dishonest way”.<sup>392</sup> If actors do so, “both performances will be partisan without giving the impression of distasteful politicizing or updating”, therefore, it is also essential that “no exterior means should be used to underline character impersonation and render a figure in a partisan way”.<sup>393</sup> Székely considered “some extra characterization” sufficient – for example, a kind of exaggerated gesture, without ridiculing a figure or creating his/her caricature<sup>394</sup> –, which is “not yet something external, but a slightly higher degree of emotion, slightly more characteristic means of expressing emotions”.<sup>395</sup> András Mikó also stressed the identification with the logic of another person – for example, with “logic gone awry” in case of the President of the Tribunal – and the consistent conduct of action and behavior it induces. After all, “if we find and create the logical line of a role, it is impossible to play without criticism”.<sup>396</sup>

However, most roles did not provide enough possibility for this creation and the proposed way of acting, and except Kamill Feleki, hardly any actors diverged significantly from all that their spectators were accustomed to and expected of them. Not even Hanna Honthy, who got a role-type now that she played “triumphantly throughout her old age. Then came *The Csárdás Princess* and from then on Hanna was the eternal youth, with a touch of piquancy, of course, as she faced her age and laughed at it.”<sup>397</sup> According to a harsh interpretation, which illustrates the supposed discrepancies of experience and declared opinion that we encounter so often in the 1950s, Honthy rendered “the realistic character of a mondaine matchmaker” convincingly, “inciting hatred against the rotten bourgeois society that produced this immoral parasite”.<sup>398</sup> But Honthy, whose greatest fear was that the audience would reject her if she played a disagreeable woman,<sup>399</sup> would not have been able to “incite hatred”, even if she had wanted to. Furthermore, some critics slightly disapproved of her making

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 54–55.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>397</sup> Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 2, 41. – Cf. also “Her new role was the *grande dame* of operetta, who holds all threads of the tale in her hands. She complicates the fine cobwebs, but also restores them. She takes part in the plot, but also rises above it. She seems to be not only a *prima donna* of the play, but also its deity. She is creating the fairy castle of the world of operetta, its domes of thin air, its gardens of fantastic beads in front of our eyes, she is blowing the firmament, the clouds and the sunshine of this whole empire like soap bubbles. Békeffy and Kellér creates a role-type in which Hanna finally finds her home. Yes, that’s her, the *grande dame*. Her Majesty, the Queen of Operetta.” Gál: *Honthy Hanna*, 608.

<sup>398</sup> Gombos: *Luxemburg grófia*, 4.

<sup>399</sup> Cf. Venczel: *Virágkor*, Part 2, 41.

Fleury, whose behavior and actions were rather questionable, appealing indeed. Although Honthy's acting suggested some mocking, and "her subtle irony and self-irony" revealed "which wax museum [Fleury] belonged to", she was more permissive to the character she played than Feleki to Sir Basil.<sup>400</sup> "She criticizes her, but also turns a blind eye to her conduct. She finds only weakness in her sins and forgives her a bit, taking on a certain slight complicity with Madame Fleury and looking for companions in the audience."<sup>401</sup> The critic of *Szabad Nép* quite rightly observed that Honthy's acting "created a very close relationship with spectators, almost involving them in the play", as if she had turned against the intentions of the *mise-en-scène* and made the audience complicit in, and even part of, "Madame Fleury's dealings".<sup>402</sup>

Honthy set an example of "the great style of operetta"<sup>403</sup> once again, but Feleki stole the show with a performance on which (and only on his, among the actors) a Brechtian production could have been built, not only in its orientation, but also in terms of its realization. Feleki's acting was praised as "the greatest event of our theatre season", and compared to Márton Rátkai's Mayor in Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, directed by Endre Gellért in 1951: "there we saw last time such an excellent characterization in a comedy".<sup>404</sup> This comparison was given particular flair by the fact that Rátkai had played Basil in the Budapest premiere of *The Count of Luxembourg* in 1910.<sup>405</sup> Feleki deepened the archetypal figure of an old lover, showing "how a well-known and dull character too often seen on stage could get new attributes"<sup>406</sup>, and how comic stereotypes could be eliminated.<sup>407</sup> According to an ideologically blindfolded interpretation of the figure, Feleki "offered the sharp satire of the aristocracy of money", instead of old templates.<sup>408</sup> His Basil was called "the Governor of Uganda" (rather than "Ugaranda") several times in an article of *Szabad Nép*, dedicated to Feleki's acting, as if it was a real country and he was

<sup>400</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid. – Cf. also "The beauty of her voice shines unbroken, and we would like to emphasize that her diction is exemplary." Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 563.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Rátkai was regarded as the best Basil worldwide. When the Theater an der Wien celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world premiere of *Der Graf von Luxemburg* with a production for which the most famous actors were asked – for example, Angèle was sung by Maria Jeritza –, director Hubert Marischka chose Rátkai as Basil, with Lehár's consent. Cf. Róbert Gál: *Óh, lányka, óh, lánykám... Lehár, az operett fejedelme*, Budapest, Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2006, 64.

<sup>406</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 563.

<sup>407</sup> Cf. "[...] there is a 'tradition' of the external means by which a superficial actor can play this humorous role. He broke with it and portrayed *a man*, without fear of exaggerations appropriate in the genre of operetta. [...] Feleki did not seek to make the task easier for himself and simplify Sir Basil's character." Sebestyén: Egy kiváló színészi alakításról, 3.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid. "A ridiculous man who is stumbling helplessly with his obsessions, and only wakes up when he is about to do some dirty business." Ibid.

a real character, not a place and a figure in an operetta. However, Feleki did not play the stereotype of the stupid capitalist, i.e. “the cretin, giving concessions in exchange for friendly favors”.<sup>409</sup> Rather he created a complex character<sup>410</sup> with traits of a senile patriarch, a benign grandfather, a grumpy old man, a charmer, certainly not in his heyday, and a tyrant abusing his power.<sup>411</sup>

Feleki’s acting was as rich as Honthy’s, though in a different way, and while he did not allow Sir Basil “to become either farcical, [...] or amiable only”, he made the audience understand why Fleury told Angèle (besides her obvious persuasion) that “this Sir Basil was basically a nice chap”.<sup>412</sup> Reviewers were keen on describing the complexity of Feleki’s character impersonation, the details of his diction, movement and gesticulation, expressing all ambivalences of a figure, and they found what they saw “irresistibly amusing”.<sup>413</sup> They regarded it as the peak performance of an actor following Stanislavsky’s guidance, and they all shared the opinion of the columnist of *Magyar Nemzet*: “a deeper, more multifaceted, more critical performance has never been seen before in operettas”.<sup>414</sup> A few months later, the actor was honored the prestigious Kossuth Prize, which Feleki’s another 1952 performance contributed to: his Glauzius in *State Department Store*. Viktor Gertler’s film of this operetta was also shot in that year and Feleki “burst upon Hungarian cinema with this performance, creating a character that he did not change for the rest of his life”.<sup>415</sup> At 44, he played a 65-year-old man, “so that he would not age in his roles for 20 years”.<sup>416</sup>

Feleki and Honthy, two stars in supporting roles, overshadowed the first couple of *The Count of Luxembourg* so much that critics addressed the *prima donna* and the *bon vivant* only to express their dissatisfaction. Although they found enough dramatic power in Zoltán Szentessy, whose René was “more

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Cf. “Feleki knows that he would be able to entertain with imbecility alone, but he would not be able to *create a personality*, only if he shows where this imbecility comes from. That’s what he has been researching tirelessly in his acting.” Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófja*, 5. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>411</sup> Cf. “Sir Basil often does a hop, skip and a jump to indicate that he is still young and strong, who has access to love, but stumbles on the stairs as an old man. He vehemently dances polka, but when he bows to his partner, he collapses and can barely get up. He takes his beloved to the dance, but after the second round gets to his heart and cannot keep up. He is proud of his money and power, but he is rather senile, without becoming pathetic. Grotesque without exaggeration. In spite of his boredom, he shows sufficient energy to be a nasty opponent to René, not that he could conquer Angèle, but he tries to carry his will through. Thus, the conflict gains strength and makes the situation more tense.” Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Both critics use the same phrase: Sebestyén: Egy kiváló színészi alakításról, 3. and Gombos: *Luxemburg grófja*, 4.

<sup>414</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófja*, 5.

<sup>415</sup> Hámori: Gondolatok a proletkult nevetéshez, 90.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

attractive, more masculine and more humorous”, Árpád Baksay’s voice was said to be more appropriate for the title hero, in spite of his “inexperience resulting in stereotypes” and “the love line of the plot becoming secondary”.<sup>417</sup> Marika Németh was admired for “the warmth of her voice”, but her charm did not receive positive evaluation: “she was only charming all the time, without becoming sharp-tongued, piquant, French actress-like and interesting a bit”.<sup>418</sup> Her alternate, Teréz Komlósi, on the other hand, was missing charm, and she played a “tougher, sharper character with a stiff manner, [...] even though Angèle has no heroic features in her mellow nature. It was a mistake to give this role to this actress.”<sup>419</sup>

Among the members of the second couple, Róbert Rátonyi’s acting provoked a positive reaction for disclosing the emotional depths beneath Brissard’s joy, vigor and youthful serenity,<sup>420</sup> so it became generally accepted that he was “a worthy successor to the great old buffos”.<sup>421</sup> Magda Gyenes was considered to get closer to Juliette’s role than Anna Zentay, but her acting was deemed problematic.<sup>422</sup> Zentay, on the other hand, was criticized for the exaggeration of her movement,<sup>423</sup> though her performance was full of “great ideas and teasing, her voice full of musical jokes”.<sup>424</sup> The multifaceted, multilayered nature of acting, highly esteemed in case of Honthy and Feleki, was not mentioned in case of these two couples at all, but the audio recording of the production made in the 1960s – the accents full of mannerism, the diction far from any kind of realism – show that all actors (including the two stars) hunted for instant laughter with banal clarity. The reason for this may be the much too long run of the production as well as its gradual decay, far from its original directors.

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

When the *mise-en-scène* had taken a step forward, the scenography had taken two steps backwards to the much-doomed tradition of playing operettas. Surprisingly, the visual aspect of the production could hardly be reconstructed from the lengthy reviews. The most information is provided by the monthly called *Színház és Filmművészet*, which mentions that “the sets are strikingly beautiful, especially in the first scene, with the Notre Dame in

<sup>417</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Gombos: *Luxemburg grófia*, 4.

<sup>421</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 563.

<sup>422</sup> Cf. Gombos: *Luxemburg grófia*, 4; Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

<sup>423</sup> Cf. Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 564.

<sup>424</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

the background (though we would recommend stronger lighting there, since half-light is too much for half an hour), then the beautiful proportions of the ballroom and the severe simplicity of ‘the hall of truth’. Add to this the beautiful clothes, costumes and the spectacular ballet in Act II. The audience is really pleased to see all that.”<sup>425</sup> The fact that critics did not pay enough attention to the description of scenography can be probably explained by its “invisibility”. When following the visual traces of the production, we see rather old-fashioned sets on photos that show us the space with actors in the center. An ornate romantic panorama picture largely based on painted elements in the first act, and a lavish but nondescript interior of a palace in the second, which appear to be the remnants of previous sets. The playbill reveals that the set designer was Tibor Bercsényi, who had also worked on the production of *The Count of Luxembourg*, directed by Vilmos Tihanyi in May 1944, in the middle of a city occupied by the Germans. We do not know that after successful cooperation with designers of the Opera House, why the management of the nationalized Operetta Theatre, wishing to remove the “dust” from the tradition of Lehár and Kálmán, asked Bercsényi, who had designed some forty shows at the “old” Operetta Theatre, and Teréz Nagyajtay, who had also been frequently employed as a costume designer before 1949, to take part in the new version of *The Count of Luxembourg*. In contrast to the intentions of the *mise-en-scène*, the two designers turned the production back towards tradition, which may have been a component of “cocking a snook at a world” in order to reproach it “by its own means, by the mood of operettas itself”, but there was no evidence of this.<sup>426</sup> We cannot assume, therefore, that the old-school set would have acted as a peculiar alienation effect in the *mise-en-scène* open (mostly theoretically, of course) to the Brechtian way of understanding theatre, and the attractive costumes did not have “the politics of the sign” (Roland Barthes) either. The fact that the achievement of the orchestra and László Várady, who was conducting the opening performance, was mentioned with no special emphasis, can be explained with the serious cutting of Lehár’s music and its rendering into an almost entirely accompanying role.

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Besides the 1954 production of *The Csárdás Princess*, *The Count of Luxembourg* has the most prestigious history of effect from the 1949–1956 period of the Operetta Theatre. In fact, this history can already be observed

<sup>425</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 564.

<sup>426</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Luxemburg grófia*, 5.

in how and why the legendary *Csárdás Princess* had been staged, since *Luxi* became its most important antecedent. On the one hand, it paved the way for a Kálmán premiere, which had the longest series of performances in the 1950s and 1960s, with a hugely successful Lehár premiere, proving that Silver-Age operettas are by no means as dead-end as some experts had claimed. The Soviet delegation to Budapest with Yuri Milyutin also came in useful, as after visiting a performance of the highly esteemed *Count of Luxembourg*, the composer asked if he could see a Kálmán operetta. According to Margit Gáspár, “in response to my reply that we were playing *The Violet of Montmartre* three years ago and that we were currently not playing a Kálmán operetta, [Milyutin] commented that it was wrong to neglect our own traditions”.<sup>427</sup> The Soviet composer could be referred to as an authority to justify the continuation of the previously discredited Kálmán-Lehár line. On the other hand, Margit Gáspár, together with Békeffy and Kellér lighted upon a form of adaptation in *The Count of Luxembourg* that was much more productive than the updating of the politically more direct *Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, and its principles could be used in *The Csárdás Princess* as well. (Furthermore, the rewritten version of Offenbach’s operetta did not prove to be viable after some revivals in rural theatres in the 1950s, but the adaptations of *The Count of Luxembourg* and *The Csárdás Princess* have had an unprecedented career up to now.<sup>428</sup>) According to critics, “Békeffy and Kellér have shown what talent and competence can produce in this field”, so Margit Gáspár certainly entrusted them with the adaptation of Kálmán’s most famous operetta. Contrary to the verdict a few years earlier, the authors “also proved that operettas with good old music, by Lehár and others, were lyrically not lost for our time, but could be resurrected, if their text was properly reworked, refreshed and made enjoyable”.<sup>429</sup>

*Luxi* ran for 278 performances to full houses until 1954 and it was only *The Csárdás Princess* that could “oust” it from the repertory of the Operetta Theatre because of the huge demand for the sensational new show. However, the *mise-en-scène* of György Székely and András Mikó returned for two more series: in February 1957 and in April 1963. In the 1956–1957 season, which was completely shattered by the revolution, after the cancelled premiere of *Mágnás Miska*, the revival of *The Count of Luxembourg* became the only

<sup>427</sup> Gáspár: *Napló Miljutyin elvtárs látogatásáról*, 165.

<sup>428</sup> Therefore, even if it is not wrong, it is certainly exaggerated that the 1954 version of *The Csárdás Princess* “harmonized with the socialist ideology of Mátyás Rákosi’s communist regime”. (Zoltán Imre: *Az operett mint interkulturális jelenség – Kálmán Imre Die Csárdásfürstin (1915) c. operettje különböző színpadokon*, [http://szin haz.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Imre\\_zoltan\\_csardaskiralyno.pdf](http://szin haz.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Imre_zoltan_csardaskiralyno.pdf) (accessed 19 July 2018). Békeffy and Kellér made Kálmán’s operetta acceptable for the 1950s, but in a version that is still a frequent guest on our stages in Hungary.

<sup>429</sup> Balázs: *Luxemburg grófia*, 563.

production of the Operetta Theatre, with another 94 performances in front of more than 100,000 spectators. The decay of the production, which we can assume by the audio recording, may have started then and culminated in the next series in 1963, since neither of the directors took part in these revivals.<sup>430</sup> However, the revised version of Lehár's operetta remained popular even later, and not only at the Operetta Theatre, where it was staged three times by other directors between 1963 and 2017.

The adaptation of Békeffy and Kellér has almost utterly replaced the previous Hungarian version of *The Count of Luxembourg*. (This Ur-version was only played in Szeged in 2005, directed by Péter Horváth.) The revised and musically reduced *The Count of Luxembourg* has become Lehár's most popular operetta in Hungary, outstripping *The Merry Widow*, which sets much higher demands on singers. René and Angèle have appeared in more than fifty productions on Hungarian stages since 1952, directed by László Vámos, István Iglódi, Ferenc Sík, István Szóke, József Bor, László Seregi and Tamás Ascher among others. Ascher's 1996 staging in Kaposvár stands out from the reception history of the operetta, not only because of its high quality of acting and *mise-en-scène*, but also because of its many references to the tradition created by the 1952 show. After all, *Luxi* and especially the roles of Madame Fleury and Sir Basil have become "lieux de mémoire" (Pierre Nora) for a style of playing operettas that linked the second half of the 20th century to the first, with interrupted continuity, of course, and in which the spirits of Hanna Honthy and Kamill Feleki have remained alive to this day.

<sup>430</sup> After "a revolutionary meeting of the company" on 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1956, György Székely resigned as chief director of the Operetta Theatre and became employed in the Library of the Theatre Association from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1957. (Cf. Dr. Székely: Operettszínház – 1956, 30.) Margit Gáspár wanted András Mikó to be chief director earlier, but "the company did not really like him and eventually Mikó left us offended and stayed at the Opera". (Venczel: Virágkor, Part 2, 40.)

THE FINAL PERFORMANCE  
OF THE OLD NATIONAL THEATRE  
ENDRE MARTON: *KING LEAR*, 1964

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*Title:* King Lear. *Date of Premiere:* 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1964 (revived on 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1967 and 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1974). *Venue:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Endre Marton. *Author:* William Shakespeare. *Translator:* Mihály Vörösmarty (revised by Dezső Mészöly). *Dramaturg:* Erzsébet Bereczky (1974). *Assistant director:* Eszter Tatár. *Set Designer:* Josef Svoboda. *Costume Designer:* Nelly Vágó. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Lajos Básti (Lear), Imre Sinkovits (Kent), Tamás Major (Gloster), Ferenc Kállai, Gyula Szersén [1974] (Edmund), Tibor Bitskey, Vilmos Izsóf [1967], László Sinkó [1974] (Edgar), Erzsi Máthé (Goneril), Katalin Berek, Mária Ronyecz [1974] (Regan), Mari Töröcsik, Melinda Máriáss [1974] (Cordelia), Kornél Gelley (Albany), Attila Tyll (Cornwall), János Horkai, Sándor Téri [1974] (Oswald), Vilmos Izsóf, Ottó Szokolay [1967], Pál Somogyvári, Antal Konrád [1974] (King of France), Elemér Tarsoly, János Horkai [1974] (Gentleman), György Kálmán, István Pathó [from 1968] (Fool), János Pásztor, Géza Sándor [1967], János Pásztor [1974] (Curan), Sándor Hindi, Gellért Raksányi [1967] (Doctor), László Csurka (Messenger 1), Ödön Gyalog (Messenger 2), László Versényi (Servant 1), Tibor Kun (Servant 2), László Balogh (Captain), Béla Bodonyi, Sándor Siménfalvy [1974] (Old Man).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

The 1964 performance of *King Lear*, which was set on stage at the National Theatre for the 400th anniversary of the playwright's birth, remained a showcase item of the one-party state's official theatre life for more than a decade, thanks to the two revivals in 1967 and 1974. The premiere was accompanied by almost unanimous critical acclaim, the tickets for the performances were sold out, and the success has been eternalized in a TV recording. But our reconstruction, half a century later, is most difficult: while the 1964 performance was celebrated for its paradigm-changing nature in the history of the play's theatrical reception<sup>431</sup> and its forward-looking nature

<sup>431</sup> Before 1964, the last production of *King Lear* was set on stage at the National Theatre 16 years earlier, in 1948, directed by Béla Both, with Artúr Somlay in the title role. Edgar was played by Lajos Básti, the Lear of the 1964 production.

regarding the proceedings of the National Theatre, all this is impossible to perceive in the mid-1970s recording. If we want to consider the possible causes of this paradox, we must pinpoint accurately the historical position of the production. Firstly, we should consider in due weight the fact that the premiere of Endre Marton's *mise-en-scène* took place barely three months after the Royal Shakespeare Company's *King Lear* guest performance in Budapest (27<sup>th</sup> February 1964), directed by Peter Brook. So the National's *King Lear* was staged directly on the heels of such a production that proved genuinely pivotal in the 20th-century history of playing Shakespeare,<sup>432</sup> and had "such a magical effect on world-theatre that it practically paralyzed or hypnotized further directors of the play."<sup>433</sup> Secondly, it was five weeks after the opening on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1964 that the iron curtain of the old, Blaha Lujza Square building of the National Theatre (to be exploded nine months later) came down for the last time, and many of the recollections mention that the preparations to the new premiere and the farewell took place simultaneously, exerting an extreme emotional strain on the company. Marton's *mise-en-scène* can be interpreted today, first and foremost, as homage to the past, while contemporary critics cheered it for "opening inspiring vistas to the future", for "our" *Lear* holding its own against that of the West, and with it the actors "already embarked on the building of the invisible walls of a new National Theatre".<sup>434</sup> Despite its innovations, the production could not release itself from the influence of Brook's masterpiece "constantly haunting in the air",<sup>435</sup> or those retraction forces that were fettering the proceedings of the National Theatre, not only in terms of aesthetics but also of human politics.<sup>436</sup> In addition, the success story of the production cannot be separated from the ongoing civil war between Endre Marton and Tamás Major, which split the company into two parties,<sup>437</sup> pushed the theatre more and more into

<sup>432</sup> Cf. Tamás Koltai: *Peter Brook*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1976, 97–137 or Árpád Kékesi Kun: *A rendezés színháza*, Budapest, Osiris, 2007, 273–275.

<sup>433</sup> Koltai: *Peter Brook*, 132–133.

<sup>434</sup> Miklós Gyárfás: Épülő színház. A Nemzeti Színház *Lear király*-előadásáról, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 22, No. 134, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1964, 8.

<sup>435</sup> Flóra Fencsik: „Lear szerepével búcsúzom a Nemzetitől...”, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 9, No. 94, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1964, 2.

<sup>436</sup> Péter Léner's two remarks become important in this respect. After 1945, "the National became a gathering and hiding place for significant artists of different styles and mentalities. [...] This diversity could only produce artistic achievement for a short time; it induced many conflicts and even tragedies." In addition, "there were 70 actors under contract at the National Theatre. Marton said it was impossible to keep a company with 25 Kossuth Prize winners together." Léner: *Pista bácsi, Tanár úr, Karcsi*, 155. and 173.

<sup>437</sup> While Marton did not stage Shakespeare at the National after *King Lear*, Major staged six of his plays, until Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki, appointed as chief directors in 1978, came up with their own works (Székely with *Troilus and Cressida* in January 1980 and Zsámbéki with the two parts of *Henry IV* in December 1980). It was rather impertinent for Major to stage and play the title hero in a parody of *King Lear*, adapted by Gábor Görgey and

“disorder”,<sup>438</sup> and then at the end of the 1970s into a “catastrophic condition”.<sup>439</sup> The recording of *King Lear* reveals these tensions in the first place, in contrast to the favorable critical reception ten years earlier.

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

As the textual cuts were insignificant, and the performance was utterly based on the text (more precisely, on the classical translation of Mihály Vörösmarty), we cannot speak of dramaturgical work in the usual sense,<sup>440</sup> only a reading of the play that is concretized in the staging.<sup>441</sup> Regarding the latter, the findings of the reviews are grouped around two components: the interpretation of the title character, which is different from earlier versions shown in Hungary, and the highlighting of Lear’s relationship to power as a factor of his tragedy. Marton’s *mise-en-scène* did not echo “the old approach to Lear”,<sup>442</sup> it did not join the (neo)romanticist tradition of those who staged the relationship of the faltering, wretched, persecuted old man and his evil daughters as a drama of ingratitude. The Lear of Lajos Básti “was far from emphasizing the helpless, pitiful old man (as so many had done it earlier so many times), he was a powerful, dignified monarch instead, who was tyrannical in his character and

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János Komlós with the subtitle, *These young people today!* The parody became the opening performance of the Mikroszkóp Stage on 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1967, only two weeks after the revival of the National’s production, in which Major was playing Gloucester.

<sup>438</sup> The word is used by Dr. Dezső Malonyai (Head of Department at the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Culture) in a reminder of a conversation he had with Endre Marton on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1971. Cf. Zoltán Imre – Orsolya Ring (eds.): *Szigorúan bizalmas. Dokumentumok a Nemzeti Színház Kádár-kori történetéhez*, Budapest, Ráció, 2010, 168.

<sup>439</sup> Cf. Tamás Koltai’s remark in his review on Péter Léner’s book mentioned above. “When [Endre Marton] felt it was a disaster to be replaced [as manager of the theatre], the National was in a catastrophic condition. (This is my statement, not Léner’s.)” Tamás Koltai: *Keresztutak, Népszabadság, Hétféle*, Vol. 73, No. 167, 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> July, 2015, 10.

<sup>440</sup> In a description of the Theatre History Collection at the National Széchényi Library about the document SZT MM 15.484, the director’s copy of the play is mistakenly considered to be “amended by the dramaturg’s, Eszter Tatár’s comments”. However, the 1964 playbill of the production does not mention a dramaturg and there is no sign of such work in the production. According to her own words, Eszter Tatár was involved in the rehearsals as “an all-sort aid”, far from dramaturg, but rather as an assistant director or “maître de jeu”.

<sup>441</sup> The approximately 110-year-old translation was revised by Dezső Mészöly, which resulted in a “conscientious and precise cosmetic operation”. (Gyárfás: *Épülő színház*, 8.) In 1986, at the request of the National Theatre of Pécs, Mészöly retranslated the play, but he used a great number of solutions from his 1964 adaptation, which wanted to “prolong the stage life of an old translation. I think, it has been achieved, as all subsequent Hungarian performances of *Lear* also used this renewed Vörösmarty text (for almost a quarter of a century) in various theatres, indoors or open-air and even on screen.” Dezső Mészöly: *Új magyar Shakespeare. Fordítások és esszék*, Budapest, Magvető, 1988, 227.

<sup>442</sup> Fencsik: „Lear szerepével”, 2.

in many of his actions” and who almost wanted to be a “monopolist of love”.<sup>443</sup> On the one hand, this setting tended towards the humanization of the title character, who had been regarded so far as quasi mythological, putting in the foreground “a human being struggling in the tangled web of thoughts and emotions not unknown to us”.<sup>444</sup> On the other hand, it flashed (but not more than flashed!) “the tragic sin of absolute power”<sup>445</sup> instead of an emotional transgression.<sup>446</sup> The theme of the “despot turned into human” interpretation was taken on by the critics in contrast to Brook’s version, in order to indicate how the Hungarian performance equalizes the one-sidedness of the English one.<sup>447</sup> While, according to Péter Nagy, for Brook the key to the human tragedy shown in the story of Lear was disillusionment (almost a swearword in the age of obligatory optimism), Marton found this key “in the relationship between power and human purity”, so his vision was “perhaps more humanist, in any case more humane” than that of the Brit.<sup>448</sup> But the Marxist reading went clearly overboard, when it claimed that in the production of the National Theatre “social reality came forth from behind the family tale”, and the spectator faced “the tragedy of tyranny, the mistakes of arbitrary power”.<sup>449</sup> In a decade of abortive attempts at “socialism with a human face” (to quote the famous phrase of Alexander Dubček, former First Secretary of Czechoslovakia), Marton and his collaborators tackled the relationship between man and tyrannical power so cautiously that it had remained virtually invisible. The television recording convinces us of the opposite of what Béla Mátrai-Betegh suggests: “the Lear legend” is not being released from “the cobweb of emotions” and does not turn into “intellectual and moral drama”,<sup>450</sup> because, instead of problematizing

<sup>443</sup> Péter Nagy: A magyar *Lear királyról*, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 8, No. 22, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1964, 9.

<sup>444</sup> d.t.: *Lear király* a Nemzeti Színházban, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 9, No. 132, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1964, 2.

<sup>445</sup> Béla Mátrai-Betegh: *Lear király*. Shakespeare tragédiájának felújítása a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 20. No. 120, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1964, 13.

<sup>446</sup> Marton underlined that “Shakespeare’s Lear [...] was a strong, masculine individual who had become a despot because of power, and it took terrible humiliation and anguish for him to become human again; since he had been a man before power made him a tyrant. That is Shakespeare’s Lear, and that’s what our Lear will be like...” Fencsik: „Lear szerepével”, 2.

<sup>447</sup> Cf. “Peter Brook staged *Lear* with increased puritanism almost to the point of inhumanity, creating the drama of disillusionment growing to cosmic proportions. Marton approaches the peaks of the drama in a softer, more lyrical way, without taking anything from the tragic.” Nagy: A magyar *Lear királyról*, 9.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid. – In an interview published a month before the premiere, in *Esti Hírlap*, Marton made an accurate reference to the fact that Brook’s *mise-en-scène* was inspired by Beckett. His “plays are not played here [nor Ionesco’s plays or existential dramas, so] we do not know the tone to which these works have retuned some of the Western theatres, and which has also influenced Peter Brook’s staging.” According to Marton, this is the reason for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production being “so shocking” for us. “We [on the other hand] feel that cruelty and humaneness add up to Shakespeare together, who always saw reality, man in all his/her diversity.” Fencsik: „Lear szerepével”, 2.

<sup>449</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Lear király*, 13.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

power, according to the accurate insight of Péter Nádas in connection with the 1974 revival, the creators merely “fulfil their duty. They stage *King Lear*. They retell the story. As a nice, well rounded, almost happy-ending tale.”<sup>451</sup>

## STAGING

Endre Marton’s *mise-en-scène* was hallmarked with its moderation, its “grand, yet restrained style”,<sup>452</sup> which, however, could not become a benefit for this four-hour tragedy performance played in three parts.<sup>453</sup> Due to his instructions, the acting noticeably left behind “the harsh sentimentality and empty effect-seeking of romanticism”<sup>454</sup> and it was devoid of cheap “sadness”.<sup>455</sup> At the same time, he avoided “the pitfalls of the approach that was tailored to the aberrations of modern psychology”,<sup>456</sup> in the sense that he did not sought his answers for the questions behind the interplay of actions and reactions in terms of psychological realism. But this “halfway” position brought about a sort of indeterminacy, accurately registered by Tamás Koltai on the occasion of the 1974 revival: “This *King Lear* is not a *social* drama because it does not refer to the circumstances among which it plays out. It is not a *psychological* drama, as it does not establish links between the players: they are all left to themselves to build up a character that cannot find a way to other characters. But it is not even *drama* enough, because the situations are not acted out.”<sup>457</sup> The recording of the performance does not commemorate an Endre Marton who, according to his students, was “an excellent analyst as a teacher”,<sup>458</sup> instead it supports those later critics who complained about the “narrow horizon”<sup>459</sup> of the production, and showed how much it lacked “the meticulous accuracy of drama analysis and the justification of the deeper content of the

<sup>451</sup> Péter Nádas: *Nézőtér*, Budapest, Magvető, 1983, 16.

<sup>452</sup> Ottó Hámosi: *Lear király*. Shakespeare tragédiája a Nemzeti Színházban, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 8, No. 22, 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1964, 5.

<sup>453</sup> According to Péter Léner, Marton “had been careful since the late 1950s to allow only the necessary physical actions instead of routine, banal, ‘general’ movements for actors. It was not so spectacular, but it had become an important element of his style.” Léner: *Pista bácsi, Tanár úr, Karcsi*, 177.

<sup>454</sup> d.t.: *Lear király*, 2.

<sup>455</sup> Cf. “Do it hard, manly... Don’t be sad – we hear the director’s instructions again and again at the rehearsals of *King Lear* at the National.” Fencsik: „Lear szerepével”, 2.

<sup>456</sup> d.t.: *Lear király*, 2.

<sup>457</sup> Tamás Koltai: *Lear király*. Shakespeare drámájának följútása a Nemzeti Színházban, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 32, No. 248, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1974, 7.

<sup>458</sup> Koltai: *Keresztutak*, 10.

<sup>459</sup> Péter Nádas’s account of Marton’s *King Lear*, László Vámos’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (Víg Theatre, 1974) and Ottó Ádám’s *Othello* (Madách Theatre, 1973) “runs into the analysis of Shakespeare’s works with the excuse that the narrow horizon of the productions does not offer much possibility for other kinds of intellectual activity.” Nádas: *Nézőtér*, 16.

roles”.<sup>460</sup> In addition, the director avoided subtexts that would make possible any allegorizing on the theme of the fall of the old order. In this respect, it is a key moment when Gloster reads the letter written by Edmund, his illegitimate son, but attributed to Edgar, his legitimate son: “such power only lasts while tolerated”, and Tamás Major stops before the last word, then emphasizes it.<sup>461</sup> Somewhat later Major/Gloster speaks up furiously against these words, inciting revolution against the fathers, the followers of the old regime, and his visceral reaction leaves no doubt that “this is treason!”<sup>462</sup>

### ACTING

The cast, qualified as “spectacular”,<sup>463</sup> met undivided praise at the occasion of the 1964 premiere.<sup>464</sup> Ten years later, however, at the time of the second revival, some of the critics made it clear that “the performance of Lajos Básti [...] was a little outdated”,<sup>465</sup> the “excellent actors, Kossuth Prize winners could not cope with their duties, [and those who] played for the first time in *King Lear*, even in real starring roles, were unable to fully develop their characters”.<sup>466</sup> Watching

<sup>460</sup> Ernő Taxner: Shakespeare 1964, *Kritika* 2:12 (1964), 30.

<sup>461</sup> The quotation is from Dezső Mészöly’s adaptation of Vörösmarty’s rendering into Hungarian, translated back to English. In the English-language text of the play, we find “aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer’d”. William Shakespeare: *King Lear*, edited by Kenneth Muir, London – New York, Routledge, 1993, 26.

<sup>462</sup> “Conspiracy”, in the English-language text. *Ibid.* – The status quo is also confirmed by Edgar. In the television recording of the production he is played by László Sinkó, whom we see as an intellectual figure first, reading a thick book, wearing glasses and a quasi-sweater, but who, unlike the subversive Edmund, believes in the old order and helps to restore it. It is not difficult to perceive the typical figure of the consolidation of the Kádár regime in him, also familiar from some films.

<sup>463</sup> Fencsik: „Lear szerepével”, 2.

<sup>464</sup> Cf. “[Acting] is so uniformly high that it is impossible to set up a value system.” Mátrai-Betegh: *Lear király*, 13. – However, the reviews highlighted three actors: Lajos Básti, Imre Sinkovits and György Kálmán. The critic of *Ország-Világ*, for example, considered that “besides Adam and Oedipus, Lear was perhaps Básti’s greatest achievement to date” (Gábor Antal: A *Lear király* a Nemzeti Színházban, *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 8, No. 24, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1964, 24.), Miklós Gyárfás appreciated the elimination of the poses that had characterized Básti’s acting (Épülő színház, 8.), and Béla Mátrai-Betegh emphasized the “lyrical beauty and human truth” of his performance (*Lear király*, 13.). Imre Sinkovits’s Kent was described by Péter Nagy as a “statue of feudal fidelity carved from a block” (A magyar *Lear királyról*, 9.). Critics agreed that “one of the most original artistic achievements of the production was György Kálmán’s Fool” (No author: Hétvég: felújítás-bemutató, *Hétfői Hírek*, Vol. 8, No. 22, 25<sup>th</sup> May, 1964, 6.), who was praised even ten years later in an independent essay by Katalin Róna (A Bolond: Kálmán György, *Színház* 8:1 [1975], 28–29.). Unfortunately, István Pathó’s performance of The Fool in the television recording cannot recall the greatness of György Kálmán’s acting, which remains invisible to today’s spectators and is documented only by a few photos.

<sup>465</sup> Taxner: Shakespeare 1964, 30.

<sup>466</sup> Koltai: *Lear király*, 7.

the recording today, it is a basic recognition – and it makes us aware of the fairly rapid obsolescence of metacommunication signals – that our present-day theatre bares hardly any resemblance to the performance recorded more than five decades ago. Acting presents us with a multitude of meaningless ingredients. For instance, diction frequently flows over from one sentence to the other; there is a strange mannerism of a momentary pause inserted after the first few words of a sentence; or the regular lack of reactions, that would be expected as a sign of psychological realism, following substantial utterances.<sup>467</sup> But the classic punchline-based timing,<sup>468</sup> the stereotypes of gestures, mimics, and intonation are also revolutive,<sup>469</sup> just like the equally strong makeup on male and female actors, too many wigs and false beards, and the huge false eyebrows on Major and Básti. Apart from a few moments of Básti, the actors' work seems downright "leisurely",<sup>470</sup> it is so devoid of any performative force. However, the "nice and clean articulation",<sup>471</sup> that was inclusive of the "builders of the less important roles" too, was very resounding and made the show viable in a reading-performance version.<sup>472</sup> The contemporary description of Péter Nádas shows that it is not only our present perspective that is inclined to understand the actors' work as an interplay of stunning speaking voices, or a kind of live radio theatre:

As if a conscious ear would pair the actors' voices with each other: hysterical and prim altos to hoarse and velvety basses; amidst the beautiful company of low-lying sounds an adolescent and a smart tenor provide the higher tones. There's no other stylistic cohesion to speak about except for the classical quality of the voices.

<sup>467</sup> Such as Gloster's statement that Edmund "hath been out nine years, and away he shall again", or Cordelia's question, "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say, / They love you all?" Shakespeare: *King Lear*, 5. and 9.

<sup>468</sup> As Lear picks up a sword, for example, and wants to stab Kent, who has dropped to his knees before him. As Gloster falls on Edmund's shoulder, or Lear on the shoulder of Kent in disguise. As Kent stretches out his left arm to protect and to cover Lear, and his robe hangs from it. Cf. the photo on the front cover of this book.

<sup>469</sup> For example, despite all the strength and masculinity quoted above, Lajos Básti's clenched fists raised to the sky, his bulging eyes and disheveled grey hair are clear signs of a centuries-old tradition that we see not only in photographs of Artúr Somlay's 1948 *Lear*, but also in early-20<sup>th</sup> century and even 19<sup>th</sup>-century pictures about *Lear*. Tamás Koltai was right to claim that "the faulty start made King Lear the hero of a *prosaic opera*, who performed a mad scene with a burr stuck in his beard". Koltai: *Lear király*, 7. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>470</sup> Cf. "The inner vibrancy of Shakespeare's plays, the rapid pace of the plot, is in stark contrast to the 'dignified slowness' of our usual style of acting; in other words, to our actors' comfortable approach to Shakespeare." Taxner: *Shakespeare 1964*, 29.

<sup>471</sup> Gyárfás: *Épülő színház*, 8.

<sup>472</sup> Cf. Ferenc Radó: Megérdemlik a vastapsot, *Kisalföld*, Vol. 22, No. 32, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 5. (On the performance of the National Theatre in Ady Endre Cultural Center in Sopron.)

Intense verblivity, the beautiful arrangement of tones provides the performance's framework, despite the completely diverse styles of the actors. The performance is well rounded.<sup>473</sup>

### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

The influence of the Royal Shakespeare Company's guest performance was most visible in the external elements, in the stage design, which was "monumentally grim"<sup>474</sup> and created "a feel that was both ancient and modern".<sup>475</sup> Josef Svoboda's stage setting, operating with abstract spatial components and appearing more architectural than representative, was a real curiosity in the context of the contemporary expectations of the audience. It did not comply with the traditions of the *Lear*-performances of the previous decades (staged by Béla Both, Antal Németh and Sándor Hevesi before him), which were "chronicler-orchestrated", revealing a "historical and fairy-tail splendor".<sup>476</sup> The essentially empty stage was divided by "metal cubes, open at the bottom", that descended from above (in different configuration for each scene), and "cold spotlights" emanated from them or from between them that cut the darkness of the stage into parts.<sup>477</sup> Acting proceeded "between these smooth, powerfully simple arrays and below the closed lights bursting from the columns moving up and down",<sup>478</sup> but the scenery (albeit no one mentioned it regarding the 1964 premiere, the recording clearly shows it) lived a virtually independent life.<sup>479</sup> Not simply because it had neither illustrative nor interpretive functions, but because, in the spirit of the visual habits of the very pictorealism that Svoboda just tried to eradicate, the extras (torchbearers,

<sup>473</sup> Nádas: *Nézőtér*, 16.

<sup>474</sup> Antal: *A Lear király*, 24.

<sup>475</sup> d.t.: *Lear király*, 2.

<sup>476</sup> Gyárfás: *Épülő színház*, 8.

<sup>477</sup> Nagy: *A magyar Lear királyról*, 9. – The reviewer makes it clear that these are "more reminiscent of the metal sheets in the English production than they should be", nevertheless they are "lucky tools for rapid scene changes". (Ibid.)

<sup>478</sup> Hámori: *Lear király*, 6.

<sup>479</sup> The reason that the TV recording confronts us with a completely decayed performance may be the disappearance of the freshness and the rhythm of the ten-year-old *mise-en-scène*. In terms of the visuals, the disintegration can be due to the fact that the production planned for the Blaha Lujza Square building was forced to be played in different spatial and technical conditions. (First in the provisional home of the National Theatre in Nagymező Street, then in their permanent theatre building on Hevesi Sándor Square.) If we compare the only scene photo of the 1964 performance, which spectacularly shows the proxemic composition of "the rings of lights and the ponds of shadows" (Gyárfás: *Épülő színház*, 8.), with the small place and neutral lighting effects that can be seen in the TV recording, it becomes clear that there was barely anything left of the well-conceived images over time.

halberdiers) continually kept encircling the stage constellations. Thus the signals of acting did not fit the signals of the set, rendering the latter an extravagant and eccentric context.<sup>480</sup>

Although the reviews talked of a “spiritual fray”, or “conceptual stage”, the visual world of this *King Lear* could not function as a “psycho-plastic space”,<sup>481</sup> responding subtly to the happenings of the performance with its alterations, following their dynamics, as it happened with the best designs of Svoboda, for example in the 1963 *Romeo and Juliet* in Prague, directed by Otomar Krejča, which had paradigmatic significance in this regard. Historically we can agree with Géza Fodor, who wrote that “Hungarian stage design was about to break with naturalism at the time, sometimes more boldly, sometimes timidly, and made some important steps towards decorative stylization. Svoboda’s scenery, with its geometric boxes and focused light beams, stood out even in that modernizing Hungarian context with such sovereignty, freedom, purity and firmness of scenic thinking and theatrical composition, that it had a highly productive effect in our theatre culture.”<sup>482</sup> However, the *mise-en-scène* was unable to make this sovereignty productive, and that is why Tamás Koltai found the stage design unsuccessful on the occasion of the 1974 revival, saying that “rectangular drain pipes, resembling a coal depot or a grain silo [...] come into motion smoothly, silently, they come and go, moving up and down, shedding emptily decorative light beams of futile beauty, creating sterile, featureless, functionless light and shadow zones”.<sup>483</sup> The costumes of Nelly Vágó, simply cut, unadorned, with “subdued colors”,<sup>484</sup> suggesting heavy materials, were outright Brook imitations, as a whole, “nondescript, but not tasteless”.<sup>485</sup>

<sup>480</sup> This eccentricity is explained by Péter Molnár Gál as a conscious awakening of the spectators’ “infantile willingness”. “The experience of movement provided by Endre Marton’s theatre is closely related to the experience of space. The bronze cubes of *King Lear* designed by Svoboda, which theatre people sarcastically called sausage smokers, generated a wide and airy effect with their massive columns, but the director did not deny himself and his audience the beauty of elements lifting up and down even in this Shakespearean tragedy. Space and movement are the main features of Marton’s *mises-en-scène*.” Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 136.

<sup>481</sup> Cf. Dennis Kennedy: *Looking at Shakespeare. A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 220.

<sup>482</sup> Géza Fodor: Római bóvli, Verdi: *Macbeth*, Magyar Állami Operaház, *Muzsika* 45:12 (2002), 20. – Svoboda worked four times in Hungary, and Géza Fodor claimed that his significance could not be judged by his last work at the Budapest Opera House in 2002. Nevertheless, Svoboda made a serious impact on set design worldwide, influencing Hungarian set designers such as Csaba Antal too.

<sup>483</sup> Koltai: *Lear király*, 7.

<sup>484</sup> Ervin Szombathelyi: *Lear király*. Bemutató a Nemzeti Színházban, *Népszava*, Vol. 92, No. 127, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1964, 2.

<sup>485</sup> Nádas: *Nézőtér*, 16.

## IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Except for Svoboda's impact, which worked independently of the performance, Endre Marton's *King Lear* did not have considerable influence on playing Shakespeare in Hungary. Nevertheless, it soon became a legend, both literally and figuratively, in program schedules and in aesthetics, being the final performance of the old National Theatre. It was feeding the myth of the "glorious palace of miracles",<sup>486</sup> and also served as a motive to keep it alive for long. It was this performance with which actors and audiences said goodbye to the prestigious building of the former People's Theatre (Népszínház), and the memory of the twenty-seven minutes' applause that sounded after the last lines of the play, spoken among tears by Albany, that is Kornél Gelley, is still vivid today.<sup>487</sup> Above all, even considering its somewhat ambivalent innovations (stage design), the performance became the summary of a bygone era of theatre, with a star casting.<sup>488</sup> During its long run, it became increasingly controversial, as this is indicated in the adverse reviews of the 1970s, which did not (or could not) refer to what is obvious today: as an example of "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous" (Reinhardt Koselleck), the performance set a tearful memorial to past greatness in a time when the future, the historically very productive endeavors of Péter Halász, István Paál, József Ruszt, etc. began to emerge.<sup>489</sup>

<sup>486</sup> László Ablonczy: Sinkovits Imre az utolsó évadban: 1963/64. A Nemzeti Színház 175 éves ünnepére, *Hitel* 25:12 (2012), 56–59.

<sup>487</sup> On 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2014, on the 50th anniversary of the event, for example, a commemoration was held at Jókai Theatre in Békéscsaba, with the participation of László Kudelka, stage manager-in-chief at the old National Theatre.

<sup>488</sup> It is far from a development in the history of effect, but we should also take into account that the ideal abstracted from "the National Theatre led by Major, Marton, later [László] Vámos, [Ferenc] Sík, [László] Ablonczy", among others, i.e. "the dominance of great actors, theatre managers and literary valuable dramas with strong moral values in moderate staging", became widespread in a whole series of productions around 2010. Produced primarily in rural theatres (e.g. in Szolnok, Békéscsaba, Eger), these productions wish to replace a theatre culture declared defunct in Budapest, and, in contrast to director's theatre, they try to restore "the respect for tradition and greatness", with "real, traditionally large-format acting performances". József Kiss: *Vitaindító tanulmány a pesti színházakról*, <http://magyarateatrum.hu/kiss-jozsef-vitaindito-tanulmany-pesti-szinhazakrol> (accessed 28 December 2015).

<sup>489</sup> Cf. "After 1968, during the 1970s, Hungarian theatre was transforming. *The theatre of great actors became a director's theatre*. MGP [Péter Molnár Gál] did not realize what was happening at the time. He saw, of course, that even the theatre of Ottó Ádám was becoming empty, but he did not realize that he had to side with the processes that unfolded in rural theatres, coincidentally, around the directors of my generation. And that you had to side quite simply because *in contrast to an empty theatre culture, the future belonged to those processes, because those processes were productive*. Of course, the new comes with losses in life. Director's theatre had brought the great surplus that a theatre production became a work of art and meaningful as a whole. It had brought the complexity of theatre as previously unknown. But it had also brought losses, the greatest of which was the regression of acting creativity, *the extinction of great actors*." Géza Fodor: „Nincsen két mérce”. Fodor Géza levelei Petrovics Emilnek, *Holmi* 24:7 (2012), 864. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

THE DRAMA OF INCOMPLETENESS  
DECLARED TO BE COMPLETE  
ENDRE MARTON: *THE DEATH OF MARAT*, 1966



*Title:* The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade. *Date of Premiere:* 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1966 (revived on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1972). *Venue:* 22 Nagymező Street, Budapest. *Director:* Endre Marton. *Author:* Peter Weiss. *Composer:* Hans-Martin Majewsky. *Translator:* Gábor Görgey. *Choreographer:* Károly Szigeti. *Set designer:* Mátyás Varga. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* György Kálmán (Jean-Paul Marat), Imre Sinkovits (Marquis de Sade), Noémi Apor (Simonne Evrard), Hédi Váradi (Charlotte Corday), György Györfly (Duperret), Vilmos Izsóf (Jacques Roux), László Versényi, János Rajz (Herald), Kornél Gelley (Kokol), József Horváth (Polpoch), Gábor Agárdi (Cucurucu), Zsuzsa Zsolnay (Rosignol), József Gáti (Monsieur Coulmier), Mária Sivó (Madame Coulmier), Zsuzsa Mányai (Inmate 1), Vali Dániel (Inmate 2), Dalma Lelkes (Inmate 3), László Csurka (Inmate 4), Gyula Szersén (Inmate 5), László Szacsuvay (Inmate 6), István Pathó (Inmate 7), Sándor Siménfalvi (Inmate 8, Teacher), Katalin Lázár (Inmate 9, Mother), Tibor Kun (Inmate 10, Father), Péter Blaskó (Inmate 11, Soldier), János Pásztor (Inmate 12, Nouveau riche), Károly Gyulay (Inmate 13), Attila Bánhidi (Inmate 14).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

Born at the time of Endre Marton's greatest achievements as a director, *The Death of Marat* was immediately declared to be of importance in Hungarian theatre history. Less than 10 years after 1956, it raised the problem of revolution (abstractly, of course), avoiding the possibility of reference to recent events. The National Theatre sought to connect the production with contemporary trends in world theatre: *The Death of Marat* was set on stage in Budapest only two years after its world premiere at the Schiller Theater in West Berlin. Peter Weiss' play was popular both inside and outside the Eastern Bloc, also staged in London by Peter Brook (no longer unknown to Hungarians because of a guest performance of his *King Lear*), and published in Hungarian in an anthology of modern German dramas at the same time

as the opening at the National. Both the genre and Marton's *mise-en-scène* were approached from the issue of novelty, discussing *The Death of Marat* (its long title was shortened and the production was usually referred to this way) together with the Budapest premieres of *The Investigation*, a dramatic oratorio by Peter Weiss and *The Deputy* by Rolf Hochhuth.<sup>490</sup> At the time of a boom of documentary dramas (and let us not forget that Marat's utterances in the play are also based on writings of the historical Marat), these seemed to be "exciting political plays",<sup>491</sup> even if they focused on a "strong ideological message" too. But they were certainly more exciting than previous stage works on industrial and agricultural production, full of stereotypes of all sorts. Their structure differed from realist dramaturgy and required a new way of staging, with which official theatres began to experiment (rather moderately, of course) in the first half of the 1960s, mostly under the auspices of epic theatre.

However, since Hungarian theatre could not really assimilate avant-garde traditions, Brecht, usually understood rather superficially, only caused confusion among theatre people and spectators for some time and provided no methodological alternative to the domestic version of a way of performance coming from Stanislavsky.<sup>492</sup> *The Death of Marat* was born during a combat between Endre Marton and Tamás Major, which was gifting the atmosphere at the National for twenty years. The previous premiere of the theatre was *Coriolanus* in an adaptation by Brecht, staged by Major and Eszter Tatár, but Marton tried to be more Brechtian than his colleagues, and his production of Weiss' play was indeed the first to make "mental theatre"<sup>493</sup> widely understandable. Although this was not analyzed at the time, it was

<sup>490</sup> *The Investigation* was first performed by the Art Ensemble of the Hungarian People's Army, directed by Tamás Török, and *The Deputy* was staged by Károly Kazimir at Thália Theatre. *The Investigation*, which Endre Marton regarded as the "logical continuation" of *The Death of Marat*, the second part of a "gigantic trilogy" (G.P.: Számvetés és előretékinés, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 10, No. 51, 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1966, 9.), was also set on stage by Tamás Major at the National Theatre on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1967. However, the German writer's trilogy was never produced and *The Death of Marat* was not part of it. Weiss was working on a contemporary version of *The Divine Comedy* from 1964 to 1969 and *The Investigation* was intended to be its third part. The first part, *Inferno* was written in 1964, found in his heritage and published in 2003, eleven years after his death. Its world premiere was in 2008. The second part of *The Divine Comedy* remained only a plan.

<sup>491</sup> F.L.: Két közéleti dráma bemutatója Budapesten, *Keletmagyarország*, Vol. 23, No. 55, 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1966, 9.

<sup>492</sup> The unstable foundations on which the comprehension of so-called "modern theatre" was based, and all that was mingling in it, are exemplified by László Kéry's claim that in the first half of the 1965–1966 season, shortly before the opening of *The Death of Marat*, "the best productions came from grotesqueness, new satire, alienation and attempts to adapt epic theatre in general". László Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 10, No. 7, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 8.

<sup>493</sup> Imre Sinkovits's expression. Cf. György Sas: Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését. De Sade és Marat párbeszéde – a Fészekben, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 10, No. 11, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1966, 7.

the main cause of the production's supposed "epochal importance",<sup>494</sup> which made quite a few critics write about "the rebirth of the National Theatre and, perhaps more broadly, our 'national theatre'".<sup>495</sup> Cultural journalism called Marton's *mise-en-scène* one of the greatest artistic achievements of 1966,<sup>496</sup> and critics described how we were able to "have a contribution to the history of theatre again" with the interpretation of the play and with the director's and actors' work.<sup>497</sup>

However, this was only possible with the critics' keeping the range of interpretations under complete control. Even the National Theatre sought to help and govern reception by relying on only historical facts in its publications and focusing on the three protagonists by means of 18<sup>th</sup> century documents and cleverly selected images.<sup>498</sup> (Not to mention the fact that only adults were allowed to see the show, which was "not for youth".<sup>499</sup>) Without "doublespeak",<sup>500</sup> the revolution had to be understood as the one that started in 1789, and in no way could be associated with 1956, which was called a counter-revolution then, anyway. At most it could also be associated with 1917, but only as an uprising whose historical consequences all mankind must face, not as an event the ideals of which were gradually desecrated in the decades that ensued. It was only Judit Szántó referring to a statement by Weiss, who said that the figure of Napoleon "represents Stalinism, lying in the background of Marat's aspirations, and recognized by de Sade".<sup>501</sup> But she also avoided expanding this interpretation, i.e. de Sade's charge of a perverted revolution

<sup>494</sup> István Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás. A *Marat halála* a Nemzeti Színházban, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 11, No. 30, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 2.

<sup>495</sup> Judit Sz. Szántó: Marat és De Sade, in Zsuzsa Gál M. (ed.): *Színházművészeti Almanach*, Budapest, Színháztudományi Intézet, 1966, 5. – Cf. also "one of the most exciting dramas and the most memorable show of the decade" (Anna Földes: Nagy mű, nagy előadás, *Nők Lapja*, Vol. 18, No. 8, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 25.); "the most valuable production of the National Theatre in this decade" (Pál Geszti: Charentoni színjáték, *Képes Újság*, Vol. 7, No. 21, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1966, 8.); "an outstanding event in our theatrical life" (Ervin Szombathelyi: *Marat halála*. Peter Weiss drámája a Nemzeti Színházban, *Népszava*, Vol. 94, No. 35, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 2.); "a serious and cathartic experience you will hardly forget. It's real THEATRE – all in upper case." (Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.); "concerning its interest, novelty and importance, we have not seen a similar production on Hungarian stages for a long time" Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, 8.).

<sup>496</sup> Together with Mária Sulyok's "whole series of roles played by means of the widest range of skills", János Ferencsik's "conducting praised with rapture at home and abroad", and also András Kovács's film "*Cold Days*, attracting worldwide attention". G.P.: Számvetés és előretékinés, 9.

<sup>497</sup> Sz. Szántó: Marat és De Sade, 8.

<sup>498</sup> Cf. "The theatre has published a small booklet and we must be very grateful for the diverse information we learn from it." László Bernáth: Nézőtéri jegyzetek, *Munka* 16:3 (1966), 28.

<sup>499</sup> István Gábor: Színházi figyelő, *Köznevelés* 22:6 (1966), 236.

<sup>500</sup> Magdolna Jákfalvi: Kettős beszéd – egyenes értés, in Tamás Kisantal – Anna Menyhért (eds.): *Művészet és hatalom. A Kádár-korszak művészete*, Budapest, L'Harmattan – József Attila Kör, 2005, 94–108.

<sup>501</sup> Sz. Szántó: Marat és De Sade, 6.

(demonstrated by the inmates, and the nose of the director of the asylum continuously rubbed in it) to the holders of power in the 1960s. Yet Marat's question, "why is it such a terrible crime to demand 500 guilty heads if we save the lives of 500,000 innocent people?",<sup>502</sup> was a hidden question of the period of consolidation after 1956 in János Kádár's regime. The play's basic question, "what can we say about the Revolution under the Emperor, and how?"<sup>503</sup> could also have given rise to a way of understanding not intended yet possible in the light of the current political establishment. Although the National Theatre's production did not necessarily have the simplistic approach stressed by the press, it did not reinforce any readings of rebuke or lamentation either, so it cannot be considered as an antecedent of the legendary 1981 production in Kaposvár, and it did not overstep the boundaries of officiality.

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Contemporary criticism provided detailed guidance for the "correct comprehension" of the play's interpretation concretized in the production, extracting Weiss' debate drama (discussed in longer columns than the show itself) into a thesis drama. With the exception of *Új Ember* and *Vigília*, all periodicals called the play one of "the strangest and most significant" dramas of the century,<sup>504</sup> which belonged to the family of "great dramatic poems, like *Faust* and *The Tragedy of Man*".<sup>505</sup> The parallels with *The Tragedy of Man*<sup>506</sup> were also relevant from the point of view of the National's repertory, since Imre Madách's famous play, directed by Major with leather clothes on actors, had its premiere a year and a half earlier, and Adam, Eve and Lucifer were played by the same actors as de Sade, Corday and Marat. Critics were keen to recognize that *The Death of Marat* was an unconventional historical

<sup>502</sup> Quoted in (zs.i.): Színelőadás az elmeegógyintézetben, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 11, No. 23, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1966, 2.

<sup>503</sup> Geszti: Charentoni színjáték, 8.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> F.: *Marat halála és A helytartó*, *Fejér Megyei Hírlap*, Vol. 22, No. 49, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 7.

<sup>506</sup> This parallel was echoed by some critics simply following the leitmotifs of the era, while others sought to deepen it. Cf. "[*The Death of Marat* also] interrogates the purpose and meaning of human progress deeply and responsibly, ponders the value of social change, asks about the prospects of mankind, but already on the basis of the historical dilemma of socialism and the imperialist bourgeois world, the reality of today". Ibid. – "The play resembles *The Tragedy of Man* [...] because its framework has a dramatic influence on the scenes in it. The framework and the inner scenes are tightly interconnected, with a back-and-forth effect. Adam is dreaming, but his vision is not valid objectively because he is dreaming what Lucifer makes him dream. Likewise, for Weiss, the history of the French revolution is not entirely valid, for the Marquis sees it as such." Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 145–146.

drama<sup>507</sup> and the intellectual duel of the title heroes were more exciting than the plot.<sup>508</sup> They pointed out that in spite of all facts it was not specifically the French revolution but “revolution itself that came under scrutiny in Peter Weiss’ play”.<sup>509</sup> This is because the inmates’ longing for freedom in the asylum of Charenton is fueled by “wrongful detention and arbitrary repression”, as it is known that those who were to be eliminated without trial because of the socio-political danger they posed were also locked up there.<sup>510</sup> Despite the author’s contemporary attitude, critics felt Büchner’s influence more significant in the play than that of Brecht.<sup>511</sup> They claimed that in spite of his indirect representation,<sup>512</sup> Weiss tried to confront the cause and impact of the revolution similarly to *Danton’s Death*. But they immediately added that in the mid-1960s it was already “the historical consequences of the Great October Revolution” that were to be faced,<sup>513</sup> and *The Death of Marat* could speak to the present because there were several phenomena behind the drum fire of dialogues that had been philosophically generalized and “that mankind had been experiencing since 1917. Many of our century’s fundamental contradictions had come to light, with the only option that resolves them, the passion for change of the masses.”<sup>514</sup>

In this context, either with a simple or a more sophisticated explanation, several reviewers underlined the importance of the asylum as the place

<sup>507</sup> It is unconventional, even though “Marat’s words in the drama are not fictitious, but based on notes of historical credibility, and became the living forces of the revolution.” Béla Mátrai-Betegh: *Jean Paul Marat üldöztetése és meggyilkolása...* Peter Weiss drámája a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 22, No. 31, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 9.

<sup>508</sup> Cf. Földes: Nagy mű, nagy előadás, 24.

<sup>509</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Jean Paul Marat*, 9. – The author “surveys revolution from an ideological perspective [...], as a category of social philosophy”. Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Péter Molnár G.: Marat–Sade. Jegyzetek Peter Weiss drámájának nemzeti színházi bemutatójáról, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 24, No. 43, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 7. – The longing for freedom means revolutionary temper as well, “with which the revolutionary play is symbolically represented as a eulogy for the revolution because of their indignation over their detention”. Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Cf. “The flamboyant form” of “one of the great examples of post-Brechtian folk theatre” has its dramatic antecedent “in *Danton’s Death*, not in *The Days of the Commune*”. Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> Gábor Mihályi derived this indirect representation from the author’s ambivalent distancing, i.e. from his intention “to show his different position, his enthusiasm as an outsider, his doubtful reservation by a Pirandellian ‘play within a play’. [...] the idea of seeking salvation and the meaning of revolutionary action appears in a spectacle of fools on de Sade’s stage. But the comedy played by madmen wears the ceremonial robe of sacral theatre. As the mystery with its elevated subject is actually a show of fools, it turns into its own parody.” Gábor Mihályi: A kegyetlenség színházától a politikus színházig, *Nagyvilág* 11:4 (1966), 615–616.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., 614.

<sup>514</sup> F.: *Marat halála és A helytartó*, 7. – The debate of the two title heroes “is full of the tension of our age: the justification for the meaning and emphasis of the play comes from the present, not from the past”. Tamás Dersi: Marat győzelme. Peter Weiss művének bemutatója a Nemzeti Színházban, *Hétfői Hírek*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 7.

of the plot,<sup>515</sup> considering the ideological rivalry (de Sade vs. Marat) more crucial than the factual opposition (inmates vs. nurses, the oppressed vs. the oppressors). Consequently, the play was understood as a clash of opposing theses: (extreme) individualism vs. (intense) collectivism. Stressing that “in its innuendoes and analogies it is about very topical issues”,<sup>516</sup> reviewers translated it in view of the present<sup>517</sup> as an ideological debate between the capitalist and the socialist world.<sup>518</sup> Since de Sade seems to be right,<sup>519</sup> they all highlighted that the playwright had changed the ending of *The Death of Marat*, “following the productions of his play in various European capitals, which were dubiously staged in some places.”<sup>520</sup> The first version of the play was published in the anthology of modern German dramas in 1966, but the version played at the National Theatre differed from it, “perhaps less in its text and more strongly in its approach. *The Death of Marat* on stage is more obvious in its worldview than *The Death of Marat* on page. Meanwhile, Peter

<sup>515</sup> Cf. “Many people have already noticed the strange phenomenon of more and more plays dealing with fools, and their setting is often a mental hospital. Let us think of *The Physicists*, Dürrenmatt’s play at the Víg Theatre. [...] Artists living in a modern bourgeois society are reminded by numerous phenomena of the real world of the conditions prevailing in mental hospitals. Peter Weiss uses this setting in this sense.” (Bernáth: Nézótéri jegyzetek, 28.) – “The asylum as a setting is symbolic. It tries to set up a world out of joint in its desperation, ambiguously, of course.” (Szombathelyi: *Marat halála*, 2.) – “This strange, closed world is not far from reality – it brings the extremes of reality gone mad to the stage.” (Földes: Nagy mű, nagy előadás, 25.) – László Kéry saw an alienation effect in the setting, stating that the inmates’ “confinement, their suffering, the brutal rules applied to them become a very effective expression of ‘normal’ social repression, the suppression of revolutionary movements and the class domination of the bourgeoisie”. (Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, 8.)

<sup>516</sup> (zs.i.): Színelőadás az elmegyógyintézetben, 2.

<sup>517</sup> Gábor Mihályi and Péter Molnár Gál stressed the relationship of de Sade’s figure to existentialism, referring to the fact that 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers made the Marquis fashionable when they were looking for predecessors, and he got into Weiss’ play through them. That is why the journalist of *Új Ember* wrote: “Marat and his supporter, Jacques Roux, the monk-turned-socialist agitator, and even Duperret, the moderate revolutionary, speak as if they believe in something despite their disappointment. The Marquis de Sade, on the other hand, not only denies the former revolutionary in himself, but turns away from everything and does not believe in anything anymore. [De Sade] is nihilist and a forerunner of passionate atheism, anticlericalism, Social Darwinism, total dictatorship and fascism, rather than a representative of individualism.” Endre Szigeti: Szent vagy vadállat?, *Új Ember*, Vol. 22, No. 16, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1966, 1. – Catholic periodicals heavily criticized Weiss’ “ideological comedy” or “political musical” (Ibid.) and the weightlessness of the debate in it, pointing out that although Marat and de Sade “stand on two poles of the dialogue, they do not confront each other dramatically, they just speak side by side, like two narrators” (Ibid.) and “usually tell each other only abstract theses”. Károly Doromby: Színházi krónika, *Vigília* 31:4 (1966), 271.

<sup>518</sup> Cf. László G. Szabó: Bírál a postás néző, *Postás Dolgozó* 11:3 (1966), 3.

<sup>519</sup> After all, “he is arguing with his own characters” (Gábor Antal: Történelem a színpadon. Peter Weiss drámái Budapesten, *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 10, No. 7, 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 25.); “Marat, locked in a bathtub that becomes his pulpit” (Szigeti: Szent vagy vadállat?, 1.), is also his creature, and “the direct development of events [...] would not justify Marat objectively on their own either” (Földes: Nagy mű, nagy előadás, 24.).

<sup>520</sup> Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.

Weiss has made Marat's truth more serious and victorious. [...] In this way, the representation of the masses of the revolution has been given greater weight, and in the penultimate scene people almost shake off the shackles of madness and grow into revolutionaries on stage."<sup>521</sup> This was considered essential so that the debate between Marat and de Sade would not remain undecided, and it would not be possible for the spectator to side with de Sade, only with Marat, who impersonated the idea of revolution, and whose aspirations, "as Weiss put it, 'lead directly to Marxism'"<sup>522</sup>

It was also particularly emphasized that the new version, written for the theatre in Rostock, was in fact required by the development of the writer's worldview. Weiss not only followed the internal logic of his play, drew its conclusion and made it even more obvious within the play itself, but also "acknowledged the futility of life without behavioral engagement".<sup>523</sup> He realized that "real freedom lies in the commitment to the cause of humanity, of socialism".<sup>524</sup> The fact that Weiss "got to the acceptance of revolutionary thinking from the politics of the third way [scolded a lot at that time] when writing the play",<sup>525</sup> was presented as evidence of the ideological progress of Western intellectuals. This explained the second version's being no longer "a skeptical bourgeois puzzling over the revolution", but a "firm position in favor of the real revolution of the Fourth Order".<sup>526</sup> Although Imre Sinkovits and György Kálmán were almost shouting at the audience, when "the hyenas of the revolution were lashed",<sup>527</sup> the opinion leaders ensured that the spectators

<sup>521</sup> Földes: Nagy mű, nagy előadás, 25. – In fact, Peter Weiss did not change the text much, "only one new scene was inserted between the penultimate and the last scene, which had some commentary on the historical drama played by the inmates". (Mihályi: A kegyetlenség színházától, 614.) This scene had changed the portrayal of Marat's assassin, Charlotte Corday too. She is "not in the least sacred, not a tool of Sade, but a tool of the Gironde, a misguided youngster, who does not realize that her lofty phrases help the reaction." (Ibid., 616.) "The first version ends with the inmates cheering the asylum, Napoleon, the empire, the revolution and the copulation before sweeping away Roux, a more ardent supporter of the revolution than Marat, who tries to hinder them. The procession escalates into a frenzied dance, and the desperate Coulmier forbids to end it while Sade is laughing triumphantly. In the new variant, the people's march falls into the apotheosis of the revolution, and the inmates take the institute cap off their heads with Roux as their leader. They are not crazy anymore, they are prisoners in a riot, who demand their freedom." (Ibid., 617.)

<sup>522</sup> (zs.i): Színelőadás az elmegyógyintézetben, 2. – So, according to László Kéry, this second version already contains "a clear message uniting a tangle of contradictions, and the truth of socialism getting on with a convoluted web of debates, attacks, doubts and denials." (Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, 8.) István Zsugán also stated that "the writer responds unmistakably: revolutionary action is the only modern and ethical, in fact, the only possible human behavior". (Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.).

<sup>523</sup> Mihályi: A kegyetlenség színházától, 614.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> (zs.i): A budapesti előadás nyilvánvalóvá tette... Német kritikus a *Marat*-ról, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 11, No. 48, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 2.

<sup>526</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Jean Paul Marat*, 9.

<sup>527</sup> Sas: Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését, 7.

would not seek those who had misappropriated the cause of the Fourth Order in their own rows, but would rather think of the bourgeois distortion of the revolution (frequently mentioned in Marxist-Leninist seminars) and on the bourgeoisie that had drowned all change in the “irresponsibility of satisfaction without any perspectives”.<sup>528</sup> In order to block emotional rapture and the resulting danger, the production rather aimed at reason so that “the spectators, persuaded to think, should experience their own struggles and their own doubts as fully as possible, getting to the complex and yet unambiguous message in that way.”<sup>529</sup>

### STAGING

Eliminating grotesque, parodic elements and maximizing the intensity of expressing thoughts, Endre Marton’s *mise-en-scène* was praised for its clear structure and firm orientation. The nuanced analysis of the drama,<sup>530</sup> which Marton had become famous for as a college teacher as well, was unanimously acclaimed and said to result in the production’s following “the only right line of interpretation with revolutionary content”.<sup>531</sup> It did not diminish the significance of madness, and it did not push it to the fore as much as Peter Brook’s staging in London either. However, it intensified “sudden turns to agitation”,<sup>532</sup> i.e. those frightening and uplifting moments, when the army of the inmates, getting rid of the control of their show and the institute that kept them locked up, appeared on stage as a revolutionary mass and became recognizable as “a people deprived of freedom”.<sup>533</sup> These moments occurred to be complete with anger and fury, suspending all grotesqueness,<sup>534</sup> so that the production would give the opportunity to “draw a palpable conclusion”, i.e.

<sup>528</sup> F.L.: Két közéleti dráma, 9.

<sup>529</sup> Antal: Történelem a színpadon, 25.

<sup>530</sup> Cf. Geszti: Charentoni színjáték, 8.

<sup>531</sup> Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, 8.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Ákos Varga: *Marat halála*. Budapesti színházi levél, *Csongrád Megyei Hírlap*, Vol. 23, No. 40, 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 2.

<sup>534</sup> Cf. The inmates’ “rebellious outbursts, their cries against Marat, are also made with their backs to him, turning slightly towards the director of the asylum (the representative of imperial power), thereby making it clear that they are fighting against bars and cruelty, not against the idea of revolution. In the perfectly executed second part of the production, the people, the whining, drooling, twitching, goggling, poor people of the mental hospital sing the revolutionary choirs with such temper and passion, with so much inexorable fervor, that the *mise-en-scène* interprets the debate of de Sade and Marat, or, to be precise, the writer’s assumption properly.” Molnár G.: Marat–Sade, 7.

“to stand for Marat as well as for acting for a collective”.<sup>535</sup> This was attributed to the director’s achievement:<sup>536</sup> to the portrayal of the two protagonists, on the one hand, and to that of the crowd, on the other.<sup>537</sup>

Certainly, Marton destroyed conventions with casting itself,<sup>538</sup> but it was considered more important that the Hungarian Marat and de Sade were “completely novel figures” as György Kálmán and Imre Sinkovits “were playing a drama much different” from the one in the play’s productions abroad.<sup>539</sup> György Kálmán’s Marat did not seem insane, i.e. he did not seem like Marat played by a patient with a paranoid psychosis, and since Imre Sinkovits’s de Sade also seemed healthy, the spectator “forgot about the spectacle built into the spectacle at times”, and had the impression that “the real Marat was arguing with the real Marquis De Sade”.<sup>540</sup> While in most Western productions Marat was said to be played as an “evil toad” or a “bloodthirsty and individualistic revolutionary”,<sup>541</sup> the staging at the National Theatre was praised for making the tribune’s not always convincing truth far-reaching and showing “Marat the hero” with a crystal clear interpretation.<sup>542</sup> In an interview, Kálmán mentioned the surprise of his performance, how a madman could be “so sublime, so pure and shining like a holy image”,<sup>543</sup> but this portrayal was essentially the director’s invention. It was Marton’s *mise-en-scène* that made Marat victorious in the ideological duel of the protagonists, and when on 4<sup>th</sup> April and 7<sup>th</sup> November the regime was raising heroic monuments all over Hungary that ended up in the Memento Park in Budapest or in junk shops after 1989, Marton’s *mise-en-scène* made Kálmán raise a statue for Marat, “the pure

<sup>535</sup> Varga: *Marat halála*, 2.

<sup>536</sup> For example, by Ernst Schumacher, a German theatre historian and critic, visiting Budapest and having been interviewed as a personal acquaintance of Peter Weiss and one of the most thorough critics of his works. He said that Marton made it clear that “there was only one solution for the individual: [...] to be a revolutionary by all means.” (zs.i): A budapesti előadás nyilvánvalóvá tette, 2.

<sup>537</sup> Cf. “The nurses crush the rebellion at Coulmier’s order, but the stage image, resembling David’s heroic paintings, indicates that people can be killed, but the idea of revolution cannot be defeated. [...] As a result of staging, de Sade’s guidance is diminishing until he becomes a spectator, not a director of his play. [Marton was right] to remove the grotesque traits from the portrayal of the great revolutionary. Marat sits in his bathtub with a statue-like stiffness, which gradually almost transforms into the pedestal of the memorial of the great man.” Mihályi: A kegyetlenség színházától, 617.

<sup>538</sup> Cf. “We are used to Sinkovits’s playing stronger, more robust and healthier heroes, and Kálmán’s playing the more differentiated, intellectual and morbid characters. Marton is now casting the other way round, giving both of our great actors the opportunity to play one of the best performances of their lives.” Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.

<sup>539</sup> Sz. Szántó: *Marat és De Sade*, 5.

<sup>540</sup> Kéry: „Tanuljatok látni”, 8.

<sup>541</sup> Sz. Szántó: *Marat és De Sade*, 5.

<sup>542</sup> Dersi: *Marat győzelme*, 7.

<sup>543</sup> Sas: *Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését*, 6.

soldier of the revolution”.<sup>544</sup> That is why Sinkovits’s de Sade had to collapse in the end, defeated in the debate, fallen and helpless while watching the frenzy of the inmates, rebelling regardless of his will.<sup>545</sup> Of those inmates, who no longer appeared as patients, but as inexorable initiators of social upheaval,<sup>546</sup> turning the lesson of the clash between Marat and de Sade into action.<sup>547</sup>

The management of the crowd, remaining on stage all the time, was highlighted as a spectacular effort of the *mise-en-scène*, although it did not overstep the 100-year-old achievements of the Meininger: “the chorus did not comprise indistinguishable faces” and its members were “all individuals”.<sup>548</sup> Marton divided the company into three parts after the first rehearsals, and in addition to the singers (Kokol, Polpoch, Cucurucu and Rosignol), rehearsing in the music room, as well as the main characters, rehearsing on a smaller stage, he worked a lot with the crowd on the main stage.<sup>549</sup> The atmosphere, the feeling of apathy was particularly important for him, in order to show “how strong the power of the revolution is and how it can mobilize an indifferent

<sup>544</sup> F.M.: Jean Paul Marat üldöztetése és meggyilkolása de Sade úr bemutatásában, *Közalkalmazott*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1966, 5.

<sup>545</sup> Judit Sz. Szántó analyzed the staging from a dramaturgical point of view, stating that the text performed by the characters and written by de Sade is determined by the inmates’ type of insanity. Corday is a somnambulist, Duperret is an erotomaniac, etc. Alone Marat’s situation is not so obvious because there are one or two signs of his being played by a paranoid patient only at the beginning of the play. Marat becomes Marat, when he takes part in the spectacle, but in other moments he sits motionless and does not have such small actions as the others, who stress their madness all the time. At the same time, de Sade’s superiority, the writer’s supremacy over his creature, the director’s sovereignty against his actor ceases to exist. “Marat, brought to life by de Sade, breaks out of the framework imposed on him by de Sade, and the content of his thinking, the revolutionary idea he embodies, gives birth to him a second time: to a being independent from de Sade. This second being brings about an ending that is [...] in accordance with the new and different convention of Marat’s independence: the inmates pay obedience to Marat instead of de Sade, the writer, but not to a sick actor moved by de Sade, but to Marat who has come to a new life, and they also come to a new life as a rebellious people. The madmen’s rebellion and its repression already take place not in de Sade’s spectacle, but on the battlefield of objective social struggles, and de Sade can only watch them helplessly.” Sz. Szántó: Marat és De Sade, 6.

<sup>546</sup> Cf. “After the assassination of Marat, the inmates become the lifeblood of the revolution, who are ready to go fighting for progressive ideas. [...] Then we do not think they are crazy anymore and we find those crazy and evil who brutally crush their enthusiastic movement. If you take care of the news of the world, you will find many events that are very similar to those seen on stage; Dominica, Ghana, Indonesia, etc.” G. Szabó: Bírál a postás néző, 3.

<sup>547</sup> Cf. “The director definitely stresses revolution and gives it particular emphasis with the chorus. [...] This work, directed by Endre Marton, in which the clash of the ideas of Marat and de Sade always cast new sparks in the crowd, is like a march.” Győző Bordás: Forradalom és bravúr. A budapesti Nemzeti Színház vendéjátékáról, *Magyar Szó*, Vol. 32, No. 335, 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1975, 13. (The review was written about a guest performance of *The Death of Marat* revived in 1972. The National Theatre took the production to Belgrade nearly ten years after its opening.)

<sup>548</sup> Sas: Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését, 6.

<sup>549</sup> Cf. Éva Lelkes: A sokdimenziós színpad, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 10, No. 8, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1966, 12.

mass even fifteen years after the fall”.<sup>550</sup> As a result, a panorama was offered by a detailed background with a wide range of simultaneous events,<sup>551</sup> which was reinforced by the spectators’ facing an open stage, when they entered the auditorium. Little by little a repository of pathologies was being built on the stage.<sup>552</sup> Later, the interval did not interrupt stage events either, as the punishment of the patients were being continued then.<sup>553</sup> The production created a fearful atmosphere with the sight of the staff ruthlessly hitting the crowd with batons,<sup>554</sup> which added some not-so-intrusive sensuousness to intense thoughts. This sensuousness was increased by the set too, designed with a taste for fine art<sup>555</sup> and using attractive elements with such economy that “the attraction of the play should be the debate of worldviews”.<sup>556</sup> Consequently, the *mise-en-scène* did not seek either spectacular symbolism or historical authenticity,<sup>557</sup> but rather sought to penetrate ideas and develop such a “harmonious system of the stage and the thoughts”<sup>558</sup> that minimizes the chance of misunderstanding.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Cf. “The novelty of Marton’s *mise-en-scène* is the director’s superior reign over the stage space, [...] he fills every square inch of the stage with life.” Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 147.

<sup>552</sup> Cf. “A fool is tying the rope of his apron on his grey [...] robe. He is tying it with the strange, monotonous, rhythmic movements of manic depressives for the third, fifth, fiftieth time. He is tying and untying, as if to knot the thread of his broken mind with resurgent hope. Over and over again, our eyes wander to this poor unfortunate standing alone on the open stage. We have been struck by the play’s abhorrence, even though the performance has not yet begun, the auditorium is just getting ready [...]. But the stage is already alive: up there, behind the proscenium, the inhabitants of the asylum of Charenton are doing their daily routine and cleaning the large bathing room. Down here in the auditorium, we are slowly gathering, meanwhile we are transformed by this beginning, by this idea of the director. We are not in Budapest, not in 1966, but in France, and we are part of an invited audience, summoned to Charenton by the directorate of the asylum to see a play. [...] We, spectators, are not only onlookers, but also participants in this performance.” Geszti: *Charentoni színjáték*, 8.

<sup>553</sup> Endre Marton said that “Peter Weiss writes that Coulmier, the director of the asylum, shouts forcefully at the crowd. I thought it was too little. Someone who is only humming a revolutionary march will be sadistically punished on our stage. These sick souls are punished during the interval, squatting at the behest of normal people in a crazy world and holding their hands up. Until the passage of historical times...” Lelkes: *A sokdimenziós színpad*, 12.

<sup>554</sup> Szombathelyi: *Marat halála*, 2. – It is worth noting the stage use of batons, five years before Tamás Major’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>555</sup> Cf. “We no longer see the chorus representing the crowd, we just hear their defiant, revolutionary song from behind the backdrop. Then fists, convulsive, gripping and stretching hands show up in front of it. The director’s idea turned the background into a powerful visual composition: the sight of protruding hands increases the striking power of the revolutionary song several times.” (zs.i.): *Színielőadás az elmegyógyintézetben*, 2.

<sup>556</sup> Sas: *Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését*, 7.

<sup>557</sup> Cf. “Those who wish to recognize complex emblems in this drama are as disappointed as those who wish to see the history of the French Revolution.” Gábor: *Színházi figyelő*, 236.

<sup>558</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Jean Paul Marat*, 9. – Cf. also “We called the premiere of the National Theatre of epochal importance, since it is the first, full-fledged performance of such a complex intellectual drama on Hungarian stages.” Dersi: *Marat győzelme*, 7.

## ACTING

Going beyond realist characterization, the director managed to turn the actors' initial resistance (to the play and to their tasks) into ensemble, moderately passionate yet conspicuously suggestive acting. A reviewer even referred to the "Budapest school", which accomplished "the trends of progressive interpretation of the drama, appearing in its Rostock production for the first time".<sup>559</sup> The actors reported on the community-building power of the work, that during the six weeks of rehearsals all the participants undertook "voluntary subordination", and even those who did not play in the production felt mentally participating in the task since they knew that "the present position of the National in Hungarian theatre culture was waiting to be altered".<sup>560</sup> Therefore, the goal was the creation of a "new style of acting free from all traditions",<sup>561</sup> which (following the missionary approach of the period) could become a guiding principle for other theatres. *The Death of Marat* sought to set an example in two ways. Firstly, by bringing actors together in an unusually disciplined way, harmonizing individual idiosyncrasies of acting (that seemed indestructible even in the following decades)<sup>562</sup> and making the ensemble the center of the production.<sup>563</sup> Secondly, by modifying the realist-naturalist language of acting, which proved to be inadequate alone in this case (though it was all too well-known to actors), by the Brechtian attempts

<sup>559</sup> Sz. Szántó: *Marat és De Sade*, 6.

<sup>560</sup> Sas: *Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését*, 7.

<sup>561</sup> Szombathelyi: *Marat halála*, 2.

<sup>562</sup> László Vámos mentions in his 1982 program speech as artistic director of the National Theatre that "since the death of [Endre] Gellért, there has been a lack of a director-pedagogue who can develop the actors' technique. [...] Thus, the young people of the National Theatre were left alone, and the elders were doing what they had always done, and nobody told them not to do so because of some false 'respect'. [...] It is a real misfortune for an actor when he gets in a position to give a role to himself, and especially when his directors and colleagues feel that he should not be insulted by instructions. When an artist is considered ready, he is ready indeed." Imre-Ring: *Szigorúan bizalmas*, 400. – According to György Cserhalmi, when Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki favored ensemble acting in the National Theatre at the end of the 1970s, a group of actors "resisted the directors with sabotage. [...] Not all 'old actors' were clearly hostile, for example Gyuri Kálmán [...] said, 'I admire you because you can do what these geniuses ask. I've got used to meaningless metrics for decades and I can't get out of this, and I'm ashamed of that.' And there was no irony in it." Magdolna Jákfalvi – István Nánay – Balázs Sipos (eds.): *A második életmű. Székely Gábor és a színházcsinálás iskolája*, Budapest, Balassi–Arktisz, 2016, 214.

<sup>563</sup> Cf. "The rhythm and the style of acting, in case of all gears of this very interesting and complex stage system, i.e. the actors are consistent, while each one revolves around his own historically and mentally individual character." Mátrai-Beteg: *Jean Paul Marat*, 9.

of previous years. Even if actors did not use alienation effects,<sup>564</sup> their limited movements, gestures and the subtlety of building their characters lessened the passion of acting severely.

György Kálmán was sitting in a bathtub all the time, forced to be almost immobile, and was “interpreting incendiary thoughts [...] without gestures, relying only on the nuances of his voice and face”.<sup>565</sup> This was the consequence of the character’s heroic portrayal, similarly to the fact that Kálmán’s Marat was not felt to be played by an inmate, so “he was preaching from his tub as a perfectly realistic prophet”.<sup>566</sup> Imre Sinkovits underscored de Sade’s “measured attitude, distinguished skepticism and cool temperament” as well, but “his excitement, his hidden, sick glow”<sup>567</sup> and “the lunacy of obsession”<sup>568</sup> could also be felt, reaching their emotional peak in the moments of his voluntary flagellation. Sinkovits and Kálmán “could certainly not become a Kossuth Prize winner and an Artist of Excellence regardless of this production”.<sup>569</sup> It was only Hédi Váradi that the critics highlighted in addition to them, saying that she showed “a thousand colors in spite of simplicity”,<sup>570</sup> and passion was overshadowed by somnambulism and depression in her portrayal of Charlotte Corday. Reviewers agreed that, with her colleagues, “she had succeeded in an acting technique that interlaced the spectators’ feelings and thoughts, avoiding the wrong extremes of naturalistic overcharacterization and illustration confined to cold signals”.<sup>571</sup>

<sup>564</sup> A reviewer (erroneously) recognized “the persistent use of *Verfremdungseffekte*” in the production, claiming that “this much-debated dramaturgical method had prevailed in Hungarian theatre for the first time with such strictness and consistency”. Mihályi: *A kegyetlenség színházától*, 617.

<sup>565</sup> Molnár G.: *Marat–Sade*, 7.

<sup>566</sup> Doromby: *Színházi krónika*, 271. – Judit Szántó argued that the play did not really provide the opportunity of double characterization in Marat’s case. Yet Kálmán could fuse two characters: Marat and the patient who played him, but this was not the goal. “The miracle of his performance lies in the way he resolves the contradiction in his role; he ‘brings himself to a second life’ mentioned above [i.e. to a life independent from de Sade], and becomes the symbol of immortal revolution within the framework of the grotesque tragicomedy of Charenton.” Kálmán conveyed a clear process of ideas: “he was a man who could be defeated and an idea which is invincible”. Sz. Szántó: *Marat és De Sade*, 6.

<sup>567</sup> Mátrai-Betegh: *Jean Paul Marat*, 9.

<sup>568</sup> Szombathelyi: *Marat halála*, 2.

<sup>569</sup> Gábor: *Színházi figyelő*, 236.

<sup>570</sup> Geszti: *Charentoni színjáték*, 8.

<sup>571</sup> Dersi: *Marat győzelme*, 7.

## STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

The scenography followed Weiss' scene description, but it was more detailed and allowed for an unconventional association. It also drew the attention of the spectators to the main characters and the ensemble at the same time. After moving out of the old building on Blaha Lujza Square and before moving into the building on Hevesi Sándor Square, the scenery had to be adapted to the cramped stage of the theatre at 22 Nagymező Street, a temporary home of the National Theatre. It made the bath hall of the asylum precisely recognizable. The back of the stage was closed by a dark wall stretching high above,<sup>572</sup> in front of which a gangway with metal railings was running at a height of about two and a half meters. "Peter Weiss perfectly dictated the set of the play. Marton came up with a corridor for this, where Roux, the revolutionary priest is standing, so that Marat's truth can always get in the foreground, if necessary, without disrupting the unity of the stage."<sup>573</sup> Underneath, curtains lined the showers and left the center of the stage empty for mass scenes. Marat's bath stood on the right and Sade's armchair on the left. There was a wooden dais for Coulmier and his family behind the chair, and the four singers sometimes retreated in front of the stage platform to show the scenes behind them.

The horizontally and vertically detailed stage set, designed by Mátyás Varga, not only separated and connected various parts of the stage spectacularly and effectively,<sup>574</sup> but also conjured up the concentration camps, the "gas chambers of Auschwitz camouflaged to be bathrooms".<sup>575</sup> This is why many people may have come to believe that there were four layers (aspects) of the drama: in addition to the time of the spectacle in Charenton and the time of the revolutionary events recalled there, i.e. 1808 and 1793, written on wooden plates hanging high, the Second World War and problems of "the most contemporary world of today".<sup>576</sup> And that is why a spectator might have mentioned that "in scenes where nurses sadistically jumped on the mentally ill, I think everybody was thinking of Nazi lagers, death factories".<sup>577</sup> (Among Nelly Vágó's costumes from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the butcher's aprons of male nurses were the most likely to help this association.)

<sup>572</sup> Cf. "For our country, as for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the stage at Berlin's Schiller Theater was exemplary. The essence of Weiss' set is a very high wall with tiny tiles, which is both the wall in front of which people are shot in the back of the head or the wall of a gas chamber in Auschwitz and also the wall of a hospital for hydrotherapy. It is the wall of all of us from the 20<sup>th</sup> century." Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 145.

<sup>573</sup> Lelkes: A sokdimenziós színpad, 12.

<sup>574</sup> Cf. Gábor: Színházi figyelő, 236.

<sup>575</sup> Mihályi: A kegyetlenség színházától, 616.

<sup>576</sup> Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.

<sup>577</sup> G. Szabó: Bírál a postás néző, 3.

The mass scenes, worked out with a choreographer and sounded in a clearly understood chorus, were able to change focus and give way to the main characters and the debate of Marat and de Sade without changing scenery. Marton “perfected in this production the way in which intimate monologues or dialogues of one or two actors at the forefront alternated with panoramic images when the entire huge crew was on stage”.<sup>578</sup>

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Journalists attributed an interpretation conceived in the spirit of the ideology of the one-party state to Endre Marton’s *mise-en-scène*, but the production may not have fully conformed. After János Ács’s paradigmatic, truly rebellious *Marat/Sade*, it is impossible not to approach the National Theatre’s 1966 production from the 1981 performance in Kaposvár, looking for something in the former that points towards the latter. Although we find nothing, Marton’s *mise-en-scène* was not necessarily determined by the completeness that critics had inferred from the supposed outcome of the debate between Marat and de Sade. According to Marton, “the struggle between a dispersed individualistic view and *pure and true revolutionary humanism*”<sup>579</sup> have been going on for centuries and continuing to this day among people. That’s why he made the Herald say the final word loud, which is part of the stage directions in the play (“Curtain!”), “with an accent that stresses that we should stop performing here because there is nothing else, we can do. On stage, the hecatomb of bodies frozen in the final convulsion, and the ‘Curtain’ indicates that nothing is definitively over, only this performance tonight.”<sup>580</sup> For Marton, who preferred to connect the beginnings and the endings of his productions,<sup>581</sup> this “incomplete ending” and the prologue with the inmates’ silent actions were hanging. They displayed what had already begun before the audience arrived and would continue after their departure – outside the confines of the performance. If we add the recollection of Péter Léner, referring to Marton’s “personal message”, his former college teacher’s “trying to protect society from madness and mania that he felt threatening”,<sup>582</sup> it becomes clear that *The Death of Marat* does not point towards Ács’s *Marat/Sade*, but rather to *Chapters of Lenin*, produced four years later. It was not mourning 1956,<sup>583</sup> but similarly to the production of László Gyurkó’s play, it advocated the purified

<sup>578</sup> Léner: *Pista bácsi, Tanár úr, Karcsi*, 163.

<sup>579</sup> G.P.: Számvetés és előretékinés, 9. (My italics – Á.K.K)

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> Cf. Léner: *Pista bácsi*, 169.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>583</sup> In fact – *horribile dictu!* –, the production could also be interpreted as the legitimization of the crushing of 1956. Cf. Varga: *Marat halála*, 2.

myth of socialist revolution. Hinting at the historical confrontation of intent and achievement, it sought to restore the pure ideal of revolution without the vehemence of the questions, “what have you done with 1917?”, “what happened to 1956?”

However, it did not prove to be a watershed, even though Imre Sinkovits claimed that “after *Marat* nothing can be done in the same way at the National as before it”.<sup>584</sup> The offstage duel, the debate between Major and Marton, the complete lack of thinking together prevented collective work praised in *The Death of Marat* from being made fundamental. Nor did the prophecy of “the actual establishing of avant-garde theatre” by Marton’s *mise-en-scène* come true,<sup>585</sup> even if some “synthetic forms of the socialist avant-garde” could be pointed out in it.<sup>586</sup> The acting techniques used in *The Death of Marat* soon seemed mannered and inauthentic for the next generation, and from the beginning of the 1970s (from their first productions in Szolnok and Kaposvár) Gábor Székely, Gábor Zsámbéki and Tamás Ascher defined the colloquial idea of Hungarian theatre for about 30 years, just as the narrow circle of Major and Marton ruled the National Theatre for three decades.<sup>587</sup> The “mental theatre” of *The Death of Marat*, however, has not been totally forgotten, and it seems to be a subject of experimentation in several productions since the turn of the millennium. There is no concrete connection, but there are strong parallels between, for example, the acting defining the *mises-en-scène* by Sándor Zsótér, especially after his *Medea* (Radnóti Theatre, 2002) and what Imre Sinkovits described as: “It is not only underacting, the economy of gestures, the dramaturgy of immobility that imposes new and even unusual obligations on us, but also deepened internal concentration with which intellectual power replaces physical effort. I feel the essence of today’s theatre in this intense [...] suggestiveness.”<sup>588</sup> If something like this is to be identified nowadays, it is a striking proof of the unpredictability of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, similarly to the resurgence of the highly political nature of performances, obviously not in the same form.

<sup>584</sup> Sas: Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését, 7.

<sup>585</sup> Dersi: Marat győzelme, 7.

<sup>586</sup> Zsugán: Az egyetlen választás, 2.

<sup>587</sup> Cf. “There was a time in the mid-1960s when the same four directors in their 50s and 60s [Tamás Major, Endre Marton, Béla Both and István Egri] were staging plays for years, as they had already been doing in the late 1940s. For more than 30 years, the leaders of the National Theatre had successfully solved the generational problem that is so much talked about today. There was only one generation here for 30 years.” Speech by László Vámos at the meeting of the company of the National Theatre at the beginning of the new season on 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1982, in Imre–Ring: *Szigorúan bizalmas*, 400.

<sup>588</sup> Sas: Tisztázni az ember rendeltetését, 7.

## FROM IDOL DESTRUCTION TO IDOLATRY ENDRE MARTON: *CHAPTERS ON LENIN*, 1970



*Title:* Chapters on Lenin. *Date of Premiere:* 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1970 (revived on 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1980). *Venue:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Endre Marton. *Author:* László Gyurkó. *Dramaturg:* Erzsébet Bereczky (1980). *Acting coach:* Eszter Tatár. *Set designer:* Mátyás Varga. *Costume designer:* Judit Schäffer. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Gábor Agárdi, Katalin Berek, Mariann Csernus, Vali Dániel, Zsigmond Fülöp (replaced by László Szacsvey in 1980), Vilmos Izsóf, Ferenc Kállai (replaced by Róbert Koltai in 1980), Magda Kohut, Tamás Major, István Pathó, Mária Ronyecz, Ildikó Sólyom (replaced by Zsuzsa Farkas in 1980), Gyula Szersén, Ottó Szokolai, László Versényi.

### CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

The National Theatre's production honoring the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lenin's birth made an icon of the public sphere out of the image that was created with iconoclastic intent during the sixties by leftist thinkers and non-mainstream theatre workshops. One of the manifold predecessors of the 1970 production was the author's previous play *Electra, My Love*, the National Theatre premiere of which in 1968 – four years before the legendary production of the so-called Twenty-Fifth Theatre (Huszonötödik Színház) and six years before one of the best films of Miklós Jancsó – “created a new playwright”.<sup>589</sup> László Gyurkó's work, recreating a classical story along contemporary questions, is indivisible from the spirit of '68, from the Western-European search for the “alternatives of contemporary revolutionary thought”.<sup>590</sup> It is closely intertwined with his work *Chapters on Lenin*, where the “conflict between Electra and Orestes transforms into the often tragic conflict between Lenin and his comrades, Lenin and the alternatives”.<sup>591</sup> Secondly, *Chapters on Lenin*

<sup>589</sup> Tamás Tarján: *Kortársi dráma. Arcképek és pályarajzok*, Budapest, Magvető, 1983, 296.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>591</sup> Miklós Béládi – László Rónay (eds.): *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1975*, Vol. 3.2, Budapest, Akadémiai, 1990, 1129. – The relevant chapter of this handbook, now ideologically *passé*, discusses *Electra, My Love* as “not only one of the high points of [Gyurkó's] oeuvre, but also a peak in the development of socialist drama after the Liberation [1945]”. *Ibid.*, 1127.

can also be classified as part of a series of plays that the National included in its repertory for explicitly political purposes from 1949 on, and “Endre Marton directed within this socio-political horror, this strict obligation disguised as aesthetics, the worthless new Hungarian, Soviet, Chinese and other plays he was forced to”.<sup>592</sup> This time, however, as Marton emphasized in an interview, he did not have to “stage a standard play”, but a unique work, “every word of which is an authentic document”.<sup>593</sup> Thirdly, this premiere was also greatly anticipated, since the foremost theatre of the country was greeting the Lenin centenary, a highly important event of state socialist culture with it. And as reviewers stated (even beyond the obligatory praise), it was not “mired in formalism, but showed the substance of things”<sup>594</sup> with admirable, “polemic novelty”,<sup>595</sup> with “revelatory” dry documentarism.<sup>596</sup> After “the religious fog of myth-building” it was a performance that “cut to the heart”.<sup>597</sup> Fourthly, the production of *Chapters on Lenin* at the National was not quite a world premiere, since the Universitas Együttes had performed the same work in a different formation back in 1967. (The version performed at the National Theatre was dated 1969 and published in Gyurkó’s volume, collecting all his plays, TV and radio scripts in 1984.) No doubt, the most important antecedent was this performance of the Universitas Együttes at the University Theatre (Egyetemi Színpad), directed by Éva Mezei as commemorative program for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1917 Russian revolution. It presented an alternative image of Lenin compared to the one established two decades before,<sup>598</sup> and although it was not directly oppositional, it was still saturated with dissenting activism.<sup>599</sup> When the National Theatre’s premiere three years later made

<sup>592</sup> Léner: *Pista bácsi, Tanár úr, Karcsi*, 122.

<sup>593</sup> Marianne Gách: Együtt éljük át a lenini gondolatot. Gyurkó László új színpadi művének próbáján, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 14, No. 16, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1970, 4.

<sup>594</sup> Pál E. Fehér: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gyurkó László dokumentumtoratóriuma a Nemzeti Színházban, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 28, No. 96, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1970, 7.

<sup>595</sup> Miklós Almási: A demokrácia gyakorlása. Gyurkó László: *Fejezetek Leninről*, *Kritika* 8:7 (1970), 38.

<sup>596</sup> Endre Varjas: Alkalmatlan alkalmiság, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 24, No. 20, 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1980, 13.

<sup>597</sup> Vera Létay: „Ha tisztelni akarjátok...”, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 14, No. 18, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1970, 13.

<sup>598</sup> This alternative image was created by Gyurkó’s *Lenin, October*, a “historical essay” first published in 1967 (almost at the same time as the commemorative program at the University Theatre was held) and later in many editions. It was based on previously ignored documents and sought to nuance the complex image of the man behind the “great Bolshevik”. In a radio interview, Gyurkó stated that “I wrote my first essay on Lenin [in 1963 and then he put it at the beginning of the 1967 book] because I was not satisfied with the poster face that I was shown over and over again about Lenin. I was interested in his personality in the first place.” *Szombat délután*. Radio broadcast at 16.34 on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1970. Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest.

<sup>599</sup> We cannot ignore the fact that Gyurkó wrote his play in a form typical of the structure of the literary evenings at the University Theatre. István Nánay points out that from the late 1950s on the University Theatre produced special literary programs in which “poetry, prose, documents and music were combined, strengthening and counterpointing each other, and

this image quasi-official, it defanged its dissenting nature, and contributed to building a “human-faced idol”,<sup>600</sup> lessening the subversive power of the iconoclastic gesture.<sup>601</sup> Even though Gyurkó’s book and documentary drama on Lenin had the power of toppling a statue as a historical echo of toppling Stalin’s statue during the 1956 revolution.<sup>602</sup> Gyurkó’s writings “rediscovered” Lenin as opposed to Stalin (and Stalin’s cult of personality),<sup>603</sup> distinguishing him from the Lenin-image created under Stalinism.<sup>604</sup> What’s more, it was

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each element received a special meaning from the wider context in which it was embedded”. (István Nánay: *Profán szentély. Színpad a kápolnában*, Pécs, Alexandra, 2007, 29.) In the performance of György Somlyó’s *Why does a man die?*, directed by Vilmos Dobai in 1962, for example, “the actors brought situations to life with the script in their hands, reading and playing alike” (Ibid., 44). *The Last Warlord*, edited by Péter Vágó in the 1966–1967 season, also “tried to give an idea of the quarter-century called the Horthy Era and, of course, of Miklós Horthy himself, with the help of documents, film excerpts, sound recordings, literary works, diaries and newspaper articles”. (Ibid., 86.)

<sup>600</sup> Béládi–Rónay: *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1975*, 1126. – The articles on the National Theatre’s production pointed out that it did not show “the desk-weight-Lenin, the bronze-Lenin or the marble-Lenin, the mandatory-ceremony-Lenin” (Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 214.), but “the man breathing behind the sculptures” (Anna Földes: Szívügyünk: a magyar dráma, *Színház* 3:7 [1970], 6.), who “was almost greeting us”. (Zoltán Lőkös: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gyurkó László dokumentumtoratóriuma a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 3, No. 112, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1970, 7.) In the decade of the ideal of “Shakespeare, our contemporary”, Gyurkó, as Tamás Tarján noted, created the idea of “Lenin, our contemporary”, while examining the possibility of “revolution after the revolution” (cf. Béládi–Rónay: *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1975*, 1127.).

<sup>601</sup> Functioning according to the mechanism of Stephen Greenblatt’s “subversion” and “containment”, the 1970 premiere made all that was potentially subversive in the play already contained in official propaganda, so that it would become practically ineffective.

<sup>602</sup> Gyurkó was sentenced to six months in prison for his participation in the 1956 revolution. However, it is part of the inescapable (and probably irresolvable) contradiction of his biography and his oeuvre that he had gone from “counter-revolutionary” not only to theatre manager – first at the Twenty-Fifth Theatre, which assumed a legitimate socialist avant-garde theatre culture, and then at the Népszínház (1970–1979) – but also member of Parliament (1971–1985), member of György Aczél’s circle of advisers and friends, and writer of János Kádár’s monograph, *Portrait with Historical Background*, published in 1982. But he also wrote an essay on “The Crisis of Hungarian Socialism” in 1987, and a book on 1956, which was later revised and published several times as *Revolution in Hiking Boots*. This ambivalence was expressed by Péter Agárdi in his study published after Gyurkó’s death: “Having read *Revolution in Hiking Boots*, now we see, although it is paradoxical, that Gyurkó’s image of 1956 is determined by the inspiration of Lenin’s revolution, and he also incorporated his experience of 1956 (a taboo then, of, course) in the description of 1917.” Péter Agárdi: Gyurkó László 77 éve és a baloldal, *Egyenlítő* 5:10 (2007), 4.

<sup>603</sup> The reviewer of the monthly *Híd* (Imre Bori) made it clear that Gyurkó’s book *Lenin, October* got rid of “countless legends of Lenin in which the man who ‘made’ the revolution remained in the background or got lost, not independently of the view of the 1930s and 1940s, as the period of the cult of personality had obviously also affected the image of Lenin”. (BI): *Leninről – eredeti módon*, *Híd* 31:12 (1967), 1405.

<sup>604</sup> The beginning of *Chapters on Lenin* already defies the cult of personality as it quotes the words of Lenin’s widow: “I ask you a lot: do not let your pain at the death of Ilyich manifest itself in external respect for the person. Do not erect monuments to him, name palaces after him, or organize large-scale celebrations in honor of his memory. He attached so

created in “the era known as the halting, the years of stagnation”, after the 1964 removal of Nikita Khrushchev, when “the not too forceful movement of destalinization halted entirely” in the USSR, and it seemed that “conservative forces will dominate permanently”.<sup>605</sup>

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

*Chapters on Lenin* was a phase in many years of preoccupation with the “Ur-father”,<sup>606</sup> and it was strongly connected to the popular genre of the sixties, the documentary drama, diverging somewhat from its form known in Hungary. While Gyurkó emphasized that his work was not “the type of documentary

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little importance to all these things in his life; they were so burdensome to him. Think about how poor our country is and how much more needs to be done. If you want to honor Vladimir Ilyich's name, build crèches, kindergartens, apartment buildings, schools, libraries, pharmacies, hospitals, children's homes. And above all, follow the principles of Ilyich with your own lives.” (László Gyurkó: *Fejezetek Leninről. Dokumentum-oratórium*, in László Gyurkó: *Szerelmem, Elektra*, Budapest, Magvető, 1984, 427.) So Nadezhda Krupskaya's warnings open *Chapters on Lenin*, around whom, a year and a half after Lenin's death, some politicians came together against Stalin. This “*Leningrad opposition* demanded more democracy within the party, advocated freedom of speech and opinion, and believed in the continuation of the Leninian traditions”. (Miklós Kun: *Egy példázat és forrásai*, in Mihail Satrov: *Tovább... Tovább... Tovább!*, Budapest, Európa, 1988, 176.) Two decades after Gyurkó's documentary oratorio, the radical reassessment of the images of Lenin and Stalin was also attempted by Mikhail Shatrov's play, in the Hungarian edition of which Miklós Kun's essay was published as an afterword. At the end of this drama, Stalin wants to talk to Lenin, but he rejects it, telling the audience that “we have to move on... Further on... Further on!” According to the stage directions, “*so they remain in a considerable distance from each other. It would be nice if Stalin left... But for now, he's still on stage...*” (Mihail Satrov: *Tovább... Tovább... Tovább!*, Budapest, Európa, 1988, 163.) Shatrov's play attracted much attention in the period of *glasnost*, and its antecedent, his former play *Blue Horses on Red Grass* was staged at Thália Theatre (by Katalin Kővári, with Gyula Szabó as Lenin) when the National Theatre revived *Chapters on Lenin* in 1980.

<sup>605</sup> Kun: *Egy példázat és forrásai*, 167 and 166.

<sup>606</sup> The 1963 Lenin essay was followed by the monograph (*Lenin, October*) four years later and also the 1967 commemorative performance at the University Theatre (*Chapters on Lenin*), which was the basis of the new version of *Chapters on Lenin*, written in 1969 and staged at the National Theatre a year later. However, some reviewers noted that *Chapters* was “nothing new” compared to the 1967 book (Ö.I.: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gyurkó László dokumentum oratóriuma, *Délmagyarország*, Vol. 60, No. 96, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1970, 5.), as if the play were “a popular and illustrative theatrical addendum to that richly nuanced and modernly rediscovered portrait of Lenin” (Létay: „Ha tisztelni akarjátok...”, 13.), which he had drawn in the monograph. Interestingly, a report published six months before the National's premiere had introduced *Chapters* as a lead to the playwright's “forthcoming second book on Lenin”, and Gyurkó had declared that he had typed “200 pages, but thrown all away” to start work anew. (bernáth: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Dokumentum-oratórium a Nemzeti Színházban. Gyurkó László új színpadi művéről és könyvéről, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 14, No. 260, 6<sup>th</sup> November, 1969, 5.). This book has never been produced, only a collection of documents, *In Private with the Revolution*, published in the spring of 1970.

drama that, say, Peter Weiss made”,<sup>607</sup> *The Investigation*, an oratorio in 11 cantos by the same Swedish-German writer, directed in early 1967 at the National by Tamás Major, was definitely a key inspiration to assembling *Chapters*.<sup>608</sup> Gyurkó felt an aversion towards historical drama,<sup>609</sup> and named the genre of his work as “documentary oratorio”, which apart from a few connecting sentences is composed of documents, minutes, letters and memoirs. The dramatic structure is created with the montage of these excerpts, and all emotional effects rely on “thoughtful, accurate superimposition”<sup>610</sup> and the “exciting qualities of the documents themselves”.<sup>611</sup> The work neither has a coherent narrative, nor does it create narrative figures, and cannot be approached with the classical categories of theatre theory, i.e. space, time and plot. It does contain names – the names of the people that the quoted documentary excerpts originate from – but it lacks dialogues or stage directions, and the combination of individual voices of different tones makes it oratoric, while “omitting the chorus typical of the oratorio”.<sup>612</sup>

Consequently, we can hardly speak of dramatic text, only of dramatic conflicts, which are conveyed by montage in the central two chapters, and while it adds to the intellectual content – following Brecht’s teaching, addressing the mind –, it also manipulates the emotions.<sup>613</sup> *Chapters on Lenin* tries to surpass a realist approach to the past, without giving up on identification – or at least on the audience’s identification with the difficult struggle involved in some of the reported historical situations.<sup>614</sup> It does not give the actor the opportunity to try on a “historical role” and identify with a “historical character”, but it does for the audience, since according to Gyurkó, without that, “we are not wholly capable of understanding our

<sup>607</sup> (bernáth): *Fejezetek Leninről*, 5.

<sup>608</sup> In other words, the director Endre Marton’s statement that “Gyurkó’s work has neither an antecedent nor a parallel” (Gách: Együtt éljük át, 5.) is false, similarly to all references to the unique status of *Chapters* by critics. Today, some of the arguments in favor of the extraordinary nature of the play seem even ridiculous. Cf. “There has never been a revolution like this, and such a leader whom this performance is about.” András Rajk: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gondolatok a Nemzeti Színház előadásához, *Népszava*, Vol. 98, No. 94, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1970, 2.

<sup>609</sup> In a radio interview, Gyurkó said that “I don’t like historical novels or historical dramas, so I don’t like having to imagine that I am in a by-gone age, among long-lost people who actually lived”. *Szombat délután*. Radio broadcast at 16.34. on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1970.

<sup>610</sup> M.B.B.: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gyurkó László dokumentumtoratóriuma a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 26, No. 99, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1970, 5.

<sup>611</sup> György Kriszt: *Fejezetek Leninről*. Gyurkó László műve a Nemzeti Színházban, *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, Vol. 24, No. 114, 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1980, 4.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid.

<sup>613</sup> Cf. Gyurkó’s statement: “I wanted to address emotions in the same way as I wanted to address the mind. Besides, I am convinced that no problem, no historical problem can be understood if we do not experience it emotionally.” *Szombat délután*. Radio broadcast at 16.34. on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1970.

<sup>614</sup> Gyurkó said that he was interested in Lenin’s human relations “in a way that would account for human struggle”. No author: A telefonnál: Gyurkó László, *Szervező* 12:3 (1970), 11.

present problems”.<sup>615</sup> In the aftermath of the 1968 Hungarian economic reforms, allusions to the New Economic Policy served as a clear parallel, and musings on the “topic of Lenin” did not contribute to the understanding of the past, but to the understanding of the future, so reviewers, sometimes clumsily, sometimes astutely,<sup>616</sup> focused on the aspects of *Chapters* that were “the most edifying *for us, today*”.<sup>617</sup> This was especially poignant in the central two chapters, which offered insight into the circumstances that led to the birth of the peace that ended World War I, and of the NEP (the new Soviet economic policy of the 1920s).

Gyurkó’s work condenses “the human motives behind Lenin’s work and Lenin’s thought” into four chapters (not acts), showing Lenin “in an intimate close-up, lit from four directions”.<sup>618</sup> The well-known events of the Bolshevik take-over and the most important episodes of the life story are skipped over, the play shows situations and relationships that are rarely in focus, using them to demonstrate the alternatives of certain actions. The first chapter, the “pastorale” of Gyurkó’s oratorio,<sup>619</sup> portrays the 1896–1900 exile, which also served as Lenin’s honeymoon with his wife, mostly through letters about hunting, fishing, picking mushrooms, skating, and paints an almost lyrical picture of “Volodya”. The second chapter uses the written records of the heated argument between the members of the Central Committee before accepting the German ultimatum for peace, to provide “a live report from history”.<sup>620</sup> It surprises us with a Lenin who – saying he has “had enough of empty revolutionary talk”<sup>621</sup> – turns against the fundamentalists who cling to the idea of world revolution, and are maniacally hoping for

<sup>615</sup> *Szombat délután*. Radio broadcast at 16.34. on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1970.

<sup>616</sup> Cf. “And for us, maybe it is more edifying *today: to be a revolutionary in the workings of everyday life*, to adapt to and act in the bloodless revolution with revolutionary faith and strong principles. [...] This is how Lenin becomes alive and *the modernity of Leninism* manifests itself here.” Lőkös: *Fejezetek Leninnről*, 7. – “On the stage of the National, [Lenin] is giving a lesson in morality, politics and democratic decision-making in the scene of *The two paths*. [...] The solution [i.e. resolving the dispute within the Central Committee before the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk] contains a deep lesson in *the exercise of democracy* as well. We realize how utopian is the idea that open democracy could be a way of avoiding conflicts, of the unproblematic and riskless *coexistence* of multiple opinions. Lenin’s decision that ensures democratism is a commitment to undertake and resolve conflicts *at the same time*.” Almási: *A demokrácia gyakorlása*, 39.

<sup>617</sup> This latter phrase between quotation marks comes from a text by Gyurkó written for the playbill.

<sup>618</sup> György Sas: *Fejezetek Leninnről – Döntés*. Megemlékezés színházban, televízióban, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 18, No. 12, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1970, 4.

<sup>619</sup> M.B.B.: *Fejezetek Leninnről*, 5.

<sup>620</sup> Anna Földes: *Gondolatok színpada. Fejezetek Leninnről, Nők Lapja*, Vol. 22, No. 18, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1970, 10.

<sup>621</sup> Gyurkó: *Fejezetek Leninnről*, 449.

the internationalization of civil war.<sup>622</sup> While Lenin votes for signing the ultimatum, he allows those who hold the opposing opinion to openly agitate against the peace, since it is the only way “to gauge the opinion of the party, and if the party votes against signing, then the ratification cannot happen”.<sup>623</sup> The third chapter edits Elizaveta Drabkina’s first-hand account of the defeat of the Kronstadt rebellion (a severe destabilization of Soviet power) together with Lenin’s closing speech at the Party Congress on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1921, where he not only draws the conclusions of the Kronstadt events, but moves beyond to discuss worker-peasant relations and the necessity of a new economic policy in order to prevent further crises.<sup>624</sup> The fourth part, the ending of *Chapters* (but for the Brecht-cantata written for the day of Lenin’s death), forms a framing device, since it is as lyrical as the first chapter.<sup>625</sup> It initiates us into the friendship between Lenin and Gorky through their personal statements; a friendship that was not without disagreements or even attacks against one another. And while it is not untrue to state that “the friendship fades to a cliché this way”,<sup>626</sup> the chapter relaxes us with “a beautiful and natural resolution of tensions”,<sup>627</sup> fulfilling its purpose, whitewashing the origins of Communist Dictatorship.

<sup>622</sup> In this chapter, we see the Lenin who was described by György Lukács in 1924 in the following way. “If we examine its basis and internal context, Lenin’s ‘realpolitik’ proves to be *the peak of dialectical materialism achieved so far*. On the one hand, it is a strictly Marxist, sober and detailed analysis of the situation, the economic structure and the class relations. On the other hand, it is of *extraordinary clarity in the face of any new trends resulting from the situation, and it is not obscured by any theoretical bias or utopian desire*.” Forradalmi réalpolitika, *Korunk* 29:3 (1970), 309. (My italics – Á.K.K.) Ideas subordinated to practice were the result of a change in attitudes in the period. Cf. a statement by Béla Köpeczi: “It can be said, of course, that the [1958] directives overestimated the importance of ideas in the education of our society’s worldview *to some extent*. This is true, and we have seen it particularly since 1968 that economic processes sometimes have a larger, more decisive impact on daily life.” Béla Köpeczi: Művelődéspolitikai alapelveink dokumentuma, in Péter Agárdi (ed.): *Művészet és politika. Tanulmányok, dokumentumok 1977–1983*, Budapest, Kossuth, 1984, 30.

<sup>623</sup> Gyurkó: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 451. – Miklós Almási considers this chapter to be the very subject of the work, in the context of which he points out the “ordinary conflicts” of the “exercise of power” that deserve consideration today. Cf. Miklós Almási: Viták a köznapisággal, *Kortárs* 14:8 (1970), 1329. – The critic of *Nők Lapja* saw “the university of democratism and agitation” in “the human drama of ingenious insights and the commitment to historical responsibility”. Földes: *Gondolatok színpada*, 10.

<sup>624</sup> Several reviewers called this section “the most shocking” (Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 5.), “the most exciting, the most human part” of the dramatic montage. Kriszt: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 4.

<sup>625</sup> Therefore, “the community of partnership, the friendly relationship full of disputes: Krupskaya and Gorky” just serve liveliness around the central two chapters. E. Fehér: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 7.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid.

<sup>627</sup> M.B.B.: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 5.

## STAGING

According to the concept of the “theological stage” (Jacques Derrida), Gyurkó referred to theatre as “pulpit”,<sup>628</sup> and Endre Marton concentrated on “finding an exceptional style for this exceptional work, which faithfully adheres to the intent and the content”.<sup>629</sup> Therefore, Marton did not join the wave of political theatre originating from 1920s German experiments, and gaining momentum in the fifties and sixties: even though some staging techniques (such as the projections) seem similar, the difference in viewpoints is more defining. Neither did he follow the structure of state socialist ceremonies: he did not apply the well-worn methods of 1<sup>st</sup> of May or 7<sup>th</sup> of November processions and commemorations, “the human pyramids, the symbolic-representative figures, the gymnastics of the cult of the proletariat”.<sup>630</sup> Instead, using the contemporary aesthetics of pulpit-theatre,<sup>631</sup> he turned the function modes of Piscator-inspired attempts upside down, so that “signs, images and choreography all place thought in the foreground”, creating a “political stage with clear thoughts but bare dynamics, focused on the text”, a theatre almost free of tradition.<sup>632</sup> It did not aim at evoking a primary effect – since Marton considered his goal to be “interpreting and evoking the Lenin problem in the brain of the man living near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>633</sup> –, meaning that he tried for an unusual degree of simplicity, which the reviewers considered an important step (even in a larger context).<sup>634</sup> With no constructed set or period costume, erasing the possibility of creating illusion, he focused on the

<sup>628</sup> The word appears in the text written for the playbill by Gyurkó.

<sup>629</sup> Gách: *Együtt éljük át*, 4.

<sup>630</sup> Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 220.

<sup>631</sup> Péter Molnár Gál mentions a guest performance at the Opera House in Budapest in the early 1960s as the main influence. It was a performance of Julien Berthaud’s company, which presented a program of masterpieces of French poetry and prose, “composed together and choreographed, with permanent movement, determining the concert-like style of Hungarian literary stages for a decade or so. Marton developed Berthaud’s choreographed oratorical style in this production.” *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>632</sup> Almási: *A demokrácia gyakorlása*, 42.

<sup>633</sup> Gách: *Együtt éljük át*, 5.

<sup>634</sup> The reviewer of *Magyar Nemzet* considered this simplicity “magic”. “Vocals came out of prose, choirs were born without choruses, flowing movements from standing or barely moving groups and dramatic dialogues without conversation. Endless colors came out of black and white attire, black and white images, film stills, slides, backgrounds and scenery.” (M.B.B.: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 5.) Péter Molnár Gál considered Marton’s puritanism as “an achievement in theatre arts. Going beyond a single production, it is a triumph in theatre autonomy as well.” (Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 220.) Miklós Almási stated that the *mise-en-scène* was “pioneering” and “after so many great productions Marton broke into the international forefront with this seemingly ‘anniversary’ production. Among today’s ‘agit-prop’, ‘street’ and all kinds of political theatres, in which the text plays only a secondary role and the spectacle of agitation is the primary”, he got ahead of alternative theatremakers. (Almási: *Viták a köznapisággal*, 1329.)

“richness” that could depict “the human polyphony ringing from the clarity and certainty of Lenin’s thinking”.<sup>635</sup> That is why multiple actors recited texts which were attributed to one name in the script. Additionally, musicality and choreography became key elements of the *mise-en-scène*, the former mostly based on the much-touted vocal talent of the National’s actors, the latter as the dynamics of formalized movement<sup>636</sup> and the visuals (composed of projected images). This dynamics also “underlined and emphasized the point of the text almost musically, and gave a subconscious meaning to sets of problems that were otherwise too complex to react to”.<sup>637</sup>

The staging of the first chapter built on a low-key, slightly stylized depiction of the things mentioned in the letters from exile. Leafless branches, running brooks, rails in motion, etc, turned up on differently sized screens, together with the play of light and shadow on stage, while larger groups of people appeared in well-lit circles, or just a single actor, separated from the darkness by a headlight. In the second chapter, the actors were placed in front of “graphically elaborate, but unidentifiable images”<sup>638</sup> of the backdrop, sitting on bentwood chairs. They read excerpts of the meeting minutes from bound volumes, sometimes standing up or stepping forward, structuring the flow of the argument with each empathetic movement. The third chapter did not use background images (apart from the video of water springing up between exploded blocks of ice), in order to “compose the space solely with actors and light, to structure the empty stage with them”,<sup>639</sup> strongly basing the composition on counterpoints.<sup>640</sup> The fourth chapter also declined to use projection, it extinguished even movement, sat the actors back down on the chairs to cite the words of the two friends almost motionlessly, with the bare backdrop brightly lit in light blue and the projection screens still hanging low. Using tools in this variation, from a slight hint to full abstraction, the *mise-en-scène* made an attempt at “forming intellectual contact with its audience”.<sup>641</sup> In other words, having a distance from Socialist Realism, but following a Marxist ideal, the production created the possibility of “communal

<sup>635</sup> Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 4.

<sup>636</sup> The critic of *Pest Megyei Hírlap* thought that it contradicted the teleology of the text. He stated that Gyurkó’s goal was to avoid “heroic appearances stiffening into sculpture. This is contrary to the performance team moving with rigid body in geometric shapes, the empty stage space with the projected images and some actors’ *declamatory* style. The production as a whole is like a heroic gesture.” Kriszt: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 4.

<sup>637</sup> Almási: *Viták a köznapisággal*, 1329.

<sup>638</sup> Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezéskísérlet*, 216–217.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>640</sup> Cf. “On one pole, a choir of women bursting into *arioso* voices are telling the military history of the siege of the fortifications in Kronstadt. On the other pole, Lenin [Tamás Major] is speaking about something very different, and yet the same: the relationship of the working class and the peasantry.” M.B.B.: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 5.

<sup>641</sup> Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 5.

dialectical thinking”.<sup>642</sup> That Marton was not working with a classical concept of theatricality is demonstrated by the fact that after the Internationale rang out at the end of the Brecht-cantata, the actors did not come back to bow.

### ACTING

In this performance, there was not a single actor appointed to each name in Gyurkó’s work (as there would be in a play), but Marton divided the lines belonging to the same name among multiple actors, so that it became impossible to identify, or identify with, the characters.<sup>643</sup> In the first chapter, the text gave merely selections from the letters of two people, Lenin and Krupskaya, but it was spoken by five men and six women, and overall the fifteen actors in the performance approximately did “an equal share of the work”.<sup>644</sup> The directorial instructions blocked character impersonation even when temporarily the same actor quoted the same character multiple times – an example of which is Tamás Major reciting Lenin’s statements in the second and third chapters – since no context was created, the gestures and the facial expressions did not become significant, and the movement followed formal patterns. Even then, Major did not try to convince anyone that it was Lenin speaking, at most, he emphasized the consistent behavior of a “robust political personage”, while in other chapters he divided him from the younger man, the older man, and the “lyrical, reticent man”.<sup>645</sup> While Marton did not work with a chorus and did not follow the labor movement’s tradition of prose choirs, the performance focused on the ensemble of the actors.<sup>646</sup> In the interrelation of individual and community, he emphasized the latter, tasking it with experiencing and carrying on “the Lenin idea”.<sup>647</sup> It is also important to note that Marton considered the

<sup>642</sup> Létay: „Ha tisztelni akarjátok...”, 13. – This objective, however, may not have been fully attained, as Vera Létay noted: “the relationship between the stage and the audience was somewhat troublesome”. (Ibid.) She recalled her own experience that in the scene of the debates and votes of the Central Committee (in chapter two), she was unable to “follow and precisely understand the arguments” in spite of her focusing strongly, and only in hindsight, when reading the play in the monthly *Valóság* she could grasp, what it was all about. “While listening to Gyurkó’s play, one sometimes feels as if she had fallen out of a train, staring numbly at the receding carriages. However, the spectator must remain on the train and travel through the drama all the way to the end station.” (Ibid.)

<sup>643</sup> Although the critic of *Pest Megyei Hírlap* did not regard it as mistaken, he thought it “reduced the possibility of creating intimacy”. Kriszt: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 4.

<sup>644</sup> Gách: *Együtt éljük át*, 4.

<sup>645</sup> (bernáth): *Gondolatok drámája a színpadon*, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 15, No. 77, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1970, 2.

<sup>646</sup> During the 1980 revival, the reviewer of *Pesti Műsor* recalled the performance ten years earlier, noting that “the ensemble [...] was like a great chamber orchestra, but all its members were also excellent soloists.” György Kárpáti: *Fejezetek Leninről*, *Pesti Műsor*, Vol. 29, No. 19, 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1980, 13.

<sup>647</sup> Gách: *Együtt éljük át*, 5.

ideologically coloured intent of experiencing *the idea*, and *carrying it on* as equally essential. Most reviewers did not even mention specific actors, but praised the ensemble, both for their consistently clear and intelligible speech and for their ability to become “the echo of words”.<sup>648</sup>

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

Endre Marton stated that space was of the utmost importance, since – as he explained to his actors on the first read-through – “we have talked a lot about oratorios and documentary dramas before, and there were some interesting experiments. Most problems surfaced when these modern elements were placed in a conventional theatrical space. Our task is to *create the place this new content needs on the stage*.”<sup>649</sup> Therefore, he worked on an empty stage, “covered with graphite-grey felt”,<sup>650</sup> and in the back, Mátyás Varga set an enormous white semi-circular curtain that sometimes served as a projection screen,<sup>651</sup> with various numbers and shapes of flat surfaces descending in front of it from above. Mostly still images and Ilona Keserű’s drawings were projected in the background (in the central chapters), and moving images were projected on the suspended screens (in the first and third chapters), not unrelated to the spoken text. One of Lenin’s lesser-known, smiling (!) photographs was also projected at the beginning and the end of the performance. Other than this, the projection did not rely on visual documents or on contemporary newsreels, but on “images of nature with a lyrical effect”<sup>652</sup> (in the first chapter) and an almost incomprehensible group image (in the third). It did not illustrate, but created an atmosphere, helped the audience associate, and rendered the mostly static visuals, based on the actors’ bodies, more dynamic. The lights served the same purpose, both when they were scanning the “stage lit in the style of Rembrandt”, and when – after the second chapter, as an intermission, to Prokofiev’s *Scythian Suite*, – they were playing across the front curtain. The short and majestic musical pieces, providing an emotional addition, such as Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* and *Appassionata* served primarily as a dividing element, but sometimes a quiet chord during the chapters “had the effect similar to cursive letters in print”.<sup>653</sup> To match the simplicity of the backdrop, Judit Schäffer did not dress the actors in costumes, only in identical formalwear: the women in floor-length,

<sup>648</sup> Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 5.

<sup>649</sup> Quoted in (bernáth): *Gondolatok drámája*, 2.

<sup>650</sup> Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 213.

<sup>651</sup> György Sas considered this screen to be “symbolic in its bareness”, as it “directs our imagination to the film-like history of the century”. Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 5.

<sup>652</sup> Almási: *A demokrácia gyakorlása*, 42.

<sup>653</sup> Molnár Gál: *Rendelkezőpróba*, 219.

dark blue gowns with minimal decoration, and with the addition of a white drape in the first chapter, the men in three-piece suits. “Their carefully and beautifully directed movements were ordered by the choreographic creation of group pictures”,<sup>654</sup> an important stylistic element of Marton’s works.

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

After the official opening on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1970, the National played *Chapters on Lenin* thirty times, including morning matinees, until 5<sup>th</sup> May, then put it on repertory, and even revived it in 1980, for the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lenin’s birth. (Marton was no longer alive at that time, so the revival was directed by Marton’s then-assistant, Eszter Tatár.) While the 1970 version had overwhelmingly positive reviews, many critics of the revival noted that ten years after the premiere, the production seemed rather anachronistic. György Kriszt commented that “it was hard to explain why they chose to revive *this specific* work of Gyurkó”,<sup>655</sup> while Endre Varjas thought it was “a fundamental repertory-making error” to recreate the oratorio on the “unremarkable” 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary. “The audience won’t go to see it, and from their point of view, they are perfectly right.” The actors also “work half-heartedly, with no feeling”, watching the “sparsely populated and aggressively bored audience”, which “creates a performance that might reach the level of a mediocre amateur ensemble’s slightly sickly production”.<sup>656</sup> Of course in 1980, it was clear that the illusion permeating *Chapters on Lenin* had dissipated, and it was not possible to reform the regime by returning to its origins: socialism in Hungary could not be rejuvenated.<sup>657</sup> (The televised recording of the performance demonstrates<sup>658</sup> that Tamás Major could not do more either

<sup>654</sup> Sas: *Fejezetek Leninről – Döntés*, 5.

<sup>655</sup> Kriszt: *Fejezetek Leninről*, 4.

<sup>656</sup> Varjas: *Alkalmatlan alkalmiség*, 13.

<sup>657</sup> Cf. Gábor Klaniczay’s *Inventory*, made in January 1980, and going beyond individual experience. “Now that it is 1980, everything under the heading of the 1970s has faded in an unattainable historical distance. And maybe that’s not so bad. We need our thinking not to be pushed back every day into the melancholic state of the loss of alternatives by the stagnation, languishing and quiet demise of the revolutionary thoughts, reforming ideas and beautiful ideals of the 1960s. It is not just a hobby of historical periodization by decades that I have been waiting for the end of ‘the Seventies’ for weeks. The differences of the past two decades sum up the development of my life to me (and perhaps to my contemporaries). The Sixties: the coordinates of my youth, my thinking, my ideals, my attitude to life. The Seventies: my growing up apathetically, my experiences of failure, my inefficiency, my loss of faith. I’m going to be 30 this year. With some relief, I’m beginning to take the disappointments of the ‘70s off. I’m going to get over the bitter taste in my mouth that’s left behind, and try to give some sense of the ‘70s at least for myself, to learn a lesson from it.” Gábor Klaniczay: 1980, *Beszélő* III:3:12 (1998), 65.

<sup>658</sup> The recording was broadcast on 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1979 on Channel 2 of Hungarian Television.

than add a tone of demagoguery and inflexible party politics to Lenin's speeches, heated with the passion of rationality.) No wonder that Gyurkó's work and the National's production had no impact:<sup>659</sup> the "humanity" of power became the untrustworthy slogan of the Kádár regime's intellectuals, and the smile responding to stunningly tragic events (such as the rebellion mentioned in *Chapters*) was nothing more than the lie of consolidation.

<sup>659</sup> After the National Theatre's premiere, *Chapters on Lenin* was staged only in Miskolc in November 1970, directed by Gábor Sallai.



THE SHIFTING POINT OF FEAR AND TREMBLING  
GEORGY TOVSTONOGOV:  
*THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR*, 1973



*Title:* The Government Inspector. *Date of Premiere:* 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1973. *Venue:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Georgy Tovstonogov. *Author:* Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol. *Translators:* Dezső Mészöly, Pál Mészöly. *Dramaturg:* István Forgács. *Set designer:* Georgy Tovstonogov. *Costume designer:* K. Dobuzinsky. *Choreographer:* Attila Bánhidi. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Ferenc Kállai (Anton Antonovich Skvoznik-Dmuhanovsky, Mayor), Hédi Váradi (Anna Andreyevna, wife of the Mayor), Mariann Moór (Marya Antonovna, daughter of the Mayor), János Rajz (Khlopov, Director of Education), Lajos Básti (Lyapkin-Tyapkin, Magistrate), Gellért Raksányi (Zyemlyanika, Commissioner for Health), István Avar (Postmaster), József Horváth (Bobchinsky, local landowner), János Horkai (Dobchinsky, local landowner), László Szacs vay (Khlestakov, a civil servant from Petersburg), Tamás Major (Osip, his servant), István Pathó (Gibner, local physician), Richárd Szél (Lyulyukov), Lajos Sugár (Rastakovsky), István Velenczey (Korobkin), Mária Majláth (Korobkin's wife), Elemér Tarsoly (Ukhovyortov, Police Superintendent), János Katona (Svistunov, police constable), István Wohlmuth (Pugovitsin), Péter Szirmai (Derzhimorda), Tibor Kun (Waiter), Miklós Benedek (Mishka, servant of the mayor), Imre Sinkovits (Voice of the author).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

Halfway through János Kádár's regime in 1973, *The Government Inspector* was staged by Georgy Tovstonogov at the National Theatre in Budapest as an example of the forced friendship between the Soviet and the Hungarian people. The director was not really known in Western countries, but he was advertised as one of the "top ten directors in international theatre" within the Eastern Bloc.<sup>660</sup> Although rehearsals had been rather strenuous for the whole

<sup>660</sup> Júlia Potoczky: „Dolgozni jöttem”, *Néző*, 8:3 (1973), 12. – As far as the director's name is concerned, “we usually write that his name is well known in Hungary. Let us change the cliché: his name is *wrongly known* in Hungary. His work, his *mises-en-scène* [...] and the incendiary wonders of his directorial-pedagogical talents are well known. Only his name is misknown. Actors, directors, theatre journalists and newspapers call him, say and write, *Tovstogonov* instead of *Tovstonogov*.” Péter Molnár G.: *Tovsztonogov, Népszabadság*, Vol. 31, No. 58, 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 7.

cast,<sup>661</sup> the premiere achieved enormous success and had a long-lasting effect on further *mises-en-scène* of Gogol's comedy on Hungarian stages. Artists of the National Theatre found it unusual that the Russian director had arrived with a complete scenario. He intended to stage his 1972 *The Government Inspector* at the Bolshoi Academic Gorky Theatre with a Hungarian cast, not as a copy – as journalists were eager to state – but “on a par with his production in Leningrad”.<sup>662</sup> The outstanding event of socialist culture was preceded by Tovstonogov's former visits to Budapest, first alone, then with his company. On 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1957, a year after the “Hungarian tragedy” (Ferenc Fejtő), *Optimistic Tragedy* opened at Petőfi Theatre. Károly Kazimir, a committed socialist put Vsevolod Vishnevsky's play on stage, “one of the first Soviet dramas in Hungarian theatres” after 1956.<sup>663</sup> The production was born in a sticky political situation – and to top it all for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution – under Tovstonogov's artistic supervision.<sup>664</sup> The Russian director revisited Budapest in 1969 with his Leningrad production of Gorky's *Philistines*, which most critics compared to Peter Brook's *King Lear* shown in the Hungarian capital five years before.<sup>665</sup>

<sup>661</sup> It took more than two months to prepare for the premiere. Actors who did not play in other productions were rehearsing in the evenings too and even cancelled their extra-theatre duties “to concentrate only on this task”. (f.f.): Félélem és fantasztikum, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 46, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1973, 2. – Tovstonogov stayed in Budapest only for the first and last two weeks of the rehearsal process and he spent most of the first two weeks analyzing and rehearsing the opening scene. In the intervening period, his assistant, Y. Aksyonov was working with the actors. A letter written to the governor of cultural life, György Aczél, by Istvánné Király, who was the director's interpreter and Hungarian aide, reveals that the extraordinary situation provoked a great deal of resistance from the members of the company. One of the distinguished members of the company, Ádám Szirtes, for example, rejected the role assigned to him, since he felt it too small and “unworthy” of him. Facing Tovstonogov's method, Lajos Básti and (according to Endre Marton, the manager of the National Theatre) even “the majority of the actors led by Ferenc Kállai” were thinking of a similar action too. (Imre–Ring: *Szigorúan bizalmas*, 181.) In her letter, Istvánné Király actually denounced Endre Marton because of his alleged “anti-Sovietism”, claiming that “his aim is to destroy the production in order to prove that the work of the Soviet director is worthless”. (Ibid. 183.)

<sup>662</sup> Gábor Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, Gellért–Tovsztonogov, *Nagyvilág*, 18:5 (1973), 775. – Cf. also “The production in Budapest is not a copy of the production in Leningrad, but its application to Hungarian theatre, taste, temperament and to the personalities of the actors.” Molnár G.: Tovsztonogov, 7.

<sup>663</sup> Molnár G.: Tovsztonogov, 7.

<sup>664</sup> The official aim of the production was summarized by Péter Molnár Gál in his 1973 article dedicated to Tovstonogov, claiming that the staging of the sailor's tragedy by Vishnevsky was “an important chapter in the emotional consolidation after the counter-revolution”. According to him, “purifying catharsis rarely soothes social convulsions so effectively”. Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Vera Létay, for example, considered “the lyrical and ironic counterpoints” in Tovstonogov's *Philistines* as “real artistic miracle”. She also noted that “we had met one of the giants of the theatre of our time”. Vera Létay: A polgármester, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 17, No. 14, 7<sup>th</sup>

In spite of the assertive support of state socialism, Tovstonogov let artists of the National Theatre, divided by petty rivalries,<sup>666</sup> perceive the horizon of world theatre and “refresh their acting techniques in the atelier of an exceptional director”.<sup>667</sup> He offered such a singular interpretation of the first Russian play ever produced at the National almost a century before<sup>668</sup> that it had diverged significantly from its former theatrical tradition. From such memorable shows, as the 1962 production of the Madách Theatre, directed by Géza Pártos, or, most importantly, Endre Gellért’s 1951 *mise-en-scène* in the Chamber Theatre of the National, i.e. in the building of the Magyar Theatre, which was the home of the National in the 1970s. The former production did not, but the latter did serve as an essential benchmark for Tovstonogov’s *The Government Inspector*.<sup>669</sup>

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Focusing on the topicality of past dramatic forms with their “deep and subtle relations” to the present,<sup>670</sup> Tovstonogov’s approach to Gogol was determined by an idea of the classic closer to Hans-Robert Jauss than to T. S. Eliot or

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April, 1973, 13. – Later, Tovstonogov’s Leningrad *mises-en-scène* visited Budapest twice: in 1974 (including *The Toth Family* by István Örkény) and also in 1980 (including *Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse*, which inspired László Marton’s staging at the Víg Theatre in 2003).

<sup>666</sup> Cf. László Szacsavay’s anecdote: “there was a scene where I had to lie down and I was only propped up in the middle. János Rajz pressed my feet against his face on a pillow, holding it tight, but Mr. [Lajos] Básti did not want to hold my head, not even with a pillow. ‘I will not hold a greenhorn college student’s head!’, he said. But I had been the member of the company for three years.” László Szacsavay: *Nem könnyű halottnak lenni*. An interview by Borí Bujdosó, <http://www.origo.hu/kultura/20101113-interju-szacsavay-laszloval-a-katonajozsef-szinhaz-szineszevel-a-ciganyok.html> (accessed 2 August 2016).

<sup>667</sup> Jenő Illés: *A revizor, Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 17, No. 11, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 4. – Péter Molnár Gál stated that “this guest staging came up to a two-month study trip for the entire company”. Molnár G.: *Tovsztonogov*, 7.

<sup>668</sup> Gogol’s comedy was first produced at the National Theatre in 1874.

<sup>669</sup> Endre Gellért’s staging was described as “epochal in theatre history” (Illés: *A revizor*, 4.) or simply “perfect” (Ottó Major: *A revizor, Tükör*, Vol. 10, No. 12, 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 13.), and it became identical with Gogol’s play “in the public’s consciousness”. (Ibid.)

<sup>670</sup> Georgij Tovsztonogov: *Gondolatok a klasszikusokról*, in *A rendező hívatása*, trans. Zsuzsa Szekeres, Budapest, Színházstudományi Intézet, 1966, 51. – The Soviet director’s essay surprisingly reminds the reader of Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, and although it was written some six decades ago, it still has some relevance. Tovstonogov declared himself to be “the authorized representative of the audience”, who tries to “watch the events of the play through the eyes of the people in the auditorium” during rehearsals, and to find and exploit the connections between the drama and their lives. (László Dalos quotes the director’s words in *Tovsztonogov, Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 33, No. 22, 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1989, 24.) – Cf. “A classic is treated like a contemporary play built on the material of history. What is important to us in classical dramas is that they would raise contemporary and topical problems. [...] A classic is classical because, depending on the age and the social conditions, it always tells spectators different things. The task of the theatre is to find what it actually has to say. [...] The theatre

Hans-Georg Gadamer. His reading broke and created a tradition at the same time when it tried to discover a certain “plus” that could be set against the well-known interpretation of the play as a simple farce and a satire of country life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia.<sup>671</sup> Tovstonogov saw this “plus” in “global and cosmic fear”, thought to be the main initiator hence the principal character of the play, and in “fantastic realism”, conceived as the main style of the production.<sup>672</sup> They shed such new light on *The Government Inspector* that a critic found the production “going far beyond a revival and equaling a world premiere of Gogol’s comedy”.<sup>673</sup> In spite of “global and cosmic fear”, Tovstonogov did not stage the drama of *Angst* but characterized social rather than existential fear in the background of an autocratic regime.<sup>674</sup> He “revealed the author of *The Nose* in the author of *The Government Inspector*, in other words, the writer of fantastic-visionary short stories in the writer of comedies”,<sup>675</sup> and he approached Gogol “from Saltykov-Shchedrin, Bulgakov and Vampilov i.e. from the rich tradition of Russian-Soviet satiric literature”.<sup>676</sup> In lieu of a tamed Gogol, a “wild” and “eerie” one turned up on stage in a different style

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must hear the word of the age: it must strive at all times to answer questions that people are interested in.” No author: Interjú Georgij Tovsztonogovval, *Világshínház*, 1:11–12. (1983), 39. and 38.

<sup>671</sup> B.B.M.: „Nem bohózatot játszunk”. Tovsztonogov a Nemzetiben, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 8<sup>th</sup> January, 1973, 9. – As a result, Tovstonogov stated that he had to “mature” the play for a long time after Dostoyevsky, who was “always very close” to him, and whose novel, *The Idiot* he had already staged, aroused his interest in Gogol. Cf. No author: Tovsztonogov a Revizorról, *Népszabadság, Vasárnapi melléklet*, Vol. 30, No. 184, 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1972, 8.

<sup>672</sup> B.B.M.: „Nem bohózatot játszunk”, 9.

<sup>673</sup> Ervin Szombathelyi: *A revizor*. Tovsztonogov rendezése a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 6, No. 69, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 6. – “We all have an idea of this play, far more different from the one we met this time.” Ibid. – At one of the first rehearsals, Tovstonogov said that they had to read the play with fresh eyes, because they were too much influenced by tradition, and his actors in Leningrad had felt as if they had already played in at least five different productions of *The Government Inspector*. Cf. Katalin Saád: *A revizor* próbáin, *Színház* 6:6 (1973), 3.

<sup>674</sup> The *mise-en-scène* focused on the representation of social life, i.e. on human relationships explored in the spirit of Meyerhold instead of class relationships in the spirit of Marxist aesthetics. Cf. “In the most shocking scene of the performance, a carriage is pushed onto the stage, an old one, cut in half. We are confronted with the back seat, on which the company, coming from brunch, is trying to take seat. They hardly fit in, they are huddling together, sitting on each other and the drunken Khlestakov is lying on their laps, chattering and boasting continuously. In fear, the trembling officials are cuddling him like a baby. They lay him on their knees, put a pillow under his head, and when he falls asleep, they watch his dreams with a lullaby so that His Excellency would be satisfied with everything. He was, by the way, only His Highness in the first scenes, and going to be His Majesty in the last one, as evidence of the possibility of rapid social ascent. Meanwhile, the magistrate spits out of the carriage, and the hussar walking by the carriage swipes the saliva off his face with an indifferent gesture. The social hierarchy is thus complete on Tovstonogov’s stage, both up and down, every moment.” Gábor Szigethy: Gogol: *A revizor*, *Kritika* 11:4 (1973), 20.

<sup>675</sup> Tamás Ungvári: Theaterbrief. Das Klassische und das Moderne, *Budapester Rundschau*, Vol. 7, No. 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1973, 11.

<sup>676</sup> Molnár G.: Tovsztonogov, 7.

than what spectators could expect and were accustomed to.<sup>677</sup> It went hand in hand with a shift in focus on the Mayor and his company instead of Khlestakov and a reversal of the scheme of the play formerly staged “as a comedy of errors”, in which “the protagonist led officials of a small town by the nose due to a misunderstanding”.<sup>678</sup> Whilst “in most productions of *The Government Inspector* a tattling, foppish Khlestakov had aptly drawn profit from some scary and imbecile officials”, this time “Khlestakov’s imbecility drew the most cunning and dangerous weapon of sticking to power from the officials”.<sup>679</sup>

In order to emphasize this reversal and the above-mentioned “plus”, the standard translation of the play (created by Dezső and Pál Mészöly for Endre Gellért’s memorable *mise-en-scène* in 1951) was revised and the omitted word “fear” was set back in several places. Altogether some “180 corrections were made”,<sup>680</sup> and the first version of Gogol’s comedy was also taken into account on the basis of a Soviet academic edition. Considerable omissions were only made in the last two acts: scenes with the inhabitants of the town i.e. both Khlestakov’s and the Mayor’s dialogues with the complaining salesmen were skipped.<sup>681</sup> The setting and the order of some episodes were also changed, e.g. the one following the visit to the hospital shifted from the Mayor’s home to a half-cut landau that gave place to a spectacular ensemble scene and Khlestakov’s appearance with his valet Osip in the second act was included in a series of scenes with the officials’ debate in the first act.<sup>682</sup> While Tovstonogov followed Stanislavsky in explaining everything from the dramatic text itself, he organized

<sup>677</sup> Cf. “This *Government Inspector* is not amusing in the superficial sense of the word. This is frightening, chilling and embodies the kind of ridicule that is said to kill. I might say that this production is sad, while, of course, we laugh at it.” No author: *A revizor, Néző*, 8:5 (1973), 2. – “Laughter is extremely important. But it is equally important that it should not be self-serving. We are not playing a farce, we are playing Gogol, so we want to stage his famous gallows humor and bitter laugh.” B.B.M.: „Nem bohózatot játszunk”, 9.

<sup>678</sup> Szombathelyi: *A revizor*, 6.

<sup>679</sup> Tamás Koltai: Tovstonogov és *A revizor*, *Színház*, 6:6 (1973), 9.

<sup>680</sup> Saád: *A revizor* próbáin, 3.

<sup>681</sup> Major: *A revizor*, 13.

<sup>682</sup> Cf. “At the beginning of the play, a letter tells that a government inspector is arriving. Then the two landowners discover the government inspector in the pub. The director interrupts the exposition here and presents, in a flash, *who was discovered*. A hooligan, a terrified worm stuck in a tree, an improvident little bastard in debt. [...] And when we get back to the interrupted exposition, we see the characters in a different way, so it will be much more effective later on, as the two people meet, dreading each other.” Tamás Major: Tanultam Tovstonogovtól, *Népszabadság, Vasárnapi melléklet*, Vol. 31, No. 65, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 7. – “Tovstonogov felt the need of only one structural change: the original first act was broken into two with the scene of Osip and Khlestakov. However, the production has fully justified this change, since Tovstonogov set the ‘rules of the game’ with this moment, extracted from Gogol’s logic. The first phantom scene is immediately followed by the introduction of Khlestakov and Osip, in which Khlestakov appears fully but ironically *comme il faut*: ‘Well, look, they will be afraid of him, they will see him as a phantom!’ [...] This episode is there, Tovstonogov explained, to realize that this Khlestakov is a little boy.” Saád: *A revizor* próbáin, 3. and 6.

all the 53 scenes of the five acts into 12 episodes and gave them titles. He used this Brechtian method (originally devised for the spectators' orientation) in the spirit of Stanislavsky so that his actors could keep the actual objectives (incorporated in the titles) in mind.<sup>683</sup> But a special effect was dislocating the theatre of make-believe, as "the voice of the author" could be heard from time to time. When the characterization of certain figures on stage (in fact Gogol's remarks for actors) were recited by Imre Sinkovits and scenes were standing still for a while, spectators could find these remarks fit for the actors so much "as if they had been written into the play during rehearsals".<sup>684</sup>

### STAGING

Having been developed for the Leningrad production and left unaltered in Budapest, the *mise-en-scène* aimed at "a subtle display of the interpretation of the dramatic text"<sup>685</sup> and was based on a clear-cut conception,<sup>686</sup> not to say unique with regards to the literary criticism and the theatre history of the play. (Fantastic realism<sup>687</sup> as its main principle had been unprecedented in Hungary since "our tradition of representing the abuse of power in the country comes from Kálmán Mikszáth and Zsigmond Móricz",<sup>688</sup> outstanding writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Endre Gellért's staging obviously followed this tradition at the beginning of the 1950s.<sup>689</sup>) Occasionally turning up as

<sup>683</sup> Cf. Major: Tanultam, 7. – Tovstonogov asked the actors to write down the titles for themselves. "The purpose of this task was to make it clear to all actors what each episode was about, what it aimed at." Saád: *A revizor próbáin*, 3.

<sup>684</sup> Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 10.

<sup>685</sup> Mihályi: *Tovsztonogov–Latinovits*, 776.

<sup>686</sup> This conception was summed up by the director himself six months before the premiere in an interview of *Népszabadság*, published on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1972. Most reviewers were echoing this conception later.

<sup>687</sup> The term, supposed to come from Pushkin in reference to Gogol's works, was also introduced by Tovstonogov in the above-mentioned interview.

<sup>688</sup> Mihályi: *Tovsztonogov–Latinovits*, 775.

<sup>689</sup> Gábor Mihályi also pointed out that "some of the essential elements of Tovstonogov's conception had already been applied in Gellért's *mise-en-scène*. [1] In particular, the fact that in contrast to [Max] Reinhardt's staging, which had put the pseudo-government inspector in the center, this time the mayor became the main character of the show." (Ibid. 775–776.) In a review on Gellért's staging, written with purblind Marxism, György Lukács had called Reinhardt's approach the gladly interrupted "bourgeois tradition". (György Lukács: *Gogoly: A revizor. A Magyar Színház bemutatója, Szabad Nép*, Vol. 9, No. 123, 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1951, 5.) Referring to Lukács, Péter Molnár Gál also noted that Reinhardt "had diverted the power of social critique to the tricks and pranks of a con man". (Molnár G.: *Tovsztonogov*, 7.) [2] "Fear may have been the reason for misunderstanding even in Gellért's staging, but it had not received as much emphasis as in Tovstonogov's production. Gellért had wanted to draw our attention primarily to the intimidation of the mayor and his clique and favored the joy of getting rid of these rats and worms of the past so that we could laugh at them. [We must not forget that the production was created in the midst of the Rákosi regime, the rage of

“the corrupt officials’ vision obscured by utmost fear”,<sup>690</sup> a weirdly impersonal figure embodied the strange and the visionary in Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène*, clad in black from tip to toe. He was threatening the Mayor as “the inevitable fate, an attendant of his crimes, an embodiment of his remorse, an erratic authority greater than him”,<sup>691</sup> until he finally entered on stage as the real government inspector. Appearing unexpectedly at Khlestakov’s place or in a jolting buggy high on stage, this “phantom”<sup>692</sup> became visible when the lights went out on other characters for a while, “as if the ghost of the government inspector in his dark carriage had arrived not at a small town but straight into the Mayor’s mind”.<sup>693</sup> This game of substitution showed exactly who the aldermen really saw: a nightmarish figure in place of the weightless Khlestakov.<sup>694</sup> Sudden changes and transformations had thrust the play into infernal circles and presented the plot as “a dance macabre of conscience”.<sup>695</sup> The *mise-en-scène* had two layers:<sup>696</sup> the ridiculous as well as the terrific

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communist terror, the ongoing forced evictions from Budapest!) Like in Tovstonogov’s production, the mayor had not turned to the laughing audience in the final act, saying ‘What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves.’, but he had told these words to his birds of a feather. As Lukács writes of this scene, ‘Satire is no longer directed against the audience, it is the clear farewell of the liberated people to the terrible past.’ (Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, 776.) Furthermore, [3] “even Endre Gellért had not backed down from the more powerful effects of humor” (ibid.), from what Lukács had called “the cruelty of the real, progressive, revolutionary writer”, the “poetic expression of social commitment”, stating that “the true masters of the comical had always been warriors, inexorable, unforgiving warriors against what they had seen as obsolete, rotten, guilty in their own society.” (Lukács: *Gogoly: A revizor*. 5.) [4] According to Gábor Mihályi, “we find the cruel vision demanded by Lukács in Tovstonogov’s conception. As in *Philistines*, he does not allow any identification or sensitive feelings towards the figures of the comedy. He laughs at them viciously and cruelly. At the end of the production, the microphone conveys a loud laugh, which then hiccups into a cry. [In Imre Sinkovits’s voice, the phrase ‘don’t curse the mirror when your face is crooked’ sounds from the speakers with a wild laugh turning to unstoppable sobbing.] Lukács quotes Pushkin in his review, who was laughing heartily during a reading of *Dead Souls* and then said to Gogol, ‘How sad was our Russia.’ [...] Tovstonogov’s conception conveys this laughter of Pushkin.” (Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, 776.)

<sup>690</sup> No author: *A revizor*, 2.

<sup>691</sup> László Bernáth: *A revizor*. A Nemzeti Színház színpadán, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 61, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 2.

<sup>692</sup> Tovstonogov’s expression, used in the interview published in *Népszabadság* on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1972.

<sup>693</sup> Pongrác Galsai: *A revizor*. (Egy remekmű remeklő rendezése), *Budapest* 21:3 (1973), 6.

<sup>694</sup> At the moments of fear, this dark figure “literally hid the real Khlestakov” from the Mayor and the officials” (Bernáth: *A revizor*, 2.), so “reality got overcome by a nightmare” (Ungvári: Theaterbrief, 11.). “Doors were opening as unexpectedly and eerily creaking as in horror films.” (Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, 777.) “The mixture of reality and nightmare worked on stage as accurately as a clock.” Major: Tanultam, 7.

<sup>695</sup> Létay: A polgármester, 13. – Cf. also “Gogol bites his mouth with blood here. Khlestakov is extremely scared too. And the audience sits in frozen silence.” Galsai: *A revizor*, 6.

<sup>696</sup> “The one is a satirical comedy made up of traditional elements, the other is a bitter, sometimes terrifying atmosphere that stops us laughing. The surface is the quirky, sometimes puppet-like leaping, chasing, confusing and mocking, but behind it, fear is sensible from time to

that had been emerging under the surface of comedy in order to make the audience feel terror “as a kind of spiritual reality”.<sup>697</sup> Referring to the feudal conditions of tsarist Russia and to the autocracy of Nicholas I,<sup>698</sup> most critics identified terror with the fear of the representatives of *an ancient regime in the past*, afraid of being inevitably summoned sooner or later.<sup>699</sup> However, a significant reference to the production in 1989 by the director Imre Csizsár (sometime leader of the National)<sup>700</sup> lets us suppose that the unbearable anxiety in Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* made spectators experience another

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time as the main force that coerces the characters into these ridiculous leaps. However, we understand this only in the last scene, when the Mayor, Ferenc Kállai shouts at the onlookers, ‘What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves.’, and all of a sudden, we realize that no one is laughing, neither on stage nor in the auditorium. At this moment, the function of a series of ‘amusing’ scenes can also be grasped, and we comprehend why our laughter has been suppressed by the gloom of the situation or by the topicality of today’s overtones of some gestures. This dichotomy, the unfolding of the Gogolian fantasy, belongs to a layer that we have previously not been aware of.” After all, “*The Government Inspector* has always appeared to us with only one face so far, mocking the bureaucrats.” *A revizor – Tovsztonogov rendezésében*. Miklós Almási’s program on Petőfi Radio, at 20.40 on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1973. Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. – Cf. also “Tovstonogov, the theatre director from Leningrad, staged two productions at the National, doubling Gogol’s satire. [...] Performances of *The Government Inspector* have been scratching only the surface of contemporary Russian society so far. [...] They have got to the play’s comic epidermis, at most to its satirical dermis here and there, but not more than some millimeters deep. Tovstonogov penetrates under the skin and even gets past the fat layer.” Béla Mátrai-Betegh: *A revizor*. Tovsztonogov Gogolj-rendezése a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 29, No. 65, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1973, 11.

<sup>697</sup> Major: *A revizor*, 13. – Cf. also “Tovstonogov explores and follows the physiology, metaphysics and even mysticism of terror, its very objective, organized structure, its hierarchy.” Mátrai-Betegh: *A revizor*, 11.

<sup>698</sup> Like the weekly *Tükör* did and *Leningradskaya Pravda* in view of the Soviet premiere.

<sup>699</sup> As if the play revealed the “anti-world” (the Mayor and his company) before the Bolsheviks’ takeover, which world could only be swept away by revolution: “Gogol knew well that the real government inspector would not come in Nicholas I’s Russia. In fact, he came only eighty-one years after the completion of *The Government Inspector* in 1836. The righteous fear of monstrous lords had lasted until 1917.” No author: *A revizor*, 2. – “The real government inspector was actually the revolution...” Roxin: *A revizor – a Nemzeti Színházban*, *SZIM Hírlap* 10:10 (1973), 7.

<sup>700</sup> The new manager of the National Theatre, Imre Csizsár claimed in 1989 that “the other tradition to be preserved is the representation of foreign classics from Shakespeare and Molière to Brecht. Not because they are all parts of school curricula, but because they may tell us more and better about our situation in Hungary today than a contemporary Hungarian drama. I remember, as it was not that long ago, when Tovstogonov [sic] came to Hungary to stage *The Government Inspector*. It was actually a copy of a production in Leningrad, but I have never seen a theatre performance more Hungarian than that. It was so much about us, about our problems, about our ridiculousness, about our cowardice [...] that perhaps the best Hungarian drama at that time was Gogol’s play. It is a matter of staging.” Judit Csáki: „Nem igazgatni: rendezni szeretném a Nemzetit.” Beszélgetés Csizsár Imrével, *Kritika* 27:9 (1989), 29.

kind of fear: fear pervading the 1970s in Hungary. It could make them hope that representatives of *the present regime* (so those of the Kádár regime) would be inevitably summoned sooner or later.<sup>701</sup>

As a crucial characteristic of the *mise-en-scène*, duality (of the layers mentioned before and also evident in the style of acting) involuntarily initiated the mechanism of “doublespeak” and largely contributed to the reputation of the production. Critics pointed out “the accurate reconstruction of the text, the careful realization of stage directions, the psychological orientation and the historic sets and costumes”.<sup>702</sup> Mentioned as praiseworthy features of faithfulness to the author, these attributes kept the production within the limits of realist-naturalist staging, while others freed it and obscured the clarity of performance style by means of circus, burlesque, tragedy, etc.<sup>703</sup> The *mise-en-scène* used distinct forms: its realism was colored by “the uproarious nature of avant-garde-revolutionary theatre”.<sup>704</sup> It combined Gogol with the early tradition of Soviet theatre but “translated both into the language of contemporary performance”.<sup>705</sup> Specifically Meyerhold’s initiatives and his 1926 stage version of the play inspired Tovstonogov’s staging to such an extent that it almost paid homage to the great predecessor liquidated by Stalin’s regime. In spite of its smart pluralism<sup>706</sup> the production did not

<sup>701</sup> Some moments had intriguing overtones, such as the Mayor’s fantasizing about becoming a general or even a generalissimo (think of Stalin’s title!), and the word was “echoing on the walls of the house, generating such hallucinations that froze our blood”. Mátrai-Betegh: *A revizor*, 11.

<sup>702</sup> Major: *A revizor*, 13.

<sup>703</sup> Tamás Koltai described this duality as “deep psychological grotesque”, pointing out that “the scene in the carriage cut into half, which imitates shaking so well, has a dramaturgical function: caressing Khlestakov, the officials reveal their relationship to him. [...] However, other moments reject naturalism. When the officials come to Khlestakov, one by one, to bribe him, they do not say their internal reflections quietly ‘aside’ as usual, but as a continuation of their previous sentence, with the same tone and volume, into Khlestakov’s eyes. It is a psychological feat (in addition to using the dialogue technique of the theatre of the absurd): it is no longer the meaning of words that matters, but their situational value.” Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 11. – Tovstonogov said that realist-naturalist foundations are needed because “everyday life gives a boost to the imagination. It is not the individual facts that are expressed in the play that matter here, but the process of life itself. [...] Tovstonogov thinks that in order to fight against stereotypes and the banality of the first conception, the director has to direct his imagination, without the formal solutions of the dramatic text, not to the future, to the performance to be directed, but to the past, to the life represented by the playwright. He has to identify with the author’s sense of life. Going back to the past can give a certain psychological impulse, a boost to the imagination.” Saád: *A revizor próbáin*, 4.

<sup>704</sup> Major: *A revizor*, 13.

<sup>705</sup> Ungvári: Theaterbrief, 11.

<sup>706</sup> Cf. “The mayor’s wife and daughter dance a grotesque and silly ballet at the moments of joy. [...] Shpyokin [the postmaster] was given a red nose and a long, hardened white bow, as if he were a clown escaping from a circus. The three bobbies are both puppets and pantomime players.” Bernáth: *A revizor*, 2. – Tovstonogov “also prefers burlesque humor, which is, of course, often justified by Gogol’s text. In a state of confusion and haste, the mayor puts the box on his head instead of the shako, [and] the magistrate’s feet are shaking

become a precursor of postmodern performance,<sup>707</sup> since its occasional slow-down<sup>708</sup> and silence as well as its visual and physical orientation did not transgress the limits of logocentric theatre. Besides the praise of the “detailed and imaginative construction of even the tiniest moments”,<sup>709</sup> some critics condemned the decelerated flow of events, highly unusual in a comedy.<sup>710</sup> But Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* let duality prevail in rhythm as well: not only did it frequently interrupt energetic, lively and farcical scenes but also enlarged micro situations in order to make the deep structure of interpretation understood.

### ACTING

Tovstonogov followed Meyerhold in the development of acting but approached him from the late Stanislavsky. Seeking adequate physical actions and charging them with sufficient emotions, he tried to stimulate “the inner life of characters so as to help actors find their life on stage”.<sup>711</sup> Regarding “words as a result of actions”, he was searching for “the starting deeds in all situations”.<sup>712</sup> Since he had not known the actors<sup>713</sup> and presumed they would need much

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so much that he falls on his face twice on the stairs, when he starts to bribe the pseudo-government inspector.” Mihályi: *Tovsztonogov–Latinovits*, 776. – “Khlopov, the director of education (the excellent János Rajz) often faints in the arms of his partners with a single clown-gag repeated. The danced dream duos of mother and daughter (Hédi Váradi and Mariann Moór) are parodies of the romantic theatre of illusions (or operetta, if you will). The drunken Khlestakov’s increasingly unscrupulous dance in front of the terrified officials is a choreographed buffoonery (with eight people sitting on a single chair). We never feel a mix of styles in these scenes. Tovstonogov always finds the form by which he can fully express the basic idea of the drama.” Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 11.

<sup>707</sup> This is what Zsuzsa Radnóti refers to, when, describing the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, she observes that “this new type of text and theatricality, inspired by the avantgarde, were living in an exciting simultaneity, in a productive symbiosis. The great reformers of stage languages and their productions [among which she mentions Tovstonogov’s *The Government Inspector* later] have not altered texts significantly yet and respected the internal intellectual and external dramaturgical constraints of plays.” Zsuzsa Radnóti: *A magyar posztdramatikuskok. Az irodalmi drámától az előadásszövegig*, *Irodalomtörténet* 36:3 (2005), 257.

<sup>708</sup> Cf. Tovstonogov “creates great silences so that gestures can really show up. He brakes down. He stops. He fixes the eye to one point. He repeats the same motif over and over again. He uses recurrent noise effects.” Galsai: *A revizor*, 7.

<sup>709</sup> Létay: *A polgármester*, 13.

<sup>710</sup> Cf. “Tovstonogov brings the underlying content of the text to the surface. He does not let go of anything of Gogol’s sentences and situations. That’s why we sometimes feel the performance exhausting and lengthy at the end of the second part.” Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 11.

<sup>711</sup> Saád: *A revizor próbáin*, 6.

<sup>712</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>713</sup> During an earlier visit, Tovstonogov saw some of the National Theatre’s performances and chose his actors on the basis of this experience. In some cases, he turned against the management of the theatre, which had recommended actors for each role. Instead of three

time to pick up his method, he showed them every little trick and made them rehearse the first episode for two weeks. Although the style of acting was unusually physical for the Hungarian cast, it did not become biomechanical since all actions were “smoothly built in the situations and in the psychology of figures”.<sup>714</sup> They helped actors elaborate their roles so carefully that reviews referred to character building as the main virtue of the production.<sup>715</sup>

Khlestakov became deliberately weightless so that fear of him could become more intense and comical.<sup>716</sup> Instead of “a rascal or an astute cheater”, spectators saw “a light- and shallow-minded young man with an ability to adapt to all situations”.<sup>717</sup> A penniless status seeker who had hardly even realized he was taken for someone else and who was “also scared, in a different way and of other things than the officials: scared of hunger, a bad run of cards, shortcomings of social success, except for being caught”.<sup>718</sup> The “through line” of this medium-like upstart was based on his “not playing but becoming the government inspector by means of the circumstances alone”.<sup>719</sup> Reviewers

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notable actors (György Kálmán, István Sztankay and István Iglódi), for example, he chose László Szacs vay for Khlestakov. As Szacs vay said in an interview, “Tovstonogov needed my character for his conception. He wanted a skinny, insignificant lad to go with the flow and take advantage of the situation he had got into.” Gábor Bóta: *Szacs vay László a Nemzet Színésze lett*, [https://nepszava.hu/1057003\\_szacs vay-laszlo-a-nemzet-szinesze-lett](https://nepszava.hu/1057003_szacs vay-laszlo-a-nemzet-szinesze-lett) (accessed 8 August 2016).

<sup>714</sup> Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 11.

<sup>715</sup> Cf. “It is not the director’s innovations that make Tovstonogov’s staging interesting, but the depth of analytical thinking and character analysis.” Klyuyevskaya: *Jog a haragra, Leningradskaya Pravda*, June 2, 1972. Excerpt from a review of the Leningrad production, *Színház*, 6:6 (1973), 48. – “Those are wrong, who praise Tovstonogov’s richness of ideas. He does not have ideas, he has characters, and it is a great difference. He richly works out – and makes the participants work out – the organic stage life of all characters.” Koltai: *Tovsztonogov és A revizor*, 11. – “The physical actions of the Mayor [...] are dramatically and stimulatingly well-chosen physical actions. [...] The aides, who are also terrified, give him the box of the hat instead of the mayor’s ornamental hat, and he quickly puts it on his head. The box hiding the Mayor’s head is not a farcical element now. By covering his eyes and supporting the precisely gained inner truth, it expresses the Mayor’s blindness symbolically. When he runs into the floor standing clock the next moment and hears a metallic, scary sound, the reverberation of the clock makes the audience feel as if he had run into Historical Time with his head.” Péter Molnár Gál: *A polgármester: Kállai Ferenc, Színház*, 6:6 (1973), 43.

<sup>716</sup> Cf. “It is precisely the pseudo-government inspector’s weightlessness that expresses the dark humor of this process.” Namely, the process of “dissecting the most ugly characteristics of the figures by fear.” Galsai: *A revizor*, 7.

<sup>717</sup> László Szacs vay’s words are quoted in (f.f.): *Félelem és fantasztikum*, 2.

<sup>718</sup> *A revizor...* Miklós Almási’s program on Petőfi Radio.

<sup>719</sup> Saád: *A revizor próbáin*, 6.

emphasized the bravura of becoming quasi ethereal and incorporeal in László Szacs vay's Khlestakov,<sup>720</sup> though some of them disapproved of it, "mistaking the actor for his part".<sup>721</sup>

The appreciation of Ferenc Kállay as the Mayor, however, was unanimous since the actor had successively penetrated the surface of comedy to show the awesome downfall of a guileful official,<sup>722</sup> but stressed the consequences of going astray instead of the *a priori* vile nature of his figure.<sup>723</sup> Although Kállay found it rather difficult that Tovstonogov asked for a different kind of acting he had been used to,<sup>724</sup> he was eventually able to "adjust the Russian director's Mayor to his body and his own habit as an actor".<sup>725</sup> So his

<sup>720</sup> Cf. Khlestakov "is played by the thinnest Hungarian actor, László Szacs vay, [who] seems to be bodiless, swinging on stage like a silk thread. Or like gossamer that floats in the sultry air of the small town in Tsarist Russia." Galsai: *A revizor*, 7. – "He recited important monologues lifelessly, as if he not only played the void, but became empty himself." Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, 777. – "Tovstonogov advised Szacs vay not to look for the figure in himself, but in his partners, in their eyes, in the electrical space they create, so that he would resonate like cigarette paper. [...] He had to wear a tailcoat from the first rehearsals. Aksyonov also asked for shoes with leather soles so that Szacs vay could walk and move easily. He had to be light enough to jump anywhere. [...] The basis of rehearsing the scenes of Khlestakov and Osip was improvisation. Szacs vay had to get rid of the burden of the great role. He had to play the cramp out of himself. He had to find true physical and spiritual lightness." Saád: *A revizor próbáin*, 8.

<sup>721</sup> Koltai: Tovsztonogov és *A revizor*, 11.

<sup>722</sup> Kállai's Mayor was described as "living through a real tragedy in a comedy: the tragedy of misunderstanding born of fear and suggesting frightening depths". Bernáth: *A revizor*, 2. – "This mayor is a Shakespearean hero, kind of a small-town Richard III, visited by ghosts." Létay: *A polgármester*, 13. – "Tovstonogov reveals Hoffmann in Gogol. Even Kafka and Bulgakov in Gogol. Kállai plays Shakespeare in Gogol. [...] The phantom on top of the piano does not even have to show up later, the Mayor only glances in the same direction, as Hamlet in Gertrude's room or Macbeth in the banquet scene, and his imagination will become a reality for us. [...] His tirade 'What a jerk I am, an animal, a dumb sheep! In thirty years, there has not been a single shopkeeper or a cunning dog who could con me!' is built up by Kállai from the inside, using a Shakespearean monologue technique. He breaks out of the fragmentation of eruptions justified by naturalism and makes his inner life visible in this soliloquy with a vast arc of passion. The building – no, the rhetoric! – of tempers is built on Shakespearean passion. And since he does not deliver his speech 'critically' at the end, not as an outer opinion but as an irresistibly erupting confession, a self-defiant fit, we do not feel mocking and comical superiority in watching and listening to him, but rather feel tragicomic poignancy. These are the moments of a lowlife's tragic realization, when his blindness bursts suddenly and he begins to see clearly in the blinding light of misfortune and anguish collapsed on him." Molnár Gál: *A polgármester: Kállai Ferenc*, 41. and 42.

<sup>723</sup> Cf. "Tovstonogov [...] does not see the Mayor as evil, as someone who was born a villain. [...] If he did so, we could study a social oddball, a psychopathological specimen, a unique piece, but not the functioning of society, the distorting influence of circumstances, its dehumanizing effect to bribe even the honest." *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>724</sup> Cf. Saád: *A revizor próbáin. Színház*, 5.

<sup>725</sup> Mihályi: Tovsztonogov–Latinovits, 777.

distinctive exclamation, pathos and even his fits of anger<sup>726</sup> contributed to the subtle characterization of blindness caused by fear.<sup>727</sup> Critics found the achievement of the ensemble equal to Kállay's performance and highlighted the performance of Tamás Major, János Rajz and Lajos Básti. However, the television recording of the production reveals that fantastic realism could not entirely permeate acting.<sup>728</sup> Instead of fitting in with an exquisite satire, some actors could not surpass constrained stylization and "a gaudy coloring of the characters they played".<sup>729</sup>

### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

Scenery designed by Tovstonogov himself combined visual effects of naturalist staging with others, shifting them into different contexts from time to time. The stage showed the Mayor's two-storey home with a large parlor and a staircase leading to rooms above, all extravagantly furnished but sometimes hidden by sliding black walls so that new places could turn up suddenly. Hence the Mayor's house transformed into "a haunted mansion" in which the black phantom of the government inspector, living in the Mayor's mind, could show up everywhere in no time, accompanied by eerie

<sup>726</sup> Cf. Bernáth: *A revizor*, 2. – Ferenc Kállai's vehemence was different from Kirill Lavrov's role-playing, who was the Mayor of the Leningrad production. He was introduced to the audience in Budapest as a result of an unusual exchange of actors. In 1974, Kállai travelled to Leningrad to play the Mayor in Tovstonogov's *mise-en-scène* running there, and then Lavrov came to the National Theatre to replace Kállai on two nights. Hungarian newspapers were writing on "the beautiful joint undertaking of theatre history" (Dalos: Tovsztonogov, 24.), the "rhyming of two theatre cultures" (András Lukácsy: A polgármester: Kirill Lavrov, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 7, No. 139, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1974, 6.), and detailed the complexity of Lavrov's acting. Cf. "Lavrov's Mayor is a bit more dignified. Kállai's Mayor is a creeping worm with nothing scary in him. His fear is more elemental and instinctive: it takes his whole environment with him. [...] The figure created by Lavrov is *more human* because he must represent some kind of strength." (E.F.P.: A művészi barátság példája. Kirill Lavrov Budapesten, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 32, No. 116, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1974, 7.) – "Low-key tone, almost mildness, calm tempos in a Russian manner, gentler tempers: his performance is quite tame, almost lyrical." (Lukácsy: A polgármester: Kirill Lavrov, 6.)

<sup>727</sup> Cf. "His eyes see inwards, his gaze is rigidly nailed into nothing, as if he were not fully present in the events." Létay: A polgármester, 13. – "He almost plays the role in trance, as if he were living in some kind of vision from the first moment." *A revizor...* Miklós Almási's program on Petőfi Radio.

<sup>728</sup> In this respect, Katalin Saád's conclusion is particularly important: "The naturalistic elements (the door, the chandelier, the staircase, the carpet, etc.) which function fantastically in the historicist scenery, the phantom, the music and the projections all create the style of fantasy as external effects, but the director's basic aim was to create this style in acting as well. [...] The creation of this second plane, the unrealistic aspect of acting was the area that could not be fully built in our performance. Maybe because the absurd had been left out of our theatre history." Saád: *A revizor* próbáin, 8.

<sup>729</sup> Létay: A polgármester, 13.

musical chords.<sup>730</sup> It was Meyerhold who had abandoned naturalism and “developed scenery from the perspective of the characters first, staging their pipe dream”.<sup>731</sup> His 1926 *The Government Inspector* gave enormous visual inspiration to Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* as well, similarly to Gogol’s own sketch for the last scene. Inviting the Mayor to the real government inspector, “the tall, straight gendarme with a shako”<sup>732</sup> seemed to have jumped from this sketch into the production. However, the half-cut landau “fantastically full of various people squeezing together”,<sup>733</sup> the “flower-basket-like pyramid of men and women” reading Khlestakov’s letter,<sup>734</sup> the reduction of Khlestakov’s room to a few square meters were all showing Meyerhold’s influence. The room, which arrived on wheels into the basic set, had only its back wall with a semicircular window and a door on the right, but no wall surrounding it. The door became part of an acoustic game by its opening and closing, as the noise of the restaurant intensified and faded in the room, so that the sounds of creating an atmosphere could include a merely signaled place into an environment aiming at illusion. Stylistic diversity was enhanced not only by costumes, make-up and coiffure adjusted to the exaggerated characters – e.g. the Postmaster’s gigantic bowtie, the Magistrate’s spiky hair and overdrawn features, the frills of lavish clothes on the Mayor’s wife and daughter – but also by dissonant and thunderous musical effects, distancing us relentlessly from the world of comedy.

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Stating that “such a smart and highly elaborated production had not been seen on Hungarian stages for long”,<sup>735</sup> reviews praised Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* without exception. However, the significance of the production was revealed in its aftermath as it started a dialogue between *Government Inspectors* in Hungary.<sup>736</sup> Some critics found Péter Gothár’s 1982 *mise-en-scène* in Kaposvár reminiscent in its approach to Gogol to the production of the National almost a decade before,<sup>737</sup> and Gothár’s emphases were legendarily underlined in the 1987 production of the Katona József Theatre in Budapest. This *Government Inspector* by Gábor Zsámbéki – read as a proof of contemporary Hungarian life in its guest performances all around the

<sup>730</sup> Koltai: Tovsztonogov és *A revizor*, 11.

<sup>731</sup> Major: *Tanultam*, 7.

<sup>732</sup> Szigethy: Gogol: *A revizor. Kritika*, 21.

<sup>733</sup> Létay: *A polgármester*, 13.

<sup>734</sup> Molnár Gál: *A polgármester*: Kállai Ferenc, 42.

<sup>735</sup> István Torda: *A revizor, Ország-Világ*, Vol. 17, No. 12, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1973, 13.

<sup>736</sup> Cf. István Sándor L.: A legenda átörökítői. Beszélgetés Máté Gáborral, *Ellenfény* 7:3 (2002), 28.

<sup>737</sup> Cf. Tamás Mészáros: „A levegő vidékies”. *A revizor* Kaposvárott, *Színház* 16:3 (1983), 11–15.

world – influenced subsequent *mises-en-scène* to such an extent that some of its ideas could be uncovered in even László Bagossy's and Viktor Bodó's memorable scenic versions of the play (at the National Theatre of Pécs in 2002, and at the Víg Theatre in Budapest in 2014).<sup>738</sup> They all recalled the 1973 *The Government Inspector* of the National Theatre, which incorporated contemporary overtones inadvertently and became the allegory of the Kádár regime, which was full of fear and trembling, capital crimes and petty villainy as well.

<sup>738</sup> According to Gábor Máté, “anyone who examines *The Government Inspector* thoroughly and tries to confront it with his/her own age, will not be able to get free from Gábor Zsámbéki's *mise-en-scène* [...] in the next ten to fifteen years. It was such an accurate analysis of the play and such an accurate application to that era [i.e. to the 1980s], that it made the ideas and solutions it raised unsurpassed in a sense. If someone wants to stage *The Government Inspector* without thinking about all these things, he/she either does not understand the play, or does not know the social environment in which he/she lives.” Sándor L.: A legenda átörökítői, 28.



## A BITTER FARCE OF LOSING POLITICAL IDEALS IMRE KERÉNYI: *KING JOHN*, 1984



*Title:* King John. *Date of Premiere:* 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1984. *Venue:* Castle Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Imre Kerényi. *Author:* Friedrich Dürrenmatt (based on William Shakespeare's *King John*). *Translator:* Gábor Görgey. *Composers:* Gábor Kemény, Tibor Kocsák. *Dramaturg:* Enikő Márai. *Set designer:* Attila Csikós. *Costume designer:* Zsuzsa Borsi. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* István Hirtling (John Plantagenet, King of England), Éva Vass (Queen Eleanor, mother of John), Anna Götz (Isabella of Angoulême, wife of John), Anna Kubik (Blanche of Castile, niece of John), Cecília Esztergályos (Constance, sister-in-law of John), Viktória Garai (Artur Plantagenet, Duke of Brittany, nephew of John), Frigyes Funtek (Philip Faulconbridge, the Bastard), Eszter Szakács (Lady Faulconbridge, mother of the Bastard), György Csák (Robert Faulconbridge, brother of the Bastard), Zsigmond Fülöp (Philip, King of France), József Kerekes (Louis the Dauphin), László Dózsa (Leopold, Prince of Austria), Zoltán Nagy (Pandulpho, Cardinal of Milan), Pál Mácsai (Earl of Pembroke, Minister of John), László Baranyi (Chantillon, Ambassador of Philip), Péter Czibulás (Lord Essex; First citizen from Angers), Csongor Ferenczy (Lord Bigot; English Herald), György Bösze (Lord Salisbury; French Herald), Bertalan Bagó (Soldier), Péter Gyóri (Soldier), Géza Kaszás (Soldier), Árpád Nagy (Musician).

### CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

During the necessary renewal of the company and the repertory, *King John* provided the National Theatre with a professional and box-office success for several seasons. When Imre Pozsgay, the Minister of Culture and Education, who had made the reform of the National a crucial issue, lost the battle for control of cultural policy against György Aczél, he “founded the Katona József Theatre as an independent institution detached from the National, and made Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki escape to there”.<sup>739</sup> It was one of Pozsgay's

<sup>739</sup> Géza Fodor: A Katona József Színház 15 éve, in Anna Veress (ed.): *Katona 1982–97, Kamra 1991–97*, Budapest, Katona József Színház Alapítvány [1997], 4. – The Katona József Theatre was formerly (between 1951 and 1982) the chamber theatre of the National.

last ministerial activities in 1982, as a consequence of which “a significant number of actors, including some old members of the National Theatre, followed the two young artistic leaders” to the Katona.<sup>740</sup> It was László Vámos, the new artistic director of the National, who had to reinforce and reshape all that remained of the company, in the midst of a countrywide cooperation for a new building, which had been promised for almost twenty years. Vámos aimed at a repertory focusing on contemporary Hungarian drama, complemented with the classics as well as contemporary foreign plays addressing a wide audience.<sup>741</sup> Dürrenmatt’s history play was considered suitable for the latter, since it had attracted a great deal of attention on Ódry Stage in a production of Imre Kerényi’s class, made for an exam at the College of Theatre and Film Arts in the autumn of 1983.<sup>742</sup> The director saw the reason for the outstanding success in the fact that “there was about twice as much human effort in it” as in an average production in Budapest.<sup>743</sup> He added that “ventures outside the structure, such as a college exam, such as the most recent production of *Stephen the King* [...] release creative energies that can be positively utilized”.<sup>744</sup> The example of *Stephen the King*, performed in the City Park, in Budapest two months earlier, is particularly important, because, similarly to the *King John* of the college students, it was born outside the establishment of repertory theatres (yet, of course, entirely within the order of officiality), and Kerényi tried to include both in the so-called mainstream “theatre structure”. (*Stephen the King* was staged at the National by Kerényi in September 1985, a year after the opening of *King John* at the Castle Theatre.) The utilization of “creative energies” in this way proved significant in the period of uncertainty and loss

<sup>740</sup> György Székely: A felszabadulás után. A Nemzeti Színház intézménytörténete, in Ferenc Kerényi (ed.): *A Nemzeti Színház 150 éve*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1987, 186.

<sup>741</sup> This objective is shown by the fact that before the premiere of *King John* in early November 1984, four plays of Miklós Hubay, Géza Páskándi, Ákos Kertész and István Sárospataky had been staged at the National and its new chamber theatre, the Castle Theatre at the beginning of the season. They were followed by plays by G. B. Shaw, Maxim Gorky and Victor Hugo at the National and by Molière, András Nagy and Goldoni at the Castle Theatre. With Dürrenmatt’s adaptation of Shakespeare, they killed two birds with one stone, so to speak, since, according to Vámos, “it is the most difficult job to select the works of contemporary world literature suitable for us. There is a shortage of new dramas everywhere and when a new play appears on the horizon that could really make us hopeful, all theatres try to seize it at the same time. The National desperately needs *attractive contemporary successes* again that the audience, interested in today’s literature, had found at the Víg Theatre and the Madách Theatre during the last decade.” László Vámos: Gondolattörődékek a nyolcvanas évek Nemzeti Színházáról, in Kerényi: *A Nemzeti Színház 150 éve*, 201. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

<sup>742</sup> Cf. “We haven’t had such an audience success at the College for ages. [...] This college exam is more expressive in its means, denser in atmosphere and has higher quality in acting than the vast majority of our theatre productions.” Tamás Mészáros: A komédiás uralkodik. Színművészeti főiskolások sikere, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 16, No. 269, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1983, 6.

<sup>743</sup> Mentioned in *Studio ‘83*, a program on Channel 1 of the Hungarian Television at 8:50 p.m. on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1983. Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.

<sup>744</sup> Ibid.

of direction caused by the “detachment” of the Katona József Theatre, in the attempt to round up some new forces. As the Katona took over *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau from Ódry Stage, which ran for nearly 200 performances in the following years with three excellent actors (János Bán, György Dörner and Sándor Gáspár), the Castle Theatre also took over *King John* (though its performance style was very alien to this theatre) with the intention of renewal. There was a difference, however, for in the latter case “the production did not come back to life unchanged”.<sup>745</sup> It remained mostly “in the hands of former college students who had signed up for the National, while other roles were given to well-known members of the company.”<sup>746</sup>

### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

In the production of the National Theatre, Dürrenmatt’s historical pamphlet came to life as the drama of losing political ideals, both mockingly exaggerated and tragically deepened. Imre Kerényi’s *mise-en-scène* underscored that particular characteristic of the Swiss author’s play that (contrary to the Shakespearean pretext) it focused on “the struggle for power *within* a system (i.e. feudalism)”,<sup>747</sup> instead of the Anglo-French antagonism.<sup>748</sup> As for the adaptation, it is the pungent irony and farcical overtones of the ruthless unmasking of “the political circus without inhibitions, morals and humanity”<sup>749</sup> that

<sup>745</sup> Tamás Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség. Dürrenmatt a Várszínházban, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 17, No. 276, 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 7.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

<sup>747</sup> Anna Földes: *János király* a Várszínházban, *Nők Lapja*, Vol. 36, No. 48, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1984, 22.

<sup>748</sup> That’s why József Ruszt, who slightly criticized the production, said that he did not like Dürrenmatt’s adaptation and obviously had a bias in favor of Shakespeare’s play. He added that “Shakespeare remains in his own historical context. Dürrenmatt is full of overtones that are completely present-day, but I cannot get an answer to today’s questions. [...] In fact, it contains neither the present nor the past. [...] I do not consider patriotism to be outdated at all. Shakespeare’s play is about a bastard protecting England if he has to, standing firmly on the shore at Dover. This idea is missing from Dürrenmatt. [...] It is not anachronisms that are problematic here, but patriotism, which we find in Shakespeare. Dürrenmatt had not created as much value in his play as he had left out of Shakespeare. [...] I like plays that explore troubles with joy, pain, power and intellect, if you like, so with all that you can really live with. [...] In Dürrenmatt, the theme of the play gets in conflict with cosmopolitanism. Why should I joke about the rivalry of great powers when I live in the middle of it on one side?! Unfortunately, I do not have so much humor. [...] For Dürrenmatt, the story is just apropos of drawing this fantastic, scary caricature of world politics. [...] Shakespeare’s play is more real. It is truer.” Gábor P. Horváth: Színházról fiataloknak. Ruszt József a *János király* várszínházi előadásáról, *Magyar Ifjúság*, Vol. 29, No. 14, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1985, 29. – It was only József Ruszt who had staged Shakespeare’s *King John* in Hungary (in Kecskemét, in 1975) after its premiere at the National Theatre in 1906.

<sup>749</sup> István Takács: A hatalom körforgása, *Pest Megyei Hírlap*, Vol. 28, No. 270, 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 4. – Cf. also “John and Philip, the King of France are fighting their power rivalry, their dynastic struggle, like a friendly sporting match. While thousands of soldiers are killed on

are usually highlighted.<sup>750</sup> Compared to the pretext, the “only additional information” is “the gesture by which the king ‘bestows rights’ on his people”, i.e. the Magna Carta, most commonly referred to along with John Lackland, and this is only “morally vile manipulation”.<sup>751</sup> Imre Kerényi recognized both the experience of the 20th century<sup>752</sup> and Jan Kott’s conception of Shakespeare’s history plays<sup>753</sup> in Dürrenmatt’s historical perspective. He sought to make spectators feel not only the ridiculous but also the painful aspect of the playwright’s malice, as he thought that “contrary to, let’s say, an adaptation like *King Ubu*, [the play] preserves the tragedy of this historical process as well”.<sup>754</sup>

The driver of the play’s interpretation, i.e. “the bloody charade of the cycle of power”<sup>755</sup> had become evident even before the pantomime that started (and then closed) the production, at the sight of the program, which displayed a profane symbol, namely a meat grinder swallowing a caricature-like army of

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both sides, and both kings have the other’s family members and relatives killed without batting an eyelash, they are talking amiably, conjuring up a relationship of kinship through a marriage of interests, opposing or submitting to the pope’s demands, which are also motivated by power and not at all by the command of religion, or they are thinking of a ruse on each other, lying and breaking an oath, without the slightest remorse. The fact that John dies at the end of the game does not stem from this contrast. He is poisoned by one of his most loyal men.” Ibid.

<sup>750</sup> Cf. *King John* is “a very entertaining play, in the truth of which we are gladly bathing. [...] Dürrenmatt’s story is rather ambivalent and seeks to display the seemingly complicated, otherwise very primitive mechanism of political machinery, explaining carefully that the driving forces of these machines are hardly the ‘happiness and future of my people’, but rather ignoble practices and impromptu killings, which promise quick success.” Károly Bulla: *János király, Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 28, No. 47, 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 4. – „It is an evil play, Dürrenmatt says about *King John* in his notes attached to it. You might as well call it a hideous one. [...] History play? Market play! [...] Marcell Benedek noted that the ladies of the royal family are quarreling about power like market-women. Dürrenmatt’s entire power struggle between England and France, with the pope’s indirect involvement, is only immense marketing, which means politics in the dictionary of the sardonic Swiss.” Tamás Koltai: *Kicsontozott királydráma. Dürrenmatt-bemutató a Várszínházban, Új Tükör*, Vol. 21, No. 49, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1984, 28.

<sup>751</sup> Endre Varjas: *Újrajátszva (Replay Dürrenmatt!)*, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 28, No. 46, 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 13.

<sup>752</sup> Cf. “This comedy is characteristically a 20th-century one, since it is the offspring of historical consciousness, reflection and comparison. Therefore, it is the equivalent of the consciousness which considers its own terrible and ‘evil’ story as a general feature of history as a whole, and only tolerates it as such.” Péter György: *Fejezet a zsarnokságról, Színház*, 18:1 (1985), 7.

<sup>753</sup> “For Dürrenmatt and Jan Kott, history does not really have either a purpose or a development, but there’s a so-called Grand Mechanism instead, [...] and it ruthlessly subdues all kinds of wills, all sorts of aspirations, and in fact, the heroes always set off somewhere from the starting point of the drama and get back to the same place.” Mentioned in *Láttuk, hallottuk*, a program on Petőfi Radio at 10:45 a.m. on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1984. Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid.

<sup>755</sup> István Takács: „Egy Pembroke az eredmény!” Dürrenmatt *János király*-átirata a Várszínházban, *Népszava*, Vol. 112, No. 268, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 6.

armored knights.<sup>756</sup> Representing the satirical as well as the tragic, the *mise-en-scène* multiplied Dürrenmatt's "bilingualism",<sup>757</sup> i.e. the "play of changing colors", in which "everything 'proved to be something else'",<sup>758</sup> and increased the (fairly significant) retuning of the figures of the two protagonists, John and the Bastard. The outcome of the story of a king "using immoral tactics"<sup>759</sup> but "still being amenable, bendable"<sup>760</sup> and Philip Faulconbridge, siding with him, following only the morality of common sense and believing in the possibility of change, was death and total disillusionment. These made the realization, stemming from the "doublespeak" of the production (i.e. the reference to the spectators' own situation), even more unbearable: the loss of ideals for any kind of betterment of the state and the social order.<sup>761</sup> Consequently, Imre Kerényi's *King John*, "this shameful tale of history"<sup>762</sup> became a poignantly amusing denial of the possibility of any reforms in the 1980s (said to be a second period of reform in Hungary), in short, dismay at the feasibility of socialism.<sup>763</sup>

<sup>756</sup> Cf. "Power is grinding all who come to power. The throne is seen first as an ultimate desire by all, but when they sit on it (or when they are already sitting on it), they realize that this throne is a place of execution. And this is how it goes round and round; every new king goes through this process." Takács: A hatalom körforgása, 4.

<sup>757</sup> Cf. Miklós Almási: Példabeszédek a túlélés trükkjeiről. Dürrenmatt *János királya* a Várszínházban, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 42, No. 275, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1984, 7.

<sup>758</sup> (bogácsi): Két vizsgaelőadás. *János király, Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 46, No. 269, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1983, 3. – Cf. also "The family reunion [proves to be] a diplomatic negotiation or vice versa, if you like. The wedding lunch is, in fact, a funeral feast over a city. The sulking of the spanked ends in a violent maneuver, in a military revenge." Ibid.

<sup>759</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>760</sup> Judit Csáki: Dürrenmatt: *János király*, *Kritika*, 23:3 (1985), 41.

<sup>761</sup> Cf. "There is no cynicism and betrayal, no wickedness that is enough to enforce rationality in the face of power." György: Fejezet a zsarnokságról, 8. – In this regard, the scene of the murder of Arthur Plantagenet, on the one hand, and that of the bastard's withdrawal, on the other hand, are crucial. In the former scene, the Bastard is howling while lifting up the child's body, wrapped in a black shroud, "as a proof of the cynical cruelty of the world". (Tamás Koltai: Reálpolitika, avagy a személyiség esélyei, *Híd* 50:8 (1986), 921.) In the latter scene, the Bastard is crying and sinking to the ground, when he is forced to admit that "the chariot of fate is pulled by stupidity and chance". The emotional power of both scenes is enhanced by the same moving melodies. The demonstration of a victim returns ten months later in a similar way, at the end of Kerényi's *mise-en-scène* of *Stephen the King*.

<sup>762</sup> György: Fejezet a zsarnokságról, 9.

<sup>763</sup> Cf. the reviews of *Népszava* and *Új Tükör*, full of overtones. "The Bastard, the chance-child of the great King Richard the Lionheart [...] hopes that after all the horrors, something good is born, that rationality prevails over wild anarchy, and common sense stops the great meat grinder of history. But the result is a Pembroke. [I.e. a sly murderer.] *Bad things will get even worse and Somebodies will be replaced by Nobodies.*" Takács: „Egy Pembroke az eredmény!”, 6. (My italics – Á.K.K.) – "Philip Faulconbridge (later Sir Richard Plantagenet) [...] is just a snooty loudmouth in Shakespeare. [...] Dürrenmatt's Bastard is a kind of hero with naïve dedication. He is an illegitimate child of a king, but in fact, a *true child of the folk*, who wants to put the wolves on the right track, with the innocence of a lamb, thought to be finesse. He fails, of course." Tamás Koltai: Újranéző. *János király*, Várszínház, 1988. november 7. 93. előadás, *Képes* 7, Vol. 3, No. 48, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 45. (My italics – Á.K.K.)

## STAGING

Kerényi's *mise-en-scène* deepened the "sneering ritual of national buffoonery"<sup>764</sup> into a story of downfall that conveyed immeasurable bitterness and avoided both uniformity and superficial eclecticism in its performance style. Several reviewers noted that the production was more complex and nuanced than Dürrenmatt's play and it had "a strong interpretation of the world appearing in a definite theatrical form, similarly to Gábor Székely's *Flight* [from Mikhail Bulgakov's play], József Ruszt's *Easter* [based on Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*] and Tamás Ascher's *The Cherry Orchard* recently".<sup>765</sup> Compared to Kerényi's previous works, the representation of this world view, as well as the polished use of elements of various traditions, styles and standards of theatre, had already come as a revelation on Ódry Stage.<sup>766</sup> Due to some new actors of the National Theatre, the heterogeneity of acting styles slightly increased at the Castle Theatre,<sup>767</sup> while "the composition became more precise and professional in every detail" at the same time.<sup>768</sup> The revived production emphasized its "overly grotesque approach", which stemmed from the representation of the mechanism of power as really mundane.<sup>769</sup> Contrary to József Ruszt's opinion, who sensed a different kind of humor,<sup>770</sup> this approach made the *mise-en-scène*

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Iván Sándor: Álkérdések helyett. Éjféle napló, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 28, No. 50, 15<sup>th</sup> December, 1984, 17.

<sup>766</sup> Cf. "This is not the kind of theatre we have recently associated with Kerényi's name. He has liked far-fetched heroism and used to boast with history, he has felt affinity for folk traditions of theatre, for dramatic folklore. He has also created a so-called social satire that seemed to understand neither society nor the genre." Mészáros: A komédiás uralkodik, 6. – "In recent years, Imre Kerényi's works have proved that the director demands a politically committed theatre open to social, political and national problems. This urgent need often dictated too fast a pace, so his results were doubtful, and the uttering of his message became more important than any other consideration. [...] This staging, *King John* is fundamentally different from this negative tendency [because] it consists of more than the void of ideological determination." György: Fejezet a zsarnokságról, 7.

<sup>767</sup> Cf. "Kerényi made [...] the actual age and the familiarity or unfamiliarity of actors part of the production and the interpretation of the play. The eclecticism of acting styles in some cases, therefore, helps to show the differences between the worlds of the characters." Ibid., 10.

<sup>768</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>769</sup> Cf. "There is plenty of derision and irony in the constant waving of flags and in the songs that characterize the courts. (The French sing *Sur le pont d'Avignon*, and the doom of the English comes with the canon of *London's burning, London's burning*.)" György: Fejezet a zsarnokságról, 11.

<sup>770</sup> According to Ruszt, "the environment of the college students' production suited the play better. The technical components of the performance were stronger, and as far as acting was concerned, the young people were playing in a more dangerous way. It was a cruel, dangerous performance. [...] The bodies and souls of the people in their 20s produced the filth of the play with their natural purity, but also dissolved it at the same time. Youth and passion put serious problems into their right place in the audience. The production of the Castle Theatre, on the other hand, was cynical. There's a fantastic political-historical machinery working in this show, and it is scary that we live in a world like this, so vulnerable. After this

“truly cruel”, “far more cruel than the cases when theatre gets puzzled by its abysmal seriousness”.<sup>771</sup> Since the production at the Castle Theatre was more stylized, “the rough power of acting”<sup>772</sup> got reduced, and since it was “inevitably more refined, it lost something of its brashness”.<sup>773</sup> Compared to the college performance, the moments that wiped the smile off the spectators’ face were considerably deeper. In other words, “the upward process of the play, in which the bloody serious embraces the bloody ironic, had become more pronounced”.<sup>774</sup> The *mise-en-scène* did not turn all sentiments into comedy, as it ranged from the absurdly exaggerated to the highly impassioned. It yielded to “the intensity of truly dramatic moments”, making the audience aware of the fact that “the bloody and depressing spectacle of the Grand Mechanism is *played by men, not puppets*”, and helping to discern “the anxiety and threat that emerge from behind the jokes”.<sup>775</sup> Consequently, the ironic distance from characters and situations, “the demonstrative gesture of alienation was no

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performance, I went home in a bad mood, but after the college performance, I was in a really good mood. [...] Its cruel events were not narrative, but truly cruel and cathartic. In the production of the Castle Theatre, the Brechtian elements of acting are more intense, but they are not organic enough. [...] If theatre plays a disturbing, cruel story, it must be expressed through clear truths. [...] This type of performance requires a homogeneous medium. [...]. It requires ensemble acting, which is very difficult to create. On the small stage of the Ódry, in that small auditorium, everything gets dense, at best, in a good performance.” But Ruszt also said that he loved “the kind of theatre that Imre Kerényi makes. I like the way he creates a background for the word, for a given gesture with a meaningful pantomime, with silent figures: the way he expands the interpretation of the play, the content of the moments. It’s all very exciting, very strong, very deep. I felt the actors’ rather superfluous approach to some situations compared to these elements.” When the interviewer noted that Pál Mácsai’s Pembroke leaves the stage with *Isabel*, a hit by Charles Aznavour at the end, Ruszt said that “these are the elements I have a problem with. They get detached from the structure of the production and create completely private effects. There are only a few moments, one or two elements. [...] For example, the armor is rattling, which is obviously exaggerated. But its goal is to make me recognize that we live in a life-threatening world. If I only laugh at it, there’s no point, no truth. [...] It is the political machinery that is the point, and it refers to every moment of the production. It exposes this value system unmistakably, as they mop the floor, Pembroke comes in and examines it with a snow-white handkerchief to see if it is dirty. This will guide me, the spectator about the world we live in here. After this you cannot joke around here. Any acting elements that slightly lose their gravity, disturb the value system. History culminates in the city of Angers’ being destroyed. As a spectator, I should not think about theatre and fun here but about destroyed cities. [...] If a character of this town appears on stage in a funny way, it looks like we are just joking. [...] The basic situation of this production, its dangerous nature is an instrument which actors are not allowed to misuse or to take easily. The credibility of emotions is provided by truth to the spectator. If an actor focuses on the form instead of the content he has to create in a situation, he is like a weightlifter who is fooling me: just pretending to lift 120 kilos.” P. Horváth: Színházról fiataloknak, 28–29.

<sup>771</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>772</sup> Koltai: Kicsontozott királydráma, 29.

<sup>773</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>774</sup> Bulla: *János király*, 4.

<sup>775</sup> Takács: „Egy Pembroke az eredmény!”, 6.

longer ‘a position of the outsider because of age’, but an ‘elegant solution for style’”.<sup>776</sup> However, it was not exclusively applied, since the *mise-en-scène* always revealed the “inner content of the situations, either ironic and farcical or tragic”.<sup>777</sup> Although it contained little anachronism and did not leave the context of historicist staging in terms of appearances, it had “a magnificent choreography of alternating historical and contemporary atmospheres”.<sup>778</sup> Despite the fact that it had no unity of style,<sup>779</sup> it was not disturbing at all.

## ACTING

*King John* was based on the teamwork of four young people from the college production and members of the National Theatre, whose different acting styles were certainly coordinated (no longer for pedagogical purposes, but for the purpose of building a company) and demonstrated as well. The artistic director, László Vámos considered “the development of a *very capable and talented young company* [...] that meets the requirements of a national theatre” as the greatest achievement of the years after 1982.<sup>780</sup> Imre Kerényi’s college class contributed three actors to this company in 1984 and besides István Hirtling, Pál Mácsai and Frigyes Funtek, it was only József Kerekes, a third-year college student, who could keep his role in *King John* played on Ódry Stage too.<sup>781</sup> Since the *mise-en-scène* had not been altered, the production was “recolored by the changed cast”.<sup>782</sup> Character impersonation had been made

<sup>776</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>777</sup> Koltai: Kicsontozott királydráma, 29.

<sup>778</sup> Almási: Példabeszédek, 7.

<sup>779</sup> Cf. “The ‘game’ of the kings, who throw colored darts at provinces on a map, is very different from the moment of the brutal death of Constance and Eleanor, which could be included in a Shakespearean production representing Kott’s conception of history plays too. [...] The parodistic movement of the lords wearing heavy armor is extremely different from the song of war performed in the style of Brecht and Weill. The entry of the ‘national groups’ with flags and anthems or the pantomime summing up the ‘intangible message’ at the beginning and the end feature intellectual irony, but physiological humor, such as the crippled Isabella of Angoulême [...] and the imbecile Dauphin, is also in place.” Koltai: Kicsontozott királydráma, 29.

<sup>780</sup> Vámos: Gondolattörödékek, 209.

<sup>781</sup> Cf. “The college class that finished its studies with this production [...] quickly became a legend. [...] The same class (at least some of the students) could repeat the ‘exam’ in a long series, refining Imre Kerényi’s original *mise-en-scène*. [...] The production has been matured, improved and enriched with the creative power of the artists of the National.” Almási: Példabeszédek, 7.

<sup>782</sup> Gabriella Molnár: Ismét *János király*. Bemutató a Várszínházban, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 29, No. 266, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1984, 2.

more multilayered<sup>783</sup> and the elements of realist acting had been more bravely reshaped by means of irony and stylization.<sup>784</sup> But Dürrenmatt's parable was conveyed with such "sensuous intensity"<sup>785</sup> even in moments of caricature as before, "giving an accurate portrayal of each figure".<sup>786</sup>

Hirtling, for example, based the extravagance of the comedian-king on the eagerness and vehemence of a "lanky young man",<sup>787</sup> continuously turning John's excessive manners and declamatory style into overacting (consciously, of course, in a reflected way), "simultaneously conjuring up a kind of Shakespearean tone and drowning the elevated style into irony".<sup>788</sup> In contrast to him, yet in pair, Funtek displayed the bastard's passion and obsessive rationalism with amazing ardor, and portrayed an attractively casual, but never harsh character articulating deep feelings.<sup>789</sup> Behind these two figures, Pál Mácsai made Pembroke almost invisible: he played the minister with measured movement and repulsive manners, yet "serving in a smooth, unnoticed way".<sup>790</sup> Despite his frequent appearances, he barely spoke, so that the "punchline" of his part would be more effective.<sup>791</sup> After the death of John, who had been poisoned by him, he savagely ruffled his own hair and winked at the spectators, as if they were his silent accomplices. Then he grabbed the crown and limped out clowning, mimicking Isabel, John's lame wife while singing her name.

Among older members of the National, reviewers highlighted Éva Vass for providing "the persiflage or ironic quintessence of both the dramatic

<sup>783</sup> Cf. "The handling of the material by individual actors shed light on appropriate differences. Zsigmond Fülöp's Philip, the King of France is a witty figure of a French farce. Zoltán Nagy's Pandulpho is surrounded by Bernard Shaw's sarcasm. Anna Kubik proudly reveals the slut she has become as a victim of politics, like some Brechtian prostitute. Éva Vass combines the blatancy of a washerwoman and a queen, stylizing it pantomimically, as if she were using an oriental acting technique." Koltai: *Kicsontozott királydráma*, 29.

<sup>784</sup> Cf. "Whatever Western notions about Socialist Realism on stage in Eastern Europe may be, it is not much in evidence in these productions [namely *King John* and *Richard II*, another production of the Castle Theatre]." Glenn Loney: *English Shakespeare: Serving Up the Playwright with a Dash of Paprika*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Vol 4. No. 4. July/August 1986, 21.

<sup>785</sup> Mészáros: *A komédiás uralkodik*, 6.

<sup>786</sup> Sándor: *Álkérdések helyett*, 17.

<sup>787</sup> (bogácsi): *Két vizsgaelőadás*, 3.

<sup>788</sup> Mészáros: *A komédiás uralkodik*, 6.

<sup>789</sup> Cf. "Frigyes Funtek is a real plebeian Bastard. He is a cool vagabond, yet he has a noble heart. He is full of patriotic passion, vulnerability and disillusionment." Koltai: *Kicsontozott királydráma*, 29. – "This young actor literally bursts onto the stage in the role of the Bastard, and his similarity [to John] will be perceived by the same physical condition and age. [...] He plays, he experiences the greatest drama alone. All that is irrelevant or ridiculous to others, become the meaning of his existence and task. He is a monologue hero, who can make confessions only on the proscenium, or can only be honest over a dead child, and Funtek is good at this test, he has learned the lesson of solitary dramatic situations." György: *Fejezet a zsarnokságról*, 9–10.

<sup>790</sup> (bogácsi): *Két vizsgaelőadás*, 3.

<sup>791</sup> Almási: *Példabeszédek*, 7.

figure and all Shakespearean Queen Mothers”.<sup>792</sup> They praised Zoltán Nagy for the Cardinal’s dressing and undressing (when John offered England to the Church in his exasperation) as a scene of clownery in all sincerity.<sup>793</sup> They also mentioned Zsigmond Fülöp as Philip, the needy King of France, who was “carrying on with power politics with lip blush and eye shadow”.<sup>794</sup> But the restraint of the ironic approach and the nuances of ensemble acting were badly damaged during the long series: Tamás Koltai, who reviewed the production for a second time, four years after the opening, noted that “the production has already disintegrated in a frightening way”.<sup>795</sup>

### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

The strong atmosphere of the production was created not so much by the costumes representing a past era but by Attila Csikós’s relatively simple scenery and the cold lights.<sup>796</sup> The background of the performance space was closed by a wooden plank as a castle wall with crenels, a winged door in the middle and stairs on both sides leading to the walkway. “A smooth floor” was spreading in front of the battlements, “like an icy surface”,<sup>797</sup> with a ramp leading to the depths of the proscenium, and pieces of furniture (a round dining table, some seating, a wooden tub, etc.) were only temporarily pushed into the empty space. The accentuated materiality and form of the elements of the set simultaneously evoked Peter Brook’s *mises-en-scène* of Shakespeare’s tragedies and Giorgio Strehler’s *mises-en-scène* of the Bard’s history plays.<sup>798</sup> Their simplicity and functionalism did not reinforce Zsuzsa Borsi’s costumes, which suited the historical milieu.

<sup>792</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>793</sup> Almási: Példabeszédek, 7.

<sup>794</sup> Mészáros: A korszerűtlen ésszerűség, 7.

<sup>795</sup> Koltai: Újranéző, 45.

<sup>796</sup> Cf. “With a slight exaggeration, the Castle Theatre has been agonizing for many years, looking for its own possibilities. But at long last, it has a production now that is typical of this space and can become inseparable from this building. It is important that after so many inorganic sets, independent of the possibilities and features of the building, after so many superficial designs, the performance space of *King John* is indeed the result of the challenge provided by this particular stage.” György: Fejezet a zarnokságról, 8.

<sup>797</sup> Takács: „Egy Pembroke az eredmény!”, 6.

<sup>798</sup> Specifically, Brook’s *King Lear*, which had a guest performance in Budapest in 1964 and Strehler’s two-evening production of *The Game of the Powerful*, staged in Milan (1965), Salzburg (1973) and Vienna (1975), and based on the first Henriad. On the stage of *King John*, the “throne” seemed as simple a stool as it had been in Strehler’s staging, and “there was something insincere in the production, which somewhat reminded spectators of a poor circus; the slightly ridiculous king, the fearsome, yet buffoon-like Powerful, who are as fearful as wild animals in a circus”. Giorgio Strehler: *Az emberi színházért*, trans. Gitta Kardos – Mária Lajos – András Schéry, Budapest, Gondolat, 1982, 375.

Both the past and the present appeared on stage. The audience's attention was sometimes drawn by an ornately carved organ at the back and high above the floor, and sometimes by blue neon tubes, illuminated in the shape of a cross above the rectangular performance space. The shimmering white floor, occasionally in a silvery light, came into focus especially at the beginning and at the end, when a ceremonial "ice ballet" was performed there to some dance music.<sup>799</sup> There was an execution at the end too, before the floor was mopped up again, but those three noblemen were decapitated then who had held the baskets at the beginning. "The story led from three beheadings to three beheadings this time, to the first act of the new regime."<sup>800</sup> The pantomime, which displayed the cycle of the Grand Mechanism, could also be made meaningful in the sense of a Marxist conception of history, stating that it was "an accurate interpretation of the pungently ironic play that pillories the madness of power, the indifferent realpolitik, the romantic enthusiasm and the great powers that reign over the heads of mankind".<sup>801</sup> But the "bizarre clean-up"<sup>802</sup> or even "purge",<sup>803</sup> performed with shocking routine and pedantry, could also gain topical political meaning, especially because of its modality, very different from the requirements of Marxism. Therefore, it could also conjure up the not-so-triumphant moments of socialist salvation history. (In this respect, the wordless procedure of the pantomime became particularly important.) Spectators were laughing at the kings kissing like veteran party leaders and at the marching behind huge flags to "mischievous leitmotifs" of national anthems and French folk songs. They were smiling at the royal families' greeting and cursing each other according to rehearsed forms following the resurgence of tableaux that had become motionless for a moment, as if to take a photo. But all this amusement was shattered by "the profane ritual of the mop, the stick and the bucket of water", confronting the audience with the fact that "the stage of history must always be cleaned of blood in the end".<sup>804</sup>

<sup>799</sup> Cf. "Three people come in: a 'master of ceremonies' and two soldiers. A bucket is taken out of the sideboard [i.e. from under the stairs], and the boss pours water into it. They dip a mop in the water, twist it on a long stick with dead serious choreography, while festive music is playing. Then they start to mop up, and the boss is checking the flag. The music is turning into a waltz, they put everything away. One of the ministers (Pál Mácsai) comes in and checks the cleanliness of the floor with a white cloth. King John (István Hirtling) and his entourage arrive, as well as the French ambassador: three lords are being executed. The heads of the political enemies are put into baskets. The king covers them with a shawl. He takes out the third one, hugs it, shows it up. The baskets are carried out. John looks at the ambassador sarcastically. And now comes the first sentence from Dürrenmatt's *King John*." Gábor Bányai: *János király az Ódry Színpadon, Népszava*, Vol. 111, No. 237, 7<sup>th</sup> October, 1983, 6.

<sup>800</sup> (bogácsi): *Két vizsgaelőadás*, 3.

<sup>801</sup> Bányai: *János király*, 6.

<sup>802</sup> Földes: *János király*, 22.

<sup>803</sup> Varjas: *Újrajátszva*, 13.

<sup>804</sup> Koltai: *Újranéző*, 45.

## IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Kerényi's *King John* had an influence not on the play's subsequent history of reception,<sup>805</sup> but on the image and style of the National Theatre, almost unchanged in the following 20 years.<sup>806</sup> The production received three nominations for The Theatre Critics' Prizes and ran about 100 performances over five seasons. At the time of its opening it almost accomplished László Vámos's artistic creed: "to stand for our national past and our present-day Hungary without waving flags nationalistically, and to be internationalists, to embrace the world without copying fashions, without bowing".<sup>807</sup> However, this objective, echoing the slogans of György Aczél's cultural policy, was modified during the regime change, and the characteristic that *King John* ironically turned all its "statements" upside down, had not become widespread. Furthermore, slightly stylized acting and the occasional suspending of realism began to tend towards a mannered and unreflected way of performance. In spite of all these changes, the 1980s, which had been largely determined by Imre Kerényi's *mises-en-scène*, were even permeating the productions of the Pesti Magyar Theatre, led by István Iglódi at the turn of the millennium. Tamás Koltai noted that "a double vision of history began to prevail at the National" after *King John*. According to this vision, "world history is a joke of clowns and Hungarian history is a fate tragedy".<sup>808</sup> This statement is certainly disputable because of the deepened tragic overtones of *King John*. But if we accept it, we can draw a direct line from *King John* to the cultural policy and perception of history of the 2010s, actively developed by Imre Kerényi as well, and taking shape in the Memorial to the Victims of the German Invasion at Szabadság Square, Budapest. This memorial was, in fact, raised to a Hungary bounced as a "little ball of great politics"<sup>809</sup> and forced to sacrifice (only) because of that. This is, of course, an indisputably false attitude.

<sup>805</sup> Dürrenmatt's adaptation has been staged only three times in Hungary since the production of the Castle Theatre. It was staged by István Szóke in Békéscsaba in 1994, by László Bagossy at Örkény Theatre, Budapest in 2011, winning The Theatre Critics' Award for Best Director, and by Attila Keresztes in Nyíregyháza in 2013.

<sup>806</sup> In the 1985–1986 season, "in order to save the cost of new sets", two history plays by Shakespeare (*Richard II* and *Henry V*) were also played in the set of *King John*, which Tamás Koltai criticized for "building a cycle in an inorganic, artificial way". Koltai: *Újranéző*, 45.

<sup>807</sup> Vámos: *Gondolattörések*, 211.

<sup>808</sup> Koltai: *Újranéző*, 45.

<sup>809</sup> The Bastard refers to the innocently killed boy, Arthur Plantagenet, with this phrase.

PATRIOTISM TURNED INTO SOCIAL ISSUE  
IMRE KERÉNYI: *STEPHEN THE KING*, 1985



*Title:* Stephen the King. *Date of Premiere:* 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1985. *Venue:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Imre Kerényi. *Conductor:* Árpád Nagy. *Author:* János Bródy (based on Miklós Boldizsár's drama *Ezredforduló* [A New Millennium]). *Composer:* Levente Szörényi. *Dramaturg:* Enikő Márai. *Choreographer:* Ferenc Novák. *Set designer:* Béla Götz. *Costume designer:* Nelly Vágó. *Company:* National Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* István Hirtling, István Bubik (Stephen the king), Angéla Császár, Mari Szemes (Sarolt, Stephen's mother), Adél Kovács, Róza Juhász (Gizella, Stephen's wife), Zoltán Nagy, Ödön Rubold (Astrik, high priest), László Baranyi, Vilmos Izsóf (Missionary), Pál Mácsai, Bertalan Bagó (Vecellin), Frigyes Funtek, Géza Kaszás (Hont, German knight), Ödön Rubold, Péter Győri (Pázmány, German knight), Gyula Vikidál, Tamás Földes (Koppány, the rebel), Csaba Ivánka (Torda, the shaman), József Tahí, Frigyes Funtek (Laborc, Hungarian gentleman), Anna Götz, Anna Kubik (Réka, Koppány's daughter), Athina Papadimitriou (Boglárika, wife of Koppány), Krisztina Peremartoni (Picur, wife of Koppány), Fruzsina Pregitzer (Enikő, wife of Koppány), László Csurka (Sur, Hungarian gentleman), Endre Botár (Solt, Hungarian gentleman), Gyula Sersén (Bese, Hungarian gentleman), György Csák, József Tahí (Young bard), Csongor Ferenczy (Géza, Grand Prince of the Hungarians).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

By trying to turn patriotism into social issue and by raising the rock opera's rhetoric of music drama to an aesthetic dimension, the production of the National Theatre started the theatre history of *Stephen the King* in the strict sense. It was the first indoor staging of the play by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy, which was taken into the repertory and played for many seasons at the National, and two years after the "theatrical folk festival"<sup>810</sup> or "open-air

<sup>810</sup> Tamás Mészáros: Az ősi érdek. *István, a király*, a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 228, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 7.

demonstration”<sup>811</sup> on which the film was based, it was indeed the first *theatre* performance of the rock opera. By that time, the play had already been successful in four versions. (1) In August 1983, it was performed seven times in the City Park (Városliget) in Budapest, on the so-called King Hill (simply sledding hill before that) in front of more than 100,000 spectators. (2) In the wake of the event Gábor Koltay made a feature film, which was seen by more than one million people. (3) More than 200,000 copies were sold from the two-disc recording made by Hungaroton. (4) In the summer of 1984, *Stephen the King* was staged at the Szeged Open-Air Festival and was played to full houses several times.

The 1983 antecedent of the National Theatre’s production sought a vast emotional impact,<sup>812</sup> using effects that provoked some controversy (particularly a large tricolor pulled out during the national anthem that closed the show), “not sublimating them into aesthetics, but in a rather direct way”.<sup>813</sup> The siege of Hungarian national consciousness mainly aimed at impressing the “peace generation”, i.e. raising the national feeling of young people who “have heard our holiest piece of national music mostly at school celebrations or before football matches only”.<sup>814</sup> Seven years after “the return of the holy crown of St. Stephen” from the United States,<sup>815</sup> in the heyday of the dance house movement, the country’s number one theatre made it possible to experience

<sup>811</sup> The term was used by Imre Kerényi at 10:45 a.m. on Petőfi Radio on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1985, Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.

<sup>812</sup> It was also highlighted by Tim Rice after a production he saw in Szeged. (Cf. Erzsébet Sebes: *István, a király* angolul? Budapesten az *Evita* szövegkönyvírója, *Vasárnapi Hírek*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 16<sup>th</sup> February, 1986, 11.) Rice visited a performance of the National Theatre too a year and a half later. He was invited by the Fonográf GMK and the Hungarian Copyright Office to write the English-language libretto for the rock opera. The planned London show, however, has never been produced.

<sup>813</sup> Tamás Koltai: Történelem kontra Magyarország, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 29, No. 40, 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1985, 13.

<sup>814</sup> Péter János Sós: István, a helyén, *Magyar Hírek*, Vol. 38, No. 45, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 1985, 17. – The rock opera by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy corrected the one-sidedness of the socialist politics of memory, which was based on overshadowing the figure of Stephen I (c. 975–1038), who established feudalism, made Christianity a state religion and was canonized in 1083. All these achievements were considered problematic in terms of the historical perception that prevailed after 1949. In contrast to Gábor Koltay’s film, Imre Kerényi’s staging corrected another one-sidedness, namely the unreflected cult of Stephen (in which only the saint is highlighted, not the man), i.e. the exaggerations of the idea of “St. Stephen’s State”, particularly popular between the world wars and defined by Prime Minister Pál Teleki as “the unification of two contents of our soul, the Hungarian and the Christian”. Cf. Pál Teleki: *A szentistváni állameszme*, *Beszéd a Katolikus Nagygyűlésen*, 1939. május 19-én, <https://mek.oszk.hu/10300/10338/10338.htm> (accessed 29 January 2021).

<sup>815</sup> Cf. *Return of the Holy Crown of St. Stephen*, <https://hu.usembassy.gov/embassy/budapest/embassy-history/return-holy-crown-st-stephen/> (accessed 29 January 2021).

patriotism, tried to be suppressed before.<sup>816</sup> Moreover, it did so within the institutional framework of theatre, and by means of theatre, i.e. by “dissecting situations”<sup>817</sup> and revealing the ambivalence of the conflict between Stephen and Koppány. At the time of the legendary shows of the Rock Theatre, this helped the National make a resounding success<sup>818</sup> with which it could rival the Madách Theatre, whose premiere of *Cats* (1983) became an unprecedented sensation, and the Víg Theatre, whose *Kelemen Kőműves* (a rock ballad also by Szörényi and Bródy, opened in 1982) tried to revive the long series of *An Imaginary Report on an American Rock Festival*, a highly acclaimed musical by Gábor Presser, Anna Adamis and Sándor Pócs, based on Tibor Déry’s short novel (1973).<sup>819</sup>

<sup>816</sup> This caused some confusion, which most critics tried to dismiss by legitimizing the production, answering the question “what makes the National Theatre produce this play?” (István Gábor: *István, a király*. Rockopera a Nemzeti Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 48, No. 228, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 8.) The daily *Magyar Nemzet* found the play worthy of being staged at the National, since “this rock opera is the folk theatre of our time, far from being pejorative”. (Ibid.) According to *Film Színház Muzsika*, “its spirit befits the ideal that a national theatre embraces”. (László Fábíán: Leng a zászló, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 29, No. 39, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 5.) *Népszava* stated that the *mise-en-scène* made a good reason for the presence of the play on the National’s stage because of its “fundamentally different approach than previous attempts”. (István Takács: A döntés drámája, *Népszava*, Vol. 113, No. 225, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 6.) The director himself added that the play deals with our state foundation and “represents a political model that [...] has been repeated in our history several times”, so the National Theatre must also deal with it. (Petőfi Radio, 10:45 a.m., 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1985.)

<sup>817</sup> Petőfi Radio, 10:45 a.m., 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1985.

<sup>818</sup> The National Theatre “was preparing for one of the most remarkable undertakings in recent decades”. (Tibor Fábíán: *István, a király* a Nemzetiben, *Pesti Műsor*, Vol. 34, No. 37, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 9.) Great expectations were increased by a press conference organized as a festive occasion and by the fact that *Stephen the King* opened the 1985–1986 season of the theatre on 21<sup>st</sup> September, the holiday of Hungarian drama. Consequently, the National Theatre had broken with “the centuries-old tradition of opening its season with *Bánk Bán* and ending it with [Mihály] Vörösmarty’s *Csongor and Tünde*”. (M.G.P.: Két zenés darabról, *Kritika* 23:11 [1985], 35.)

<sup>819</sup> It was noted in a program of Kossuth Radio (*Gondolatjel* at 11:00 a.m. on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1985.) that the queue in front of the box office on Hevesi Sándor Square was extraordinary, since “it was a long time ago, if there had been a time lately, when tickets had been sold out for years in advance for a series at the National”. (Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.)

## DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

The musically rather eclectic play, containing 4x7 numbers, which combine rock with melodies of church and folk music,<sup>820</sup> unfolded as a “drama of conscience”<sup>821</sup> with tight logic in the production of the National Theatre. The interpretation of *Stephen the King* was adapted to the (relatively poky) conditions of the building at Hevesi Sándor Square, not only providing a chamber-theatre version of the shows in the City Park and in Szeged, but also, as a novelty, exploring the drivers of the situations behind every song.<sup>822</sup> On the one hand, the *mise-en-scène* approached the rock opera from the issues in Shakespeare’s history plays,<sup>823</sup> and on the other hand, it included *Stephen the King* in a series of Hungarian historical dramas (by Gyula Illyés, László Németh, Magda Szabó, András Sütő, János Székely, etc.), frequently played by the National and other theatres.<sup>824</sup> Accordingly, it focused on the struggle of the title hero, shifting the emphasis from Koppány to Stephen. “This Stephen has remorse. The one who entered King Hill in the City Park, did not have much then.”<sup>825</sup> The 1983 “breakthrough performance”<sup>826</sup> and the film had become Koppány-centric because of three reasons. Firstly, Koppány, the rebel had been portrayed as a quasi-freedom fighter. Secondly, he and

<sup>820</sup> The structure of the rock opera is determined by the fact that it was written for a musical film and the soundtrack was intended to be released on a record. Cf. “The success of the 1981 concert film *Illés* [about the famous beat band] made it possible for Gábor Koltay to make another musical film. However, the scenario was not taking shape at all. In the end, we realized that we were musicians, so we should think about records. A double album has four sides, so the story had to be divided into four parts. A side takes about 20 minutes, so the length was given,” says [János Bródy]. This recording became the basis for what he called an open-air spectacle that the film was made about.” Dóra Matalin: *A magyar rockopera: István, az első és utolsó*, [http://nol.hu/kultura/20100821-istvan\\_\\_az\\_első\\_es\\_utolso-779481](http://nol.hu/kultura/20100821-istvan__az_első_es_utolso-779481) (accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>821</sup> Koltai: *Reálpolitika*, 921.

<sup>822</sup> A critic rightly noticed that “the sequence of scenes loosely stitched together from musical numbers has become a drama now, at the hands of Kerényi and Novák”. Takács: *A döntés drámája*, 6.

<sup>823</sup> *Stephen the King* was connected to the National Theatre’s cycle of history plays created at that time in a special way. Imre Kerényi had staged Dürrenmatt’s *King John*, based on Shakespeare’s play, at the Castle Theatre a year before, which was followed by his productions of *Richard II* and *Henry V*, and László Vámos’s staging of *Henry IV*. Kerényi saw the play of Szörényi and Bródy as a “deep well” as Shakespeare’s works. “There are several layers of what is happening: the acceptance of a new ideology and new customs, struggle, death and the birth of a new country. Just instead of speaking we sing and express dramatic twists and turns with movement and gestures.” (Fábián: *István, a király* a Nemzetiben, 9.)

<sup>824</sup> This series of dramas offered not only a “vision of Hungarian history, but also an experience of the movements and influencers of this history”. (Fábián: *Leng a zászló*, 5.) – It is worth noting that the dramas about King Stephen, the most famous of which is Magda Szabó’s *That Beautiful Bright Day* and József Ratkó’s *Help the King*, usually dramatize a different situation in history as well as in personal life than the rock opera.

<sup>825</sup> Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

<sup>826</sup> Fábián: *István, a király* a Nemzetiben, 9.

the members of his circle received boisterous and emotionally overwhelming songs. Thirdly, the cast was rather uneven, as, for example, the rock star Gyula Vikidál (Koppány) with his extremely powerful voice stood half naked against the unknown and mediocre actor László Pelsőczy (Stephen), who was only lip-synching, while Miklós Varga was singing instead of him.<sup>827</sup> The production of the National Theatre redressed the balance between István and Koppány, emphasizing their being a “binary star”,<sup>828</sup> despite all their differences in political attitude, worldview, thinking and way of life. Furthermore, it focused on Stephen’s serious doubts and portrayed the founder of the Hungarian state as a “charismatic dramatic hero”.<sup>829</sup> He is a hero in whom “the moral being confronts the man of realpolitik”,<sup>830</sup> who is aware of the serious loss caused by his decision to preserve the country, i.e. aware of the showdown with his blood relative and the internal war that has claimed countless casualties.<sup>831</sup> This was done in order to make an allegory out of the situation displayed by the rock opera, not so much to connect it with the present, but rather to show it as the fate of national history.<sup>832</sup>

#### STAGING

As a result of its distinguished interpretation of the rock opera, the *mise-en-scène* provided “the drama of a decision with extremely serious human and public consequences”,<sup>833</sup> instead of some unreflected patriotic fervor based

<sup>827</sup> The production on King Hill did not only seem to favor Koppány, but, although everyone knew that “Stephen is right historically, scientifically and in principle, [...] the tough and strong pagans with their beautiful voice [...] sang down the representatives of the bumpy road of historical progress from the hill”. András Székely: *A Tizenkét dühös ember és az István, a király* a Nemzetiben, *Új Tükör*, Vol. 22, No. 41, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1985, 28.

<sup>828</sup> According to the director, if we survey Hungarian history, we see such “binary stars” or pairs of stars a lot. In spite of their radically different concepts, “they are of the same origin. They have a common root. [...] That’s the story we were trying to tell.” Petőfi Radio, 10:45 a.m., 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1985.

<sup>829</sup> Koltai: *Reálpolitika*, 921.

<sup>830</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>831</sup> Cf. “And the production at the National Theatre now, perhaps, makes Stephen a dramatic figure, or let’s say tragic, for he is well aware of the decision that will cause damage in any case somewhere in his personality and throughout the life of the country.” Petőfi Radio, 10:45 a.m., 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1985.

<sup>832</sup> Cf. “The great men of our country were always forced to make decisions that were bad in both directions, but they still had to choose the lesser of two evils.” *Ibid.* – “We see the formula of our history here: the tragic choice between two paths, between two options. [...] Kerényi makes us feel this serious drama excellently from the very beginning by the way he stages the song ‘Mondd, kit választanál?’ [Tell me, who would you choose?]. And this idea, the inescapable tragedy of the decision, is brought back in the last scene, with Stephen, left alone, a winner and a loser at the same time.” Takács: *A döntés drámája*, 6.

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid.*

on appearances. To this end, it focused on details, based them on clear-cut situations,<sup>834</sup> revealed previously unrecognized correlations between them, and drew the characters with sharp contours. This is why the authors could perceive that a “more meaningful” production had been made,<sup>835</sup> and the press reported that “it is in many respects almost a completely new play that we see at The National now, although its lyrics and music have not changed”.<sup>836</sup> Critics praised the director’s creation of “thoughtful symbols”,<sup>837</sup> the rituals of religious mission, kneeling, pagan washing and shielding, Latin burials and Asian shaman dances, relocated “from the infinitely wide space of King Hill to Béla Götz’s tiny stage construction”.<sup>838</sup> They also appreciated the stage, kept in motion all along, where “the paced cross-marches of groups, the constantly simultaneous actions, the on-stage changes of costumes and requisites are beneficial in filling short intermissions and giving the protagonists a permanent rhythmic background – literally, the lively rhythm of rock accompanying all events – and also balancing necessarily static arias”.<sup>839</sup> The fact that actors were singing live in clearly outlined dramatic situations<sup>840</sup> often gave lyrics unusual meaning and importance, enhancing the atmosphere of incessant threat posed by sinister incidents.<sup>841</sup> Through the unity of singing *and* acting, the singers/actors’ work as well as the director’s numerous ideas expressed Stephen’s tragedy markedly in “a stage form tailored to the music”,<sup>842</sup> and as far as interpretation was concerned, they connected the staging with two notable previous *mises-en-scène* by Kerényi, *The Passion of Csíksomlyó* and *King John*.<sup>843</sup> In this way, the dilemma of state foundation,

<sup>834</sup> Cf. Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

<sup>835</sup> János Bródy claimed that the production “reveals deep relationships that we may not have been able to write”. Ferenc Simon Gy.: *István a Nemzetiben*, *Képes Újság*, Vol. 26, No. 42, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1985, 14.

<sup>836</sup> Takács: *A döntés drámája*, 6.

<sup>837</sup> Székely: *A Tizenkét dühös ember*, 28.

<sup>838</sup> Lajos Fodor: *István, a király* – a *Nemzetiben*, *Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 30, No. 225, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, 2.

<sup>839</sup> Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

<sup>840</sup> In the productions in the City Park and in Szeged, both the music and the vocals were prerecorded. This is why Tamás Koltai stated that “previous shows had illustrated canned music with demonstrative spectacle” and the lack of intense drama, stemming from the fact that the actors were only lip-synching and were unable to express internal content through spontaneous singing, was “replaced by direct demonstration”. Koltai: *Történelem kontra Magyarország*, 13.

<sup>841</sup> Cf. “The body of the hanged Laborc sways over the heads of the celebrants, the tortured and muted chronicler is dragged away from the coronation by soldiers, and in the finale, Stephen, the king of all Hungarians, is left alone.” Sós: *István, a helyén*, 17.

<sup>842</sup> Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

<sup>843</sup> The critic of *Film Színház Muzsika* felt “the experience and intricate style” of *The Passion of Csíksomlyó* present throughout *Stephen the King*, as if the *mise-en-scène* had regarded the rock opera as a “passion play conceived in the present”. (Fábián: *Leng a zászló*, 5.) In addition, the symbolic gesture that closes *Stephen the King*, namely, the title hero is lifting a child wrapped in a black shroud while he is looking upwards, shows “innocence as victim

the moral corruption caused by domination,<sup>844</sup> the compulsion to yield oneself up emotionally,<sup>845</sup> and the unavoidable prevalence of fanaticism<sup>846</sup> all obtained complex visual analysis.

While these issues were all welcome, the (not too complex) symbolism caused some confusion. The ensuing debate mainly concerned the end scene, which had been considerably refashioned compared to the production on King Hill, and it was about the role of a child and the Anthem there. The child rolled himself into a dark shroud in front of Stephen, who put down his crown and regalia, grabbed his own head and sank to the ground. Then he raised the boy high to show him to “the dead”, all lined up on the back ramp. The critics of *Magyar Nemzet* and *Film Színház Muzsika* identified the child with Prince Imre, Stephen’s son (died in 1031 as an adult), with whom the *mise-en-scène* demonstrated “the future [...] with more lucidity”.<sup>847</sup> However, in view of the boy’s previous appearances, both in the production<sup>848</sup> and in the Hungarian

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of History. This motif is eerily identical to the corresponding moment in *King John*.” (Koltai: Történelem kontra Magyarország, 13.) The critic refers to the moment, when in the middle of the game of the powerful, Philip Faulconbridge (the Bastard) lifts up the corpse of King John’s murdered nephew, the little Arthur Plantagenet in a similar way.

<sup>844</sup> Cf. “When our national anthem is played in the final scene, this previously controversial ‘effect’ is not simply a patriotic coda: it accompanies a situation in which the sole political authority, too weak not to kill, is forced to recognize his moral defeat.” Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

<sup>845</sup> The *mise-en-scène* made clear the strong emotional relationship of Réka and István. They run out of the stage, hand in hand, at the end of the song ‘Töltsd el szívünk fényességgé’ [Fill our hearts with brilliance] as a little girl in a green and a little boy in a white dress, in order to run in the next moment as adults, in similar clothes, still hand in hand. When Gizella begins to sing (between Géza, Grand Prince of the Hungarians and Asztrik, the high priest), Réka steps farther away from Stephen, even though he is about to kiss her. At the end of the song, Gizella and Stephen are already standing side by side, as a couple, and Réka is watching them alone, hugged only by her father, Koppány. The painful memory of their suggested love determines their gaze on each other further on.

<sup>846</sup> Fanaticism was emphasized by Sarolt on one side and by Torda on the other. “The most tense, most decisive moment” of the drama was made memorable by Torda, the Táltos (the shaman). “When Koppány was about to accept the royal sword from Stephen”, Torda abruptly seized the symbol of peace offered to the rebel, which soon became the bloody sword of battle in his hands. Antal László: *A Táltos: Ivánka Csaba, Pesti Műsor*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1986, 13.

<sup>847</sup> Gábor: *István, a király*, 8.

<sup>848</sup> The boy in a white peasant shirt appeared first at the beginning of the show, and the chorus sang the song ‘Mondd, kit választanál?’ [Tell me, who would you choose?] to him. István, also in a white shirt, and Koppány were both facing him, when they sang the refrain, “Help us!”, immediately stressing a serious question and a dramatic situation even in their intonation. In the next scene, the boy held little Réka’s hand as the child Stephen, then he became the bearer of the coronation sword later, and Stephen took the sword from his hands. Tamás Mészáros rightly stated that the child appeared not really as a character but as a “thought-out stage effect”. In the last scene, therefore, it was not Prince Imre who turned up unexpectedly, but “the child, already identified as Stephen, returned as a symbol, familiar from the prologue”. Tamás Mészáros: *Még egyszer Istvánról – avagy mi a neve a gyerekeknek?*, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 252, 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1985, 6.

theatres of the time, where he had been brought in as a symbol of innocence by József Ruszt's *mises-en-scène* of Shakespeare's plays in the 1970s,<sup>849</sup> the final image tended to make the act of (self-)sacrifice more emphatic and increased the tragedy of Stephen, who was left alone in his victory with a sense of loss.<sup>850</sup> The uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of the sacrifice made for the consolidation of power also confronts us with the anomaly of "doublespeak", i.e. the inability to make stage signs unambiguous. The myth of the rock opera was fueled from the outset by the fact that "the conflict of Stephen and Koppány, Christian and Hungarian, can be projected onto quite a lot of political situations",<sup>851</sup> so that János Kádár and Imre Nagy (executed after the 1956 revolution) can also be seen in them from both a "revolutionary" and "counter-revolutionary" point of view.<sup>852</sup>

The end scene of the production, felt "overly elevated" throughout,<sup>853</sup> roused the poignancy over the historical necessity of "the world on a forced course" (as the lyrics say), conjuring up the future at most in this way. At the same time and in stark contrast to the film's finale full of ribbons, the national

<sup>849</sup> "The personification of the purity of childhood in this way is a common stage symbol now." Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> Cf. "[The boy rolled in the black shroud] is lying like a sacrifice at the adult Stephen's feet. Stephen, the king, lifts his purer self into his hands and turns to the defeated. Towering over Stephen, the dead Koppány and the others are already standing in the window of the back wall. Stephen walks to them to show his sacrifice in front of their altarpiece." Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7. – „[...] das symbolgeladene Schlußbild, als Stefan seine Ideale 'zu Grabe' trägt und doch nicht von ihnen lassen kann." No author: *Eine alte Geschichte spannend aufbereitet*, *Neue Zeit Berlin*, Vol. 44, No. 90, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1988, 7.

<sup>851</sup> Matalin: *A magyar rockopera*.

<sup>852</sup> In other words, either as the exposed weakness of the murderous "king" János Kádár, or as ideological reinforcement in the service of the reigning power: "rebellion is beautiful but meaningless, the country can only survive if we follow Stephen's path, the reality of history". Ibid. – "Moreover, according to the rock opera's fiction, Stephen had nothing to do with Koppány's death (contrary to the drama of Miklós Boldizsár, on which it was based), while the execution of Imre Nagy remained the original, unnamed sin of the Kádár regime. From the point of view of power, therefore, such an interpretation of *Stephen the King* seemed to be the most perfect whitewash." Zoltán Orosz R.: *Istvánban Kádárt, Koppányban Nagy Imrét látták*, <http://24.hu/kultura/2015/08/20/istvanban-kadart-koppanyban-nagy-imret-lattak/> (accessed 2 August 2017). – The interpretation that denies the subversive nature of the rock opera came out shortly after the world premiere in the City Park, published by Emericus (Zoltán Krasznai). The article, "John the King – or the light of grace shines on us" stated that "the authors and the director managed to create an image of King Stephen in line with the conditions of advanced socialism, and more than that, 'the idea of St. Stephen' of the Kádár regime." In Gábor Demszky (ed.): *Szamizdat '81–89. Válogatás a Hírmondó című folyóiratból*, Budapest, AB-Beszélő Kft., 1990, 86–91.

<sup>853</sup> Koltai: *Történelem kontra Magyarország*, 13. – In his review, Péter Molnár Gál mentioned maliciously that deheroization had been in vogue on Hungarian stages, but there was an attempt to "reheroize" now. "Deheroization answered the glorious glaze that the Hungarian historical past had been given in the 1950s, while the bust of Mátyás Rákosi had been gilded and even made of lard. [...] A heroized past, however, is only good for masking everyday contradictions and difficulties." M.G.P.: *Két zenés darabról*, 35.

anthem (creating a frame with Beethoven's *Overture to King Stephen*) was played on an electric keyboard and sounded not bombastic at all, while a shabby and faded red-white-green flag rose high at the back.<sup>854</sup> In spite of the low-key use of the elements of national identity, far from stirring up loud patriotism, some disputed the aesthetic character of this stage effect.<sup>855</sup> However, as Stephen was raising up the child at the same time, the sound and the image were as fully rooted in the dramatic situation as they had been at every moment before.

#### ACTING

Instead of hosting the cast of the 1983 production that seemed paradigmatic in terms of voices, the National Theatre relied almost entirely on its own resources to produce the rock opera. The composer, Levente Szörényi was coaching the actors throughout the summer of 1985,<sup>856</sup> and they were “working with unprecedented hardness and intensity (at least on this stage)” during rehearsals.<sup>857</sup> In addition to the mostly young members of the company, the National Theatre signed a single guest: Gyula Vikidál, who had played Koppány in the City Park two years before. “Uniting spontaneous elements of folk dance and rock culture into a coherent composition of movement”,<sup>858</sup> the choreography was based on “some simplified, rhythmic gestures” that had been transferred “from the effects of the monumental scenes full of dance” on King Hill.<sup>859</sup> It was executed by students of the College of Theatre and Film Arts as well as the actors’ studio of the National. Singing did not sound as the imitation of the movie soundtrack, and the not-specifically trained voices created “a new Hungarian singing style [...] from the contrast between the strange emphases of rock music and the singing of folk songs in dance

<sup>854</sup> Cf. “The Anthem, which had been played previously with a huge apparatus at the end of the play and overemphasized by a mass of large tricolors and flags, is sounded on keyboard now, exquisitely and only as a reference to the centuries of history following Stephen. The overwhelming national tricolor is replaced by a faded, slightly tattered flag, worn in the storms of centuries.” Takács: *A döntés drámája*, 6.

<sup>855</sup> István Bölcs mentioned “forced and precarious devotion”, since some of the audience stood up, when they heard the Anthem, others remained seated, but felt forced to stand up still a bit later. (*Gondolatjel*, Kossuth Radio, at 11:00 a.m. on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1985. Transcript for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.) According to Tamás Koltai, “this Olympic moment of announcing cathartic victory is aesthetically dissonant. It is breaking the style and harming the skin of music drama. Unexpectedly, we get excluded from the theatre event, we get outside of the theatrical consensus. Spectators immediately sense that they are expected to demonstrate so they stand up.” Koltai: *Történelem kontra Magyarország*, 13.

<sup>856</sup> Fábíán: *István, a király*, 9.

<sup>857</sup> Takács: *A döntés drámája*, 6.

<sup>858</sup> Koltai: *Történelem kontra Magyarország*, 13.

<sup>859</sup> Fodor: *István, a király*, 2.

houses”.<sup>860</sup> In this style, “ordinary voices did not impede the effect of the music” and even “evoked the folk reality which may have been one of the most important layers of *The Passion of Csíksomlyó*”.<sup>861</sup> *Stephen the King* was played in double-casting (except the roles of Koppány and Torda, which were only played by Gyula Vikidál and Csaba Ivánka) and the actors debuted in an order decided by lottery. The critics did not find any “particularly weak points”<sup>862</sup> in either of the casts, and “the two teams were matching each other evenly”.<sup>863</sup>

In case of the title hero, double-casting became a remarkably nuanced factor of interpretation, since the temperament and acting of István Bubik and István Hirtling highlighted Stephen’s different characteristics, both as a character in the rock opera and as a historical figure. Hirtling was singing “softer, in a more lyrical tone”, and portrayed “a more skeptical and less confident Stephen, who seemed to be drifting with the tide”, while Bubik was “more determined and purposeful” in all Stephen’s dilemmas.<sup>864</sup> The difference between the two portrayals of Stephen was precisely described by the reviewer of *Pesti Műsor*, who detailed the performance of the two actors in a separate article. According to him, Hirtling’s Stephen is the obedient son of his mother, but he suffers under the heavy burden and offers his suffering to God, bowing his head like a sacrificial lamb and shouldering the fault of the terrible fight. “He is the protector of the Roman Church, the pillar of Christianity, St. Stephen.”<sup>865</sup> Bubik’s Stephen is the grandson of the leaders of the steppes, who definitely vows to move forward and fights face-to-face with his relative, Koppány. He listens to his mother prudently, and looks proudly at the sky when he says, “With you, my Lord, but still without you.” “He is the protector of the country, the pillar of the state, Stephen the King.”<sup>866</sup> Besides these two actors, Csaba Ivánka was highlighted in the reviews, whose scene frequently achieved “complete success” with an immediate applause, by portraying the figure of Torda with his body writhing and his eyes twisting in ecstasy.<sup>867</sup> In spite of these extremes, neither he nor anyone else in the cast had changed realist acting as required by a *mise-en-scène* that tried to reveal all motivations and relations precisely. Realism was not really modified by the actors who played

<sup>860</sup> Ibid.

<sup>861</sup> Fábrián: *Leng a zászló*, 5.

<sup>862</sup> Gábor: *István, a király*, 8.

<sup>863</sup> Székely: *A Tizenkét dühös ember*, 28.

<sup>864</sup> Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7. – Tamás Koltai even stated that “the more appropriate actor for the title role is István Bubik. He is as royal as a figure should be in a rock opera with all the explosiveness, toughness, vulnerability and strength of a boisterous, modern-day adolescent. István Hirtling’s Stephen is less resolute, and his lyrical acting interprets the role from the point of view of a history play – necessarily, as his voice suits the requirements of his part less.” Koltai: *Történelem kontra Magyarország*, 13.

<sup>865</sup> Eszter Seress: „Mondd, te kit választanál?“, *Pesti Műsor*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1986, 11.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid.

<sup>867</sup> Simon Gy.: *István a Nemzetiben*, 14.

the three gentlemen, Sur, Solt and Bese as turncoats (literally as well) in hats with Orphan maidenhair and singing into disco mics, sometimes directly to the audience.

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

While the 1983 production in the City Park evoked the iron-pipe sets of the film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which had provided a model for *Stephen the King*,<sup>868</sup> the production of the National Theatre created an autonomous world of scenography. Its main elements, the curved bridges, rising and sinking dynamically, and a huge lurex disc shining in several colors behind them, reminded spectators of the main sites of the previous history of *Stephen the King* without attempting to copy the shape of King Hill or the imposing façade of the Cathedral of Szeged. The stage of the National Theatre was, in fact, tiny compared to the previous ones, but the system of bridges, which was structuring the performance space both horizontally and vertically throughout, became an active part of the show. Smaller visual elements displayed a sky-high world tree (shaman ladder), on which “the shaman was crawling up in trance to see into the future”,<sup>869</sup> as well as a raised shield shining like the sun, or the above-mentioned disc of the background, whose pale blue glow evoked the moon. Béla Götz’s set design “almost conjured up the cosmology of ancient Hungarian faith on the stage of the National Theatre”, which transformed easily into “dimensions of the new faith”,<sup>870</sup> since the bridges could remind the audience of the straps of St. Stephen’s crown too. The antlers straddling the shield carried by the “amazons guarding the Wonder Stag”,<sup>871</sup> i.e. the women of Koppány, and the long crosses became instruments of sacral theatre-like celebrations: focal points of the spectator’s gaze in the midst of a crowd often swirling onstage. Although the production was not devoid of “some clutter – all kinds of cloth, shrouds and requisites in excess”<sup>872</sup> –, it met the requirements of a large-scale spectacle expected from the musical stage with much invention and tastefulness. In Nelly Vágó’s folksy clothes, accentuating the fabrics of canvas, leather, silk and velvet, the actors were singing to the music recorded by Hungaroton, and the orchestral playback was complemented only by an ominously whistling and blustering wind that connected the songs.

<sup>868</sup> The film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was released in Hungarian cinemas ten years late, only in the summer of 1983.

<sup>869</sup> Fábíán: Leng a zászló, 5.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid.

<sup>871</sup> Koltai: Történelem kontra Magyarország, 13.

<sup>872</sup> Mészáros: Az ősi érdek, 7.

## IMPACT AND POSTERITY

The peculiarity of the production's reception history is that Imre Kerényi's *mise-en-scène* could not "override" the other *Stephen the King*, the "decorative mass event",<sup>873</sup> which took on increasingly nationalistic and retro traits. However, the National Theatre's production received the so-called Niveau Prize of the Ministry of Culture and remained in the repertory for several seasons. In 1988, it had two consecutive guest performances at the Komische Oper in Berlin, and when it travelled to the theatres of Baden, Cologne and Pergine in 1990, it had already been performed more than 250 times in Budapest.<sup>874</sup> Although a lady in a white dress threw an egg on the stage at the premiere and ran away, and Péter Molnár Gál described the production as a "typical scandal of our entertainment industry", attributing its social reception and success purely to patriotism and money, its long run secured the rock opera's place on the National's stage for years. István Iglódi, who staged the other two parts of the "trilogy" of Levente Szörényi, *Attila, the Sword of God* and *With You, My Lord!* at the Esztergom Castle Theatre and the Szeged Open-Air Festival, produced a new *mise-en-scène* of *Stephen the King* for the millennium. This performance ran for twelve seasons at the theatre still called the National at the time of the premiere but renamed some months later as Pesti Magyar Theatre. It was at this point in time that the new National Theatre was founded and began to be built.

However, it is the paradox of the play's reception history that an "intellectually so deep"<sup>875</sup> a production as Kerényi's staging, and so apt to provoke a "horizon of change" (Hans-Robert Jauss), had not been born until Róbert Alföldi's *mise-en-scène* for the Szeged Open-Air Festival in 2013, for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world premiere. Moreover, Alföldi used the same method as Kerényi: he unified the mosaic structure of the rock opera through stage actions,<sup>876</sup> and his *mise-en-scène* entered into unwitting dialogue with

<sup>873</sup> Ibid.

<sup>874</sup> Seeing the ovation, Kerényi made Szörényi and Bródy create the rock ballad *Anna Fehér* (sunk into oblivion by now), which opened on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1988 at the National, exactly three years after the premiere of *Stephen the King*, which was still being played. Before the opening, there were some "previews" of *Anna Fehér* in the Carmelite courtyard of the Castle Theatre and on the Cathedral Square in Szeged. Although a double album was also recorded with the cast of the world premiere, the play did not make a success and it has not been produced any more.

<sup>875</sup> Imre Kerényi's expression in an interview given to *Pesti Műsor*. Fábíán: *István, a király*, 9.

<sup>876</sup> Tamás Mészáros rightly noticed that "the structure of scenes in *Stephen the King* is that of a dramatic oratorio; its figures get characterized not in the plot, but rather in their utterances. You could say they live primarily in their numbers, in their vocals and not in the happenings. The director [Imre Kerényi], however, in order to realize his 'history play concept', had to develop an epic line that could be carried through, had to stretch an arc for the narrative, so he had to cover the mosaic structure in the process of stage actions." Mészáros: *Az ősi érdek*, 7.

the 1985 production of the National Theatre. That's why it was both eerie and ironic to hear the sound of blustering wind in the 2013 production as well, and to see the title hero, "crucified on the cross of domination as a king",<sup>877</sup> desperately sunk to the ground with arms outspread.

<sup>877</sup> An expression by Tamás Koltai in connection with the production directed by Imre Kerényi. Koltai: *Reálpolitika*, 921.



REMEMBRANCE OF A LANDMARK  
IN THEATRE HISTORY  
TAMÁS ASCHER: *THREE SISTERS*, 1985



*Title:* Three Sisters. *Date of Premiere:* 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1985. *Venue:* Katona József Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Tamás Ascher. *Author:* Anton Chekhov. *Translator:* Dezső Kosztolányi. *Dramaturg:* Géza Fodor. *Set designer:* István Szlávik. *Costume designer:* Györgyi Szakács. *Company:* Katona József Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* Tamás Végvári (Andrey), Dorottya Udvaros (Natalia Ivanovna), Erika Bodnár (Olga), Juli Básti (Masha), Ági Szirtes (Irina), László Vajda (Kulygin), László Sinkó (Vershinin), János Bán (Tuzenbach), Géza Balkay (Solyony), József Horváth (Chebutykin), Erzsi Pártos (Anfisa), Vilmos Kun (Ferapont), Sándor Gáspár, Péter Blaskó (Fedotik), Frigyes Hollósi (Rode).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

The context of a really paradigmatic theatre production of the 1980s and “one of the longest series of Hungarian prosaic theatre” ever,<sup>878</sup> is determined by two factors. Firstly, the socio-political stagnation of the decade before the regime change and the total loss of credibility of the socialist salvation history, and secondly, the questionable productivity of Hungarian theatre and the problematic nature of its productions at that time.<sup>879</sup> The former could be not reflected by Hungarian reviewers, but they noted that the production was “a mere urge to face our age, face ourselves”,<sup>880</sup> that it “argued with ferociously honest acting for the lost human fulfillment”,<sup>881</sup> and that “it showed the story of *Three Sisters* [...] in its intense topicality”.<sup>882</sup> Foreign critics, on the other hand, were much more outspoken in their claims that “anger glows red” in

<sup>878</sup> Tamás Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás emlékére, *Színház*, 27:4 (1994), 1.

<sup>879</sup> We can agree with the statement that by the time of the Katona’s *Three Sisters* “Hungarian theatre, at least as far as the average quality of its shows was concerned, had disintegrated, diminished or become dull in its companies – let us think of the deteriorating quality in the countryside –, [...] so it was more and more declining.” Ibid.

<sup>880</sup> András Barta: *Három nővér*. Csehov színműve a Katona József Színházban, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 49, No. 21, 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1986, 9.

<sup>881</sup> Tamás Mészáros: „Hát hova tűnt minden?” A *Három nővér* a Katona József Színházban, *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 301, 24<sup>th</sup> December, 1985, 11.

<sup>882</sup> László Ablonczy: Csehov most – és nálunk. A *Három nővér* két változatban, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1986, 6.

Ascher's "furious" *mise-en-scène*,<sup>883</sup> and together with Gábor Zsámbéki's *The Government Inspector* (Katona József Theatre, 1987), it offers "an allegorical representation of the communism of the 1980s".<sup>884</sup> After the last performance in 1994, even Ascher said that, "the fury, ferocious desperation and loud pain of our *Three Sisters*, and the Beckettian anxiety that prevailed in the last act mirrored the 1980s of East-Central Europe".<sup>885</sup>

The *implicit* political nature of the production manifested itself in the diminution of the fantasies about a bright future (characteristic to Vershinin's and Tuzenbach's philosophizing); in the powerful suggestion of the feeling that "we cannot live here"; in Chebutykin's repeating that "it doesn't matter", which had become the loathsome ideology of self-deception after the nihilism of drunkenness; and in the astonishingly powerful finale. In this finale, Olga's hopeful words were completely suppressed by the roaring soldier's music, and she took turns running with a manic gesture of determination to her sisters crying and shouting on the ground, while an army was marching at the back of the stage. In order to interpret this image, spectators had to notice that the members of the army temporarily stationed in the city were marching *in place*, so, contrary to the text, they did not leave. While the three sisters were mentioning Moscow all the time, the overriding plainness of the feeling that "we must get away" did not make the audience associate with the center of the colonial empire of socialist countries, familiar to everyone by photos circulated high and low. This highlights the paradox that Ascher and some other directors (mainly Gábor Zsámbéki, Péter Gothár and István Szőke) frequently made hidden criticism about the Kádár regime through Russian dramas that were otherwise preferred by the regime, in this case, through the contemporary social sensibility of *Three Sisters*. When a reviewer pointed out how "little failures suffered from time to time gnaw at people and destroy what is best in them: creativity, emotional richness, faith in themselves and in others",<sup>886</sup> it shed light on the same social problem as most of the Hungarian dramatic literature at the time did, from Imre Sarkadi's *Simeon Stylites* to István Csúrka's *Deficit* and Mihály Kornis's *Hallelujah*.

This, in turn, leads us to the second factor mentioned above, insofar as *Three Sisters* was the work of a director of a prominent generation that carried out a complex series of experiments with strong commitment to social analysis. They developed a model "in which an alternative way of action, encoded in the plot and particularly important 'here and now', is being analyzed in the

<sup>883</sup> Peter Kümmel: Ásít a vidék, *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, June 22, 1987. Quoted in Anna Veress (ed): *Katona 1982–97, Kamra 1991–97*, Budapest, Katona József Színház Alapítvány, [1997], 28.

<sup>884</sup> Helen Kaye, the critic of *Jerusalem Post* was quoted in Tamás Koltai: Egy vendéjáték kritikái, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 35, No. 28, 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1991, 13.

<sup>885</sup> Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás, 1.

<sup>886</sup> Anna Földes: Három nővér – és a többiek, *Nők Lapja*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1986, 22.

process of performance”.<sup>887</sup> The members of this generation, most notably Gábor Zsámbéki, Gábor Székely, Tamás Ascher, József Ruszt, István Paál, László Babarczy and János Ács “sought to broaden the boundaries of their audience’s tolerance by the choice of plays and styles”.<sup>888</sup> In this way, “they were ‘smuggling in’ numerous elements of European theatre, which had already gone to the school of the avant-garde. However, their fundamental innovation was the representation of an image without any illusions, an image of society and personality created in the process of the performance and different from Hungarian traditions.”<sup>889</sup> Consequently, the professional prehistory of *Three Sisters* and its extraordinary qualities that “classicized and synthesized”<sup>890</sup> the innovative theatre achievements of the seventies and eighties are “precisely traceable”.<sup>891</sup> According to Ascher, his *Three Sisters* was born in contrast to productions, “staged and lived only ‘as if’”,<sup>892</sup> which were frighteningly increasing their majority on Hungarian stages. Furthermore, it was produced by a company whose “ethos and ideal of acting and making theatre had developed in the workshops of Kaposvár and Szolnok in the 1970s”, then at the National Theatre, led by Gábor Zsámbéki and Gábor Székely.<sup>893</sup> So the paradigmatic nature and historical significance of the Katona József Theatre’s production was due to its *only partially manifested* social, political and theatrical complexity by which it had departed from the age of its birth in every aspect.<sup>894</sup>

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Ascher’s *mise-en-scène* hardly modified Dezső Kosztolányi’s translation of Chekhov’s play, but told the story “sharply and relentlessly”.<sup>895</sup> Neither the socialist reading of *Three Sisters* could be pointed out in it (about the condemned figures of a social class historically doomed to perish), nor the symbolist interpretation, mainly opposed to the tradition of naturalism (and

<sup>887</sup> Gyöngyi Heltai: Rímélések. Adalékok a Csehov-életmű értelmezéséhez, *Világosság* 28:11 (1987), 723.

<sup>888</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>889</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>890</sup> *Ibid.*, 719.

<sup>891</sup> Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás, 1.

<sup>892</sup> Heltai: Rímélések, 723.

<sup>893</sup> Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás, 1.

<sup>894</sup> That is why the political topicality of the production is simplified by the mere (and rather clichéd) statement about the last scene that “this is how the world has inexorably swept away the chances of the sisters with its violence”. István Sándor L.: Minden eltörölve?, *Ellenfény* 10:1 (2005), 13.

<sup>895</sup> Renate Klett: Wunder und Wirklichkeit, *Theater Heute*, No. 8, 1987. Quoted in *Katona 1982–97*, 29.

still present in József Ruszt's staging in Zalaegerszeg in 1985 too), nor even the popular conception of Chekhov as a forerunner of the theatre of the absurd, concretized in the drama of communicational deficiencies. Following the dramaturg Géza Fodor's precise analysis of the drama, the Katona's production was based on "the unbiased scrutiny of the dramatic micro-texture".<sup>896</sup> It focused on the complex, "in-depth and original" reading of the relationship of the characters,<sup>897</sup> and pushed events beyond words into the foreground. One of its foreign reviewers rightly observed that "interpretation is nothing more than theatrical nuance here, strictly within the framework of the play, down to its smallest components".<sup>898</sup> In addition to the astonishing details thus created, the production was made really special by the suspension of Peter Szondi's well-known conception about Chekhov's renunciation of dramatic tension. The series of stage events were made particularly dramatic here, similarly to the sudden escalation of situations. As a result, the tone became "unequivocally tragic, despite occasional bursts of laughter",<sup>899</sup> and only some of the text's latent comic elements were used (moderately, of course) and others were inactivated.

Moreover, the *mise-en-scène* made the few philosophical parts of the dialogues sound trivial, at times ironic, and the lyrical parts emotionally overheated, eliminating the possibility of sentimentalism, which is rather seductive in Chekhov. "The means of performance highlighted the often revelatory gestures of 'bad moments', incomprehension and confusion, which formed the world of the drama."<sup>900</sup> However, the characters did not renounce making themselves understood at all, and they even seemed to understand each other very well, but their attending to their own feelings and thoughts hindered their powerful reactions, their help to the others. (For example, Olga and Natasha were hindered in comforting Irina, stirred by Solyony's violent declaration of love, or Masha and Andrey, who had learned of the conflict between Tuzenbach and Solyony, were hindered in preventing the duel, the shooting of the baron.) Acting also made another novelty of the play's interpretation very spectacular, namely the nuanced portrayal of the brutality of the figures, a mass of both wittingly or unwittingly uttered insults, irritations and humiliations, to which the characters were reacting on the level of metacommunication, and which were also wittingly or unwittingly returned to each other. The constant presence of petty violence and vengeance was cumulated in the last act, reaching its climax in the frenzy of the finale. Thus the Katona's *Three Sisters* concentrated its exceptional reading of

<sup>896</sup> Heltai: Rímélések, 719.

<sup>897</sup> (Torda): *Három nővér*. Katona József Színház, *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1986, 8.

<sup>898</sup> The critic of the Israeli periodical *Dávár* was quoted in Koltai: Egy vendégjáték kritikái, 13.

<sup>899</sup> Heltai: Rímélések, 724.

<sup>900</sup> *Ibid.*

Chekhov in the work of the actors, and only the superficial interpretation of a few critics could find some kind of “regular” or “normative Chekhov” in it.<sup>901</sup> The insistence on the dramatic text went hand in hand with an impressive variety of stage signs constructed beyond, but entirely on the basis of, the text, so the production became governed by “the peculiar rhythm of the presence of individual actors” as a principle of dramaturgy too.<sup>902</sup>

### STAGING

It was a general professional consensus that Ascher’s *mise-en-scène* was “a masterpiece of precision, timing, guiding actors, dramaturgical structure and rhythmic shifts.”<sup>903</sup> The precise orchestration of all means of theatre, the alternation of static and dynamic situations as well as different moods, the attention to the minutiae that seemed irrelevant but not meaningless, the abundant creation of the formality of a former world and the eruptions of inwardness that shattered it – all these features provided the performance with such richness that had a mostly emotional effect on the audience. After all, in the midst of the density of events, the spectator was hardly able to realize them: although he/she perceived them, they did not affect him/her at the level of cognition. In addition to acknowledging this unusual “theatre symphony”<sup>904</sup> and the “polyphony of labyrinthine emotions”,<sup>905</sup> reviewers often mentioned the highly “traditional” and “conservative” nature of the production, but (with the exception of a few foreign critics) they immediately dispelled the pejorative overtones of these adjectives and even questioned their validity.<sup>906</sup> István Nánay made the description of such productions more precise, claiming that “every little detail is worked out and connected with each other in them, everything has its reasons and consequences, every action of the characters triggers reactions in the others, thereby creating an infinitely fine and sensitive system of relationships, all serving the message of the production.”<sup>907</sup> Consequently, the “traditional” and the “conservative” had been concretized in psychological realism by that time, and Ascher’s

<sup>901</sup> The critics of the Israeli periodicals *Háárec* and *Chádásot* were quoted in Koltai: Egy vendég-játék kritikái, 13.

<sup>902</sup> András Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, *Jelenkor*, 29:6 (1986), 541.

<sup>903</sup> Klett: Wunder und Wirklichkeit, 29.

<sup>904</sup> Cf. “Ascher’s production is indeed built like a piece of symphonic music...” Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, 544.

<sup>905</sup> Tamás Koltai: Csehóviádák, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1986, 13.

<sup>906</sup> Cf. “As for style”, Ascher’s *Three Sisters* is “a perfectly realist, almost conservative production. It proves how pointless these adjectives become when the personal involvement and credibility of the performance sweep away all sorts of definitions. When the world view of the production is indisputable.” Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás, 1.

<sup>907</sup> István Nánay: Változatok a reménytelenségre, *Színház* 19:3 (1986), 12.

*mise-en-scène* represented the “triumph” of this special language of performance,<sup>908</sup> in contrast to its countless superfluous manifestations all over the country. Psychological realism made the texture of performance so transparent that many critics started to write about organicity and “the sensitivity of a living organism”.<sup>909</sup> The recurrent justification of “living theatre”,<sup>910</sup> as opposed to the one that Peter Brook called “dead theatre”, stemmed from the realization that “we can feel the intense presence of the actors all the time”.<sup>911</sup> Its more precise description was made possible by the comparison of Ascher’s *Three Sisters* with a notable production of the Víg Theatre, directed by István Horvai in 1972. István Sándor L. rightly states that

it is the basic intentions, the basic tones of utterances that become clear, and the reactions reveal basic emotional relationships in the production of the Víg Theatre. The Katona’s production, on the other hand, projects a complex network of intentions and attitudes behind every utterance. While verbal communication is the primary focus of the Víg Theatre’s production, and signs of metacommunication just reinforce them, the Katona’s production makes the signs of metacommunication much more emphatic and render the underlying content of the words visible: not only what happens in people when they speak, but also how others understand it and think about it. From the very first moment, the numerous gestures detail the rich, mostly speechless events of human relationships and personalities.<sup>912</sup>

Ascher’s *Three Sisters* had thus become an achievement of the brilliant retuning of psychological realism, which created a sumptuous illusion of life, not devoid of some cruelty (in the Artaudian sense of the word) that provided its topical and political character. This was largely due to its dismissing a genteel and melancholic way of performance, which dismissal was initiated by Anatoly Efros, who had rejected the interpretation of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and whose approach was somewhat radicalized by Ascher.<sup>913</sup> While “previous *Three Sisters* were overflowing with emotion to a greater or lesser extent” (including István Horvai’s staging), the Katona’s production “wanted to break radically with this ‘tearful’ tradition” and “looked at the

<sup>908</sup> Koltai: Csehviádák, 13.

<sup>909</sup> Iván Sándor: Miközben a színházról beszélgetünk, *Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 30, No. 43, 25<sup>th</sup> October, 1986, 12.

<sup>910</sup> Cf. “[...] the rare organicity of this performance, its own circulation of blood provides us with the precious experience of *living theatre*.” Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, 544.

<sup>911</sup> Ablonczy: Csehov most – és nálunk, 6.

<sup>912</sup> Sándor L.: Minden eltörölve?, 8.

<sup>913</sup> Cf. “It is well-known that Nemirovich-Danchenko defined the main theme of the play as ‘longing for a better life’. These words suggest that the Moscow Art Theatre emphasized ‘longing’ instead of ‘aspiration’ or ‘struggle’. However, according to Efros, the characters of *Three Sisters* are not really longing for something but looking for some truth for themselves, firmly and forcefully.” Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, 540.

world of Chekhov from another era: beyond our receptiveness to neo-sentimentalism and nostalgia”.<sup>914</sup> Staged as a drama of losing hope, Ascher’s disillusioned *Three Sisters* almost cruelly revealed from behind the melodrama “the bleakness of the semblance of life, [...] the overpowering of stupidity and violence, the fall into the abyss”.<sup>915</sup> This is why András Pályi could recognize with a keen eye that in spite of all its realism, Ascher’s *mise-en-scène* could also be characterized as “ritual”, since “we continuously feel the presence of another stage, the ‘Double’ of a theatre, which is like the ‘metaphysics’ for psychological interpretation, the stage of individual style and presence”.<sup>916</sup>

### ACTING

As a German reviewer pointed out, “acting solved the artistic task of appearing both as an artistic form and as something self-evident” in the production of the Katona József Theatre.<sup>917</sup> Thus the reviewer shed light on the mediality of psychological realism, i.e. on the paradox that the more authentic and realistic acting seems to be, the more it draws our attention to its brilliance, its created nature, its theatrical existence. In other words, it draws our attention to art as emphatically as to life, and this can be studied in Ascher’s *mise-en-scène* particularly well. Despite the rethinking of the language of acting, none of its moments overstep the boundaries of this language. They become, at most, bolder results that slightly or significantly depart from tradition.<sup>918</sup> But, for example, simultaneous speech is not used at all, though simultaneous actions frequently occur, and utterances do not overlap or run into each other either. Therefore, diction is characterized by utterances alternating at a different pace, and their artistic pronunciation provides emotional content that the spectator can experience. The performance “requires *perfect identification* with the role from all the actors. There is neither *indication* in acting nor ‘stylized’ demonstration. [...] Every character of the play *experiences and suffers* his/her own drama, and the director’s ‘bias’ cannot be felt at all. He even renounces the occasional possibility of exaggeration.”<sup>919</sup> It means that no one is highlighted, everyone gets the same attention and “exists with the same mental, neural concentration in the scene.”<sup>920</sup> This intensity is mainly

<sup>914</sup> Miklós Almási: Csoportkép bűgőcsigával, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 43, No. 290, 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1985, 7.

<sup>915</sup> Barta: *Három nővér*, 9.

<sup>916</sup> Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, 544.

<sup>917</sup> Peter Burri: Egy asszony, három nővérel. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. No. 6, 1987. Quoted in *Katona 1982–97*, 28.

<sup>918</sup> Cf. Földes: *Három nővér*, 22.

<sup>919</sup> Mészáros: „Hát hova tűnt minden”, 11.

<sup>920</sup> Heltai: *Rímélések*, 726.

conveyed by mimics, posture, gesture and movement, which make visible the inner (emotional and volitional) drives behind all utterances and the reactions to three factors of equal importance in the production, “the spoken, the acted or the spiritual shifts felt behind the words”.<sup>921</sup> This is how the opposition of Kulygin, Masha’s husband and Vershinin, Masha’s lover comes out in several scenes of the third act, openly but strictly beyond words, similarly to the reasons for Solyony’s impertinence or Tuzenbach’s hyperactivity.

Acting is full of revelatory details: for example, after Olga mentions that she has grown older and thinner, she suddenly throws away a pencil, which is an obvious sign of her anger at the lack of reaction (the denial she may expect) to her remark. When, laughing and suppressing her crying, she declares that she is 28, she accidentally knocks her students’ exercise books off her desk, touches her head in confusion, then bends down and picks up the books with Irina, stating acquiescingly that “it’s all quite right, it’s all from God”. Faces always function as a precise barometer of the inner world, and the usually telling gestures that dominate alongside mimics unveil happenings not always in direct connection to what has been said. “Although there is hardly any contact in words, gestures and glances accurately reveal the shifts of emotions in each character and the essence and changes of their relationships with others.”<sup>922</sup> The subtly created inner life of the figures mostly erupts into the surface like lava: not in direct replies, but as (neither inadequate nor completely appropriate) reactions to things happening in later micro situations. At the beginning of the production, for example, Olga breaks her pencil after a cheeky remark by Solyony, and bursts into tears, but her anger and desperation are much more strongly fueled by Masha’s intention to leave, mentioned shortly before. In the third act, Olga begins to cry vehemently when Kulygin arrives, but the expression of her tension is the result of a previous dispute with Natasha. When emotions come out in a direct way, much more rarely, of course, they come “elementally and unbridled, and the others quickly hide them away from prying eyes”.<sup>923</sup>

As a result, indeterminacy dominates the construction of scenes, as “everything is constantly in motion: in space, in intent, in emotion. Thus, acting also alternates extremes of various moods, with the participants seeking psychological authentication in every happening all the time”.<sup>924</sup> Diction follows this alternation precisely, increasing “the prosaic mood” by defusing lyrical-philosophical tirades “with a slightly stylized monotony”.<sup>925</sup> This is the most obvious in László Sinkó’s way of speaking, who portrays

<sup>921</sup> Ibid.

<sup>922</sup> Nánay: *Változatok a reménytelenségre*, 13.

<sup>923</sup> Almási: *Csoportkép bűgőcsigával*, 7.

<sup>924</sup> Sándor L.: *Minden eltörölve?*, 12.

<sup>925</sup> Almási: *Csoportkép bűgőcsigával*, 7.

Vershinin as an insignificant figure. Sinkó disassembles his texts, “so that most sentences sound as independent clichés, and his philosophizing is just a repetition of things heard somewhere else and suitable for telling them effectively. His quibbling with Tuzenbach about the future becomes obviously false, since the director makes the actors express the recurring thoughts of their utterances in such a way that the repetition of sentences with the same content becomes conspicuously pronounced.”<sup>926</sup> Acting also underscores certain aspects of the characters through diction, so Tuzenbach becomes “an unbearable chatterbox and Natalya Ivanovna more amusingly vulgar than usual.”<sup>927</sup> At other times, as in Vershinin’s overly soldier-like accentuation and giggling, it discloses some mannerisms. However, contrary to Peter Stein’s legendary *mise-en-scène*, a subject of comparison for the production’s German critics, this mannerism has not prevailed as an essential feature of the figures, but rather as a result of attempts to conceal confusion and the defects of the pursuit of unembarrassed behavior. (It is another important difference that in Ascher’s *mise-en-scène* acting followed patterns of mainly present-day gesticulation that made it highly lifelike, but Peter Stein’s 1984 *Drei Schwestern* followed patterns a hundred year older, so it was much more formal, and although it seemed familiar, it remained rather strange.)

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

On the stage of the Katona József Theatre, the whitewashed, battered plank walls of the 1972 *Three Sisters* of the Víg Theatre seemed to have “turned into a more decorative wall paneling”.<sup>928</sup> István Szlávik’s set represented a real location: a drawing room with bright walls, ceiling and wide plank flooring, a huge dining room at the back, Olga’s desk in the forefront, seating on the left, a piano behind it, and countless small objects (plants, pictures, etc.). The structuring of the space largely contributed to “the accurate placement of the events in the foreground and the background (ensuring continuous life on stage), and to the creation of the environment of intimacy through various angles and openings”.<sup>929</sup> The third act showed a room half as deep as before, with carpets on the walls and crowded with a closet, a sofa, a rocking chair, a screen, etc. In the fourth act, however, the black depth of the stage was left open between walls of a house on both sides, with bare branches hanging in an almost empty space. Even in its spaciousness, the stage gave a sense of being enclosed, and was rightly described by reviewers as “a wooden

<sup>926</sup> Nánay: *Változatok a reménytelenségre*, 14.

<sup>927</sup> (Torda): *Három nővér*, 8.

<sup>928</sup> Sándor L.: *Minden eltörölve?*, 11.

<sup>929</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

coffin”<sup>930</sup> or “white hell”.<sup>931</sup> The tone of lighting and the colors of Györgyi Szakács’s costumes became darker as the acts became gloomier. (In the last act, for example, only Tuzenbach wore a bright suit, though he was preparing for a deadly duel.) Consequently, the scenography corresponded to the interpretation of the play, and exposed “a well-thought-out and consistently realized conception”,<sup>932</sup> and sound effects, which dominated the tradition stemming from Stanislavsky, were provided only with striking restraint.

The use of space was following the shifts of moods, and due to its realism, it was expanding into emblematic images only in exceptional moments. Such an image was the initial group composition of the three sisters “in the halo of the backlight”, in front of the rear window.<sup>933</sup> The beginning of the production was lively and upbeat, with Olga, Masha and Irina advancing on piano music by Debussy. And such an image was the last one, also with the three sisters, but without a halo now, in convulsive hysteria. We must highlight the famous scene with the spinning-top from the first act too, which nevertheless did not transform into a symbol (providing cognitive surplus on a higher level of meaning), but into a visual synecdoche, offering emotional surplus instead. Therefore, it was not taken out of the series of events, but only stopped (for a photograph as well, taken by Rode and Fedotik in the meantime), so that the long process of waiting, “exceeding the spectator’s margin of tolerance, and the actual spinning of the spinning-top would make stage time relative for a while”.<sup>934</sup> Other noteworthy images of the production did not transcend stage events either, which events led from almost idyllic situations to real stalemates, the unusual detonation of the inner charges of the figures, and the inexorable consequences of the end.<sup>935</sup> In other words, as the nearly musical precision of the structure was described by a critic, the production led from a “lively, cheerful prelude” in crescendo, via “a slow and slightly sleepy andante”, followed by a *rondo furioso* with the image of a broken family, to the *allegro con brio* movement, full of the motif of farewell.<sup>936</sup> Overall, the visual and auditive world of *Three Sisters* could be defined “as a progressively rising arc of emotions and a gradually darkening arc of moods”.<sup>937</sup>

<sup>930</sup> Koltai: Csehoviádák, 13.

<sup>931</sup> Barta: *Három nővér*, 9.

<sup>932</sup> Nánay: Vázlatok a reménytelenségre, 13.

<sup>933</sup> István Takács: Csehov – csehovul. A *Három nővér* a Katona József Színházban, *Népszava*, Vol. 114, No. 4, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1986, 6.

<sup>934</sup> Pályi: Színházi előadások Budapesten, 541.

<sup>935</sup> Cf. Mészáros: „Hát hova tűnt minden”, 11.

<sup>936</sup> Barta: *Három nővér*, 9.

<sup>937</sup> Heltai: Rímélések, 724.

## IMPACT AND POSTERITY

*Three Sisters* was in the repertory of the Katona József Theatre for eight years and two months, running 179 performances in Budapest and 59 abroad. In the season of its opening, it won the Awards for Best Director, Best Actress (Juli Básti as Masha) and Best Costume both at the annual voting of Hungarian theatre critics and at the National Theatre Festival. The long series of guest performances in foreign countries started with a highly successful performance in Stuttgart a year later, and the production even won the BITEF Grand Prix in Belgrade. In fact, “*Three Sisters* opened the international festivals for the Katona”,<sup>938</sup> and largely contributed to the theatre becoming a member of the Union of European Theatres in 1990. Both Hungarian and foreign critics wrote in superlatives about it, describing it as a “cathartic”,<sup>939</sup> “masterful”<sup>940</sup> and “extraordinary experience”<sup>941</sup> and even “a masterpiece in our recent theatre history”<sup>942</sup> already at the time of its birth. Since then, Ascher’s *Three Sisters* has become one of the most important milestones in Hungarian theatre culture of the 1980s: both a legend and a benchmark for any achievements in the field of playing Chekhov in Hungary. The normativity of the *mise-en-scène* was only called into question in the early 2000s, due to the works of a new generation of directors (first Róbert Alföldi and Péter Telihay), which incorporated some elements of the 1985 production of the Katona as ironic visual quotations. Negative criticism of Ascher’s *mise-en-scène*, for example that “we can only understand, but cannot experience or enjoy it”,<sup>943</sup> were rather scarce and mostly based on superficial reading or misunderstanding. Moreover, they are not justified by watching the televised version of the production either, which came out on DVD two and a half decades after the premiere.

<sup>938</sup> Mészáros: Egy korszakos előadás, 1.

<sup>939</sup> Mészáros: „Hát hova tűnt minden”, 11.

<sup>940</sup> Barta: *Három nővér*, 9.

<sup>941</sup> Nánay: Változatok a reménytelenségre, 13.

<sup>942</sup> Sándor: Miközben a színházról beszélgetünk, 12.

<sup>943</sup> Almási: Csoportkép bűgöcsigával, 7.



THE TRAGIC OF “VITAL HATRED”  
GÁBOR SZÉKELY: *THE MISANTHROPE*, 1988



*Title:* The Misanthrope. *Date of Premiere:* 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1988. *Venue:* Katona József Theatre, Budapest. *Director:* Gábor Székely. *Author:* Molière. *Translator:* György Petri. *Dramaturg:* Géza Fodor. *Set designer:* Csaba Antal. *Costume designer:* Györgyi Szakács. *Company:* Katona József Theatre, Budapest. *Actors:* György Cserhami (Alceste), Dorottya Udvaros (Célimène), Gábor Máté (Philinte), Géza Balkay (Oronte), Ágnes Bertalan (Éliante), Erika Bodnár (Arsinoé), Zoltán Varga (Acaste), János Bán (Clitandre), József Horváth (Du Bois), Frigyes Hollósi (Basque), Olivér Csendes (Guard).

CONTEXT OF THE PERFORMANCE IN THEATRE CULTURE

*The Misanthrope* was created during the period of outstanding international successes of the Katona József Theatre, as the last *mise-en-scène* by Gábor Székely there, who managed the company from 1982 to 1989. It exemplifies the professional perfectionism and latent political character of the Katona's productions staged in the “Székely era”: the determination of a theatre which did not avoid social problems and dared to analyze them in the public sphere, as sensitively as possible, in order to influence collective thinking about them. Shortly before the regime change, at the end of a decade far from revolutionary, it made moral corruption going hand in hand with social degradation the subject of “doublespeak”, judging our social conditions through a tolerated classic, mostly appealing to overtones, in the robe of historicist staging.<sup>944</sup> The vitality of the pronouncement and the intensity of

<sup>944</sup> There was a reviewer who defined the subject of Alceste's vehement hatred (in a rather clichéd way) in “a world that swept away all ideas, ideals, opinions and beliefs”. (Erika Szántó: Karzat, *Képes* 7, Vol. 3. No. 49, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1988, 43.) Others pointed out more precisely that the production was about “the most pressing problems of our individual and social actions” (András Barta: Alceste, korunk hőse, *Magyar Nemzet*, Vol. 51, No. 309, 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1988, 9), “the decay of our mental health” (Tamás Koltai: Újranéző, *Képes* 7, Vol. 4, 14, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1989, 43) and “the consensus on opportunism” (Miklós Almási: Szeressétek az embergyűlölőt!, *Népszabadság*, Vol. 46, No. 285, 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 7). Tamás Tarján also made it clear that “György Cserhalmi plays Alceste, while he plays hundreds and hundreds of figures of contemporary Hungarian intellectual and public life”. Odi et amo, *Színház* 22:2 (1989), 22.

utterances like "Two wounds in both eyes. This world is rotten. / I dare not look around lest I'll throw up."<sup>945</sup> were guaranteed by the new translation of György Petri, which was connected to his own poetry in many ways.<sup>946</sup> Subsequently, the "disgust" erupting in an undisguised way expressed the desperation of "we cannot live here" with the same power as *Three Sisters* by Tamás Ascher three years earlier.

#### DRAMATIC TEXT, DRAMATURGY

Petri's excellent version of Molière, still widely used today, replaced the impeccably metricized translations of Lőrinc Szabó (1954) and Dezső Mészöly (1971). Instead of formality, Petri made an attempt at the clarity of thoughts:<sup>947</sup> he did not update, but made Alceste's temper clear, eliminating a great number of problems of the play that had not survived Molière's times.<sup>948</sup> The rhetorical complicatedness – all figures that did not serve the content of speech – had

<sup>945</sup> It is a word by word translation of Petri's rendering of the couplet: „Két seb a két szemem. Ez a világ rohad. / Nem merek szétnézni, mert elhányom magamat.” Molière: *Drámák. Petri György fordításában*, Pécs, Jelenkor, 1995, 146. – In Richard Wilbur's English translation: "All are corrupt; there's nothing to be seen / In court or town but aggravates my spleen." Molière: *The Misanthrope and Tartuffe. Translated into English Verse and Introduced by Richard Wilbur*, New York, Harcourt, Inc., 1965, 20.

<sup>946</sup> See, for example, the stream of invective of *Electra* through the persona of the heroine of the myth adapted by all three playwrights of the ancient Greek tragic trio: "What they think is that it's the twists and turns of politics / that keep me ticking; they think it's Mycenae's fate. / Take my little sister, cute, sensitive Chrysothemis – / to me the poor thing attributes a surfeit of moral passion, / believing I'm unable to get over the issue of our father's twisted death. / What do I care for that gross geyser of spunk / who murdered his own daughter! The steps into the bath / were slippery with soap – and the axe's edge too sharp. / But that this Aegisthus, with his trainee-barber's face, / should swagger about and hold sway in this wretched town, / and that our mother, like a venerably double-chinned old whore, / should dally with him, simpering – everybody pretending not to see, / not to know anything. Even the Sun glitters above, / like a lie forged of pure gold, the false coin of the gods! / Well, that's why! That's why! Because of disgust, / because it all sticks in my craw, revenge has become my dream / and my daily bread. And this revulsion is stronger / than the gods. I already see how mould is creeping across Mycenae, / which is the mould of madness and destruction." György Petri: *Electra*, trans. George Gömöri, Clive Wilmer, in Michael March (ed.): *Child of Europe. A New Anthology of East European Poetry*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, 7.

<sup>947</sup> Cf. Géza Fodor's statement, who was the dramaturg of the show and (not incidentally) wrote a monograph on Petri's poetry: "From the point of view of a theatre production [...] that wants to convey Alceste's problems and the topicality of his temper, a form-true translation has serious limitations. [...] The problem and temper [...] for which our own 'experience and vision' are looking for expression, are not as concrete as Molière's and cannot be rendered by the pure form of the classical style." Géza Fodor: *Mizantrop-változat*, in *Molière: A mizantrop*, Program for the production of the Katona József Theatre, November 1988, 11.

<sup>948</sup> Cf. "Quite a few moments of the play are so much rooted in the age that they have no dramatic weight and vibrancy anymore. The relationship between the court and the city, the city and the countryside, the nobleman and the artist, the society as the medium of life, the *honnêteté* (honesty, fairness, virtuosity) and some important ethical debates of the 17th century,

disappeared, and the general informality of addressing each other, together with the often rather crude phrases had made the dialogues familiar, echoing “the court” as Hungarian people used (and still use) “the system” in terms of state socialism. As the *sine qua non* of Székely’s *mise-en-scène*, Petri’s translation also implied present-day forms of behavior,<sup>949</sup> especially since it transformed misanthropy into “vital hatred”.<sup>950</sup> With the help of the (more than) dramaturg, Géza Fodor, and as a result of the elimination of the traces of Molière’s times, Alceste became almost a tragic hero,<sup>951</sup> who cried out his distaste for the world and the people around him as a self-destructive intellectual, and seemed to be a contemporary of the spectators.<sup>952</sup> Because the play focused on a central character and the directness of the protagonist’s anger, this relationship became a determining factor to refashion most of the events.

### STAGING

Although many reviewers mentioned “the personal [as such] that governed the production”,<sup>953</sup> the anger in the Katona’ *Misanthrope* was not due to the individual discontent of its creators. Rather, it had become paradigmatic as an example of a consistent conception of theatre, arguing over social existence

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many forms of human contact (from the way points of honor were handled to always saying ‘thou’) are all dramatic factors in the play, because they were of particular importance to the theatre and audience of the time.” Ibid., 12.

<sup>949</sup> Cf. “This language and this reworking gives the theatre, the director and the actors the opportunity to adapt our intense rhythm of life, our accelerated pace, our feelings of life that barely allow for softness, the often agitated, hysteroid behaviors and the influences on our mindset.” Katalin Róna: *A mizantróp, Film Színház Muzsika*, Vol. 32, No. 47, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 6.

<sup>950</sup> The phrase is used in Petri’s *Two fragments from the Brezhnev era*. The word by word translation of the poem goes like this: “1 (objectively) This part and that part / are afraid of each other more and more, / so they can form a whole / in which there is no room for any parts. 2 (subjectively) One day we will wake up forgetting all, / we won’t find the vital hatred in our hearts. / The day we lose everything. / Even if it does come, it’s too late for the News: / We’re shrinking like burning paper.” *Petri György versei*. Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1991, 281.

<sup>951</sup> In this respect, Géza Fodor’s comment is fairly telling. “Approaching the [1789] revolution, Alceste had increasingly become a positive hero of the opposition to the existing social order, until Camille Desmoulins called him a Jacobine.” in *Molière: A mizantróp*, Program for the production of the Katona József Theatre, November 1988, 5.

<sup>952</sup> Cf. “Alceste is a tormented intellectual here, who fights his battle with Célimène neck or nothing in a single day and tumbles from failure to failure.” Colette Godard: A pillanatok, amikor minden odavész, *Le Monde*, 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1988, trans. Judit Szántó, *Színház* 22:2 (1989), 48. – “It is as if we are hearing the literary monologue of an intellectual, misled, desolate and fed up, who is going into a one-man civil war for the right to honesty.” Judit Csáki: „Ez a világ – rohad”. *A mizantróp* a Katona József Színházban, *Új Tükör*, Vol. 25, No. 48, 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 28.

<sup>953</sup> Róna: *A mizantróp*, 6. – Cf. “Gábor Székely says that Molière painted a self-portrait in Alceste, but the people around Székely believe that the director has transferred a great much of himself into the production.” Godard: A pillanatok, 48.

and searching for the causes of misanthropy, which placed the 1988 premiere into a whole series of productions. Its pendants include Székely's *Timon of Athens* (staged in Szolnok in 1976), *Coriolanus* (staged at the Katona in 1985) and *Ivanov*, his last *mise-en-scène* (staged at the Új Theatre in 1996), while its direct (not just chronological) antecedent was *Catullus* (staged at the Katona in 1987).<sup>954</sup> As a result of this unwavering interest, Székely's *Misanthrope* had also gained extremely gloomy overtone – not uniquely, of course, but by joining a centuries-old tradition<sup>955</sup> – and moved towards tragicomedy. In contrast to László Vámos's 1971 staging at the Madách Kamara, Székely's *mise-en-scène* was not updated in terms of visuals, but still gave its verdict on the present because of its ideotextual nature (in the sense of Patrice Pavis<sup>956</sup>). The harrowing interpretation was conveyed through a clear guidance of actors, characteristic to Székely, moderately historicist sets and costumes and apt solutions of acting full of contemporary vibrance, in short, "with a very clear style".<sup>957</sup>

#### ACTING

The *mise-en-scène* focused on the actors' interpretation of the drama so much that a critic complained that "the director's ingenuity could hardly be discovered in it".<sup>958</sup> On the one hand, the actors' work was characterized by the psychologically motivated and authenticated disclosure of situations, figures and relationships, in the spirit of identification with the character, and placing Molière almost within the framework of playing Chekhov in recent times.<sup>959</sup> On the other hand, it was the complete opposite of classicist acting and was defined by continuous movement to express attitudes corresponding to "our hectic rhythm of life", "hasty pace" and "hysteroid mindset".<sup>960</sup>

<sup>954</sup> Cf. Székely "stages the drama as a 'continuation' of Milán Füst's (and his own) *Catullus* about a cursed passion in which nothing is clear". Tamás Koltai: A tökélyre vágyó magányossága, *Élet és Irodalom*, Vol. 32, No. 48, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 12.

<sup>955</sup> As Géza Fodor noted, "Rousseau [in his famous letter to Monsieur d'Alambert] started the reinterpretation and reassessment of Alceste as a tragic figure". in *Molière: A mizantróp*, Program, 2.

<sup>956</sup> Patrice Pavis: *From Page to Stage: A Difficult Birth*, trans. Jilly Daugherty, in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, London – New York, Routledge, 1992, 24–46, especially 36.

<sup>957</sup> Almási: Szeressétek az embergyűlölőt!, 7.

<sup>958</sup> Szántó: Karzat, 43.

<sup>959</sup> Csaba Antal's "veranda-like system of corridors" (Tarján: Odi et amo, 21.) could have been a set for a play by Chekhov as well. The bench on the proscenium, on which actors were occasionally sitting with their backs to the audience, could also allude to the spatial configuration of (the first act of) the Moscow Art Theatre's *Seagull*, as a sign of acting conceived in the spirit of Stanislavsky.

<sup>960</sup> Fodor: Mizantróp-változat, 11. – In this respect, it is emblematic that the production began and ended with running. At the beginning, Alceste was running into the performance space to hide himself from Philinte. At the end, he was running out, with Philinte and Éliante

In György Cserhalmi's performance, it was not the ridiculous eccentricity of the misanthrope (similar to that of the miser, Tartuffe and the imaginary invalid) that came to the fore, but the ambivalence of moral battles with other people and the tragic of the loss of these battles. Carrying in his body the memory of the tragic heroes he had already played, Cserhalmi, with his shoulders raised and his hands in his pocket, with his frequent leaping, squatting and lying on the ground, created an imposing but familiar figure, colored by "his modern anxieties and neuroses".<sup>961</sup> His "end-of-the-century misanthrope" made present many of the "burnt-out, distressed, hysterical" and self-destructing figures of contemporary Hungarian literature from Imre Sarkadi to Péter Hajnóczy,<sup>962</sup> choosing not only his solitary retirement from social life for all, but supposedly suicide at the end. Dorottya Udvaros displayed Célimène's love and fear for Alceste with as much finesse as the inability to give up her insistence on the appearances Alceste hated most. Their clinging together as well as clashing each other seemed to be portrayed with the experience of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*. Besides the precision of ensemble acting, reviewers highlighted the "amoeba-like spinelessness" of Gábor Máté's Philinte.<sup>963</sup> They underscored the "perfection and virtuosity" of Géza Balkay's acting,<sup>964</sup> together with the contrast of his Oronte to the protagonist, pointing out that this figure is "much more attractive, more human", and stands closer "to our daily compromises, our little deceits".<sup>965</sup> They also mentioned the successful efforts of Erika Bodnár (Arsinoé) and Ágnes Bertalan (Éliante) to avoid the clichés of women highly influenced by Alceste's attitude.

#### STAGE DESIGN AND SOUND

Csaba Antal's set was neither completely historic nor modern, but rather characterized by "some kind of stylized classicism".<sup>966</sup> A coffered ceiling covered the stage, but there were no chandeliers hanging from it, and the space was closed by a large number of off-white glass doors, but there were no rooms behind or next to them. The metaphorical and interpretative power

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following him after a while. There was a critic for whom "the running and some of the extravagant movements seemed to be superfluous and emphasized at the expense of the text". (Anna Földes: *A mizantrop*, ma, *Nők Lapja*, Vol. 40, No. 49, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1988, 21.)

Another reviewer described them as components of "powerful physical acting", interspersed with "hugs and informal gestures". (Godard: *A pillanatok*, 48.)

<sup>961</sup> Csáki: „Ez a világ – rohad”, 28.

<sup>962</sup> Földes: *A mizantrop*, ma, 21.

<sup>963</sup> Koltai: A tökélyre vágyó magányossága, 12.

<sup>964</sup> Tarján: Odi et amo, 22.

<sup>965</sup> Almási: Szeressétek az embergyűlölőt!, 7.

<sup>966</sup> Koltai: A tökélyre vágyó magányossága, 12.

of the scenery was enhanced by the fact that this complex set, which did not show a concrete location and whose impenetrability was an essential feature, was pushed to the back more and more between the acts until it disappeared almost completely. "As a space, it ended as a theatre space."<sup>967</sup> Although it got stripped down and became gradually clearer and emptier, as the need for clarity was increasing in Alceste's drama, its theatricality became even more evident. A velvet curtain, some lighting effects, Arsinoé's and the barons' entry with music in order to show the letter revealing all or nothing – all these things indicated that theatricality as well as impenetrability are inextinguishable. There was also a chandelier lying on the ground as a peripheral element in the left front corner of the stage, and Alceste repeatedly crouched down there to light its burnt candles. The alternatives of making this chandelier a theatrical sign (i.e. of involving it in the process of signification) became telling factors of divergence in the otherwise uniformly positive critical reception of the show. Some did not even notice it, some thought it was meaningless,<sup>968</sup> some interpreted it exclusively within the scope of the *mise-en-scène*,<sup>969</sup> and some highlighted it in a broader context.<sup>970</sup> Only this latter approach gave sufficient emphasis to an element which, in terms of the orientation of the *mise-en-scène*, could even be considered as its emblem. It displayed (firstly) classicality lowered from its supposed heights, (secondly) the lighting of candles for departed souls with sacral symbolism,<sup>971</sup> and (thirdly) the total ruin of the situation, in a politically allegorical way. In keeping with the set, the costumes evoked Molière's age too, but only by their tailoring: the modesty of their decorations and the darkish colors diminished their archaic character. Alceste's brown corduroy jacket and breeches contained a reference to the attire of Hungarian intellectuals of the 1980s, at least as far as the color and the material were concerned. Some musical insertions, such as Wagner's

<sup>967</sup> Tarján: Odi et amo, 21.

<sup>968</sup> Cf. "[...] I have not discovered any functions of the chandelier placed on the ground, and the repeated acting with it." Földes: *A mizantrop*, ma, 21.

<sup>969</sup> Cf. Cserhalmi's Alceste often "squats down, sinks to the ground. Lying on the floor, he repeatedly sets fire to the candles of the lowered chandelier, as if he were hoping for light on the earth from a single matchstick." Tarján: Odi et amo, 21.

<sup>970</sup> Cf. "Onstage, the twinkling light of a lamp barely lights up. Alceste is fiddling with a chandelier, trying to draw some more light out of it. He is lighting the candles for a while, then forgoes the process and stops. He is right: this chandelier is – torn off. It's over." Csáki: „Ez a világ – rohad”, 28.

<sup>971</sup> Cf. "Cserhalmi plays Molière, but he also plays Zoltán Latinovits and Gábor Bódy. At the age of forty, at the height of his strength [...] he is a typical generational hero, a medium for an earlier and a future generation too." Tarján: Odi et amo, 21. – Six weeks after the opening of *The Misanthrope*, István Verebes made the same gesture (in a much more bombastic way) in his *mise-en-scène* of George Bernard Shaw's play, produced simply as *Joan* at Radnóti Theatre, after the end of which the audience found great many portraits of tragically deceased famous Hungarians in the lobby, with candles burning in front of them and Ferenc Demjén's pop hit, *Candles* resounding from the loudspeakers.

overture to *Tannhäuser* at the beginning, influenced the sense of atmosphere, but the slight creaking of the floor proved to be more important from the point of view of acoustic effects. As in Ascher's *Three Sisters*, the first three acts of which took place on an upper floor of a house, the creaking suggested the porousness of the walking surface and the structure that included it.

#### IMPACT AND POSTERITY

Although *The Misanthrope* was one of the paramount productions of the Katona József Theatre in the 1980s, it saw relatively few (in fact, only 47) performances, compared to other notable productions. The reason for this lies not so much in the impact of the events of 1989 (the regime change), or in the loss of the ideotextual power of the *mise-en-scène*, but rather in the fact that Gábor Székely and György Cserhalmi left the company at the end of the 1988–1989 season, after which the production lived only for six months (until March 1990). It was only taken on tour to Moscow, but foreign theatre-makers and journalists saw it in Budapest as part of a professional meeting. Székely received The Theatre Critics' Award for Best Director and Györgyi Szakács for Best Costume and *The Misanthrope* was almost unanimously described as "masterful",<sup>972</sup> "fantastically good",<sup>973</sup> "100% theatre".<sup>974</sup> The Katona's production and Petri's new translation drew attention to Molière's play, which had been previously staged only three times (all on Ódry Stage) following its 1971 production with Miklós Gábor and Edit Domján. However, in the last three decades it achieved some two dozen shows, directed by Tamás Ascher (Kaposvár, 1991), Gábor Tompa (Cluj, 2000) and Árpád Schilling (Krétakör Theatre, 2004) among others. Gábor Zsámbéki, who managed the Katona József Theatre from 1989 to 2011, also left his position with *The Misanthrope*, similarly to his predecessor. Zsámbéki started his *mise-en-scène* where Székely had finished: on the bare stage, so that his Alceste, choosing to leave society, would end up homeless, locked in just a few square feet of trash, totally destitute, albeit in freedom...

<sup>972</sup> Barta: Alceste, korunk hőse, 9.

<sup>973</sup> Koltai: Újranéző, 43.

<sup>974</sup> Tamás Barabás: *A mizantrop, Esti Hírlap*, Vol. 33, No. 279, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1988, 2.



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